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Navigating Shared Leadership: An Inquiry on the Challenges and Coping Strategies Among School Heads

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Abstract: This study explored public elementary school heads' lived experiences of implementing shared leadership, focusing on challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights for strengthening collaborative leadership. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed with nine purposively selected school heads from small, medium, and large public elementary schools in Tarragona District, Davao Oriental. Data were gathered through individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using a validated semi-structured interview guide and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Findings identified three categories of challenges: building teachers' readiness for shared leadership, managing organizational constraints, and maintaining collaborative relationships. In response, school heads developed teachers as shared leaders, optimized organizational resources, and strengthened collaborative practices. The findings suggest that sustainable shared leadership depends on teacher preparation, organizational support, and trust-based participation. The study proposes a structured teacher leadership development program, stronger organizational support systems, and a school culture of open communication and inclusive decision-making. These conclusions reflect participants' experiences rather than measured intervention effects.

Keywords: *An Inquiry, Navigating Shared Leadership, Challenges and Coping Strategies, Among School Heads.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Shared leadership emphasizes the distribution of influence and responsibilities among school stakeholders to foster collaboration, innovation, and collective decision-making. Although it can help schools respond to complex organizational demands, school heads may struggle to balance their formal authority with teachers' meaningful participation. Understanding these difficulties is essential for developing leadership practices that are both inclusive and workable in public elementary schools.

International scholarship describes shared leadership as a dynamic process in which leadership functions and influence are exercised among team members (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Farley (2024) argues that shared leadership can support staff development and professional morale in schools. Abdillah et al. (2023) similarly associate shared leadership with meaningful work and collaborative team practices. Nevertheless, Chen and Zhang (2022) caution that shared leadership can also have negative effects, making its conditions and implementation challenges worthy of examination.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 9155, or the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, establishes a framework of shared governance and accountability across levels of the education system. Torres et al. (2024) associate shared leadership with professional learning and collective problem-solving, while Macapobre et al. (2024) identify structural and resource constraints facing educational leaders. In Davao City, Escobar (2024) describes shared leadership in relation to teachers' teamwork and collaborative problem-solving.

In Tarragona District, Davao Oriental, the researcher observed that school heads encounter resistance to change, limited stakeholder participation, and insufficient resources when attempting to implement shared leadership. Although existing literature discusses its benefits and general obstacles, context-specific accounts of how school heads experience and respond to these difficulties remain limited. Accordingly, this study investigated (1) the challenges school heads encounter in implementing shared leadership, (2) how they cope with these challenges, and (3) the insights that can strengthen shared leadership practices in public elementary schools.

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The study was anchored on Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006), which situates leadership in interactions among leaders, followers, and their contexts, and Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978), which emphasizes motivation, shared purpose, and collective improvement. Together, these perspectives provide a lens for interpreting the structural and relational demands of shared leadership.

II. METHOD

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and responses of school heads implementing shared leadership in Tarragona District. The design enabled an in-depth examination of how participants understood the challenges of collaborative leadership and the strategies they used to address them (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Nine public elementary school heads were purposively selected on the basis of direct experience implementing shared leadership. To represent different organizational environments, the sample comprised three school heads from small schools, three from medium-sized schools, and three from large schools. This variation supported environmental triangulation by allowing comparisons across school contexts. Purposive sampling was appropriate for identifying information-rich participants (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024).

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions aligned with the three research questions. Experts in educational leadership, qualitative research, and educational management evaluated the guide for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness; it was pilot-tested with nonparticipants. Data were gathered through individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), allowing both detailed individual accounts and collective reflections.

Before gathering data, the researcher secured institutional endorsement, ethics clearance, and approval from the relevant Schools Division authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and gave voluntary informed consent, including consent to audio recording. Recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim and reviewed against participants' accounts. Confidentiality and participants' rights were observed throughout the research process.

The data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher compared IDI and FGD accounts, examined convergence and variation, and refined themes against the original narratives. Methodological triangulation across interviews and group discussions and environmental triangulation across school-size categories strengthened interpretation. Findings are qualitative and are not intended for statistical generalization.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The thematic analysis revealed distinct, cross-contextual dimensions characterizing the lived experiences of school heads implementing shared leadership paradigms. The findings are rigorously organized into three overarching thematic matrices corresponding to the research questions: (1) Challenges of School Heads, (2) Coping Mechanisms Employed, and (3) Actionable Insights Generated.

➢ *Challenges of School Heads in Implementing Shared Leadership*

The first research question yielded three interconnected themes: building teachers' readiness for shared leadership, managing organizational constraints, and maintaining collaborative relationships. These challenges demonstrate that sharing leadership responsibilities requires both individual preparation and organizational conditions that make participation possible.

- *Building Teachers' Readiness for Shared Leadership*

This theme highlights the difficulties school heads encountered in preparing teachers to participate actively in shared leadership. The findings show that resistance to change, limited leadership preparation, and hesitation to accept responsibilities complicated efforts to distribute leadership roles.

✓ Resistance to Change Among Teachers. School heads observed that teachers accustomed to principal-centered decisions were sometimes reluctant to participate in shared leadership. Established hierarchical routines made new expectations for initiative and collective responsibility unfamiliar. This echoes the challenges of sustaining distributed leadership identified by Kang and Svensson (2022).

✓ Insufficient Teacher Leadership Preparation. Participants described gaps in teachers' preparation for collaborative decision-making, conflict resolution, and leadership assignments. Some teachers requested reassurance before leading committees or school programs. The accounts indicate that participation cannot be assumed simply because responsibilities are delegated; it requires professional learning and developmental support.

✓ Teacher Hesitancy to Assume Leadership Roles. School heads reported that teachers sometimes waited for instructions or approval even when authorized to lead. Such hesitancy suggests uncertainty about responsibility and confidence, consistent with Irvine's (2021) discussion of teacher beliefs as potential barriers to distributed leadership.

- *Managing Organizational Constraints*

This theme concerns the structural and operational conditions that restricted school heads' efforts to implement shared leadership. Heavy administrative workloads, limited time for collaboration, and insufficient resources made it difficult to sustain collective planning and leadership activities.

✓ Heavy Administrative Workload of School Heads. Participants described administrative and reporting

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obligations that competed with time for mentoring, consultation, and shared decision-making. This suggests that school heads may support collaborative leadership in principle yet lack sufficient operational capacity to sustain it.

- ✓ Limited Time for Collaborative Leadership. School heads identified scheduling pressures and competing instructional responsibilities as barriers to meetings, consultation, and joint planning. Shared leadership consequently required intentional time allocation rather than relying on incidental opportunities for collaboration.
- ✓ Resource Limitations. Inadequate material, financial, or logistical resources constrained shared initiatives and opportunities for teacher leadership development. These accounts align with the thesis's discussion of structural barriers to educational leadership (Macapobre et al., 2024).

- *Maintaining Collaborative Relationships*

This theme reflects the interpersonal challenges of sustaining cooperation while distributing leadership responsibilities. School heads needed to balance trust with accountability, address communication barriers, and negotiate differing perspectives during shared decision-making.

- ✓ Balancing Trust and Accountability. School heads described the need to empower teachers while remaining accountable for school outcomes. Sharing responsibility did not remove the school head's formal obligations. Bokhart (2022) similarly cautions that shared leadership does not eliminate administrative accountability.
- ✓ Communication Barriers. Differences in information access, expectations, and communication practices complicated coordination. Participants emphasized that collaborative leadership depends on clear, sustained exchanges that allow teachers to understand roles, contribute ideas, and respond to concerns.
- ✓ Negotiating Consensus in Shared Decision-Making. Participants reported that divergent perspectives sometimes prolonged decisions and produced disagreement. One school head explained that reaching a decision acceptable to everyone takes longer because teachers hold different priorities. These accounts suggest that inclusive decision-making requires patient facilitation rather than the absence of conflict.

➢ *Coping Mechanisms of School Heads in Implementing Shared Leadership*

In response to these challenges, school heads described three main coping mechanisms: developing teachers as shared leaders, optimizing organizational resources, and strengthening collaborative practices. These were practices reported by participants, not strategies whose effectiveness was experimentally tested.

- *Developing Teachers as Shared Leaders*

This theme describes how school heads built teachers' confidence and capacity to assume leadership responsibilities. They used mentoring and coaching, expanded professional learning opportunities, and gradually delegated tasks to support teachers' development as shared leaders.

- ✓ Providing Leadership Mentoring and Coaching. Participants supported teachers who assumed leadership responsibilities through close guidance, encouragement, and feedback. Mentoring helped teachers navigate unfamiliar tasks while maintaining responsibility for school initiatives.
- ✓ Expanding Leadership Development Opportunities. School heads encouraged participation in seminars and professional development and asked trained teachers to share learning with colleagues. This widened access to leadership knowledge despite unequal opportunities to attend external training. Such peer learning is consistent with the collaborative professional development discussed by Admiraal et al. (2021).
- ✓ Empowering Teachers Through Gradual Delegation. Rather than immediately assigning major leadership tasks, school heads began with manageable responsibilities and increased teachers' roles as confidence grew. This approach linked teacher empowerment with continuing support and accountability.

- *Optimizing Organizational Resources for Shared Leadership*

This theme emphasizes the practical adjustments school heads made to sustain shared leadership despite organizational limitations. They prioritized administrative responsibilities, integrated collaborative planning into available time, and mobilized school resources and external partnerships

- ✓ Prioritizing and Managing Administrative Responsibilities. School heads described organizing and prioritizing administrative duties to preserve attention for leadership activities. Their accounts suggest that effective delegation requires practical management of routine obligations.
- ✓ Maximizing Time Through Collaborative Planning. Participants integrated planning and consultation into existing school routines and used scheduled discussions to make collaboration feasible. This response directly addressed the shortage of time for shared leadership.
- ✓ Mobilizing Available Resources and Partnerships. School heads drew on available school resources and partnerships with parents, community stakeholders, and local institutions. Such resource mobilization supported school initiatives where internal resources were insufficient.

- *Strengthening Collaborative Practices in Shared Leadership*

This theme highlights the relational strategies school heads used to make shared leadership more effective and sustainable. Building trust through shared responsibility, maintaining open communication, and encouraging inclusive decision-making helped strengthen cooperation among school personnel.

- ✓ Building Trust Through Shared Responsibility. School heads distributed tasks while encouraging mutual respect,

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reliability, and collective ownership. This emphasis is consistent with Abson et al. (2024), who identify trust as foundational to shared leadership.

- ✓ Promoting Open and Continuous Communication. Participants used regular dialogue, updates, and opportunities for feedback to reduce misunderstandings and encourage teachers to raise concerns. Open communication helped connect individual responsibilities to common school goals.
- ✓ Facilitating Consensus Through Inclusive Decision-Making. School heads invited teachers' perspectives, mediated differences, and worked toward agreements centered on school priorities. The findings suggest that consensus develops through deliberation and compromise rather than unilateral direction.
- ✓ Insights to Strengthen Shared Leadership Practices. The insights derived from the school heads' experiences point to the need for sustained teacher leadership development, stronger organizational support, and a collaborative school culture. Together, these directions address the preparation, resource, and relationship challenges identified in the study and offer practical ways to strengthen shared leadership in public elementary schools.

- *Establish a Structured Teacher Leadership Development Program*

The study recommends institutionalizing mentoring, coaching, leadership workshops, peer learning, and progressively challenging leadership responsibilities. This direction responds to teachers' resistance, insufficient preparation, and hesitation to lead, while formalizing coping practices already used by school heads.

- *Strengthen Organizational Support Systems for Collaborative Leadership*

The study proposes streamlining administrative processes, protecting time for collaborative planning, and expanding access to resources and community partnerships. Such support is necessary to reduce the workload, time, and resource constraints identified by participants.

- *Foster a School Culture of Trust, Communication, and Inclusive Decision-Making*

The study emphasizes transparent communication, shared accountability, respectful dialogue, and meaningful participation in school decisions. These practices respond to challenges involving trust, communication barriers, and the negotiation of consensus, and are consistent with the importance of trust highlighted by Abson et al. (2024).

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