

Leading from the Margins: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experiences of School Heads Managing Low-Performing Schools

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school heads managing low-performing public schools in the Surigao City Division. It examined the challenges encountered by school heads, the leadership strategies and interventions they used, their perceptions of role, motivation, and accountability, the support mechanisms that sustained school improvement efforts, and the insights that may inform policy and leadership development. Anchored on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology and operationalized through Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, the study involved ten purposively selected school heads assigned in low-performing schools. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed through familiarization, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of emergent themes, exhaustive description, identification of the fundamental structure, and member checking. Findings yielded five emergent themes: intersecting instructional and organizational challenges, visible manifestations of systemic underperformance, strategic leadership practices and capacity building, collaboration and stakeholder engagement, and resilient and human-centered leadership. These themes show that leadership in low-performing schools is not merely a technical or administrative task but a contextual, relational, and emotionally demanding practice. School heads navigated literacy gaps, learner underachievement, teacher-related concerns, limited resources, stakeholder expectations, and accountability pressures through data-informed decision-making, instructional supervision, teacher capacity building, stakeholder collaboration, communication, resilience, empathy, and recognition of incremental progress. The study concludes that managing low-performing schools requires context-responsive leadership development, sustained instructional support, stronger stakeholder partnerships, and institutional mechanisms that protect the well-being and resilience of school leaders.

Keywords: Low-Performing Schools; School Heads; Instructional Leadership; Phenomenology; Colaizzi Method; Stakeholder Engagement; Resilience; School Improvement

1. Introduction

Educational leadership remains a central factor in school effectiveness because school heads influence instructional quality, organizational culture, teacher motivation, and school improvement. In schools identified as low-performing, this leadership role becomes more demanding because school heads must respond to learner underachievement, weak mastery levels, limited resources, teacher-related concerns, and accountability pressures while sustaining morale and a sense of direction. Recent scholarship affirms that successful school leadership is associated with vision-setting, instructional support, collaboration, and school climate (Day et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, low-performing schools require more than routine administrative management; they require leaders who can interpret complex contextual realities and mobilize school communities toward improvement.

Low performance in schools is often interpreted through measurable indicators such as achievement results, completion rates, dropout patterns, and mastery levels. While these indicators are useful for monitoring

accountability, they do not fully explain the human realities experienced by school heads who manage these conditions. The Philippine basic education setting presents additional challenges because school heads are expected to function as instructional leaders, administrative managers, community coordinators, and implementers of national reform programs. In resource-constrained and geographically varied settings, school heads often make decisions under conditions of limited support, limited personnel, and uneven community engagement. These realities justify inquiry into leadership as a lived experience rather than as a set of performance indicators alone.

The rationale for the present study lies in the need to understand how school heads make meaning of leadership when assigned to schools that consistently require targeted improvement. Existing literature has examined school leadership through quantitative measures, leadership traits, teacher perceptions, and student outcomes; however, fewer studies have documented the lived experiences, emotional labor, sense-making processes, and resilience practices of school heads in low-performing contexts. This gap is important because policies and leadership development programs may become more responsive when grounded in the actual experiences of leaders who operate under pressure. Therefore, this study provides experience-based evidence on how school heads confront underperformance, interpret accountability, mobilize support, and sustain hope amid difficult school conditions.

Philosophical and Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to describe lived experience as it is consciously encountered by those who experience the phenomenon. This orientation was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to test causal relationships but to describe the essence of leadership as experienced by school heads assigned in low-performing schools. The researcher adopted bracketing to reduce the influence of preconceptions and to allow the informants' descriptions to guide the formulation of meanings and themes. Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method served as the analytic pathway for moving from raw narratives to significant statements, formulated meanings, clustered themes, emergent themes, and the essential structure of the phenomenon.

The study was also informed by constructivist assumptions, which hold that meaning is constructed through interaction, reflection, and interpretation. School heads' experiences of underperformance, accountability, teacher supervision, stakeholder engagement, and resilience were therefore treated as subjective and context-bound realities. This philosophical stance supported the use of interviews as a means of eliciting rich narratives and preserving the informants' voices. The approach also aligns with contemporary qualitative inquiry, which emphasizes depth, reflexivity, trustworthiness, and contextual interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2022).



Conceptual Framework

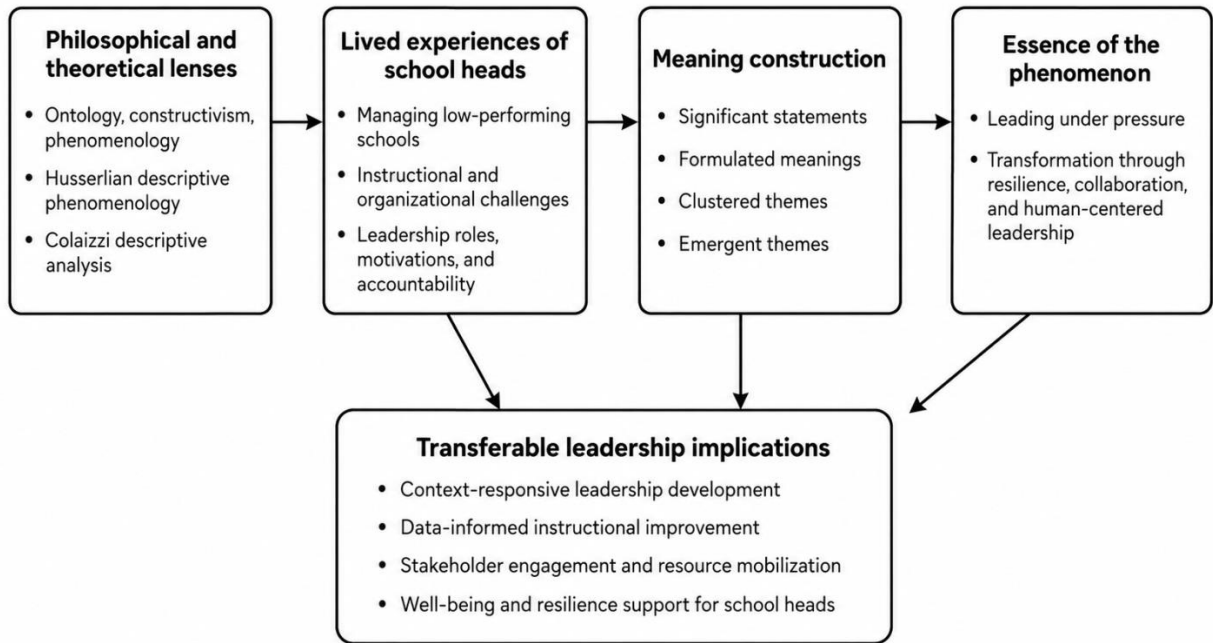


Figure 1. Eidetic model of leadership experience in managing low-performing schools.

Figure 1 presents the eidetic model of the study. The framework begins with the philosophical and theoretical lenses that guided the inquiry, namely ontology, constructivism, phenomenology, Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, and Colaizzi's descriptive analysis. These lenses directed attention to the lived experiences of school heads and to the meanings they attached to the challenges of managing low-performing schools. The model then shows the analytic movement from lived experience to meaning construction, where significant statements were transformed into formulated meanings, clustered themes, and emergent themes. The final component presents transferable leadership implications related to context-responsive leadership development, data-informed instructional improvement, stakeholder engagement, resource mobilization, and well-being support for school heads.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of school heads managing low-performing public schools in the Surigao City Division, with emphasis on leadership challenges, strategies, meanings, support mechanisms, and implications for policy and leadership development.

Statement of the Problem

1. How do school heads describe the challenges they encounter in managing low-performing schools?
2. What leadership strategies and interventions do they employ to improve school performance?
3. How do school heads perceive their roles, motivations, and accountability in leading low-performing schools?
4. What support mechanisms or resources help them sustain improvement efforts?
5. What insights can be drawn from their experiences that may inform policies or leadership development programs?

2. Literature Review

The literature on educational leadership consistently identifies school heads as influential actors in improving school performance. Effective leaders establish direction, support teacher learning, strengthen professional collaboration, and create conditions for instructional improvement (Day et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). In low-performing schools, leadership becomes more complex because underperformance is not produced by a single factor. It often reflects the interaction of learner gaps, teacher capacity, resource scarcity, family conditions, community context, and institutional constraints. This confirms the need to view school heads not merely as administrators of accountability metrics but as adaptive leaders working within interdependent systems.

Recent studies on school turnaround and leadership in disadvantaged contexts emphasize the value of collaboration, professional learning, and distributed leadership. Bellibas et al. (2021) found that instructional and distributed leadership influence classroom practice and instructional quality, while Bickmore et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of communities of practice and sustained school improvement processes. These findings suggest that improvement in low-performing schools depends on the ability of school heads to build collective capacity rather than rely only on individual authority. Leadership, therefore, involves creating structures for shared problem-solving, teacher coaching, and continuous monitoring of learner outcomes.

The literature also shows that leading low-performing schools involves significant emotional labor. School heads must respond to accountability pressures while managing teacher morale, learner needs, parent expectations, and limited resources. Silbaugh et al. (2023) reported that principals perform emotional labor as they balance interpersonal demands and organizational expectations, while Kutsyuruba et al. (2021) emphasized resilience as a key leadership resource in difficult school contexts. These studies are relevant to the present inquiry because they show that leadership is not only strategic but also affective and human-centered. School heads are required to sustain commitment, empathy, and composure while confronting persistent underperformance.

Phenomenological studies are particularly useful in this area because they move beyond surface-level descriptions of leadership practice. Instead of treating low performance only as a measurable school outcome, phenomenology allows researchers to examine how school heads experience, interpret, and respond to underperformance as a lived reality. Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method provides a rigorous structure for such inquiry by preserving participant voices while identifying the essential meanings of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow et al., 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019). The present study contributes to this line of inquiry by documenting how school heads in low-performing schools construct leadership through challenge, strategy, collaboration, resilience, and meaning-making.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design. The design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the essence of school heads' lived experiences in managing low-performing schools rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses. Phenomenology enabled the researcher to obtain rich descriptions of the leadership realities, challenges, strategies, motivations, and support mechanisms experienced by school heads within their actual school contexts.

The study was conducted in the Surigao City Division, Surigao del Norte, Philippines. The informants were ten public school heads assigned in schools identified as low-performing based on division-level performance indicators. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required that the informant be a current public school head or principal in the Surigao City Division, have at least two consecutive years of assignment in a low-performing school, have involvement in school improvement efforts, and be willing to participate voluntarily.



The researcher served as the primary instrument of the study. Data were collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews guided by the grand tour question: 'Can you describe your experiences, challenges, and leadership practices in managing your low-performing school?' Follow-up questions were used to elicit further descriptions of leadership challenges, interventions, accountability, support systems, and insights. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes. Data collection continued until thematic sufficiency was reached.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the data, extracted significant statements, formulated meanings, clustered similar meanings into themes, developed emergent themes, wrote an exhaustive description, distilled the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and validated the findings through member checking. Trustworthiness was supported through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures, including member checking, thick description, audit trail documentation, reflexive journaling, and the use of verbatim quotations.

Ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and school names were not disclosed in the manuscript. Interview data and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes. The researcher practiced reflexivity and bracketing to reduce bias and to preserve the authenticity of informants' narratives.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the informants' profile and the emergent themes generated through Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological analysis. The discussion emphasizes the meaning of leadership in low-performing schools as articulated by the school heads themselves.

Table 1. Informants' Biographical Information

Informant	Current Position	Type of School	Years as School Leader	School Location
Andres	School Head	Elementary	4 years	Rural, coastal, geographically isolated
Luna	Principal	Elementary	12 years	Rural
Rafael	Principal	Elementary	7 years	Rural and coastal
Isabela	School Head	Elementary	11 years	Rural
Mateo	School Head	Elementary	2 years	Rural and coastal
Gabriela	Principal	Elementary	12 years	Rural and coastal
Diego	Principal	Elementary	3 years	Rural
Sofia	School Head	Elementary	3 years	Rural
Emilio	Principal	Elementary	2 years	Rural and geographically isolated
Clara	Principal	Junior High School	2 years	Rural

Table 1 shows that the informants represented varied school leadership contexts. Most were assigned in elementary schools, while one informant served in a junior high school. The school locations included rural, coastal, and geographically isolated contexts, and leadership experience ranged from two to twelve years. This profile is important because it situates the findings within diverse but consistently challenged school environments. School heads with longer service provided perspectives shaped by sustained exposure to leadership pressure, while those with shorter tenure reflected adjustment and immediate responses to underperformance.

Table 2. Summary of Emergent Themes and Meanings

Emergent Theme	Sub-themes	Essential Meaning
Intersecting Instructional and Organizational Challenges	Learner-related challenges and literacy gaps; teacher performance and instructional issues; structural and contextual constraints	School heads experienced underperformance as a convergence of learning gaps, instructional concerns, and resource or contextual limitations.
Visible Manifestations of Systemic Underperformance	Use of performance indicators; evidence of learner underachievement; root cause analysis	School heads recognized low performance through measurable indicators and observable learner difficulties, then interpreted these through root-cause analysis.
Strategic Leadership Practices and Capacity Building	Training and professional development; instructional supervision and coaching; adaptive and reflective leadership	School heads responded to underperformance through teacher support, coaching, monitoring, and flexible leadership strategies.
Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement	Internal collaboration; external stakeholder engagement; communication and partnership	School improvement was sustained through shared responsibility among teachers, parents, learners, community partners, and school leaders.
Resilient and Human-Centered Leadership	Emotional burden and pressure; resilience and persistence; human-centered leadership; recognition of progress	Leadership was experienced as emotionally demanding and morally complex, requiring empathy, resilience, and recognition of small gains.

Table 2 summarizes the five emergent themes that describe the essence of leading low-performing schools. The first theme indicates that school heads did not encounter isolated problems; rather, they dealt with overlapping learner, teacher, and structural concerns. The second theme shows that school heads used performance indicators, assessment results, and root-cause analysis to make sense of underperformance. The third theme reflects the action-oriented dimension of leadership, particularly through supervision, coaching, training, and adaptive decision-making. The fourth theme underscores the relational nature of school improvement, where internal and external collaboration helped sustain reform efforts. The fifth theme captures the emotional and ethical dimension of leadership, showing that resilience, empathy, and recognition of progress were essential in maintaining leadership commitment.

Table 3. Representative Verbalizations Supporting the Emergent Themes

Theme	Representative Verbalization	Interpretive Point
Instructional and organizational challenges	"Reading is one of the major problems and many learners are struggling." (Clara, L16-L18)	Foundational literacy gaps were central leadership concerns.
Instructional and organizational challenges	"Limited resources and large class sizes make it difficult to provide individualized attention." (Diego, L6-L8)	Resource scarcity and class size affected instructional support.
Systemic underperformance	"Exam results are monitored every quarter and we submit SMEA." (Isabela,	School heads used formal monitoring systems to track



	L58-L64)	performance.
Strategic leadership practices	“We analyze root data, prepare targeted intervention plans, meet regularly, and set clear improvement goals.” (Diego, L22-L24)	Leadership involved data-informed intervention planning.
Strategic leadership practices	“We intensify instructional supervision and provide technical assistance especially to new teachers.” (Rafael, L41-L48)	Supervision and technical assistance were used to strengthen teacher capacity.
Stakeholder engagement	“Parent meetings help families feel like partners.” (Emilio, L39-L41)	School improvement required meaningful parent partnership.
Human-centered leadership	“Leadership requires resilience and commitment.” (Clara, L67-L69)	Resilience was central to sustaining leadership under pressure.
Human-centered leadership	“Small improvements already mean a lot.” (Clara, L61-L63)	Leaders redefined progress through incremental improvement.

Table 3 provides representative verbalizations that support the emergent themes. The statements show that the informants' leadership experiences were grounded in concrete school realities, including reading gaps, insufficient resources, large classes, monitoring requirements, and the need for targeted interventions. The excerpts also reveal how school heads made sense of their roles through partnership, resilience, and incremental progress. These accounts support the interpretation that leadership in low-performing schools is both evidence-based and deeply human.

Theme 1: Intersecting Instructional and Organizational Challenges

The first theme shows that school heads encountered underperformance as a layered problem involving learner difficulties, teacher performance concerns, and structural constraints. Literacy gaps, weak mastery, limited resources, and large classes shaped the instructional environment. The theme suggests that school heads cannot address low performance only through administrative compliance; they must understand the instructional roots of underachievement and the organizational conditions that constrain improvement.

Theme 2: Visible Manifestations of Systemic Underperformance

The second theme indicates that school heads identified underperformance through formal indicators and direct evidence of learner underachievement. Monitoring of examination results, quarterly performance reviews, school monitoring and evaluation reports, and root-cause analysis helped leaders interpret the status of their schools. This confirms that effective leadership in low-performing settings requires evidence-based sense-making. However, the findings also show that data become meaningful only when school heads use them to design targeted interventions rather than simply to comply with reporting requirements.

Theme 3: Strategic Leadership Practices and Capacity Building

The third theme captures the intervention-oriented practices of school heads. Informants described training, teacher development, technical assistance, instructional supervision, coaching, and reflective adjustment as essential responses to low performance. These practices align with the literature on instructional leadership, which emphasizes that leaders affect student learning indirectly through their influence on teacher practice and school climate (Bellibas et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). The findings show that school heads led improvement by building teacher capacity rather than merely enforcing accountability.



Theme 4: Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

The fourth theme highlights collaboration as a practical and relational mechanism for sustaining school improvement. School heads relied on teachers, parents, learners, community partners, and external stakeholders to support programs and interventions. Parent meetings, communication, and partnership-building were interpreted not only as support strategies but also as ways of creating shared responsibility. This finding strengthens the view that low-performing schools require community-centered improvement efforts, especially when internal resources are limited.

Theme 5: Resilient and Human-Centered Leadership

The fifth theme presents leadership as emotionally demanding and human-centered. School heads described pressure, discouragement, accountability demands, and emotional strain, but they also emphasized resilience, commitment, empathy, and recognition of small progress. This theme supports research on emotional labor and resilience among school leaders (Kutsyuruba et al., 2021; Silbaugh et al., 2023). It further shows that in low-performing schools, progress is not always dramatic or immediate; school heads sustain themselves by valuing incremental improvement and maintaining purpose.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that leading low-performing schools is a complex, contextual, and human-centered phenomenon. School heads navigate intersecting instructional, organizational, and structural challenges while interpreting underperformance through data, learner outcomes, and root-cause analysis. Their leadership is enacted through strategic interventions such as teacher capacity building, instructional supervision, coaching, and reflective adaptation. However, the findings also show that improvement cannot be sustained by the school head alone. Collaboration with teachers, parents, learners, community partners, and external stakeholders is necessary in mobilizing resources and strengthening school improvement efforts. At the same time, school heads require emotional resilience, empathy, and recognition of small gains to sustain leadership under pressure.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that leadership development programs for school heads be made more context-responsive by including modules on data-informed decision-making, instructional supervision, teacher coaching, stakeholder engagement, crisis-sensitive leadership, and resilience-building. The Schools Division Office may strengthen mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance systems for school heads assigned in low-performing schools, particularly those in rural, coastal, and geographically isolated contexts. School improvement planning should also integrate root-cause analysis, targeted interventions, and mechanisms for monitoring incremental progress. Schools may strengthen parent and community engagement systems to ensure that school improvement becomes a shared responsibility rather than the burden of the school head alone. Future researchers may conduct comparative qualitative or mixed-method studies involving teachers, parents, learners, and division personnel to broaden understanding of leadership and improvement processes in low-performing schools.

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CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Crischel Virtudazo-Pugoy: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Review and Editing, and Project Administration.

Ethical Statement



Informed consent was obtained from all informants before data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms and secure handling of interview data. The study complied with applicable ethical and data protection standards for qualitative research.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no competing financial, personal, institutional, or professional interests that may have influenced the conduct or findings of this research.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional approval, participant confidentiality, and applicable data privacy requirements.

AI Usage Disclosure

AI-assisted tools were used only for language refinement, organization, translation support, grammar checking, and formatting assistance. The author reviewed, verified, and approved the final manuscript and remains responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and interpretation of the research content.

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