

Navigating Struggle and Support: The Lived Experiences of Clustered Multigrade School Heads in Managing Instructional and Leadership Tasks

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school heads managing clustered multigrade schools in geographically isolated and resource-limited areas within the Division of Dinagat Islands. Anchored in constructivist ontology and guided by Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, the study involved eight purposively selected school heads who participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Analysis revealed seven major themes: emotional distress and personal sacrifices coping up with resilience; deep commitment and values-driven attitude amid complex tasks; effective strategies and adaptability in response to adversity; struggles in giving timely technical assistance and instructional supervision; resistance with dedication from isolation, distance, and burnout; strong relational foundation and enduring strength found in community; and meaningful connection to one's role in making a difference. Findings indicated that despite emotional and logistical challenges, school heads demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong service orientation, employing strategic leadership practices and community engagement to sustain school operations. The results underscore the need for enhanced systemic support, tailored professional development, and policy reforms recognizing the unique realities of clustered multigrade leadership.

Keywords: Multigrade Leadership, Clustered Schools, Instructional Supervision, Emotional Resilience, Adaptive Strategies, Educational Management, Phenomenological Inquiry

Introduction

School leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness, culture, and performance of educational institutions. In the Philippines, school heads are expected not only to manage resources and oversee administrative operations but also to provide instructional supervision, engage communities, and uphold learner achievement. These expectations are heightened in multigrade contexts, where one teacher handles multiple grade levels in a single classroom, often in remote and underserved areas.

Multigrade education has long been recognized as a practical solution for delivering equitable access to quality education in geographically isolated communities (Bongala et al., 2020; Taole, 2017). In the Philippine public school system, 20,594 out of 38,911 schools operate multigrade classrooms (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020). In the Division of

Dinagat Islands, 43 multigrade and 9 mixed multigrade schools require leadership that can address challenges in instructional delivery, resource management, and community engagement under resource constraints.

The governance framework under Republic Act 9155 grants school heads full authority over school management. However, administrators in clustered multigrade settings face amplified difficulties, including overseeing two or more distant school sites, coping with delayed support services, and managing limited teaching personnel and instructional resources. These responsibilities require not only technical competence but also emotional resilience, strategic adaptability, and a values-driven approach to leadership (Sepuru et al., 2020; Mutambala, 2022).

Despite the critical importance of leadership in such contexts, most studies on multigrade education focus on pedagogical approaches and student outcomes, with limited attention to the lived experiences of school heads managing clustered multigrade schools. Understanding these experiences is essential for informing policy reforms, designing targeted professional development, and strengthening systemic support structures.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the real-life experiences of school heads in clustered multigrade settings in the Division of Dinagat Islands. Guided by Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology, it seeks to capture the essence and meanings of their leadership journeys, highlighting both the struggles and strategies that define their roles.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to describe and interpret the lived experiences of school heads in the Division of Dinagat Islands who are managing clustered multigrade schools, focusing on the challenges, coping strategies, and leadership practices that shape their roles.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of school heads in leading clustered multigrade schools?
2. What essence and meanings can be derived from their lived experiences?
3. What themes and meanings can be formulated from these experiences?
4. Based on the analyzed data, what implications may be proposed for enhancing support systems for school heads in clustered multigrade settings?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to benefit multiple stakeholders in the education sector. For school heads, the results offer practical insights into effective strategies for managing instructional and leadership tasks in clustered multigrade settings, highlighting approaches that promote resilience and adaptability. Teachers will gain from leadership practices that foster collaboration, provide consistent instructional support, and encourage professional growth despite resource limitations. Students will benefit indirectly through improved learning outcomes, achieved by enhanced school leadership, strengthened instructional supervision, and active community involvement. The Department of Education may use the evidence-based recommendations to guide policy reforms, design systemic support mechanisms, and develop professional development programs tailored to the realities of clustered multigrade contexts. Furthermore, communities and parents can be empowered through stronger school–community partnerships, fostering shared responsibility for sustaining quality education in geographically isolated areas.

Literature Review

Leadership of School Heads in the Multigrade Setting

The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines recognizes the practicality of multigrade education as a means of providing equitable and quality learning to children in remote and marginalized communities. This approach allows learners in geographically isolated areas to complete elementary education despite the absence of standard single-grade classes (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). School heads in these contexts are expected to articulate the school's vision, set instructional objectives, and create a supportive environment for teaching and learning. Leadership in clustered multigrade settings requires flexibility, ethical judgment, and strong instructional commitment. In Puerto Princesa City, for example, school leaders play a central role in curriculum delivery and in maintaining instructional quality in classes that combine multiple grade levels (Rabang & Perez, 2021). Effective leadership behaviors have been linked to higher teacher job satisfaction, underscoring the importance of motivated and supportive leaders in multigrade contexts (Ayala & Villocino, 2024). Studies further indicate that strategies such as differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, and collaborative learning action cells can help school heads navigate the complexity of leading multigrade schools with limited resources (Bagay, 2025; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2023).

Challenges of School Leaders in Multigrade Schools

School heads in multigrade settings face distinct challenges that differ from those in traditional single-grade environments. These include logistical issues due to distance and poor infrastructure, which hinder regular supervision and delay administrative tasks (Rabang & Perez, 2021). Instructional leadership is particularly difficult when teachers lack specialized training to manage multiple grade levels, leading to inconsistencies in technical assistance (Bagay, 2025). Workload pressures, overlapping responsibilities, and resource scarcity further exacerbate these challenges. Many schools lack essential teaching materials, adequate facilities, and access to modern educational technologies, forcing school leaders to rely on community collaboration to bridge resource gaps (Reyes & Ching, 2024). Psychological strain is also prevalent, as the demands of overseeing multiple school sites and meeting administrative deadlines can lead to emotional exhaustion. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, fairness, and ethical decision-making tend to foster positive school climates that help mitigate these stresses (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2023; Cruz et al., 2022).

Clustering of Schools in a Multigrade Context

Clustering, as outlined in DepEd Order No. 007, s. 2024, is a school-based management strategy in which nearby schools collaborate to improve educational outcomes and share resources. In clustered multigrade arrangements, school heads are tasked with supervising two or more multigrade schools, ensuring standardization of practices while adapting to local needs (Mutambala, 2022). Policies under DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2010 specify that clustering should be limited to schools within the same district and should consider proximity, accessibility, and staffing levels. Criteria for leadership assignments in clusters are tied to teacher numbers and school distribution, with allowances made for isolated schools that cannot be clustered. These guidelines align with the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), which emphasize reflective practice, professional responsibility, and collaborative leadership. While clustering can improve administrative efficiency, it also adds complexity to leadership roles, requiring greater strategic planning, resource mobilization, and stakeholder engagement.

Synthesis of the Review

The literature underscores that leading clustered multigrade schools demands a blend of strategic adaptability, emotional resilience, and ethical leadership. School heads must navigate logistical barriers, provide instructional support across diverse learning contexts, and manage with limited resources. Approaches such as distributed leadership, community engagement, and context-specific professional development have been shown to strengthen leadership effectiveness in these settings (Ortiz et al., 2025). Success in multigrade leadership is therefore not only a matter of individual capacity but also of systemic support through policy, training, and resource provision. These insights form the foundation for the present study, which aims to provide a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of the lived experiences of school heads in the clustered multigrade settings of the Division of Dinagat Islands.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a constructivist ontological perspective, which posits that reality is individually and socially constructed based on personal experiences, backgrounds, and social contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997). In this view, the lived experiences of school heads in clustered multigrade settings are shaped by their unique circumstances and interactions, allowing for multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon. This perspective aligns with the study's aim to capture the richness, complexity, and depth of individual narratives.

Methodologically, the study adopts Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach, rooted in Husserl's philosophical tradition. This method seeks to uncover the essential meanings embedded within participants' lived experiences through systematic steps of bracketing assumptions, extracting significant statements, transforming them into meaning units, and synthesizing them into themes (Giorgi, 2009). It emphasizes remaining faithful to participants' perspectives while uncovering the psychological and structural essence of the phenomenon.

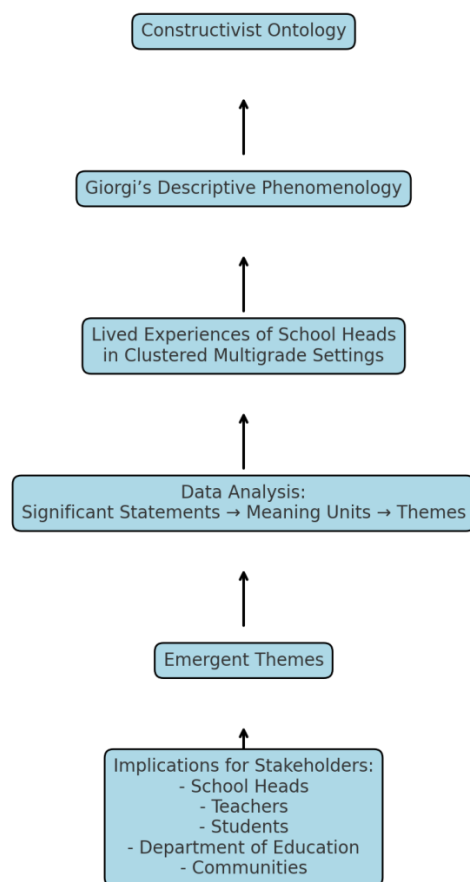


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, showing how the constructivist ontological perspective underpins the use of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology in exploring the lived experiences of school heads in clustered multigrade settings. The framework illustrates the flow from gathering and analyzing participants' narratives—through the extraction of significant statements, transformation into meaning units, and synthesis into themes—to deriving practical implications for various stakeholders, including school heads, teachers, students, the Department of Education, and communities.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of school heads managing clustered multigrade schools in the Division of Dinagat Islands, grounded in constructivist ontology and guided by Giorgi's phenomenological method to capture the essence of participants' narratives while bracketing the researcher's assumptions. Eight purposively selected school heads, either full-fledged or serving as School-in-Charge, met the inclusion criteria of at least one year of experience handling two to three clustered multigrade schools during School Year 2023–2024 and willingness to provide informed consent. The research was conducted

in geographically isolated and resource-limited schools across the division's 10 districts. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a validated guide containing a grand tour question and follow-up prompts on challenges, coping strategies, and support systems, with sessions conducted face-to-face in participants' workplaces, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes. Analysis followed Giorgi's five-step process—transcription and extraction of significant statements, transformation into meaning units, identification of psychological meaning units, conceptualization, and categorization into overarching themes—while maintaining bracketing and phenomenological reduction. Ethical clearance was obtained from St. Paul University Surigao, and participants' confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms, secure data storage, and voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any stage.

Table 1. Themes and Descriptions of School Heads' Experiences

Theme	Description
Emotional Distress and Personal Sacrifices Coping up with Resilience	Experiencing emotional exhaustion, physical strain, and personal sacrifices while maintaining the determination to fulfill leadership responsibilities.
Deep Commitment and Values-Driven Attitude amid Complex Tasks	Upholding strong moral values and a sense of duty despite the challenges of managing multiple schools and diverse learner needs.
Effective Strategies and Adaptability in Response to Adversity	Employing time management, task alignment across schools, and flexible planning to sustain operations and instruction.
Struggles in Giving Technical Assistance and Instructional Supervision Timely	Facing logistical barriers, distance, and workload constraints that limit the ability to provide regular and timely instructional support.
Resistance with Dedication from Isolation, Distance, and Burnout	Encountering resistance due to fatigue and remoteness, yet maintaining commitment to leadership and service.
Strong Relational Foundation and Enduring Strength Found in Community	Drawing strength from community relationships, parental support, and local partnerships to address resource and operational gaps.
Meaningful Connection to One's Role in Making a Difference	Finding purpose and motivation in the positive impact of leadership on students, teachers, and the school community.

These themes in table 1 reveal a leadership reality characterized by a balance between enduring hardships and sustaining commitment. Participants' accounts underscored the emotional resilience required to navigate the challenges of clustered multigrade leadership, as well as the centrality of community engagement in sustaining educational delivery.

Table 2. Essence and Meanings of School Heads' Lived Experiences

Essence / Meaning	Description
Resilience in Managing Dual Roles	Continuously adjusting to balance instructional leadership and administrative responsibilities despite resource and time constraints.
Leadership as Service and Commitment	Viewing the role as a moral and professional duty that demands dedication, sacrifice, and integrity.
Adaptability in Dynamic Contexts	Recognizing that effective leadership requires ongoing adjustment to shifting demands, challenges, and school conditions.
Sacrifice as Part of the	Accepting personal and professional sacrifices as inherent to managing clustered

Essence / Meaning	Description
Leadership Journey	multigrade schools.
Centrality of Community Support	Relying on the involvement of parents, local stakeholders, and community partnerships to sustain school operations.
Need for Institutional Backing	Understanding that sustainable leadership depends on systemic support, policy reforms, and equitable resource allocation.

The essence of these experiences in table 2 reflects a leadership role grounded in moral purpose, resilience, and adaptability. School heads described their work as both a calling and a challenge, requiring them to navigate logistical, emotional, and instructional demands while finding strength in community engagement and seeking systemic support.

Table 3. Formulated Themes from School Heads' Responses

Theme	Sub-Themes / Focus Areas
Emotional Distress and Personal Sacrifices Coping up with Resilience	Physical strain from travel; emotional exhaustion; perseverance in fulfilling leadership duties.
Deep Commitment and Values-Driven Attitude amid Complex Tasks	Integrity in decision-making; prioritizing student welfare; moral and professional dedication.
Effective Strategies and Adaptability in Response to Adversity	Aligning tasks across schools; time management; flexible scheduling to address varied school needs.
Struggles in Giving Technical Assistance and Instructional Supervision Timely	Limited mobility due to distance; competing administrative tasks; delays in providing teacher support.
Resistance with Dedication from Isolation, Distance, and Burnout	Fatigue from multiple responsibilities; geographic isolation; sustained commitment despite setbacks.
Strong Relational Foundation and Enduring Strength Found in Community	Collaboration with parents; community resource mobilization; partnership with local leaders.
Meaningful Connection to One's Role in Making a Difference	Motivation from student achievements; satisfaction from school improvements; sense of personal fulfillment.

These themes and sub-themes in table 3 show how leadership in clustered multigrade schools is shaped by the interplay of personal resilience, strategic adaptability, and collaborative engagement. They highlight that while challenges are persistent, school heads anchor their work in values, community partnerships, and a commitment to improving learning outcomes.

Summary of Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of eight school heads managing clustered multigrade schools in the Division of Dinagat Islands, using a descriptive phenomenological design grounded in constructivist ontology and Giorgi's method. Data gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews revealed seven major themes: emotional distress and personal sacrifices coping up with resilience; deep commitment and values-driven attitude amid complex tasks; effective strategies and adaptability in response to adversity; struggles in giving timely technical assistance and instructional supervision; resistance with dedication from isolation, distance, and burnout; strong relational foundation and enduring strength found in community; and meaningful connection to one's role in making a difference. These themes encapsulate the complex interplay between the challenges of managing geographically dispersed schools and the strategies employed to sustain instructional leadership. The findings

highlight that while clustered multigrade leadership is fraught with logistical, emotional, and resource-related challenges, school heads draw upon resilience, moral commitment, strategic adaptability, and community engagement to fulfill their responsibilities.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that leadership in clustered multigrade schools is defined by a constant balancing act between multiple professional obligations and personal well-being, requiring continuous adaptation to changing conditions. School heads perceive their roles not only as administrative functions but as a form of service and moral duty, often involving significant personal sacrifice. Resilience and adaptability emerge as essential traits for navigating the demands of overseeing multiple school sites with limited resources. The results also underscore that leadership effectiveness in such contexts is sustained not solely by individual effort but by systemic factors, including equitable resource allocation, supportive policies, and accessible professional development. Moreover, community involvement is a critical enabler, helping school heads address gaps in resources, foster collaborative relationships, and reinforce the shared responsibility for educational success.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that the Department of Education strengthen systemic support for school heads in clustered multigrade settings by implementing policies that streamline administrative processes, ensure equitable distribution of resources, and provide targeted professional development programs focused on leadership in resource-limited contexts. School heads should continue to cultivate adaptive leadership practices, including strategic time management, delegation, and the fostering of collaborative school–community relationships. Local government units and community stakeholders are encouraged to deepen their partnerships with schools to help bridge resource gaps and support educational initiatives. Finally, future research should extend the scope to include other divisions and regions, allowing for comparative analysis and the identification of strategies that can be applied across different geographic and socio-economic contexts to sustain effective leadership in multigrade education.

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