



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Lived experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century school leaders: A phenomenological study

Caryn N. Marquez <sup>1,\*</sup> and Jennifer S. Rubio <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graduate School, Mabini Colleges Inc., Capalonga, Camarines Norte, Philippines.

<sup>2</sup> Graduate School, Mabini Colleges Inc., Daet, Camarines Norte, Philippines.

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### Abstract

School leadership in the 21st century requires adaptability, innovation, and strong interpersonal competencies. This study described and documented the lived experiences of school heads in navigating their roles as 21st-century leaders in public elementary schools in the Capalonga District, focusing on how they exercise critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication; the challenges they encounter; and the strategies they employ to cope with leadership demands. Ten (10) purposively selected public elementary school heads participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically using NVivo, following framework analysis procedures. The study revealed the following findings: 1.) School leaders consistently demonstrated the 4Cs of 21st-century leadership critical thinking was shown through root-cause analysis, evidence-seeking, and reflective judgment; creativity appeared through classroom innovations, improvised resources, and encouraging teacher initiative; collaboration was practiced through shared planning, stakeholder involvement, and strong community partnerships; and communication was reflected in transparent information flow, regular consultations, and conflict-resolution practices. 2.) Leaders encountered key challenges such as excessive workload, limited resources and manpower, overlapping policies, and competing expectations from parents, teachers, and the division office. 3.) To cope with these challenges, school leaders relied on task prioritization, delegation, peer mentoring, emotional regulation, continuous learning, and mobilizing support from parents, LGUs, and community partners. 4.) Based on the results, an intervention program, the “LEAD21: Leadership Enhancement and Development Toolkit for 21st-Century School Heads” was developed to strengthen school leaders’ competencies through structured routines, reflection tools, governance templates, communication guides, and resilience-building strategies. From these findings, the study concluded the following: 1.) 21st-century leadership among school heads is characterized by an iterative cycle of analysis, creativity, collaboration, and communication that guides their everyday decision-making. 4.) A structured leadership support program is needed to strengthen capacity, reduce role strain, and promote sustainable leadership practices.

**Keywords:** 21st-Century Leadership; Critical Thinking; Creativity; Collaboration; Communication

### 1. Introduction

The role of school leaders has evolved significantly in the 21st century, with increasing demands placed on them to navigate modern education. Globally, UNESCO’s Education 2030 Agenda highlights the necessity of qualified school leaders to achieve education targets and emphasizes equitable and quality education for all [1]. School leaders need to think strategically about the goals and systems that will support student success in a rapidly changing world [2].

Additionally, modern educational leaders are tasked with building teacher capacity by empowering teachers and involving them in decision-making processes to enhance instructional practices [3]. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) strengthened leadership expectations through the Philippine Professional Standards for School

\* Corresponding author: Caryn N. Marquez

Heads (PPSSH) under DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020, which promotes continuous professional development and effective leadership practices [4].

In rural settings, principals often juggle multiple roles while addressing the unique needs of their communities, including limited infrastructure and resources [5]. In Capalonga District, school leaders also face challenges in organizing and gathering data information, ensuring clear direction setting, and navigating digital issues such as the authenticity and reliability of online resources, alongside limited resources and a generation gap in utilizing technology.

While research recognizes the value of professional development and innovative leadership strategies [6], there remains a gap in understanding how school leaders in rural Philippine contexts experience and respond to 21st-century challenges. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of elementary school leaders in the Capalonga District, including the challenges they encounter, their coping strategies, and an intervention that may be proposed to enhance 21st-century leadership skills.

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## 2. Materials and Methods

This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of 21st-century school leaders. This approach is ideal for capturing the participants' personal perspectives and understanding the deeper meaning behind their leadership practices (Neubauer, 2019). The population of this study is the public-school principals in the elementary schools in the Capalonga District. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 public school leaders who met the following criteria: (1) they have been serving as school leaders for at least five years; (2) they are actively serving during the school year 2024–2025; and (3) they demonstrate active involvement in addressing 21st-century educational leadership challenges, such as integrating technology, managing resources, and fostering teacher development. To ensure a diverse range of leadership experiences, the principals were selected from different schools within the district.

Data collection followed a structured and ethical process. An approval letter was secured from the relevant authorities in SDO Camarines Norte, and consent forms were provided to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher and focused on participants lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies as 21st-century leaders. The interview guide consisted of three parts: Part I addressed lived experiences anchored on critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication; Part II explored challenges encountered by school leaders; and Part III examined coping strategies and support systems. The interview guide was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts composed of two school principals and three master teachers, and their comments were used to refine the wording, sequence, and clarity of the questions. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed for accuracy. The researcher engaged in bracketing to set aside personal biases and ensure the authenticity of participants' perspectives. Data analysis adopted the Framework Analysis Methodology outlined by Goldsmith (2021) and used NVivo software.

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## 3. Results and discussion

The lived experiences of 21st-century school leaders in this study show a practical cycle of diagnosing problems, co-planning solutions, communicating clearly, and adjusting as situations change. Leaders use critical thinking to find root causes, apply creative and contextualized strategies in teaching, collaborate with staff and community partners, and keep information and expectations transparent. They face heavy workloads, limited funds and facilities, and overlapping policies that strain time and attention. To cope, they reprioritize tasks, seek peer support, and engage in continuous learning and mentoring. Overall, leadership is framed as steady, team-based work that protects instruction and builds small, repeatable improvements despite constraints.

*Critical Thinking.* Participants described critical thinking as careful analysis of problems, evidence-based judgment, consultative planning, and reflective self-regulation in decision-making. Table 1 clusters their accounts into three themes: (1) Analytical and Evidence-Based Decision Making, (2) Strategic Problem Solving and Planning and (3) Reflective and Composed Decision Behavior. Overall, participants commonly begin with causal diagnosis, translate this into consultative plans, and regulate responses to adjust decisions as conditions change.

Participants emphasized identifying the problem and its causes before choosing solutions. P1 stated:

***“Tinitingnan ko muna kung ano yung problema... kinukuha ko ano yung mga sanhi... then saka ako magdedecide ng solution.”*** (“I first look at what the problem is... then I identify its causes... and only then do I decide on a solution.”)

Moreover, they described that making decisions are more implementable through consultation and visible prioritization under constraints. P6 explained:

***“During budgeting... you convene the stakeholders... you plot it on the board and let them see everything... That’s how I use critical thinking.”*** (*“During budgeting... you convene the stakeholders... you post it on the board and let them see everything... that’s how I apply critical thinking.”*)

They also highlighted pausing, composure, and reflection to prevent reactive decisions and sustain working relationships. P9 shared:

***“Pig-hold ko yung sarili ko, pig-compose ko yung sarili ko, huminga lang malalim... realized mali yun so nag-back out ako.”*** (*“I held myself back, composed myself, took a deep breath... I realized it was wrong, so I stepped back.”*)’

Across themes, critical thinking appears as an iterative cycle of diagnosing, planning with stakeholders, and reflecting to regulate and adjust decisions in response to changing situations.

**Creativity.** School leaders described creativity as generating context-fit solutions, redesigning instruction, adapting resources under constraints, and enabling others’ creativity through autonomy and recognition. The responses of the participants are clustered three themes: (1) Instructional Innovation and Flexibility, (2) Resourcefulness and Adaptive Solutions, and (3) Motivation and Empowerment through Creativity. Overall, participants most frequently located creativity in redesigned classroom instruction, followed by adaptive responses to resource limitations, with a complementary emphasis on motivating teachers and learners to generate and own creative ideas.

Leaders described deliberate departures from routine pedagogy to make learning more engaging. P1 stated:

***“Nagtatry kami ng mga bagong strategies para mas maging interesting ang class hindi lang puro lecture.”*** (*“We try new strategies to make classes more interesting, not just pure lectures.”*)

Similarly, they highlighted improvisation when materials are limited. P6 recalled:

***“During the pandemic, wala kaming materials gumamit kami ng recycled items sa science lab activities.”*** (*“During the pandemic, we lacked materials, so we used recycled items for science lab activities.”*)

They also emphasized creating opportunities and recognition that encourage experimentation. P9 shared:

***“Binibigyan ko sila ng chance to explore their creative side kahit simpleng class decorations o outputs.”*** (*“I give them a chance to explore their creative side even in simple class decorations or outputs.”*)

Across themes, creativity appears as a set of repeatable leadership practices redesigning instruction, improvising solutions under constraints, and encouraging and recognizing innovation among teachers and learners.

**Collaboration.** Participants described collaboration as shared planning and decision-making, active consultation with teachers and staff, and purposeful partnerships with parents, LGUs, and community groups. Table 3 clusters their narratives into three themes: (1) Participatory Decision-Making (shared planning, team consultation, inclusive leadership), (2) Strengthening Stakeholder Partnership (parent–community involvement, external collaboration, shared accountability), and (3) Team Empowerment and Mutual Support (peer mentoring, shared responsibilities, recognition and motivation). School leaders most often described collaboration as inclusive internal decision routines, followed by deliberate engagement of parents and community partners, with complementary attention to collegial mentoring and task-sharing.

The respondents emphasized convergence-seeking through consultation before major decisions. P2 stated:

***“Ina-analyze ko kung saan sila magkakasundo at yun ang aking ginagawa... nag-me-meet kami sa gitna para maging effective sila para sa learners.”*** (*“I analyze where my teachers can agree, and that’s what I pursue; we meet halfway to be effective for learners.”*)

School leaders highlighted involving parents, LGUs, and community partners to strengthen ownership and implementation. P8 shared:

***“We collaborate with barangay officials and NG***

***Os para sa cleanliness drive at reading programs.”*** (“*We collaborate with barangay officials and NGOs for cleanliness drives and reading programs.*”)

Leaders described shared work and peer support as practical mechanisms that sustain implementation. P7 explained:

***“We share tasks para hindi mabigat sa isa lang. Lahat may ambag, may cooperation.”*** (“*We share tasks so the work isn’t heavy for one person; everyone contributes and cooperates.*”)

Collaboration appears as a cycle of inclusive internal planning, community partnership for shared accountability, and mutual support through mentoring and task-sharing that strengthens coordinated action for teaching and learning.

**Communication.** Participants described communication as sharing clear plans and expectations, maintaining open channels for feedback, and handling disagreements through respectful dialogue. Participants narratives into three themes: (1) Open and Transparent Communication, (2) Constructive Conflict Management and Feedback, and (3) Motivational and Empathetic Communication. Participants most frequently used communication to keep plans and standards visible, followed by dialogue to manage tensions and provide feedback, with complementary emphasis on sustaining trust and morale through empathetic talk.

School leaders emphasized keeping everyone informed and aligned through accessible channels. P1 stated:

***“Importante sa akin na lahat informed. I make sure na may open line of communication, lalo na sa mga decisions ng school.”*** (“*It’s important to me that everyone is informed. I make sure there is an open line of communication, especially for school decisions.*”)

They also highlighted calm, professional dialogue to resolve issues without escalation. P2 explained:

***“We discuss issues openly. Hindi ako yung tipong nagagalit agad gusto ko, pinag-uusapan.”*** (“*We discuss issues openly. I’m not the type who gets angry right away; I prefer talking it through.*”)

Furthermore, leaders described listening and affirmation as ways to build trust and sustain effort. P7 shared:

***“Kailangan marunong kang makinig, lalo na kapag may problema sila, para makuha mo yung loob nila.”*** (“*You must know how to listen, especially when they have problems, so you can gain their trust.*”)

Communication appears as a coordinated cycle of clarifying information, resolving issues through respectful dialogue, and reinforcing effort through empathy and encouragement, helping keep the school community aligned around teaching and learning.

**Challenges Encountered by School Leaders.** The school leaders described challenges as conditions that hinder effective leadership and school management, particularly in balancing administrative duties, instructional supervision, and stakeholder engagement. Table 5 clusters their narratives into three themes: (1) Excessive Workload and Administrative Demands (time constraints, overlapping tasks, burnout), (2) Limited Resources and Support Systems (inadequate funding, lack of facilities, insufficient manpower), and (3) Managing Stakeholder Expectations and Policy Pressures (conflicting demands, policy overload, accountability stress). Overall, school heads primarily struggled with heavy administrative workload, followed by chronic resource gaps and compounded pressure from multiple, often competing, expectations.

The participants emphasized how overlapping reports, meetings, and deadlines interfere with instructional leadership. P1 stated:

***“Sabay-sabay na reports, training, at meetings. Minsan, hindi mo na alam alin ang uunahin.”*** (“*Reports, trainings, and meetings all come at the same time. Sometimes you no longer know what to prioritize.*”)

Meanwhile, leaders highlighted persistent shortages that require personal sacrifice and improvisation. P2 shared:

***“Kulang sa materials, minsan sariling bulsa namin ginagamit para maituloy ang project.”*** (“*We lack materials, and sometimes we use our own money just to continue the project.*”)

In addition, leaders described stress arising from competing demands and frequent directives. P9 explained:

***“Minsan magkaiba ang gusto ng parents, teachers, at division lahat gusto mong i-please.”*** (“Sometimes parents, teachers, and the division want different things, and you try to please everyone.”)

The challenges encountered by school leaders appear as layered and reinforcing pressures administrative overload reduces time for instructional supervision, limited resources constrain basic operations, and policy and stakeholder demands intensify accountability stress. Together, these conditions shape the everyday reality of school leadership, requiring continuous prioritization and coordination to sustain school performance despite persistent constraints.

**Coping Strategies of School Leaders.** School leaders described coping strategies as deliberate routines that help them manage heavy workloads, resource gaps, and policy demands while protecting instructional priorities. Table 6 clusters their narratives into three themes: (1) Adaptability and Strategic Adjustment (task reprioritization, time management, contextual decision-making), (2) Peer Support and Collaborative Coping (team consultation, shared emotional support, peer mentoring), and (3) Continuous Learning and Professional Growth (attending seminars, reflective practice, seeking mentorship). Overall, school heads most often coped by reorganizing work and schedules, followed by relying on collegial support, with complementary emphasis on learning from experiences and development opportunities.

Leaders emphasized prioritizing tasks and adjusting plans to fit current demands. P1 stated:

***“Kapag sabay-sabay ang task, I list down kung alin ang urgent, tapos doon ako nagfofocus.”*** (“When tasks overlap, I list what is urgent first and focus on that.”)

School leaders highlighted consultation and shared support to reduce stress and isolation. P2 shared:

***“Nag-oopen ako sa mga co-teachers at co-leaders, kasi mahirap kung ako lang mag-isa nagdadala ng problema.”*** (“I open up to my co-teachers and co-leaders because it is hard to carry the problems alone.”)

Moreover, participants described training and mentoring as sources of new ideas and improved practice. P7 stated:

***“Sumasali ako sa mga webinar at leadership training para may bagong ideas.”*** (“I attend webinars and leadership training to gain new ideas.”)

Across themes, coping appears as a repeatable cycle of reprioritizing and adjusting, drawing support through consultation and mentoring, and strengthening capacity through continuous learning, enabling school heads to sustain school operations and decision quality despite persistent pressures.

### **3.1 Proposed intervention**

In response to the findings of this study, a structured leadership development toolkit titled “LEAD21: Leadership Enhancement and Development Toolkit for 21st-Century School Heads” was developed to address the Statement of the Problem and the lived experiences of school leaders in the Capalonga District. The toolkit is designed to strengthen school heads’ capacity by institutionalizing practical routines aligned with the core competencies of 21st-century leadership critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication while also addressing key challenges such as administrative workload, limited resources, and policy pressures.

In relation to SOP No. 1, the toolkit formalizes practices that leaders already use (problem diagnosis, resourceful innovation, shared decision-making, and transparent communication) through decision-making templates, planning routines, innovation cycles, stakeholder collaboration forms, and communication scripts, making these routines deliberate, consistent, and transferable, particularly for newly designated administrators. Aligned with SOP No. 2, it includes priority mapping, delegation matrices, resource mobilization templates, and policy-intake logs to help leaders organize workload, leverage partnerships, and harmonize directives to prevent task overload. In connection with SOP No. 3, it embeds peer support routines, brief reflective sessions (“coffee debriefs”), and monthly micro-learning commitments to sustain resilience and continuous professional growth. Addressing SOP No. 4, the toolkit is intended for a 90-day roll-out cycle, with progressive adoption of tools and involvement of department heads, teacher-leaders, and school governing stakeholders to reinforce shared leadership and sustainability.

Implementation includes orientation, guided practice, monitoring, and quarterly review using documentation logs, leadership check-ins, and school-level feedback to track adoption and effectiveness. The researcher will disseminate the

study results and the toolkit to Capalonga District school heads through a district-level presentation and distribution of printed and digital copies, conducted either in-person or virtually. Following approval, the Public Schools District Supervisor (PSDS) of Capalonga District will validate the toolkit by reviewing its relevance, clarity, feasibility, and alignment with DepEd leadership standards and will provide recommendations for refinement prior to district-wide adoption

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#### 4. Conclusion

The study concludes that 21st-century school leadership, as reflected in the lived experiences of the participants and the thematic analysis, is characterized by evidence-informed decision-making, creative and flexible instructional leadership, collaborative planning and shared governance, and transparent communication that aligns people, processes, and school goals. However, school leaders' capacity to sustain instructional priorities and continuous improvement is significantly constrained by administrative overload, resource limitations in funding, facilities, and manpower, and the presence of frequent or competing directives. Despite these challenges, school leaders continue to maintain school performance by strategically prioritizing and reorganizing tasks, relying on peer collaboration and support networks, and strengthening their competence through continuous professional learning and mentorship. These findings indicate the need for a structured capacity-building toolkit to institutionalize effective leadership practices, promote consistency across school contexts, and support the scalable development of school heads.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

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No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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