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STEERING THE TRANSITION: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN ADAPTING LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING DURING THE MATATAG TRANSITION

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum reforms place school principals at the center of implementation, yet their lived experiences of adapting leadership and decision-making during an ongoing transition remain underexplored, particularly in Philippine basic education. This study explored how public elementary school principals adapted their leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition. It examined how principals adapted their leadership practices and the meanings they attached to these adaptations, the essence of their decision-making processes, how they drew on knowledge, values, and relationships to manage conflicts and sustain collaboration, and the lessons they derived for future practice. Anchored on Fullan's Educational Change Theory, Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory, and Simon's Administrative Behavior Theory, the study employed a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological design. Nine principals and officers-in-charge in the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan, were selected through purposive criterion sampling until data saturation. Interview data, gathered with an expert-validated guide, were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, with trustworthiness established through Lincoln and Guba's criteria. Seven transition-specific themes emerged. Principals translated the decongested curriculum into lesson plans, built school-made materials where textbooks were absent, and read learners' literacy and numeracy results as a call beyond compliance. They guarded instructional time, paced implementation to teacher readiness, negotiated teaching and intervention loads, and made learner gaps a shared school concern. Principals did not simply implement the reform; they made it workable, and they judged its workability by what it did for learners. They concluded that preparation should begin earlier and that reform should not rest on their resourcefulness alone.

Keywords: *adaptive leadership, curriculum transition, decision-making, lived experiences, MATATAG Curriculum, phenomenology, school principals*

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Educational reform has become a global priority as countries strive to improve learning outcomes and prepare learners for the demands of the twenty-first century. These reforms require governments to redesign curricula, strengthen governance, and enhance school leadership to ensure successful implementation. This global effort aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2024) emphasizes that effective school leadership is essential in translating educational policies into improved teaching, learning, and school performance. Consequently, understanding how school leaders steer educational transitions has become an important area of educational research.

As educational reforms continue to reshape school systems worldwide, the responsibilities of school principals have expanded beyond administrative management to include leading curriculum implementation, supporting teachers, and making strategic decisions during periods of change. Although Govindasamy and Mestry (2022) highlighted instructional leadership during curriculum reform and Ó Gallchóir et al. (2026) examined principals' sense-making and instructional leadership in curriculum reform enactment, these studies primarily examined how principals interpret and enact reforms within their school contexts. Less attention has been given to the lived experiences of school principals as they adapt their leadership and decision-making during ongoing curriculum transitions, particularly within the Philippine basic education context. This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological inquiry into principals' experiences during periods of curriculum reform.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education introduced the MATATAG Curriculum to improve foundational learning and address long-standing educational challenges through a decongested curriculum that prioritizes the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills (Department of Education, 2024). During the implementation, public elementary school principals are expected to lead instructional change, support teachers, manage resources, and make timely decisions that influence curriculum implementation and school improvement. However, Herrera (2025) found that the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum presented recurring challenges for teachers and school heads, including resource limitations, implementation concerns, training needs, and the need for adaptive leadership to sustain curriculum reforms. Despite the crucial role of school principals in this transition, their lived experiences in adapting leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG Curriculum implementation remain insufficiently explored. These realities highlight the need to understand principals' experiences within their respective school contexts.

Addressing the challenges encountered by public elementary school principals during the MATATAG transition requires a deeper understanding of how they adapt their leadership and decision-making in actual school settings. Exploring their lived experiences can generate evidence to strengthen leadership development, policy implementation, and support mechanisms for school leaders. The findings of this study may benefit the Department of Education in designing responsive leadership development initiatives and implementation strategies for future educational reforms. Likewise, public elementary school principals may gain practical insights that can help them strengthen their leadership practices and decision-making, while future researchers may use the findings as a reference for further studies on educational leadership and curriculum implementation.

This study is anchored on national and international policies that emphasize the importance of effective educational leadership in achieving quality education. Article XIV, Section 1 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution affirms the State's responsibility to provide quality education for all, while Republic Act No. 9155, or the *Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001*, recognizes school heads as key leaders in improving school performance and managing schools effectively. In support of this mandate, the Department of Education issued DepEd Order No. 10, s. 2024, which provides the policy guidelines for implementing the MATATAG Curriculum and highlights the role of school leaders

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in ensuring its successful implementation. These national policies, together with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), reinforce the importance of understanding how public elementary school principals adapt their leadership and decision-making during curriculum reform.

As educators pursuing the Doctor of Education program, the researchers have observed that curriculum reforms often emphasize teachers and learners while giving less attention to the experiences of school principals who lead these reforms. This observation motivated the researchers to explore how public elementary school principals adapt their leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition. The study is expected to contribute to the field of educational management by providing evidence that may strengthen leadership practice and policy implementation. Guided by these considerations, the research problem and questions stated in Section 1.11 were formulated.

Theoretical Framework

The present study was conceptualized along Fullan's Educational Change Theory (1982), Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory (1994), and Simon's Administrative Behavior Theory / Bounded Rationality Theory (1947).

Fullan's Educational Change Theory provides a foundational perspective for understanding how educational reforms are initiated, interpreted, implemented, and sustained within school organizations. Fullan (1982) conceptualized educational change as a complex and multidimensional process rather than a simple process of introducing new policies or practices. Educational change involves changes in beliefs, teaching practices, organizational arrangements, and the ways individuals understand and respond to reform. The theory emphasizes that successful change depends not only on the technical aspects of implementing a reform but also on the people who experience and enact the change. School leaders therefore play a critical role in facilitating change by creating shared understanding, building organizational capacity, addressing concerns, and supporting teachers as they adjust to new expectations. From this perspective, educational change is an evolving process characterized by interaction among individuals, organizational conditions, and the broader reform environment.

Fullan's Educational Change Theory is particularly relevant to the present study because the MATATAG transition represents a significant educational reform that requires public elementary school principals to navigate changes in curriculum expectations, instructional practices, school processes, and teacher responsibilities. The theory provides a lens for examining how principals understand the transition, communicate its implications, mobilize school personnel, and respond to difficulties encountered during implementation. It also supports an examination of the principals' experiences as they balance the demands of policy implementation with the needs and capacities of teachers and their schools. Thus, Fullan's theory explains the change context within which principals exercise leadership and make decisions during the MATATAG transition.

Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory provides a framework for understanding how leaders respond to complex challenges that cannot be addressed solely through established procedures or technical solutions. Heifetz (1994) distinguishes between technical problems, for which existing knowledge and procedures can provide solutions, and adaptive challenges, which require individuals and organizations to learn, change perspectives, modify practices, and adjust to new realities. Adaptive leadership emphasizes the leader's capacity to diagnose situations, regulate distress, maintain disciplined attention to difficult issues, give the work back to people, and protect voices of leadership from below. Rather than positioning the leader as the person who possesses all the answers, the theory views leadership as a process of mobilizing people to confront challenges, learn, and develop responses to changing circumstances. This perspective is particularly applicable to educational settings where reforms often involve uncertainty, resistance, competing expectations, and changes in established practices.

Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory directly supports the present study's focus on adapting leadership during the MATATAG transition. As principals encounter new curriculum requirements, varying levels of teacher readiness,

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resource limitations, implementation difficulties, and other emerging concerns, they may need to adjust their leadership approaches rather than rely exclusively on existing practices. The theory provides a lens for understanding how principals distinguish between problems that can be addressed through established procedures and challenges that require behavioral, relational, or organizational adaptation. It also helps explain how principals manage resistance, engage teachers, facilitate learning, and respond to uncertainty while maintaining the direction of the reform. Consequently, Heifetz's theory illuminates the adaptive leadership processes through which principals respond to the complexities of the MATATAG transition.

Simon's Administrative Behavior Theory provides a foundational explanation of decision-making within organizations. In Administrative Behavior, Simon (1947) challenged the assumption that administrators make decisions through complete and purely rational processes. He argued that decision-makers operate within limits imposed by incomplete information, time constraints, cognitive capacity, organizational structures, and the complexity of the situations they encounter. This perspective is associated with the concept of bounded rationality, which recognizes that individuals attempt to make rational decisions but are constrained by the information and resources available to them. Rather than evaluating every possible alternative and selecting an objectively optimal solution, administrators may rely on available information and select a course of action that is sufficiently satisfactory or workable under existing circumstances. Decision-making, therefore, is influenced not only by individual judgment but also by the organizational environment in which decisions are made.

Simon's perspective is highly relevant to the present study because decision-making is an explicit component of principals' experiences during the MATATAG transition. Public elementary school principals are required to make decisions while responding to policy requirements, limited resources, time pressures, teacher concerns, organizational demands, and circumstances that may not always be fully predictable. Simon's theory provides a lens for understanding how principals make and justify decisions when complete information or ideal conditions are unavailable. It allows the study to examine how principals weigh alternatives, prioritize competing demands, seek information, consult stakeholders, and arrive at practical courses of action amid uncertainty. Thus, Simon's theory explains the decision-making dimension of principals' experiences as they navigate the MATATAG transition.

Taken together, Fullan's Educational Change Theory, Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory, and Simon's Administrative Behavior Theory provide complementary perspectives for understanding the phenomenon investigated in the present study. Fullan explains the broader process of educational change and establishes the MATATAG transition as a complex reform that requires organizational and individual adjustment. Heifetz explains how principals adapt their leadership when they encounter technical and adaptive challenges that emerge during the transition. Simon explains how principals make decisions within the practical constraints of information, time, resources, organizational structures, and competing demands. The three theories therefore provide a logical progression from change to leadership adaptation to decision-making. Collectively, they offer a comprehensive theoretical lens for examining how public elementary school principals experience, interpret, navigate, and respond to the demands of the MATATAG transition. Rather than treating the three theories as competing explanations, the present study views them as complementary perspectives that illuminate different but interconnected dimensions of the principals' lived experiences: Fullan provides the change lens, Heifetz provides the adaptive leadership lens, and Simon provides the decision-making lens.

Review of Related Literature

The MATATAG Curriculum and the Role of the School Head

The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines initiated the MATATAG Curriculum (*Make the curriculum relevant to produce job-ready, active, and responsible citizens; Accelerate delivery of basic education facilities and services; Take good care of learners by promoting learner well-being, inclusive education, and a positive learning*

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environment; and Give support to teachers to teach better) to address national literacy deficits, curriculum overcrowding, and acute learning losses. The MATATAG framework decongests learning competencies by approximately 70%, prioritizes foundational reading and numeracy skills in Key Stage 1 (Kindergarten to Grade 3), and systematically embeds peace education, localization, and socio-emotional learning into daily pedagogy. While central education authorities establish national policy parameters, the operational translation of curriculum reform into classroom reality relies heavily on public elementary school principals. School heads occupy a vital position at the intersection of national mandates, severe administrative constraints, teacher capabilities, and community expectations. Transitioning to a new curriculum requires these administrators to move beyond routine managerial oversight and exercise flexible adaptive leadership.

The legal and professional expectations for public school administrators in the Philippines are established by DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020, which governs the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). The PPSSH establishes an institutional benchmark across five core domains: *Leading Strategically*, *Managing School Operations and Resources*, *Focusing on Teaching and Learning*, *Developing Self and Others*, and *Building Connections*. Recent empirical work reports that school heads' leadership practices across these domains are generally rated high (Patiga, 2025), and that Domain 3, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, is positioned as central to instructional leadership in the current reform environment (Department of Education, 2020), although at least one study found it the lowest-rated of the five domains (Apillanes, 2025). Under the MATATAG curriculum rollout, DepEd policy assigns school heads the management and supervision of curriculum implementation at the school level (Department of Education, 2024), and the conceptual emphasis of school leadership shifts toward Domain 3 and Domain 2, since principals are positioned not merely as office managers but as instructional leaders who must evaluate teacher competence and align local learning materials with national standards (Herrera, 2025).

Building upon the PPSSH, Republic Act No. 9155, also known as the *Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001*, provides the legal foundation for decentralization and school-based management (SBM). R.A. 9155 grants school principals administrative and instructional authority over their respective schools, explicitly charging them with creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Recent studies of SBM implementation in Philippine public elementary schools confirm that this decentralization remains uneven in practice, with persistent gaps in stakeholder engagement, resource tracking, and action follow-through (Patiam, 2025). In the context of the MATATAG transition, this legal framework empowers principals to exercise administrative discretion. It frames the school head as both an instructional leader and an administrative manager responsible for translating national DepEd memorandums into localized school-level policies, setting the stage for how administrative decisions are contextualized on the ground (Republic of the Philippines, 2001; Bentayao et al., 2024).

A recent mixed-methods evaluation of the first-year pilot across 70 schools in seven regions found that Grade 2 students in pilot schools demonstrated large, statistically significant learning gains across all subjects, while Grades 5 and 8 showed selective improvements, though issues such as delayed provision of learning materials, insufficient training, and uneven articulation of competencies across grade levels were also documented (Gavan et al., 2025). Scholars of educational reform, such as Darling-Hammond (2021), emphasize that structural changes in curriculum architecture directly alter instructional dynamics, requiring school heads to re-engineer daily class schedules, reassign teaching loads based on subject specializations, and overhaul formative assessment metrics.

As noted by Kilag et al. (2024), when central authorities reduce learning areas, school heads must manage the transition from broad content coverage to deep pedagogical mastery. Elementary principals must guide generalist teachers, who are accustomed to teaching broad subjects under the old K to 12 model, toward adapting to merged and restructured learning areas, learner-centered pedagogies, and revised instructional materials (Ampoyo & Uy, 2026; Gavan et al., 2025). Thus, curriculum decongestion invites principals to shift their supervisory focus from checking

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content coverage to evaluating deep learning acquisition; causal evidence indicates that instructional coaching and feedback improve instruction and student achievement (Kraft et al., 2018).

Leadership Adaptation During Educational Change

The theoretical literature on Adaptive Leadership, as recently rearticulated by Tewari and Dhingra (2024), underscores that rigid, top-down administrative styles fail during systemic educational transitions. Tewari and Dhingra contend that when organizations face adaptive challenges characterized by high ambiguity and changing operational parameters, leaders who rely exclusively on authority and directive command generate organizational friction and employee resistance, because adaptive problems demand a reworking of values, behaviors, and assumptions among stakeholders rather than predefined technical solutions. Recent school-level studies point in the same direction, showing that principals who solve problems with teachers through dialogue are better positioned to navigate the complexity of educational change (Alene et al., 2025), although the same Ethiopian study classed the protection of leadership voices among the poorly practiced behaviors. Adaptive leadership has likewise been identified as a theme among Davao City school heads during the MATATAG transition (Bentayao et al., 2024).

Ja'afar and Zainal Adnan (2025) affirm that flexible adaptation of the directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating styles to teacher readiness enhances motivation, reduces work-related stress, and cultivates a positive school climate. During the initial phases of the MATATAG transition, teachers frequently experience cognitive overload, confusion over new learning competencies, and uncertainty about expectations under the new curriculum, with recent phenomenological evidence documenting emotional vulnerability, instructional hesitation, and stress and preparation burden among implementers (Ampoyo & Uy, 2026). Conceptual literature suggests that school heads must temporarily adopt a highly supportive, coaching-oriented leadership posture, offering step-by-step guidance on lesson planning, before gradually transitioning toward delegative leadership as teacher confidence and competence increase, a pattern reported in recent small-scale studies of principals who use more directive and supportive styles with novice teachers and more freedom with experienced ones (Safrida et al., 2025; Gicain, 2024).

School leadership adaptation refers to the capacity of school leaders to adjust their practices, strategies, and approaches in response to changing educational demands and organizational conditions. Adams and Muthiah (2020) describe contemporary school leadership within a context where principals encounter challenges arising from the school environment, stakeholders, organizational demands, and the need to respond to changing educational conditions. Principal leadership consequently extends beyond administrative responsibilities and encompasses the ability to address complex and evolving demands within the school. In this context, leadership adaptation can be understood as the adjustment of leadership practices in response to changes in organizational circumstances, professional expectations, and the broader educational environment.

Moreover, Ikram et al. (2021) frame instructional leadership around areas such as defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, developing a positive school climate, and supporting teaching and learning. Such a perspective positions principals as leaders who provide instructional direction while coordinating school processes related to curriculum and classroom practice. Instructional leadership therefore becomes particularly significant when schools encounter changes that require adjustments in curriculum implementation and instructional practices.

Additionally, leadership during educational change involves more than simply complying with externally introduced policies. According to Abdul Aziz et al. (2021), principal instructional leadership is closely connected with educational reform and teachers' readiness to implement change. The literature positions principals as agents of pedagogical change who help establish an environment conducive to learning while supporting changes in educational practice. From this perspective, school leadership during reform involves connecting institutional expectations with instructional processes and creating conditions in which members of the school community can respond to new educational directions.

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Furthermore, Mifsud (2023) discusses distributed leadership as an important perspective within contemporary educational leadership, emphasizing the distribution of leadership across individuals and organizational contexts rather than locating leadership exclusively in the formal position of the principal. This perspective broadens the understanding of leadership adaptation by recognizing that responding to change may involve collaboration, shared responsibility, and the interaction of multiple actors within the school.

Similarly, Widodo and Suyatno (2023) conceptualized effective school leadership in the contemporary educational environment as requiring principals to respond to technological developments, changing learner populations, accountability demands, and other emerging challenges. Effective principal leadership is understood as a combination of leadership skills, practices, and capacities that enable school leaders to create supportive learning environments and respond to contemporary educational challenges. This perspective reinforces the importance of continuous learning and flexibility in leadership, particularly when school leaders are confronted with conditions that require established practices to be reconsidered or adjusted.

Adaptive leadership has also been examined in relation to the challenges created by technological advancement, globalization, and the changing requirements of 21st-century education. Within this perspective, principals need to demonstrate responsiveness and flexibility while encouraging collaboration, innovation, and organizational learning (Oktaviani et al., 2025). Adaptive leadership consequently views change not simply as something that school leaders manage, but as an ongoing condition requiring leaders to adjust their approaches and help the school organization respond to emerging challenges.

Taken together, Adams and Muthiah (2020), Ikram et al. (2021), Abdul Aziz et al. (2021), Mifsud (2023), Widodo and Suyatno (2023), and Oktaviani et al. (2025) all highlight that school leadership adaptation involves flexibility, responsiveness, instructional guidance, collaboration, and continuous adjustment to changing educational conditions. Across these perspectives, effective school leaders are not merely implementers of policies but active agents who connect organizational needs with instructional practices, support teachers and learners, and foster collaborative responses to emerging challenges. Thus, school leadership adaptation may be viewed as an ongoing process through which principals and other school leaders modify their leadership practices to sustain effective teaching, learning, and organizational development in a changing educational environment.

School leaders' personal and professional experiences as they respond to changing educational demands, organizational challenges, and stakeholder needs have also been examined. Huddleston et al. (2024) conducted a theoretical literature review of 62 studies published between 1984 and 2022 documenting teachers' principled resistance to curricular control, drawing on models of teacher socialization to analyze how and why teachers resist. The review found that teachers do not resist change arbitrarily; they resist reforms they believe fail their students' academic and social needs, disproportionately harm ethnically diverse and impoverished learners, or conflict with their professional principles, and they enact this resistance through strategic means such as strategic compliance, compromise, redefinition, overt resistance, or exit.

Nadeem (2024) examined distributed leadership in educational contexts as a catalyst for school improvement, drawing on social learning theory and communities of practice to frame leadership as a co-constructed phenomenon involving multiple stakeholders. The review identified practical strategies through which collaborative leadership operates, including shared vision, clear roles, distributed decision-making, collaborative learning communities, continuous professional development, and recognition of contributions, while also acknowledging persistent challenges such as resistance to change, role ambiguity, and trust-building.

Goh (2024) conducted a systematic literature review of studies published between 2019 and 2023 on data-driven decision-making (DDDM) in educational leadership, analyzing 13 selected articles to identify how school leaders implement DDDM and what challenges and strategies characterize it. The review found a persistent gap between

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theory and practice in schools' use of data, and concluded that successful implementation requires strong leadership, professional development, and a sustained commitment to data literacy so that data are used effectively and ethically to improve educational outcomes.

Javier et al. (2026) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of 18 peer-reviewed studies published from 2019 to 2024 on the challenges encountered by secondary-level out-of-field teachers in the Philippines, where staffing realities routinely assign teachers subjects beyond their specialization. Guided by the PRISMA protocol and Braun and Clarke's thematic framework, the synthesis identified interrelated themes spanning interaction with learners, limited professional development, heavy lesson-planning demands, resource constraints, affective strain such as stress and self-doubt, and difficulties mastering unfamiliar content.

Areri (2025) conducted a systematic review of 50 eligible articles published between 2021 and 2025 on leadership challenges in implementing educational policy reforms in secondary schools, drawing on global and Ethiopian evidence. The review synthesized five major challenge areas: resource-related challenges, stakeholder management challenges, capacity and training challenges, contextual and cultural challenges, and communication and coordination problems.

Taken together, the literature reviewed by Huddleston et al. (2024), Nadeem (2024), Goh (2024), Javier et al. (2026), and Areri (2025) highlights the importance of flexibility, collaboration, data-informed decision-making, and resilience in addressing educational challenges. These studies suggest that effective leadership requires principals to understand teachers' concerns, encourage shared decision-making, strengthen professional capacity, and respond to resource and organizational limitations. Collectively, these findings provide a foundation for exploring how principals adapt their leadership practices based on their actual experiences and the changing needs of their schools.

Decision-Making During Curriculum Reform

Educational leadership encompasses the processes through which school leaders guide, manage, and respond to the evolving needs of educational institutions. Curriculum change requires school principals to assume an active leadership role in guiding schools through new educational expectations and practices. Govindasamy and Mestry (2022) emphasize that principals play an important role in facilitating curriculum reforms by providing direction, mobilizing resources, supporting teachers, and fostering a collaborative school culture. Managing curriculum change, therefore, requires principals to move beyond routine administrative functions and adapt their leadership practices to address emerging instructional, organizational, and stakeholder needs. In this context, curriculum reform creates leadership situations that require principals to exercise professional judgment, prioritize competing demands, and make context-sensitive decisions to support effective implementation.

Educational leadership decision-making is often characterized by bounded rationality, wherein leaders make choices without having complete knowledge of all possible consequences. Under such conditions, uncertainty and risk become inherent considerations in evaluating alternatives and determining appropriate courses of action. Lambert (2025) in the Journal of Work-Applied Management further emphasizes that leadership decisions become visible through leaders' behaviors and actions, while also exposing head teachers and principals to professional accountability and reputational risks when decisions produce unintended outcomes. This perspective highlights that educational leader must exercise judgment within the limitations of available information, organizational expectations, and contextual circumstances.

A substantial body of literature also links leadership approaches to how school leaders make decisions and respond to organizational demands, particularly during periods of educational reform. Transformational leadership is among the most extensively examined approaches in school leadership research, emphasizing behaviors that enable leaders to establish direction, motivate stakeholders, and foster organizational improvement. Li and Karanxha (2022), in their

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systematic review of transformational school leadership, identified key leadership behaviors that include establishing a shared vision and goals, providing intellectual stimulation and individualized support, modeling important values and practices, communicating high expectations, and cultivating a productive school culture. These behaviors suggest that transformational leadership can shape the context in which principals make decisions by promoting shared purpose, professional engagement, and collective responsibility. In the context of educational reform, such leadership practices enable principals to respond to emerging challenges, balance competing demands, and align decisions with institutional goals and the needs of school stakeholders.

Alongside transformational leadership, distributed leadership provides an important perspective for understanding how decision-making authority is shared within schools, particularly during periods of organizational change. Distributed leadership conceptualizes leadership as a collaborative process in which responsibility and influence extend beyond the school principal to include teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other stakeholders who contribute their expertise and perspectives to organizational goals. Recent literature emphasizes that this approach promotes shared responsibility and collective ownership. At the same time, Das and Dixit (2024) highlight its potential to strengthen collaborative decision-making by encouraging stakeholder participation and shared responsibility within educational institutions. Distributing leadership responsibilities can make decision-making more inclusive, context-sensitive, and responsive to the diverse needs of the school community. For principals navigating educational transitions, such an approach may enable them to draw upon the knowledge and experiences of various stakeholders when interpreting reforms, addressing emerging challenges, and determining appropriate courses of action.

Educational transitions and disruptions can also require school leaders to reconsider established leadership practices and develop new ways of responding to emerging demands. McLeod and Dulsky (2021) emphasize that school leaders faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many having little or no formal preparation for managing a crisis of such scale and duration. Their work highlights the need for leaders to demonstrate resilience, reorientation, and reinvention as they respond to rapidly changing educational conditions. This suggests that effective educational leadership during periods of disruption requires principals to adapt their approaches, reassess priorities, and make decisions in response to evolving circumstances. Although the COVID-19 pandemic represents a distinct form of disruption, its implications for leadership adaptation provide a useful perspective for understanding how principals may navigate other significant educational transitions.

The effectiveness of leadership decision-making during educational reform is also influenced by the organizational conditions within which decisions are developed and implemented. Aldridge and McLure (2023), in their systematic review of 191 studies, identified several conditions that support schools in preparing for mandated change, including a reform-ready school climate, comprehensive planning, systematic implementation preparation, and organizational capacity building. These conditions highlight that effective decision-making extends beyond selecting appropriate courses of action; it also requires leaders to establish the organizational structures and capacities necessary to translate decisions into practice. Adequate preparation, shared understanding of reform expectations, and institutional capacity can therefore strengthen principals' ability to respond to changing demands and facilitate successful implementation. In the context of educational transitions, organizational readiness may consequently shape both the decisions principals make and their capacity to adapt those decisions as implementation progresses.

The reviewed literature establishes that educational leadership decision-making is a contextual, collaborative, reflective, and adaptive process. Principals make decisions amid uncertainty, competing demands, organizational constraints, and stakeholder expectations, while leadership approaches and school readiness influence how decisions are developed and implemented. These perspectives suggest that educational transitions require principals to continuously exercise professional judgment and adapt their leadership responses to changing school conditions.

Curriculum changes require school leaders to interpret policy directives, assess implementation challenges, and make decisions that respond to learners' needs and teachers' readiness. Gunnulfsen and Hall (2023) highlight how

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Norwegian principals preparing for curriculum reform treated policy as an organizing anchor, but not in a purely mechanical way. Instead, they actively reinterpreted and customized reform demands to fit their schools' organizational contexts. This shows that while national directives provide structure and legitimacy, principals exercise agency in translating them into workable strategies. Their findings complicate the notion of passive compliance, emphasizing that leadership involves adaptive planning and context-sensitive interpretation of policy.

Consistent with the mixed-methods evaluation of the MATATAG Curriculum's first-year pilot by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (Gavan et al., 2025), learner welfare is the ultimate criterion guiding principals' decisions. The evaluation surfaced both early gains and implementation strains tied to learner outcomes, reinforcing that reforms must be judged by their impact on students. Principals who placed learners' needs at the center of their leadership were better able to navigate the challenges of curriculum transition while sustaining improvements in literacy and numeracy.

Yuliana et al. (2025) further advanced this perspective by developing and validating a learning-leadership model specifically designed to help vocational school principals foster student well-being. Their study demonstrates that leading with learner welfare in mind is not only a recognized leadership orientation but also a trainable competency. By embedding student well-being into leadership frameworks, principals can systematically cultivate practices that safeguard learners' holistic development, ensuring that reforms translate into meaningful educational experiences.

Lorono (2025) found that many MATATAG-implementing teachers lacked sufficient knowledge, skills, and materials, recommending that school heads integrate time-allocation and mentorship structures into their planning. This reinforces the idea that teacher readiness is a decisive factor in curriculum reform, requiring principals to actively design support systems that strengthen instructional capacity and ease the transition.

Adalid et al. (2026) similarly demonstrated that limited budgets, competing internal priorities, and aggressive external stakeholder pressures force administrators into difficult trade-offs between immediate operational needs and long-term goals. They further emphasized that severe time constraints systematically prevent leadership from engaging in proactive strategic planning, compelling decision-makers to postpone critical projects and compromise institutional growth.

Taken together, the studies of Gunnulfsen and Hall (2023), Gavan et al. (2025), Yuliana et al. (2025), Lorono (2025), and Adalid et al. (2026) emphasize the importance of context-sensitive planning, learner-centered decision-making, teacher support, and resource management in navigating curriculum changes. Their findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires principals to interpret policy according to school needs, strengthen teacher readiness, prioritize learner welfare, and address organizational constraints. These studies provide a foundation for understanding how principals make decisions and respond to the challenges of curriculum transitions.

Relational Leadership: Trust, Collaboration, and Conflict Management

Educational leadership extends beyond administrative functions and technical decision-making to encompass the quality of relationships that school leaders cultivate within their organizations. Adams and Adigun (2024) examined the structure of principal-teacher conversations about instructional change and found that transformative leadership conversations, which support teacher autonomy and psychological needs, had moderate to strong positive relationships with teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy, and teacher vitality, whereas controlling conversations had small negative relationships with teacher trust and autonomy. These findings indicate that the manner in which principals communicate with teachers carries relational consequences, influencing the trust and engagement that underpin collaborative school cultures.

Aydin (2026) states that relational leadership has increasingly been recognized in contemporary scholarship as a leadership orientation grounded in the quality of interpersonal connection rather than positional authority. A

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systematic review of 277 publications on relational leadership found that the field has grown substantially in recent years, with more than half of the reviewed literature published within the past six years, and that the body of work spans conceptual, empirical, and review-based contributions.

Collaboration among educators has long been identified as central to effective professional practice, yet the construct remains conceptually underdeveloped. Wijarwadi, Nguyen, and Alonzo (2025), in a PRISMA-guided review of 66 studies, found that teacher collaboration lacks a universally accepted definition and is often used interchangeably with related terms such as cooperation and teamwork, underscoring the need for greater conceptual clarity in how school leaders design and support collaborative structures.

Conflict-handling styles remain a central concern in how principals manage disputes and preserve collegial relationships. Escalo-Halaman (2024), in a study of principals across selected campuses of a private educational system, found that principals most frequently used a collaborating style of conflict management, followed by accommodating, with teacher-respondents' assessments varying according to educational attainment and length of service, though not according to age or workload.

Principal leadership practices are closely tied to the collective efficacy that underlies effective teacher collaboration. Meyer, Richter, and Hartung-Beck (2022) examined the relationship between principal leadership and teacher collaboration across German schools and found that principal leadership practices were associated with teacher collaboration indirectly, through the mediating effect of teachers' collective efficacy, indicating that leadership influences collaboration largely by strengthening teachers' shared belief in their collective capability.

Relational trust functions as a precondition for collaboration to take hold, independent of formal structures. Miesner, Blair, Packard, Velazquez, Macgregor, and Grodsky (2022), in a study of eight elementary schools, found that teachers who reported relational trust collaborated with colleagues regardless of whether collaborative time was formally allocated, while teachers who described an absence of relational trust opted against collaborating even when optional or informal structures were available.

Taken together, Adams and Adigun (2024), Aydin (2026), Meyer, Richter, and Hartung-Beck (2022), Miesner et al. (2022), Wijarwadi, Nguyen, and Alonzo (2025), and Escalo-Halaman (2024) all highlight that effective educational leadership is fundamentally relational, requiring principals to build trust through supportive rather than controlling communication, cultivate collaboration through both relational trust and collective teacher efficacy, and apply conflict-management styles — most often collaborating and accommodating — suited to the specific demands of each situation rather than relying on a single fixed approach. This body of literature collectively suggests that relational competence is not a peripheral leadership skill but a core determinant of whether schools can successfully navigate periods of institutional change, particularly curriculum transitions that place competing demands on teachers, students, and parents.

The reviewed literature emphasizes the importance of trust, open communication, fairness, empathy, and collaborative leadership in managing conflicts and strengthening relationships within schools. Xie, Ahmad, and Lu (2026) explored the effects of authentic leadership on teacher engagement in high-performing secondary schools in Guangdong Province, China, through a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis in four schools. Their results showed that authentic principals' moral leadership, open dialogue, and collaborative governance enhance teacher engagement, as school leaders fostered open communication, incorporated teacher input, and built relational trust to strengthen teachers' motivation and commitment to the school mission. This indicates that open and authentic dialogue is a primary channel through which principals connect with teachers and sustain their engagement.

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Siva Vikaraman, Mansor, Mohd Nor, Alias, and Gurusamy (2021) examined ethical leadership practices and trust in leaders among public school leaders in Malaysia using a mixed-methods approach with 438 teachers nationwide. The findings showed that principals practiced high levels of ethical leadership and that teachers' trust in principals was correspondingly high, with a very strong, significant relationship found between ethical leadership and teachers' trust in their principals. This suggests that when principals anchor their leadership in values such as fairness, honesty, and integrity, these values become the foundation upon which trusting relationships with teachers are built.

Parcon and Pedroso (2025) examined the mediation practices of principals in private schools through a qualitative design involving in-depth interviews in three purposively selected schools. The thematic analysis revealed four major themes: understanding root causes and implementing effective problem-solving strategies, fostering proactive communication and active listening, demonstrating impartiality, assertiveness, and adaptability in decision-making, and developing collaboration and mediation competencies among school leaders. The findings emphasize that conflict mediation is not merely a managerial task but a vital leadership skill that integrates empathy, fairness, and strategic communication to strengthen professional relationships and promote a harmonious school atmosphere.

Baog and Cueme (2026) examined teachers' trust in school leaders in the Philippines by modeling the influence of empathy, management support practices, and relational transparency using structural equation modeling with 400 public junior high school teachers. The results showed high levels of perceived trust, empathy, management support, and relational transparency, with empathy and relational transparency emerging as significant direct predictors of teachers' trust in the best-fitting model. This finding highlights that in the Philippine setting, the transparency and relational warmth of school leaders are central to sustaining teachers' trust.

Jan (2026) synthesized theoretical foundations and empirical evidence on how distributed leadership fosters collaborative school cultures and empowers teachers. The review identified key mechanisms including shared decision-making, teacher leadership roles, professional learning communities, collective teacher efficacy, and relational trust, which collectively enhance teacher agency, job satisfaction, professional learning, and commitment, and noted that the model proves particularly effective in complex, reform-driven environments by building adaptive capacity and reducing reliance on individual leaders. This indicates that matching responsibilities to people's strengths is a deliberate strategy for sustaining empowered and collaborative school communities during change.

Taken together, Xie et al. (2026), Siva Vikaraman et al. (2021), Parcon and Pedroso (2025), Baog and Cueme (2026), and Jan (2026) highlight that trust and collaboration are strengthened through open communication, ethical leadership, empathy, transparency, and fair conflict management. Their findings suggest that principals can transform disagreements into opportunities for stronger professional relationships by listening to stakeholders, addressing concerns fairly, and promoting shared responsibility. These studies provide a basis for understanding how principals bridge conflict and develop lasting collaboration within their school communities.

Reflection, Learning, and Continuous Improvement

School leadership is increasingly understood not simply as the performance of prescribed administrative functions but as a continuing process of learning from complex experiences and responding to changing organizational conditions. Hanover Research (2023), in a literature review prepared for the School Superintendents Association, explained that reflection provides leaders with the mental space needed to examine their goals and determine the cognitive strategies required to achieve them. Within this framework, reflection is understood as a component of executive functioning that allows leaders to plan how they will direct and regulate their attention and behavior in future situations. The review further emphasized that leadership simulations paired with structured reflective exercises can strengthen a leader's capacity to adapt, positioning reflection not merely as a retrospective activity but as a mechanism that actively shapes forward-looking leadership behavior.

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This understanding of reflection as a driver of adaptive capacity is reinforced in the education sector specifically. Campbell and Ceau (2023), in a review commissioned by the Education Workforce Council and the National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales, examined how reflective practice is conceptualized, applied, and supported within educational leadership. Their review traced the development of theories and approaches to reflective practice and considered how school leaders use and lead reflection within their institutions. The authors concluded that reflective practice is essential to professional growth, noting that when leaders critically examine their experiences, they are better positioned to continuously refine their practices and improve outcomes within their organizations. This conclusion underscores a recurring theme in the literature: reflection is not an isolated cognitive exercise but a professional discipline that directly informs how leaders adjust their strategies over time.

Complementing this view, Chiarelli (2024) situated reflective leadership within the broader framework of adult and lifelong learning theory, arguing that as leadership models move away from rigid, bureaucratic structures, leaders must continuously strengthen their capacity to learn from experience in order to remain effective amid increasingly complex and dynamic environments. Chiarelli identified common barriers to reflective leadership, including the perception that reflection consumes valuable time and a general lack of awareness regarding how to translate reflective insight into concrete leadership action. Despite these barriers, the literature consistently frames reflection as a tool that equips leaders to make more deliberate decisions, particularly when confronting unfamiliar or high-stakes problems.

Beyond individual reflective capacity, the literature also connects reflective practice to sustained organizational learning and long-term leadership effectiveness. Liao (2022) conducted a literature review on sustainable leadership and found that this leadership approach is fundamentally oriented toward the long-term development of both individuals and organizations, requiring leaders to balance immediate demands with a broader, future-oriented vision. This synthesis suggests that leadership sustainability is not achieved through isolated decisions but through an accumulated pattern of learning, adjustment, and capacity-building over time.

Extending this discussion into the education sector, Abu Bakar et al. (2024) reviewed the theoretical foundations of sustainable leadership as applied to schools, drawing on established frameworks that describe sustainable leadership as leadership that is learned, sustained, and distributed throughout an organization rather than concentrated in a single leader. Their review highlighted that sustainable leadership requires an internal environment supportive of continuous development, wherein learning opportunities are made available not only to the leader but to the wider organizational community.

This emphasis on organization-wide learning aligns closely with the literature on continuous improvement in schools. Anderson et al. (2023) provided a conceptual framework situating continuous improvement within its historical and sectoral development, describing how the principles of improvement science—such as iterative, evidence-based advancement and the acknowledgment of contextual variability—equip school and system leaders to treat improvement as an ongoing organizational process rather than a discrete event. Their work emphasized that leading continuous improvement requires leaders to build internal capacity for reflection and adaptive learning among staff, thereby distributing the responsibility for improvement across the organization rather than positioning it solely as a top-down directive.

Taken together, this body of literature suggests that reflective leadership, organizational learning, and continuous improvement are conceptually interdependent. Reflection provides the cognitive and professional foundation through which leaders interpret past experiences and decisions; learning represents the mechanism through which those reflective insights are internalized and translated into adjusted practice; and continuous improvement constitutes the organizational outcome of sustained reflective learning over time. This interconnection provides a relevant theoretical grounding for examining how public elementary school principals draw upon past leadership decisions and translate the lessons derived from those experiences into future practices during periods of curriculum transition, such as the MATATAG implementation.

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School leaders' past decisions and experiences serve as valuable sources of learning that can guide their future leadership practices. Mifsud (2023) carried out a systematic review of school distributed leadership research published between 2010 and 2022. The review examined trends in study purpose, topics, methods, and geographic distribution. It notes that qualitative studies in this field concentrate on how distributed leadership responsibilities are actually enacted, how they strengthen organizational commitment, and how they contribute to policy reform.

Lee et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 56 empirical studies on principals' data literacy in K–12 schools. They identified 63 indicators grouped into seven dimensions, and argued that three dimensions (using data to foster a data-driven culture, for school improvement, and for informing one's own practices) especially distinguish principals' data literacy from that of teachers.

Chen (2026) presented a narrative review of 47 journal articles on principal resilience published from 2005 to 2024. The review clarified the construct, identified the drivers and outcomes of principal resilience, and proposed a conceptual framework, concluding that promoting principal resilience is a path toward principals' growth and quality education, although the construct remains fragmented.

Herrera (2025) conducted a scoping review of eleven studies on MATATAG implementation published in 2024. The review produced five themes: teachers' perspectives, school heads' perspectives, training experiences, challenges encountered, and teaching and leading with resiliency. It concluded that successful implementation depends on teachers' and school heads' experiences, effective training, ongoing professional development, policy support, and adaptive strategies.

Heffernan et al. (2025) presented a scoping review of the emotional, relational, and care-based aspects of principals' work, which are often undervalued. The review explored four themes (emotions and emotional labor, relationships, health and well-being, and care) and concluded that school leaders' work is emotionally intense, with direct consequences for their well-being and personal relationships.

The reviewed literature emphasizes reflection, resilience, collaboration, and evidence-based decision-making in leadership development of Mifsud (2023), Lee et al. (2024), Chen (2026), Herrera (2025) Heffernan et al. (2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that learning from past experiences enables principals to refine their leadership approaches, address challenges, and adapt to changing educational demands, thereby improving their future leadership practices.

Review of Related Studies

The following studies are reviewed to provide insights and background on the problem under investigation.

Studies on the MATATAG Transition and Principals' Leadership Adaptation

Navigating systemic educational reform requires school leaders and educators to balance central policy mandates with the complex, ground-level realities of school operations. An empirical investigation by EPRA Publishing (2025) utilized a grounded theory design to analyze how eight public school leaders in Davao City navigated decision-making during the transition from the K to 12 framework to the MATATAG Curriculum. Through qualitative interviews, the researchers explored the cognitive, relational, and contextual factors that influenced administrative choices during periods of high policy uncertainty. The study revealed that decision-making during systemic reform is inherently non-linear, adaptive, and deeply relational, driven by the immediate necessity to reconcile top-down DepEd directives with ground-level operational shortages.

This empirical finding aligns with previous studies by Santos and Cruz (2022) and Garcia et al. (2021), who observed that school heads with prior change-management experience were significantly more adept at maintaining institutional

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stability during crisis-driven or policy-mandated shifts. The study concluded that localized, context-driven leadership is indispensable for overcoming resource constraints and aligning central policy goals with school capacities.

A qualitative phenomenological inquiry published by the Candijay Educational Research Group (2025) explored the lived experiences of elementary school teachers and administrators during the initial rollout of the MATATAG curriculum. The researchers gathered detailed narrative accounts regarding classroom-level adaptation, instructional challenges, and administrative responses. The findings revealed substantial operational friction during the early implementation phase, primarily characterized by delayed deliveries of finalized MATATAG learning exemplars, insufficient technical training, and acute teacher anxiety regarding modified time allocations and subject alignments.

A quantitative descriptive-correlational study published in the International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Studies (2025) examined the relationship between school heads' administrative and instructional leadership skills and teacher performance during the MATATAG implementation phase. Utilizing standardized survey instruments administered to public elementary school heads and teachers, the researchers measured supervisory frequency, instructional feedback quality, and resource provision against teacher evaluation scores on the Individual Performance Commitment and Review Form (IPCRF).

A convergent parallel mixed-methods study by EPRA Journals (2025) investigated the relationship between school heads' personal resilience, strategic adaptation, and transition management capability during the shift from K to 12 to MATATAG. The quantitative phase surveyed public school heads to measure emotional intelligence, stress management, and flexibility, while the qualitative phase utilized semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators to capture strategic leadership behaviors during the transition.

A qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) by Navarro (2026) explored the lived experiences of newly promoted public school principals navigating the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in Bataan. Utilizing in-depth interviews and MAXQDA thematic analysis, the study captured the professional challenges, personal adjustments, and coping strategies of novice administrators experiencing a "double transition"—adapting to their new executive roles while simultaneously leading a major national curriculum overhaul. The study revealed a critical "intention-behavior gap," wherein 86% of participant principals expressed a strong desire to act as instructional leaders but found their time and energy dominated by routine administrative burdens, resource shortages, and bureaucratic compliance. The participants reported experiencing role strain, isolation, and cognitive overload.

Amels et al. (2021) found that distributed leadership and inquiry-based work were associated with primary teachers' capacity to change. The study involved 1,077 teachers and 87 school principals from Dutch primary schools and investigated how leadership distribution and inquiry-oriented practices related to teachers' change capacity. The findings indicated that distributed leadership was positively associated with teachers' capacity to change, while inquiry-based work also contributed to this capacity. The results suggest that leadership practices that involve teachers and encourage professional inquiry can support schools in responding to educational change.

Moreover, Ralebese et al. (2022) reported that primary school principals in Lesotho experienced difficulties in leading the implementation of an integrated curriculum because of inadequate preparation and professional development for the reform. Drawing on interviews with six primary school principals, the study revealed challenges involving principals' understanding of the new curriculum, training opportunities, and their preparedness to guide teachers through curriculum implementation. The findings indicated that insufficient preparation limited principals' ability to effectively lead curriculum reform and highlighted the need for stronger professional support for school leaders during curriculum transitions.

Meyer et al. (2023) revealed that principal leadership practices can support teacher collaboration and organizational change during school improvement initiatives. Through a longitudinal multiple-case study of three German schools,

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the researchers investigated leadership practices associated with collaborative school improvement. The findings showed that principals used different leadership practices, including establishing direction, creating structures for collaboration, and involving teachers in processes connected with school development. The study further indicated that leadership practices were not applied uniformly but varied according to the circumstances and developmental needs of the schools.

Furthermore, Famero (2024) developed an adaptive leadership model based on the collective practices of nine public secondary school principals during the COVID-19 education crisis in the Philippines. The study identified adaptive practices involving stakeholder participation, monitoring and evaluation, resource management, data management, curriculum review and contextualization, teaching and assessment, and teacher support. The findings demonstrated that principals responded to crisis conditions by modifying leadership practices and engaging different school stakeholders in addressing emerging educational challenges. These practices were synthesized into an adaptive leadership model for educational crisis management.

Similarly, Ralebese et al. (2025) found that primary school principals played important instructional leadership roles in navigating curriculum reform and implementation. Using a qualitative case study approach involving primary school principals in Lesotho, the researchers explored how principals influenced curriculum implementation through instructional leadership practices. The findings highlighted principals' involvement in communicating curriculum expectations, supporting teachers, monitoring instructional practices, and addressing challenges associated with curriculum implementation. The study emphasized the importance of principals' instructional leadership in translating curriculum reform into school-level practice.

A study by Gunnulfsen and Abrahamsen (2024) investigated school leaders' reform work and their collaboration with external supporting resources in realizing curriculum reform in Norway. The study focused on how school leaders navigate reform processes involving multiple actors, resources, and organizational relationships. It provides an empirical perspective on the complexities principals encounter when translating curriculum intentions into school-level change, particularly when leadership involves negotiating responsibilities, support, power, and decision-making within the reform process.

These studies of Amels et al. (2021), Ralebese et al. (2022), Meyer et al. (2023), Gunnulfsen and Abrahamsen (2024), Famero (2024), and Ralebese et al. (2025) demonstrate that effective school leadership adaptation is closely associated with teacher participation, professional preparedness, collaboration, instructional support, stakeholder engagement, and responsiveness to contextual demands. The studies further show that leadership practices need to be adjusted according to the nature of educational reforms, school conditions, and emerging challenges. These findings reinforce the view that adaptive school leadership is a dynamic process in which principals work collaboratively with teachers and other stakeholders to translate reforms into meaningful school-level practices.

Studies on Principals' Experiences in Educational Reform

The experiences of school leaders are shaped by their relationships with teachers, collaborative practices, professional learning, and the challenges encountered in improving school performance. Bellibaş, Polatcan, and Berkovich (2025) surveyed 1,005 teachers across 92 schools in Türkiye and used multilevel latent profile moderation analysis to examine how principal-teacher relationship patterns interact with transformational leadership to influence teachers' innovativeness and resistance to change. The study identified three relationship profiles within schools, cohesive, conflicting, and balancing, and found that transformational leadership was effective in promoting teacher innovativeness and mitigating teacher resistance to change only when principals had cohesive relationships with teachers; in conflicting or balancing relationships, and in schools mixing both, the leadership effect on reducing resistance was not significant.

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Leynes (2026) explored the views and experiences of 15 purposively selected master teachers in Quezon Province, Philippines, in conducting School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) sessions, using interpretative phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that SLAC sessions served as a dynamic platform for instructional support, curriculum alignment and contextualization, sharing of differentiated and inclusive strategies, peer mentoring and shared accountability, and collaborative review of assessment tools. Master teachers also reported challenges, including time constraints, limited resources, overlapping schedules, and varying teacher engagement, which they addressed through proactive planning, feedback mechanisms, and collaborative leadership.

Diab and Green (2025) conducted a phenomenological study, using interpretative phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with 17 pre-service teachers during year-long teaching internships, examining how they discovered their creative capacity through meaningful success stories with individual students. Three interconnected themes emerged: participants systematically transformed personal struggles into professional tools for supporting students facing similar challenges, they developed sophisticated environmental awareness and relationship-building approaches that evolved from intuitive care into systematic professional practice, and they engaged in principled rule-breaking that prioritized student success over institutional compliance. The study concluded that difficult life experiences, rather than being barriers to effective practice, were converted into professional resources when supported by authentic relationship-building time, supervision that encouraged personal and professional integration, and institutional environments permitting thoughtful innovation.

Farley-Ripple (2024) analyzed data from a national survey of more than 4,000 educators across 134 schools in the United States to conceptualize and examine principal leadership for evidence use in school improvement. The findings showed that principals can contribute to their schools' capacity for research use through developing human capital, influencing culture, leveraging resources, and shaping decision-making, but also revealed only moderate evidence of research use in agenda setting, limited uptake of organizational routines that support research use, and low staff confidence in critically consuming research.

Masoumi, Khalkhali, Doostar, and Pali (2026) explored the ontology of the school leadership journey using an interpretive phenomenological design with in-depth interviews of 27 school principals in Rasht, Iran. The findings revealed that leadership is experienced as a nonlinear, complex, and existential process unfolding within liminal situations of crisis, ambiguity, and internal transformation, in which the leader moves from an "inauthentic self" shaped by organizational and social expectations toward an "authentic self" through suspending certainties and redefining one's situatedness, a process occurring not in isolation but through deep interactions with teachers, students, and parents.

The studies of Bellibaş et al. (2025), Leynes (2026), Diab and Green (2025), Farley-Ripple (2024), and Masoumi et al. (2026) provide insights into the experiences of educational leaders as they navigate professional relationships, instructional challenges, and organizational expectations. Their findings highlight the importance of collaborative leadership, professional growth, evidence-informed decision-making, and personal transformation in adapting leadership practices.

Studies on Decision-Making During Curriculum Change

Decision-making is a central function of educational leadership, as school principals are continually confronted with complex problems that require informed judgment and appropriate action. Chitpin (2021) emphasizes that effective leadership decision-making can be strengthened through reflection, dialogue, interaction, and engagement with others, enabling principals to develop deeper insights when addressing problems of practice. This perspective positions decision-making not merely as an individual cognitive process but as one shaped by knowledge, professional experience, reflection, and collaboration within the school community. Thus, effective leadership decision-making

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involves both individual judgment and engagement with others in developing appropriate responses to complex educational concerns.

Competing demands and contextual constraints also shape the decision-making process of school principals. McLaughlin et al. (2025) found that principals encounter tensions arising from policy constraints, resource limitations, relationship management, value conflicts, and restrictions on their discretionary authority. These findings indicate that principals do not exercise decision-making in an unconstrained environment; rather, their choices are influenced by institutional policies, available resources, stakeholder expectations, and the specific circumstances of their schools. Consequently, leadership decision-making requires principals to negotiate competing priorities while balancing organizational requirements with the needs and realities of their school communities.

The contextual nature of decision-making is further evident in Philippine public schools. Biñas et al. (2023) found that micro-level decision-making involved contextualizing planning and implementation in response to local issues, institutional constraints, and stakeholder needs. Their findings emphasized the importance of flexible leadership and stakeholder participation, suggesting that school-level decision-making is an iterative and context-sensitive process rather than a fixed administrative activity. Such contextualization is particularly relevant when principals are required to translate broader educational policies into actions that respond to the specific circumstances of their schools.

The complexity of leadership decision-making becomes more pronounced during periods of educational reform. Ganon Shilon (2024) found that school principals serving as boundary spanners during national curriculum reform engaged in bridging and buffering strategies to facilitate shared sense-making. These strategies included communicating a shared vision, supporting teachers' well-being, managing uncertainty, and maintaining stability in school processes. The findings suggest that curriculum reform requires principals to navigate between external policy expectations and internal school realities, thereby requiring adaptive leadership and context-sensitive decision-making.

Similarly, Paunan et al. (2026) found a significant relationship between principal change leadership competency and teacher agency among private secondary school teachers in the Philippines. Their findings underscore the importance of principals' adaptability and capacity to lead educational reform by creating conditions that support teacher autonomy, adaptability, and professional participation. This suggests that leadership during reform extends beyond the implementation of prescribed policies and involves the capacity of school leaders to respond strategically to changing circumstances while engaging teachers in the change process.

In the Philippine context, emerging research on the MATATAG Curriculum further demonstrates the complexity of educational transition. Peñeda (2025) found that school administrators experienced challenges related to inconsistent training preparedness, insufficient learning resources, teacher capacity gaps, and instructional time constraints during MATATAG implementation. In response, administrators engaged in classroom monitoring, resource mobilization, collaborative professional development, and stakeholder partnerships. These findings demonstrate that MATATAG implementation requires school leaders to respond to multiple and sometimes competing demands while adapting their leadership practices to the conditions and needs of their respective schools.

The reviewed literature establishes that decision-making is an essential dimension of educational leadership and is shaped by reflection, professional knowledge, collaboration, contextual constraints, and competing demands. Studies further demonstrate that educational reforms intensify these demands by requiring principals to interpret policy expectations, manage uncertainty, engage stakeholders, and adapt leadership practices to school-specific circumstances. Philippine studies likewise indicate that school leaders exercise contextual and flexible decision-making in responding to local needs and the challenges associated with curriculum implementation.

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Curriculum-related decisions are influenced by learner needs, policy requirements, teacher capacity, stakeholder participation, and available resources. Richardson and Khawaja's (2025) meta-synthesis of 42 studies found that school leaders who prioritize learner-centered, personalized education build organizational structures to support this goal. Their findings affirm this orientation rather than contest it, showing that leadership decisions anchored in student welfare foster environments where personalized learning can thrive. At the same time, they acknowledge that this orientation competes with other pressures principals must manage.

In contrast, Brooks and Brooks (2024) found that principals vary considerably in how they enforce, adapt, or even set aside policies depending on their perceived agency and oversight. Particularly in remote or under-monitored schools, guidelines functioned less as a fixed anchor and more as a flexible resource that leaders drew on selectively. This perspective underscores the variability of leadership responses to policy, suggesting that principals' decision-making is shaped not only by directives but also by their sense of autonomy and accountability. Together, these studies illustrate that while policies serve as anchors, their role in practice is negotiated, contingent, and deeply influenced by context.

Parojenog and Miasco (2025) noted that while teachers generally viewed the MATATAG curriculum favorably, insufficient training and increased workload strained its practical implementation. More experienced teachers expressed heightened concern over workload management, pointing to the uneven burden across the teaching workforce. Together, these studies affirm that principals who overlook teacher capacity and workload risk undermining curriculum reform, regardless of how sound the policy framework may be.

Also, Yamoah and Quansah (2025) present empirical evidence showing a statistically significant positive relationship between stakeholder collaboration in school improvement planning and student achievement across Ghanaian junior high schools. Their study illustrates that when principals actively involve teachers, parents, and community members in shared planning, schools are better positioned to achieve academic excellence. This reinforces the idea that collaborative decision-making is not only a leadership competency but also a practical strategy that directly enhances learner outcomes.

Batt (2025), however, complicates the picture by showing that even when districts allocate identical resources, principals' beliefs, prior experiences, and sensemaking shape how those resources are used, suggesting that resource decisions are not purely externally constrained but also actively influenced by principal agency. Collectively, these studies affirm that leadership decision-making requires principals to negotiate competing priorities while balancing organizational requirements with the realities of their school communities.

The studies of Richardson and Khawaja (2025), Brooks and Brooks (2024), Parojenog and Miasco (2025), Yamoah and Quansah (2025), and Batt (2025) demonstrate that principals' decision-making during curriculum changes involves balancing learner welfare, policy expectations, teacher readiness, stakeholder collaboration, and resource limitations. Their findings suggest that curriculum implementation is shaped not only by formal guidelines but also by principals' professional judgment, beliefs, and understanding of their school contexts. These studies provide a basis for examining how principals make decisions, adapt policies, and respond to the practical challenges of curriculum transitions.

Studies on Conflict Management, Trust, and Collaboration

Studies on conflict management in schools highlight the strategies principals employ to address disagreements among teachers. Zaitoun et al. (2023) found that settlement was the most preferred conflict management method used by school principals as perceived by secondary school teachers in Jordan, followed by cooperation, while avoidance was the least preferred method, and recommended training courses to raise principals' awareness of conflict management.

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Ogharen, Egbule, and Joy (2022) found that interpersonal conflicts in Nigerian public secondary schools were mainly caused by intergroup and interpersonal relations, personnel practices, work structure, and management issues, and suggested strategies for promoting productive interpersonal relationships between teachers and principals.

In the Philippine context, studies have examined the relationship between school heads' leadership practices and the quality of school relationships. Aquino, Afalla, and Fabelico (2021) found that school heads contribute to the educational milieu through their information-sharing methods, creating supportive social connections, participating in mentoring programs, and fostering progress, and established an interrelation between public school heads' leadership practices and teachers' performance.

Villanueva, Disu, and Villanueva (2021) found that school leaders' interpersonal, leadership, and supervisory skills were regarded as evident by both the schools and their teachers, and that there were significant associations among these skills. These studies indicate that Philippine school heads exercise relational and interpersonal capacities that shape teacher outcomes and school functioning.

Philippine studies have also examined the conflict management styles of school heads. De Guzman, Gonzales, and Pajotagana (2024) found that among five conflict management styles, compromising had a positive impact on teachers' job satisfaction while collaborating had a negative impact, in a study of junior high school teachers in Bulacan, and suggested further investigation into the discrepancy between school heads' and teachers' perceptions of conflict management.

Phenomenological studies in the Philippines provide insight into the relational challenges faced by school leaders. Hungo, Casinillo, and Madrigal (2024) found that teacher-principals in Leyte and Southern Leyte experienced challenges in teaching strategies, behavior management, technology integration, and parental communication, while exercising strategic management skills including prioritization, planning, and stress.

Taken together, Zaitoun et al. (2023), Ogharen et al. (2022), Aquino et al. (2021), Villanueva et al. (2021), De Guzman et al. (2024), and Hungo et al. (2024) highlight the importance of relational and interpersonal leadership in addressing conflicts and strengthening collaboration in schools. The studies indicate that effective communication, supportive relationships, interpersonal skills, and appropriate conflict-management strategies enable school leaders to respond to challenges and maintain productive relationships with teachers. Overall, the literature suggests that relational leadership is essential for creating a collaborative school environment and managing conflicts constructively.

School leaders manage relationships and address differences among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, emphasizing ethical leadership, effective communication, empathy, trust, and shared responsibility as important practices in resolving conflicts and strengthening collaboration. Roallos (2024) employed descriptive research to determine the relationship among ethical leadership, teacher professional development, and parent engagement in a town district in Batangas, Philippines, involving 422 secondary school teachers. The results revealed a highly significant relationship among ethical leadership, teacher professional development, and parent engagement, implying that schools with ethical leadership are more likely to achieve higher teacher professional development and demonstrate active parent engagement. This finding demonstrates that the values practiced by school heads extend beyond the faculty room, shaping productive partnerships with parents and the wider school community.

Rebugio (2025) explored the lived experiences and perceptions of public elementary school principals in Lambayong District, Philippines, in resolving conflicts using a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews involving ten purposively selected school principals. The thematic analysis revealed six key themes, including collaborative conflict resolution strategies, communication as a foundation for resolution, and contextual adaptability, and the findings indicated that effective conflict resolution requires a combination of empathy, active listening, and inclusive dialogue, with values such as bayanihan playing a central role in shaping resolution practices. This shows

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that Filipino elementary principals rely on listening and culturally grounded, fair approaches to convert disagreements into constructive outcomes.

Keravnos and Symeou (2024) conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods study, including 1320 questionnaires and interviews with 40 teachers and 5 principals, to identify the practices, behaviors, and actions of highly trusted primary school principals in Cyprus. The study identified eight practices that foster robust trust in school leaders: fairness, respect, consistency-reliability, trusting the teachers, setting the example, competence and organization, confidentiality, and open-door support. These findings provide practical suggestions that principals can implement to enhance faculty trust, underscoring that consistent, transparent, and supportive behavior is the currency through which trust is built and preserved.

Valdepenas (2026) explored the leadership skills of school heads, their collaboration with staff and stakeholders, and the level of stakeholder support in the Schools Division of Antique, Philippines, using a descriptive-correlational design with 218 teachers and school personnel. The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of leadership skills, particularly in communication, decision-making, instructional supervision, and strategic planning; that collaboration among school heads, teachers, parents, and community members was rated high; and that significant positive relationships existed among leadership skills, collaboration, and stakeholders' support. This confirms that in Philippine public schools, the school head's leadership skill is the engine that draws teachers, parents, and community members into shared ownership of school programs.

Okei and Asiyai (2026) examined principals' distributed leadership and teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria, through a correlational survey involving 564 respondents drawn from 94 public secondary schools. The findings revealed that principals' collaboration and delegation of responsibilities were significantly related to teachers' job performance, and the study recommended that principals adopt distributed leadership practices by actively involving teachers in school decision-making and leadership activities to enhance their commitment and job performance. This demonstrates that assigning responsibilities according to teachers' capabilities yields measurable gains in how teachers perform and engage with their work.

Taken together, these studies of Roallos (2024), Rebugio (2025), Keravnos and Symeou (2024), Valdepenas (2026), and Okei and Asiyai (2026) emphasize that effective collaboration is strengthened through ethical leadership, communication, empathy, trust, and shared decision-making. Their findings show that principals who involve teachers and stakeholders, address conflicts through inclusive dialogue, and demonstrate fairness and consistency can build stronger professional relationships and shared ownership of school goals. These studies provide a foundation for examining how principals move beyond conflict toward lasting collaboration within their school communities.

Studies on Reflection and Lessons from Past Leadership Experiences

Reflective leadership, continuous learning, and ongoing improvement are increasingly recognized as essential dimensions of effective school leadership. Damore and Rieckhoff (2021) examined how school leaders develop instructional-leadership competencies through structured reflection paired with coaching. Interviewing twelve school leaders across six schools in the United States, they found that consistent self-reflection was central to a leader's capacity to improve their own practice and, in turn, to model and cultivate reflective habits among teachers. Their findings support the premise that leadership improvement is not a one-time event but an ongoing cycle of reflection, action, and adjustment that ripples outward from the leader to the wider school community.

Chitpin (2021) proposed a decision-making framework for school leaders built on the idea that objective, reflective engagement with problems of practice leads to better institutional decisions. The study argued that when leaders pair individual reflection with dialogue and engagement with others, their capacity to interpret situations accurately and

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respond effectively increases, and that this reflective-dialogic process directly enhances leadership performance and organizational outcomes over time.

Sheldon (2022), in a doctoral study conducted at Michigan State University, explored how principals' own learning processes shaped their decision-making and problem-solving during a period of unprecedented disruption. The study revealed that principals who actively engaged in continuous personal learning — rather than relying solely on prior experience — were better equipped to adapt their leadership approaches, reinforcing the connection between a leader's ongoing learning and their ability to navigate complex transitions.

Pashmforoosh et al. (2023) studied how practicing school leaders strengthened their instructional leadership through a formal Reflection Cycle embedded in professional development. Analysis of leaders' reflective narratives revealed three recurring patterns: reflection tied to teaching and learning improvement, reflection tied to professional growth, and reflection that moved leaders toward more transformational practice. The study concluded that structured reflection measurably increased leaders' awareness of their own decision-making and helped translate that awareness into concrete instructional planning for the future.

Dyantyi and Ncanywa (2024) conducted a qualitative study of five school principals leading in historically under-resourced districts in South Africa. Through in-depth reflective accounts, the principals identified persistent challenges — limited government support, funding gaps, and weak parental involvement — while also describing how reflecting on these recurring obstacles informed adjustments to their leadership approach over time. The study illustrates how reflection functions as a coping and adaptive mechanism for leaders operating under sustained systemic pressure, a condition with clear parallels to curriculum-transition contexts.

Sun (2026), in a narrative review synthesizing decades of school-leadership research, identified recurring pathways through which principals influence school and student outcomes, noting a documented shift over time from reactive, short-term problem-solving toward more strategic, capacity-building, and equity-oriented leadership. The review emphasized that successful principals continuously recalibrate their practices in response to feedback from their environment, treating leadership improvement as an iterative, evolving process rather than a fixed skill set — directly reinforcing the continuous-improvement dimension of reflective leadership.

Taken together, Damore and Rieckhoff (2021), Chitpin (2021), Sheldon (2022), Pashmforoosh et al. (2023), Dyantyi and Ncanywa (2024), and Sun (2026) emphasize that reflective leadership is an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and improvement. The studies highlight how reflection, continuous learning, and feedback enable school leaders to evaluate their practices, respond to challenges, and make informed adjustments. Overall, the literature suggests that reflective leadership supports continuous professional growth and contributes to sustained school improvement.

Previous leadership experiences can shape how principals respond to similar challenges and make decisions in future situations. Ralebese et al. (2025) examined how three primary school principals in Lesotho led a national curriculum reform. All the principals stressed shared leadership, working through committees that let teachers take ownership of parts of instructional management and fostered a sense of shared responsibility.

Bentayao et al. (2024) used a qualitative case study of five school heads in the Division of Davao City to explore management practices amid policy changes brought by the MATATAG curriculum. Their results resembled Lewin's change management model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing, and produced themes on transitional challenges and curriculum adoption, strategic support and capacity building, and adaptive leadership and positive implementation. They recommended training and sufficient preparation before any educational policy is implemented, and urged school leaders to be adaptive, provide support, and promote positive communication among teachers.

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Duray (2025) explored the lived experiences of fourteen public school heads through interviews and focus groups. The school heads met teacher resistance, funding constraints, and technological adaptation, and responded through mentorship programs, policy advocacy, and community engagement. Their responses showed patterns of adaptive leadership, and they perceived the challenges as opportunities for growth.

Bongar (2025) surveyed 150 teachers and 62 school heads in public elementary schools in Zone 1, DepEd Zambales, on teacher resistance to MATATAG and the supervisory strategies school heads used. The study was grounded in the unfreezing, change, and refreezing stages of curriculum change theory. Monitoring and assessment emerged as the most effective supervisory strategy, followed by professional development, emotional support, and collaborative communication.

Navarro (2026) examined the lived experiences of seven newly promoted junior high school principals in Balanga City, Bataan, as they implemented the MATATAG curriculum. The principals described their transition as an "emotional duality": all of them felt professional pride, while also feeling overwhelming pressure from the demands of the reform. The dominant coping strategy was collaborative leadership, and the study concluded that resilience is a process rather than a trait.

Taken together, the studies of Ralebese et al. (2025), Bentayao et al. (2024), Duray (2025), Bongar (2025), and Navarro (2026) show that principals' past experiences with curriculum reforms and leadership challenges influence their approaches to future practice. Their findings highlight shared leadership, capacity building, mentorship, monitoring, communication, and resilience as important responses to change. These studies suggest that principals learn from previous challenges and use these experiences to refine their leadership decisions, strengthen support for teachers, and better manage future educational changes.

Research Gap

Despite existing literature on leadership decision-making, educational reform, and change leadership, limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of public elementary school principals as they adapt leadership and decision-making during a specific curriculum transition. In particular, there remains a need to understand how principals experience challenges, navigate competing demands, and adjust their decisions throughout the MATATAG transition. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of public elementary school principals as they steer their schools through the transition.

Likewise, despite these contributions, a gap remains in understanding the lived experiences of public elementary school principals as they navigate decision-making while adapting their leadership during the MATATAG transition. Existing studies have examined principal decision-making, change leadership, curriculum reform, and the experiences of school administrators in MATATAG implementation; however, these areas have not been sufficiently brought together to explore how principals themselves experience, interpret, and navigate the decisions they make amid the demands of the transition. Addressing this gap may provide a deeper understanding of the processes through which principals exercise professional judgment, respond to competing demands, and adapt their leadership practices while steering their schools through the MATATAG transition.

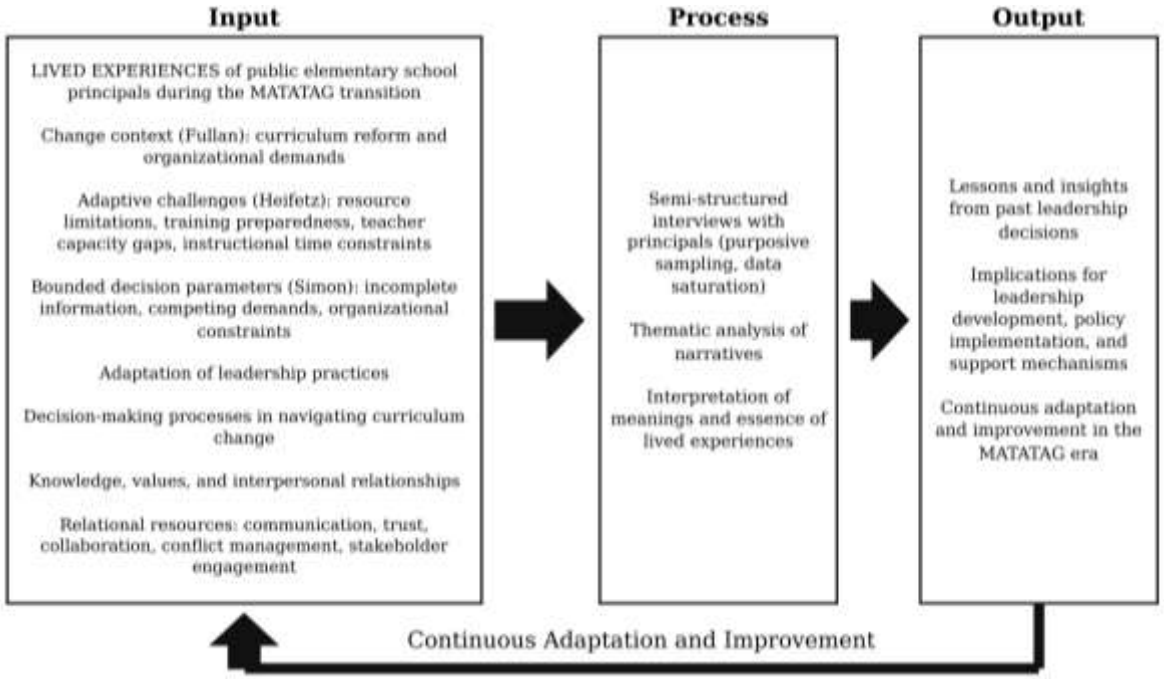
Conceptual Framework

This part presents the conceptual framework of the study that illustrates how the study explores the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in adapting leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition.

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Figure 1. **Paradigm of the Study**



The Input encapsulates the change context (Fullan), adaptive challenges (Heifetz), and bounded decision parameters (Simon) experienced by principals during the MATATAG transition. It consists of the principals' lived experiences, including the change context of curriculum reform and organizational demands; the adaptive challenges such as resource limitations, training preparedness, teacher capacity gaps, and instructional time constraints, which require principals to learn and adjust rather than apply ready-made technical solutions; and the bounded decision parameters arising from incomplete information, competing demands, and organizational constraints within which principals make choices. It likewise includes their adaptation of leadership practices, their decision-making processes in navigating curriculum change, and the knowledge, values, and interpersonal relationships they draw upon, supported by relational resources such as communication, trust, collaboration, conflict management, and stakeholder engagement.

The Process involves phenomenological inquiry, wherein data are gathered through semi-structured interviews with principals selected through purposive sampling until data saturation is reached, followed by thematic analysis of their narratives and the interpretation of the meanings and essence of their lived experiences.

The Output consists of the themes and essence that emerge from principals' narratives, the lessons and insights revealed through their past leadership decisions, and the implications for leadership development, policy implementation, and support mechanisms. A returning arrow labeled "Continuous Adaptation and Improvement" connects the Output back to the Input, representing how these insights are incorporated into future practices to promote continuous adaptation and improvement in the MATATAG era.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined conceptually and operationally as they are used in this study.

Lived experiences. Conceptually, lived experiences refer to the subjective, first-hand experiences of individuals as they encounter and interpret events in their lives, which are central to phenomenological inquiry. Operationally, they

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refer to the personal accounts and narratives that public elementary school principals share about adapting their leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition, as gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Leadership adaptation. Conceptually, leadership adaptation refers to the process by which school leaders adjust their practices, priorities, and approaches in response to changing organizational conditions and demands. Operationally, it refers to the changes principals make to their leadership practices in response to the challenges posed by the MATATAG transition, as described in their narratives.

Decision-making. Conceptually, decision-making refers to the process of selecting a course of action among alternatives, shaped by knowledge, experience, values, and contextual constraints. Operationally, it refers to the processes principals describe in navigating curriculum changes during the MATATAG transition, including the factors they perceive as most influential in shaping their decisions.

MATATAG Curriculum. Conceptually, it refers to the Department of Education's basic education curriculum reform under DepEd Order No. 10, s. 2024, which decongests the curriculum and prioritizes the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Operationally, it refers to the curriculum reform implemented in public elementary schools beginning School Year 2024-2025, which serves as the context of the principals' experiences in this study.

MATATAG transition. Conceptually, it refers to the period of change and adjustment during the implementation of a new curriculum. Operationally, it refers to the period from the introduction of the MATATAG Curriculum in School Year 2024-2025 to the present, during which the principal-respondents have served as school heads for the full duration of the transition.

Relational leadership. Conceptually, it refers to a leadership approach grounded in care, ethics, and the quality of interactions between leaders and followers, wherein principals who hone values such as care set supportive examples for teachers and learners. Operationally, it refers to the ways principals draw upon their knowledge, values, and interpersonal relationships to lead their schools during the MATATAG transition.

Interpersonal relationships. Conceptually, they refer to the connections and interactions between individuals characterized by communication, trust, and mutual respect. Operationally, they refer to the relationships principals maintain with teachers, students, and parents during the transition, as described in their narratives.

Communication. Conceptually, it refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and expectations between individuals. Operationally, it refers to the ways principals share information, expectations, and support with teachers, students, and parents during the MATATAG transition.

Trust. Conceptually, it refers to a psychological state involving confidence in the competence, consistency, openness, respect, and integrity of another. Operationally, it refers to the confidence principals build and sustain with teachers, students, and parents, which enables collaboration and conflict resolution during the transition.

Collaboration. Conceptually, it refers to working jointly with others toward shared goals. Operationally, it refers to the joint efforts principals engage in with teachers, students, and parents to implement the MATATAG Curriculum and address the challenges of the transition.

Conflict management. Conceptually, it refers to the process of addressing disagreements and tensions in ways that yield constructive outcomes. Operationally, it refers to the strategies principals use to manage conflicts among teachers, students, and parents during the MATATAG transition.

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Stakeholder engagement. Conceptually, it refers to the active involvement of individuals and groups with an interest in the school in its activities and decisions. Operationally, it refers to the participation of teachers, students, parents, and community members in school activities and decision-making during the transition.

Values. Conceptually, they refer to the principles and standards that guide an individual's behavior and decisions. Operationally, they refer to the principles principals draw upon in managing conflicts, fostering collaboration, and sustaining positive connections among teachers, students, and parents during the MATATAG transition.

Public elementary school principals. Conceptually, they refer to school heads who lead and manage public elementary schools. Operationally, they refer to the school heads currently serving in public elementary schools within the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan, who have implemented the MATATAG Curriculum for the full duration of the transition period.

Essence. Conceptually, it refers to the core meaning or invariant structure that emerges from the analysis of lived experiences in phenomenological research. Operationally, it refers to the common themes and meanings that emerge from principals' narratives about their decision-making processes during the MATATAG transition.

Phenomenological study. Conceptually, it refers to a qualitative research design that seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to those experiences. Operationally, it refers to the research design used in this study to explore principals' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

Significance of the Study

This study on the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in adapting leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition is expected to benefit the following:

Department of Education (DepEd), particularly the Schools Division Office of Bataan. The findings of this study may provide the Department with grounded, experience-based evidence on how school leaders navigate curriculum reform at the field level. This can inform the design of more responsive leadership development programs, technical assistance, and monitoring mechanisms during future curriculum transitions. The insights generated may also help division and district supervisors anticipate the specific support principals need as new reforms are rolled out.

Public elementary school principals. As the primary subjects of this study, principals stand to benefit from having their experiences documented, validated, and given scholarly attention, particularly since curriculum reform literature tends to focus more on teachers and learners. The study may surface coping strategies, decision-making patterns, and leadership adaptations that other principals facing similar transitions can draw lessons from, while affirming the complexity of their role and supporting calls for leadership-focused capacity building.

Teachers. Since principals' leadership and decision-making directly shape the working conditions, guidance, and support teachers receive during curriculum transitions, the findings may help teachers better understand the rationale behind school-level decisions made during the MATATAG rollout. Improved principal adaptability, informed by this study, may translate into clearer communication and more responsive instructional support at the classroom level.

Learners. Although not direct respondents, learners are the ultimate beneficiaries of effective school leadership during curriculum reform, since principals' decisions influence how well the MATATAG Curriculum is implemented in classrooms. Strengthened principal leadership may lead to smoother instructional transitions and more stable learning environments that support improved foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Parents and the school community. Parents and community stakeholders benefit indirectly through improved school governance and more stable, well-managed transitions during curriculum reform. When principals are better equipped

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to lead change, schools are able to maintain parent and community trust and engagement, fostering stronger home-school partnerships.

Future researchers. This study may serve as a reference for future researchers interested in educational leadership, curriculum implementation, and phenomenological inquiry in the Philippine basic education context. It may also open avenues for related studies, such as comparative research across school levels or divisions, and can guide future scholars in refining qualitative research instruments for studying leadership experiences during periods of educational reform.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study is phenomenological in design and focuses on the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in adapting their leadership and decision-making practices during the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum. It covers the transition period from the K to 12 Curriculum to the MATATAG Curriculum, beginning with the first implementation year of the MATATAG Curriculum in School Year 2024–2025 and extending to the present.

The respondents of this study are public elementary school principals currently serving within the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan, who have direct experience implementing the MATATAG Curriculum for the full duration of the transition period covered. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, with the actual number of participants determined by data saturation, consistent with standard practice in phenomenological research. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews to capture participants' experiences in depth.

This study is delimited to the lived experiences of school principals and school heads only, excluding the perspectives of teachers, learners, parents, or other school personnel, although these groups are recognized as indirect beneficiaries. It is further delimited to public elementary schools within the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan, excluding secondary schools, private schools, and principals or school heads from other districts or divisions. Given that only three duly appointed principals were serving in the district for the full transition period from the K to 12 Curriculum to the MATATAG Curriculum, officers-in-charge who assumed the role of school head and served in that capacity for the full duration of the transition were included to attain data saturation; officers-in-charge who did not serve the full duration were excluded.

The study is subject to potential limitations. Because it explores sensitive aspects of leadership decision-making, some respondents may have been hesitant to fully disclose certain challenges, conflicts, or shortcomings encountered during the transition, which may have affected the depth of the data gathered. Additionally, the study was bound by the time constraints of the research period itself, which may have limited the number of follow-up interviews or member-checking sessions that could be conducted to further validate emerging themes.

Assumptions of the Study

Since this study is phenomenological and qualitative in nature, no hypothesis is formulated to be tested statistically. Instead, the study proceeds from the following assumptions:

1. Public elementary school principals have lived experiences of adapting their leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition that can be articulated, described, and understood through their narratives.
2. The challenges encountered by principals during the MATATAG transition, including resource limitations, training preparedness, teacher capacity gaps, and instructional time constraints, shape the ways they adapt their leadership practices and make decisions.
3. Principals draw upon their knowledge, values, and interpersonal relationships to manage conflicts, foster collaboration, and sustain positive connections among teachers, students, and parents during the transition.

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4. The meanings principals attach to their experiences, as well as the lessons and insights derived from their past leadership decisions, can be incorporated into future practices to promote continuous adaptation and improvement in the MATATAG era.
5. The participants, as public elementary school principals who have implemented the MATATAG Curriculum for the full duration of the transition period, possess sufficient firsthand experience to provide rich and meaningful accounts of their lived experiences.
6. The participants would respond truthfully, openly, and voluntarily during the semi-structured interviews, and their accounts would accurately reflect their experiences within their respective school contexts.
7. The phenomenological research design, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis are appropriate and sufficient for capturing the essence of principals' lived experiences during the curriculum transition.

Statement of the Problem

The general objective of this study is to analyze the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in adapting leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do principals describe their lived experiences of adapting leadership practices in response to the challenges posed by the MATATAG transition? What meanings do they attach to these adaptations?
2. What essence emerges from principals' narratives about their decision-making processes in navigating curriculum changes, and what factors do they perceive as most influential in shaping these decisions?
3. In what ways do principals draw upon their knowledge, values, and interpersonal relationships to manage conflicts, foster collaboration, and sustain positive connections among teachers, students, and parents during the transition?
4. What lessons and insights are revealed through principals' lived experiences of past leadership decisions, and how are these incorporated into future practices to promote continuous adaptation and improvement in the MATATAG era?

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METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm, specifically a phenomenological design, to explore the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in adapting their leadership and decision-making during the MATATAG transition. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study is primarily concerned with understanding the meanings, perceptions, and interpretations that principals attach to their experiences rather than with measuring or quantifying variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the general problem of the study centers on how principals describe, make sense of, and derive lessons from their experiences, a design that privileges depth of understanding over statistical generalization was necessary.

Specifically, the study followed a transcendental phenomenological design as articulated by Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology is concerned with describing the essence of a phenomenon as it is consciously experienced by individuals who have lived through it, setting aside, to the extent possible, the researcher's own preconceptions through the process of epoché or bracketing. This design is consistent with the study's aim of uncovering the essence that emerges from principals' narratives regarding their decision-making processes, as well as the essential meanings they attach to adapting their leadership during the transition. Rather than explaining causal relationships or testing predetermined hypotheses, the design allowed the researchers to capture the structure of the phenomenon, that is, what it is like for public elementary school principals to steer their schools through the MATATAG transition, as it is directly experienced.

The specific method used was in-depth, semi-structured interviewing, which allowed the researchers to explore the four sub-problems of the study, namely leadership adaptation, decision-making, relational leadership, and lessons learned, while retaining the flexibility to probe emerging insights unique to each principal-participant's context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because it allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words and enables the researchers to ask follow-up or clarifying questions that draw out the depth and texture of those experiences.

Consistent with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, no hypothesis was tested. Instead, the researchers proceeded from the assumptions presented in Section 1.10 and allowed themes to emerge inductively from the participants' narratives through thematic analysis, as discussed in Section 2.7.

Participants and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of public elementary school principals currently serving within the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan, who have led their respective schools through the full duration of the MATATAG Curriculum transition beginning School Year 2024–2025. As school heads directly responsible for translating the MATATAG Curriculum into school-level practice, they possess first-hand, information-rich knowledge of the leadership adaptations and decisions the study seeks to understand.

Table 1 presents the background profile of the principal-participants who took part in the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Consistent with the ethical safeguards, the participants are identified only through assigned codes, and the names of their schools are withheld. The profile is presented to establish the contextual backdrop against which the participants' narratives are to be understood, particularly their length of service as school heads and their length of stay in their present schools, both of which shaped the vantage point from which each principal experienced the transition.

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Table 1. Profile of the Principal-Participants

Code	Current Position	Years as School Head	Years in Current School
P1	School Principal III	16 years	4 months
P2	School Principal II	5 years	5 months
P3	School Principal I	14 years	2 years
P4	Assistant School Principal II	2 years	4 months
P5	HTIII/OIC-Principal	6 years	1 1/2 years
P6	HTIII/OIC-Principal	16 years	15 years
P7	HTIII/OIC-Principal	15 years	8 months
P8	HTIII/OIC-Principal	2 years	3 months
P9	TVI/TIC-Principal	2 years	24 years

As shown in Table 1, the participants represent a range of appointment statuses, with three holding Plantilla principal positions, one serving as Assistant School Principal II, four serving as Head Teacher III/Officer-in-Charge (OIC)-Principals, and one designated as Teacher VI/Teacher-in-Charge (TIC)-Principal.

Their experience as school heads ranges from two to sixteen years, while their length of service in their present school ranges from three months to twenty-four years. This variation is analytically significant because it reflects differences in leadership experience and familiarity with the school context. Participants with long tenure in a single school, such as P6 and P9, brought perspectives shaped by extended familiarity with their respective school cultures, although P9 had served as school head for only two years despite having 24 years in the current school, indicating prior experience in the same institution. In contrast, participants who were newly assigned to their present schools, such as P1, P2, P4, P7, and P8, had been in their current schools for only a few months and therefore described the challenges of leading while establishing their credibility, relationships, and understanding of the existing school culture. P3, who had served as school head for 14 years and had been in the present school for two years, likewise provided a perspective shaped by substantial leadership experience while navigating a relatively newer school context.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, which involves the deliberate selection of individuals who meet predetermined criteria relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To be included in the study, a participant must (a) be a duly appointed public elementary school principal, or an officer-in-charge performing the functions of school head; (b) be currently assigned within the Bagac District, Schools Division of Bataan; and (c) have served as school head for the full duration of the MATATAG transition period covered by the study. This criterion was adopted because only three duly appointed principals served within the district for the full transition period, necessitating the inclusion of officers-in-charge to reach data saturation.

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Consistent with standard practice in phenomenological research, the actual number of participants was not fixed in advance but was determined by data saturation, that is, the point at which subsequent interviews no longer yield new themes or insights relevant to the phenomenon under study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Nine participants were interviewed, which falls within the range of six to twelve participants with which phenomenological studies of this nature typically achieve saturation, given the depth and intensity of the interviews conducted with each participant.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers. The guide consisted of open-ended questions organized around the four specific questions of the Statement of the Problem: (a) principals' lived experiences of adapting leadership practices and the meanings they attach to these adaptations; (b) the essence of principals' decision-making processes and the factors they perceive as most influential; (c) how principals draw upon their knowledge, values, and interpersonal relationships to manage conflicts, foster collaboration, and sustain positive connections; and (d) the lessons and insights principals derive from past leadership decisions and how these are incorporated into future practice.

Each section of the guide began with a broad, grand-tour question intended to elicit a spontaneous narrative from the participant, followed by planned probing questions designed to draw out greater depth and specificity without leading the participant toward a predetermined response. The guide also included a brief introductory portion to establish rapport and obtain relevant background information about the participant's tenure and school context, as well as a closing portion inviting participants to share any additional insights not previously covered.

The complete interview guide is presented in Appendix A.

Construction and Validation of the Instrument

The interview guide was constructed based on the specific questions of the study. The initial draft of the interview guide was submitted to a panel of experts composed of specialists in educational leadership, qualitative research methodology, and school administration for face and content validation. The validators evaluated the guide in terms of clarity, relevance to the research questions, appropriateness of language, and alignment with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. Their comments and suggestions were used to revise, reword, and, where necessary, remove or add items to the guide.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to the conduct of the study, the researchers secured the necessary permissions from the Schools Division Superintendent of the Schools Division of Bataan, the Bagac District Supervisor, and the respective principal-participants. Communication letters explaining the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study, as well as the ethical safeguards to be observed, were sent to these offices for approval.

Once permission was granted, the researchers coordinated directly with the identified principal-participants to explain the nature and purpose of the study, secure their voluntary participation, and obtain their informed consent. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any point without penalty, and the confidentiality of the information they would share, consistent with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

Interviews were scheduled at the time and place most convenient to each participant to minimize disruption to their administrative responsibilities. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection and were later transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Field notes were also taken during each interview to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations relevant to the analysis. After transcription,

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participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts through member checking to confirm the accuracy of their statements and to clarify or elaborate on points as needed.

All data gathered, including audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes, were kept confidential and stored securely, accessible only to the researchers, and were used solely for the purposes of this study.

Ethical Considerations

The study involved public elementary school principals narrating their personal and professional experiences of a high-stakes national reform; the researchers therefore took deliberate steps to protect participants throughout every phase of data collection and analysis. Before any principal was approached, formal permission was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent of the Schools Division of Bataan and the Bagac District Supervisor, followed by direct coordination with each identified principal-participant to explain the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study.

Each participant was asked to provide informed consent only after the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any point without penalty or professional repercussion, and the confidentiality of their disclosures were clearly explained. This was especially important given that participants were being asked to reflect candidly on leadership decisions made under the scrutiny of a system they still work within, which could make them hesitant to speak freely if they perceived any risk of exposure to their superiors or peers.

To safeguard participants once data collection began, interviews were scheduled at times and venues of the participants' choosing to minimize disruption to their administrative duties, and audio recording proceeded only with their explicit consent. All recordings, transcripts, and field notes were treated as confidential, stored securely, and accessible only to the researchers, consistent with the requirements of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

Anonymity was further protected through the use of codes in place of participants' actual names when reporting findings, ensuring that individual participants could not be identified from the excerpts. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their own transcripts through member checking, which not only strengthened the credibility of the findings but reaffirmed their control over how their words would ultimately be represented in the study.

Data Analysis

Data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. This was followed by the generation of initial codes across the entire data set, after which codes were collated into potential themes. The candidate themes were then reviewed and refined against the coded extracts and the entire data set to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction from one another. Once a satisfactory thematic structure was achieved, each theme was clearly defined and named, and the final analysis involved weaving together the thematic narrative with supporting excerpts from participants to address the specific questions of the study.

Because the study sought to describe what was distinctive about the MATATAG transition, the transcripts were read for accounts that were tied to the transition itself, namely specific episodes, tools, structures, dilemmas, and disagreements. Statements that any school head could make about any reform, such as listening to teachers, following DepEd guidelines, or valuing respect and fairness, surfaced in nearly all nine interviews, but they say little about this particular transition. They were therefore recognized but treated as the background of school leadership and not as themes. What was retained are the episodes, tools, structures, dilemmas, and disagreements that exist only because of the MATATAG Curriculum: the unpacking of decongested competencies, the ILAW lesson plans, the absence of

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textbooks, the foundational literacy and numeracy assessments (CRLA, Phil-IRI, and RMA), the intervention and ARAL programs, the restructuring of schedules for early literacy and numeracy blocks, and the remedial classes needed to secure mastery. Seven themes met this standard: three under Part 1, two under Part 2, and two under Part 3. Responses to the fourth specific question, on lessons and insights, were not developed into themes but are reported as findings in Part 4 of the Results. The initial codes and the theme-by-participant matrix are presented in Appendices B and C.

Excerpts are drawn from the participants' transcripts as condensed to preserve their transition-specific accounts. They appear in italics within quotation marks, with the participant code in parentheses after each excerpt. The participants' wording was retained, with only typographical and punctuation corrections; bracketed words stand in for details withheld to protect anonymity. The account of P6, which was given partly in Filipino and is available here in the researchers' English translation, is paraphrased in the text and not quoted.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers applied the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through member checking and prolonged engagement with participants during the interview process. Transferability was supported through thick, detailed description of the research context and participants' experiences, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, from instrument construction to data analysis. Confirmability was pursued through the researchers' continuous practice of epoch, or bracketing, to set aside personal biases and preconceptions, and through peer debriefing among the researchers throughout the analytic process.

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RESULTS

This section presents the findings drawn from the narratives of the nine principal-participants (P1 to P9). It is organized by the specific questions of the study. Parts 1 to 3 present the seven themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, and Part 4 reports the lessons and insights that answer the fourth specific question. The relation of these findings to the related literature and to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks anchoring the study, namely Fullan's Educational Change Theory, Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Theory, and Simon's Administrative Behavior Theory, is taken up in the Discussion (Section 4).

Part 1. The Essence of Principals' Lived Experiences in Adapting Leadership

Three themes emerged from the narratives on how principals adapted their leadership during the MATATAG transition, namely: (1) Decoding the Decongested Curriculum: Principals as Translators of MATATAG into Lesson Plans; (2) Building the Boat While Sailing: School-Made Materials and Peer Networks Where Textbooks Were Absent; and (3) When Figures Became Faces: Reading Learner Results as a Call Beyond Compliance. Taken together, they show that adapting leadership during this transition meant carrying the reform from the page into the classroom: translating it, supplying what it lacked, and finding in it a purpose larger than compliance.

Theme 1: Decoding the Decongested Curriculum: Principals as Translators of MATATAG into Lesson Plans

A decongested curriculum was not a lighter one to implement. The principals' accounts show that trimming the competencies did not remove the work; it moved the work into the school, where someone had to decide what the trimmed competencies meant, in what order they should be taught, and how they should appear in a lesson plan. In the nine narratives, that someone was the principal.

"Teachers initially resisted the changes in the subjects they handled, the time allotment of subjects, and the lesson plans." (P1)

"The moment that stands out was fixing the curriculum congestion and the misplaced and/or prerequisite competencies, which required unpacking skills. I questioned whether teachers could do the unpacking well." (P2)

"In the first year of implementation I oriented untrained teachers on the major changes and key practices, and conducted classroom observations to check that the new curriculum was being implemented effectively." (P4)

"At [my school], full implementation of the DLP in the ILAW Framework was immediately required, so I built ILAW lesson-plan development into our LAC sessions and INSET." (P4)

"My supervision went beyond checking documents to technical assistance in aligning lesson objectives, activities, assessments and interventions." (P3)

"My main challenge was moving from leading secondary Mathematics to an elementary school, where I had to give technical assistance across all subjects. I addressed this through self-directed learning, using online curriculum guides, instructional materials and webinars." (P4)

The first adaptation the participants described was interpretive. The resistance P1 met was not directed at MATATAG in the abstract; teachers pushed back on three concrete things, namely the subjects they handled, the time allotted to those subjects, and their lesson plans. P2 described the unpacking of skills as demanding work because the older, congested curriculum had left misplaced and prerequisite competencies, and questioned whether teachers could do the unpacking well.

P4 and P3 described how they answered. P4 did not wait for teachers to master the ILAW lesson plan alone but folded its development into the LAC sessions and INSET, oriented untrained teachers in the first year, and conducted

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classroom observations. Having moved from leading secondary Mathematics to an elementary school, P4 also turned to online curriculum guides, instructional materials, and webinars to learn the subjects well enough to give technical assistance across all of them. P3 redefined supervision itself, from checking that documents existed to providing technical assistance in aligning objectives, activities, assessments, and interventions.

Theme 2: Building the Boat While Sailing: School-Made Materials and Peer Networks Where Textbooks Were Absent

The MATATAG Curriculum reached some classrooms before its materials did. Participants spoke of learners with no textbooks and of teacher resources that existed only as downloads. Rather than wait for supplies, several principals treated the gap as a design problem to be solved at the school and district levels.

"The most difficult problem was resources: there were no textbooks for learners, and many teacher resources had to be downloaded, which consumed teachers' time." (P1)

"I was frustrated that implementation was hampered by the lack of textbooks and other learning resources. This motivated me to act: the Division Mathematics Supervisor selected me as a writer of supplementary Mathematics materials for Grades 4 to 10, and I helped produce PowerPoint presentations and ILAW-format DLPs." (P4)

"As Mathematics Department Head I proposed and completed my L&D project, Project SIKAT (Strengthening Instruction through Knowledge Advancement and Technical Support in Mathematics), giving technical support and instructional guidance to Mathematics teachers." (P4)

"I established a Professional Learning Community for all secondary Mathematics teachers in Bagac, using a dedicated group chat and shared online platforms to exchange test items, learning exemplars, performance tasks, interactive modules and PowerPoint presentations." (P4)

"Our school is a small public elementary school with limited resources, so I had to be practical in planning and in deciding which needs to prioritize." (P5)

"Instead of letting each teacher cope alone, I had them exchange strategies, materials and experiences." (P7)

The accounts follow a recognizable sequence: a shortage, a refusal to let it stall the reform, and the construction of channels through which materials and know-how could circulate. P1 observed that downloading resources consumed teachers' time, so that the missing textbook was paid for in teachers' hours. P4's frustration did not remain a grievance; it became the push behind supplementary materials written as a division-selected writer, a project of technical support (Project SIKAT), and a professional learning community that reached beyond one school through a dedicated group chat and shared online platforms. P5, leading a small school with limited resources, answered with prioritization, and P7 with peer exchange, so that no teacher had to carry the gap alone.

Theme 3: When Figures Became Faces: Reading Learner Results as a Call Beyond Compliance

The MATATAG Curriculum places foundational literacy and numeracy at its center (Department of Education, 2024), and in the schools this made assessment results the mirror in which principals saw the reform's real stakes. For several participants, the meaning they attached to adapting their leadership was found in that mirror.

"I used CRLA, Phil-IRI, RMA, quarterly results, learner outputs, attendance and intervention records to guide flexible grouping and remediation." (P3)

"The figures represented actual children." (P3)

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"We built individual learner profiles, improved reading corners, maximized the library and Math Room, developed contextualized intervention materials, and linked these to ARAL and our school-based literacy and numeracy programs." (P3)

"I paid closer attention to how teachers were adapting their lessons and how the changes affected learners, and encouraged teachers to use learner performance results to plan interventions." (P7)

"MATATAG's emphasis on Inclusive Education made me more attentive to learners with disabilities and to making learning relevant to learners' everyday experiences." (P1)

"I had to balance DepEd directives with the realities of our classrooms, teachers and parents, and to move from enforcing compliance to being more adaptive, collaborative and communicative." (P8)

"I often worried whether we were doing enough for learners who continued to struggle. I tried not to pass my anxiety to teachers; I stayed calm and encouraging but was honest about how hard it was." (P3)

"Beyond my role as leader, it affected me mentally; it was very stressful." (P2)

P3 reported reviewing CRLA, Phil-IRI, and RMA results, which revealed serious gaps in foundational literacy and numeracy, and read them with the conviction that "the figures represented actual children." The response was concrete and local: learner profiles, reading corners, a library and Math Room put to full use, contextualized intervention materials, and a deliberate link to ARAL. P7 likewise asked teachers to read learner results as the basis for interventions, and P1 found in the reform's emphasis on inclusive education a reason to look more closely at learners with disabilities and at the relevance of lessons to learners' daily lives. P8 named the shift directly: leadership had to move from enforcing compliance toward being adaptive, collaborative, and communicative.

This meaning came at an emotional cost, and the participants did not hide it. P3 worried about learners who kept struggling yet tried not to pass that anxiety to teachers, choosing to stay calm and encouraging while being honest about the difficulty; P2 described the unpacking work as mentally stressful; and P8 felt that every DepEd directive carried urgency.

Part 2. The Essence of Principals' Decision-Making Processes in Navigating Curriculum Changes

Two themes emerged from the narratives on how principals made decisions during the transition, namely: (4) Guarding the Clock: Deciding How to Spend Scarce Instructional Time; and (5) Setting the Pace: Deciding How Fast to Move When Compliance Is Immediate but Readiness Is Uneven. The factors the principals perceived as most influential run through both themes: what the policy required, what assessment evidence showed, how ready and how loaded their teachers were, what materials and time the school had, and what learners needed. The essence of their decision-making was the stewardship of time and pace in a reform that demanded more of both than schools could readily supply.

Theme 4: Guarding the Clock: Deciding How to Spend Scarce Instructional Time

The decisions participants found hardest were not about whether to implement MATATAG but about time: where the intervention period would sit, who would teach it, what to do when a quarter ended with competencies untouched, and whether early literacy and numeracy blocks justified rebuilding teachers' schedules.

"Difficult decision: organizing the class program, teachers' workloads and intervention periods without reducing regular instructional time. I weighed teachers' specialization, experience, workload, class size, learner assessment results and available time." (P3)

"An arrangement that looks balanced on paper may not be manageable in practice." (P3)

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"Difficult decision: what to do when teachers could not complete all required competencies within the quarter, since learners might miss essential skills." (P4)

"I judged mastery of essential competencies more important than keeping to timelines." (P4)

"One of the most difficult decisions was whether to restructure teachers' schedules to prioritize early literacy and numeracy blocks in the lower grades. I weighed whether teachers had the training and energy to adapt without burning out." (P8)

"A difficult decision was adjusting our school activities and teachers' work plans to meet the new curriculum requirements. I considered teachers' workload, available resources and, above all, what would be manageable for learners." (P9)

Time emerged as the scarcest resource of the transition, scarcer than money or policy guidance. P3's dilemma was a zero-sum puzzle: intervention periods had to be created without borrowing from regular instruction, so the class program became a weighing of specialization, experience, workload, class size, and assessment results. P3 remarked that an arrangement balanced on paper may not be manageable in practice, which is why the decision was tested through consultation and not simply announced. P4's dilemma sat at the edge of the quarter. Faced with competencies left uncovered, P4 chose remedial classes, targeted sessions, and close monitoring of coverage, and stated the rule behind the choice plainly: mastery of essential competencies outranked the timeline. P8 and P9 faced the same scarcity from the side of teachers' energy, weighing early literacy and numeracy blocks and revised work plans against the risk of burnout and the limits of what learners could manage.

Theme 5: Setting the Pace: Deciding How Fast to Move When Compliance Is Immediate but Readiness Is Uneven

DepEd's directives carried urgency, yet teachers reached the reform at different levels of preparation. Principals therefore made a second kind of decision alongside what to do, namely how fast to do it. In their accounts, the speed of implementation became a leadership decision in its own right.

"Even when DepEd required immediate compliance, I weighed teacher readiness and available resources before deciding how fast to move." (P8)

"Knowing teachers were already overloaded, I considered their readiness and training needs first, and decided on phased orientations and ongoing coaching instead of expecting immediate full implementation." (P4)

"I did not want them to feel judged for needing more time, so instead of immediately requiring additional outputs I first provided guidance, opportunities for collaboration and practical support." (P7)

"Having undergone the training made me confident my decision was right." (P2)

"My decisions began with three questions: What does the policy require? What does our evidence show? What is practical and beneficial for our teachers and learners? When information or resources were incomplete, I chose the most workable response, monitored its effects and stayed willing to revise it." (P3)

These excerpts show principals holding two clocks at once, the one set by the memorandum and the one set by their teachers' readiness. P8 kept the first from overruling the second, asking whether teachers had the readiness and resources to move before deciding how quickly to go. P4 translated the same concern into phased orientations and continuing coaching, and P7 into a sequence in which guidance and practical support came before any additional output was demanded. P2, who gave technical assistance to teachers not yet trained in MATATAG, drew confidence from having been trained personally, which suggests that the principal's own preparation was among the factors

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shaping decisions. P6 described a similar calculus in deciding what to adjust in school activities without overwhelming teachers, weighing workload, time, resources, and learners' needs.

P3's three questions offer the most compact statement of the factors principals considered most influential: the requirement of the policy, the evidence of the school, and the practicality for teachers and learners. The decision that followed was not the optimum but the most workable response, monitored and open to revision.

Part 3. Drawing on Knowledge, Values, and Interpersonal Relationships

Two themes emerged from the narratives on how principals managed conflict and sustained relationships, namely: (6) Who Carries the Load? Negotiating Teaching Loads, Remedial Duties, and Schedules; and (7) No Single Teacher's Problem: Turning Learner Gaps into a Shared School Concern. The disagreements recounted by the participants were seldom about whether MATATAG was worthwhile. They were about who would carry its new burdens, and the principals' ways of resolving them show how knowledge, values, and relationships were put to work.

Theme 6: Who Carries the Load? Negotiating Teaching Loads, Remedial Duties, and Schedules

The conflicts that stand out in the narratives had a common origin. The reform created duties that had not existed before, such as intervention periods, remedial classes, and restructured daily schedules, and teachers asked reasonable questions about who would perform them and on what basis.

"The main disagreement was over the distribution of teaching loads and intervention responsibilities: teachers questioned additional duties, schedule changes and fairness." (P3)

"Where an adjustment was reasonable I made it; where a responsibility had to remain, I explained why and identified the support we could provide." (P3)

"Some teachers raised concerns about conducting remedial classes because of workload and scheduling. I listened, explained the rationale based on learners' needs and DepEd policy, and stayed open to their suggestions." (P4)

"A group of teachers strongly disagreed with the new daily schedule restructuring. I made sure they understood why the changes were happening, not just what they had to do, and shared DepEd guidelines openly to reduce uncertainty." (P8)

"Some teachers were concerned about the very poor teaching competency among colleagues; others were complacent and preferred the convenient way of teaching without making sure learners actually learned." (P2)

"When I did not know the answer to a question, I told teachers honestly that I needed to verify it, and I made clear that mistakes and difficulties could be discussed without fear." (P7)

P3, P4, and P8 each faced a dispute that only this reform could have produced: the allocation of intervention duties, the scheduling of remedial classes, and the restructuring of the daily schedule. In each case, the principal's method was the same in kind. Rather than defend the decision by authority, they explained its basis. P3 laid out the grounds of every assignment, namely learner needs, specialization, experience, workload, and required instructional time, then adjusted what was reasonable and, for what had to stay, explained why and named the support available. P8's phrasing was the most telling: teachers needed to understand why the changes were happening, "not just what they had to do." P4 treated teachers' objections as professional discussion and arrived at a solution that was both practical and policy-compliant. P6, P7, and P9 likewise reported teachers who differed on how to respond to specific changes, and each described hearing everyone out before settling on what suited the school.

P7 said that when an answer was not known, teachers were told honestly that it needed to be verified, and assured that difficulties could be raised without fear. P2's account showed a harder form of the same conflict, in which some

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teachers were concerned about colleagues' very poor competency while others were complacent; P2 addressed it through a series of LAC sessions with the master teacher.

Theme 7: No Single Teacher's Problem: Turning Learner Gaps into a Shared School Concern

If Theme 6 shows how principals handled disagreement, Theme 7 shows how they kept relationships whole. Where assessment results exposed gaps in learning, principals worked to ensure that no teacher, grade level, or learner would stand alone under the spotlight, and they widened the circle to include parents and community partners.

"I did not use assessment results to find fault; we treated the data as joint evidence for improving instruction, and teachers slowly understood that classroom observations were for coaching." (P3)

"We reviewed learner data together so that literacy and numeracy gaps were seen as a school concern, not the problem of one teacher or grade level." (P3)

"Learners were supported using assessment findings and never shamed or labeled. Parents were informed in simple terms about attendance, home reading, remediation and cooperation with teachers." (P3)

"I held a series of LAC sessions with the help of our master teacher, and used focus group discussions to keep communication open." (P2)

"Teachers, parents and other stakeholders were involved in planning and implementation through the SPTA, School Governing Council, Teachers Association, Elementary Learners Government and the LGU." (P1)

"Their contributions were recognized during the 'Bigkis Bisig' activity, where all stakeholders were acknowledged." (P1)

"With parents, I explained the importance of the changes and listened to their questions and concerns." (P5)

P3 offered the most developed example of how data were used without blame. P3 treated results as joint evidence, presented classroom observation as coaching, and reviewed learner data with teachers so that gaps belonged to the school and not to one classroom. The same care extended to learners, who were supported on the basis of findings and never labeled, and to parents, who were told in simple terms what attendance, home reading, and remediation required of them. Coordinators and experienced teachers led LAC sessions and mentored colleagues, so that responsibility for improvement was distributed along lines of strength. P2 used LAC sessions and focus group discussions to keep communication open when relationships were strained, and P6 insisted that the transition was a collective responsibility that neither the principal nor any individual teacher had to face alone.

P1's account showed the widest circle. Through the SPTA, the School Governing Council, the Teachers Association, the Elementary Learners Government, and the LGU, stakeholders took part in planning and implementation, and the "Bigkis Bisig" activity gave recognition to all of them. P5 and P7 worked at the parent end of the same circle, explaining the importance of the changes and emphasizing the part parents play in learning beyond the classroom.

Part 4. Lessons and Insights from Principals' Past Leadership Decisions

The fourth specific question asked what lessons and insights principals drew from their past leadership decisions and how these are incorporated into future practice. Unlike Parts 1 to 3, the responses to this question were not developed into themes but were reported as findings. Five findings emerged:

1. Principals would begin school-based preparation earlier. They would take an early inventory of teacher readiness, learner needs, resources, and scheduling concerns (P3), give teachers time to unpack competencies and practice new approaches before full implementation (P3, P6), and involve teachers and parents from the

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planning stage (P8, P9), and they advised fellow school heads to invest in training and mentoring before rolling out changes (P8).

2. Principals concluded that a curriculum change cannot succeed through memoranda and monitoring alone. They learned to read evidence in context, giving attention to the circumstances behind assessment results and to observation and professional conversation as well as documents (P3), and they would use school data from the beginning so that decisions rest on what learners and teachers actually need and not on compliance alone (P7).
3. Principals came to regard adjustment as learning and not as failure. One no longer saw adjustment as a sign that the original plan failed (P7), another treated mistakes as opportunities to become a better leader (P9), and another resolved to stand strong on the purpose of the reform while staying flexible on how it is achieved (P3). P2 held that leadership is not about compliance and should be instructional and transformational, which means shared ownership.
4. Principals held that the transition should be faced with the whole learning community and not alone. They reported that teamwork, trust, and shared ownership made change manageable (P1, P6, P7, P9), and one hoped to leave a leadership legacy in which teachers and parents feel empowered to face future reforms (P8).
5. Principals observed that the success of the reform should not depend solely on their own resourcefulness. They pointed to the need for timely guidance, sustained training, adequate instructional materials, responsive technical assistance, and realistic reporting expectations (P3), and for training and mentoring in advance of rollout (P8).

Summary of Results

Table 2 summarizes the seven themes under the specific question each answers, together with the participants whose accounts supported them.

Table 2. **Summary of Themes by Specific Question and Contributing Participants**

Part	Theme	Participants
Part 1	Theme 1: Decoding the Decongested Curriculum: Principals as Translators of MATATAG into Lesson Plans	P1, P2, P3, P4
	Theme 2: Building the Boat While Sailing: School-Made Materials and Peer Networks Where Textbooks Were Absent	P1, P4, P5, P7
	Theme 3: When Figures Became Faces: Reading Learner Results as a Call Beyond Compliance	P1, P2, P3, P7, P8
Part 2	Theme 4: Guarding the Clock: Deciding How to Spend Scarce Instructional Time	P3, P4, P8, P9
	Theme 5: Setting the Pace: Deciding How Fast to Move When Compliance Is Immediate but Readiness Is Uneven	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8
Part 3	Theme 6: Who Carries the Load? Negotiating Teaching Loads, Remedial Duties, and Schedules	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9

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Part	Theme	Participants
	Theme 7: No Single Teacher's Problem: Turning Learner Gaps into a Shared School Concern	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7

Under Part 1, principals adapted their leadership by translating the decongested curriculum into lesson plans, by building school-made materials and peer networks where textbooks were absent, and by finding in learner results a purpose beyond compliance. Under Part 2, their decisions centered on guarding instructional time and on setting the pace of implementation according to teacher readiness. Under Part 3, they managed conflict by explaining the basis of teaching and intervention loads, and they sustained relationships by making learner gaps a shared concern of teachers, learners, parents, and the community. The accounts of P3 and P4 supplied the most episode-specific material, with P1, P2, and P8 adding to it; the accounts of P5, P6, P7, and P9 were less specific and for the most part corroborated the themes rather than originated them.

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DISCUSSION

The Essence of the Phenomenon

Read together, the seven themes describe a single phenomenon. Steering the MATATAG transition was experienced as standing between a decongested curriculum on paper and a crowded reality in the school, and working at that point of tension: translating the curriculum into lesson plans (Theme 1), supplying what it lacked (Theme 2), reading learner results as a call beyond compliance (Theme 3), guarding the clock (Theme 4), setting the pace (Theme 5), negotiating who carries the load (Theme 6), and making learner gaps a shared concern (Theme 7). The essence that emerges is that principals did not simply implement the reform; they made it workable, and they judged its workability by what it did for learners.

Adapting Leadership: Interpreting Themes 1 to 3

Theme 1: Decoding the Decongested Curriculum

Principals' first adaptation was interpretive. The resistance P1 met mirrors the teacher anxiety over modified time allocations and subject alignments reported in the transition study of the Candijay Educational Research Group (2025). P2's account goes further. Because the older, congested curriculum had left misplaced and prerequisite competencies, unpacking skills was not the application of a ready-made procedure but a series of judgment calls whose soundness could not be known in advance, which is what Heifetz (1994) describes as an adaptive challenge. It also echoes the uneven articulation of competencies across grade levels documented by Gavan et al. (2025).

The responses of P4 and P3 reflect the movement that Kilag et al. (2024) describe when central authorities reduce learning areas: school heads must shift from broad content coverage toward deep pedagogical mastery. In Fullan's (1982) terms, the principals worked where change actually lives, not in the new documents but in the new practices and understandings behind them.

Theme 2: Building the Boat While Sailing

The delayed provision of learning materials is a documented feature of the MATATAG rollout (Gavan et al., 2025), and Lorono (2025) found that many implementing teachers lacked sufficient knowledge, skills, and materials. What the present narratives add is the principals' response. Peñeda (2025) reported that administrators engaged in resource mobilization and collaborative professional development; P4 and P7 show how this looks on the ground, in a group chat, a shared folder of test items, and a district-wide learning community. In Heifetz's (1994) language, the principals gave the work back to the people best placed to do it, building structures through which teachers could produce and share, rather than producing everything themselves or waiting for supplies to arrive.

Theme 3: When Figures Became Faces

P3's account is the clearest statement of how data changed meaning. The principal's reading of CRLA, Phil-IRI, and RMA results, that "the figures represented actual children," turned a compliance exercise into a moral prompt. The emotional cost that principals reported resembles the "emotional duality" of professional pride and overwhelming pressure that Navarro (2026) found among newly promoted junior high school principals in Bataan, but here its object is specific: learners whose foundational skills had yet to catch up with the curriculum. For these principals, adapting leadership was less about a new style than about a new answer to the question of what leadership was for. It was for the learner behind the figure. The meaning is consistent with Gavan et al.'s (2025) view that the reform must ultimately be judged by its effects on learners.

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Decision-Making: Interpreting Themes 4 and 5

Theme 4: Guarding the Clock

These decisions fit Simon's (1947) account of administrative behavior. None of the principals could optimize across every alternative; each worked within limits of time, information, and teacher capacity, and settled on an arrangement that was workable and open to revision. They also reflect Darling-Hammond's (2021) observation that structural changes in curriculum alter instructional dynamics and require school heads to re-engineer daily schedules and reassign teaching loads. The finding is consistent with Peñeda (2025), who identified instructional time constraints among the challenges of MATATAG implementation, and with Lorono (2025), who recommended that school heads build time-allocation and mentorship structures into their planning. What the narratives add is the principle by which principals chose: where time had to be traded, learners' mastery was protected before the calendar.

Theme 5: Setting the Pace

The decision that principals reached was not the optimum but the most workable response, monitored and revisable, which is the satisficing logic of bounded rationality (Simon, 1947). The pacing also reflects the situational adjustment of directing, coaching, and supporting to teacher readiness described by Ja'afar and Zainal Adnan (2025), and it reconciles top-down directives with ground-level shortages in the way reported by EPRA Publishing (2025) among school leaders in Davao City. Bentayao et al. (2024) recommended training and sufficient preparation before any policy is implemented; the principals in this study, working after the rollout had begun, in effect improvised that preparation, adjusting the pace of the reform to what their schools could bear.

Knowledge, Values, and Relationships: Interpreting Themes 6 and 7

Theme 6: Who Carries the Load?

The knowledge principals drew upon in these disputes was of two kinds: the text of the policy, which they shared openly, and the facts of their own schools, which they set beside it. The values were fairness and honesty. P7's readiness to say that an answer needed verifying, and to assure teachers that difficulties could be raised without fear, protected trust at the moment when a principal's authority was most easily tested. In Heifetz's (1994) terms, disputes of this kind belong to adaptive work, where competing values and loyalties must be worked through and cannot be settled by decree. They are consistent with Parojenog and Miasco (2025), who found that insufficient training and increased workload strained the practical implementation of MATATAG, and with the caution in the literature that principals who overlook teacher capacity and workload risk undermining the reform, however sound the policy may be.

Theme 7: No Single Teacher's Problem

By treating results as joint evidence, presenting classroom observation as coaching, and reviewing learner data with teachers so that gaps belonged to the school and not to one classroom, P3 removed the shame that assessment results can carry. The pattern of widening the circle to parents and community partners agrees with Leynes (2026), who found that School Learning Action Cell sessions served as platforms for instructional support, peer mentoring, and shared accountability, and with Peñeda (2025), who reported stakeholder partnerships among administrators' responses to MATATAG. It is also consistent with Navarro (2026), whose principals identified collaborative leadership as their dominant coping strategy. In the present study, collaboration did not stay at the level of teamwork in general. It took the specific form of treating learner gaps as everyone's concern, which Fullan (1982) would recognize as the creation of shared understanding on which lasting change depends.

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Lessons and Insights from Past Leadership Decisions

The five lessons principals drew align with several strands of the reviewed literature. Their conviction that preparation should begin earlier echoes Bentayao et al. (2024), who recommended training and sufficient preparation before any educational policy is implemented, and Aldridge and McLure (2023), who identified comprehensive planning and systematic implementation preparation among the conditions that support schools in preparing for mandated change. Their resolve to read evidence in context and to use school data from the beginning relates to the literature on data literacy and data-driven decision-making (Goh, 2024; Lee et al., 2024), which documents a persistent gap between theory and practice in schools' use of data. The view that adjustment is learning and not failure reflects the reflective-practice literature, in which leaders who critically examine their experiences are better positioned to refine their practices (Campbell & Ceau, 2023) and in which reflection functions as a coping and adaptive mechanism under sustained systemic pressure (Dyantyi & Ncanywa, 2024). The conviction that the transition should be faced with the whole learning community corresponds to the shared-leadership findings of Ralebese et al. (2025) and the collaborative coping reported by Navarro (2026). Finally, the principals' observation that the success of a reform should not rest on their resourcefulness alone is consistent with Ralebese et al. (2022), who reported that inadequate preparation and professional support limited principals' ability to lead curriculum reform in Lesotho.

Theoretical Implications

The three theories discussed in Section 1.2 each illuminate a different layer of this essence. Fullan's (1982) Educational Change Theory explains why the work fell where it did: change took place in practices such as the ILAW lesson plan, the class program, and the remedial schedule, and principals who built shared understanding made those practices stick. Heifetz's (1994) Adaptive Leadership Theory explains why no memorandum could settle the matter: each theme has a technical shell, such as a lesson template, an assessment tool, or a schedule, and an adaptive core of competing loyalties, uncertain judgments, and strained relationships that principals had to work through with their teachers. Simon's (1947) Administrative Behavior Theory explains the character of their decisions, which were made under limits of time, information, and teacher capacity and were therefore workable and open to revision. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 is borne out: the change context, the adaptive challenges, and the bounded decision parameters in the Input are all visible in the narratives, and the Output, with its themes, essence, and lessons, flows from them.

In terms of the theories that anchor the study, the findings affirm Fullan's view that change lives in practice and shared understanding, Heifetz's distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges, and Simon's account of decisions made within bounds.

What Distinguishes the Transition-Specific Themes

What sets these themes apart from findings on adaptive leadership and decision-making in general is that each depends on a feature of this reform. Without decongested competencies there is nothing to unpack; without ILAW there is no lesson-plan format to build into LAC sessions; without a shortage of textbooks there is no occasion for school-made materials; without CRLA, Phil-IRI, and RMA there are no figures to turn into faces; and without early literacy and numeracy blocks, intervention periods, and quarterly competencies there is no clock to guard. The listening, consulting, and flexibility that principals described elsewhere in their interviews are real, but they belong to school leadership in every reform. The seven themes presented here belong to this one.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings carry implications for the support given to school heads during curriculum reform. They suggest that reforms are carried further when preparation, materials, training, and technical assistance reach schools before full implementation, and when reporting expectations fit the time that schools actually have. They also suggest that school-

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made practices such as learner profiling, peer-led LAC sessions, and professional learning communities are worth documenting and sharing, since they already show how a school can carry the reform forward.

Limitations

Because the study is phenomenological and drew on nine principals in one district, its findings describe the experiences of these participants and are not meant to be generalized. The accounts of P5, P6, P7, and P9 were less specific than those of P3 and P4 and, for the most part, corroborated the themes rather than originated them, so the themes rest most heavily on the more episode-specific narratives. As noted in Section 1.9, participants may have been hesitant to disclose certain challenges, conflicts, or shortcomings, and the time available for follow-up interviews and member-checking sessions was limited.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn, presented in the order of the specific questions raised in the Statement of the Problem:

1. Public elementary school principals adapted their leadership in the MATATAG transition chiefly by translating the reform into classroom practice, supplying what it lacked, and finding in it a purpose beyond compliance. To carry a decongested curriculum into lessons, they interpreted it for teachers, built materials and peer networks where textbooks were missing, and read learners' foundational literacy and numeracy results as a call to action, at a considerable emotional cost.
2. The essence of principals' decision-making was the stewardship of time and pace. Working within limits of time, information, and teacher capacity, principals protected learners' mastery over the calendar, moved at the speed their teachers' readiness allowed, and treated each decision as one to be monitored and revised. The factors that shaped their decisions were policy requirements, assessment evidence, teacher readiness and workload, materials and time, learners' needs, and their own training.
3. Principals managed conflict and sustained relationships by making the basis of decisions visible and by locating learner gaps in the school as a whole. Disagreements over teaching loads, remedial duties, and schedules were settled through explanation, adjustment, and honest communication, and collaboration with teachers, learners, parents, and the community was built around shared responsibility for learners' progress.
4. The lessons principals drew converge on five convictions: preparation should begin earlier and at the school level; reform cannot succeed on memoranda and monitoring alone; adjustment is a form of learning; the transition should be led with the whole learning community; and the success of a reform should not rest on the resourcefulness of principals alone.

Taken together, these conclusions suggest that steering a school through the MATATAG transition was experienced as a single phenomenon in which translating, supplying, timing, and sharing the work of the reform could not be separated from keeping learners in view.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing conclusions, the following recommendations are offered:

Department of Education, particularly the Schools Division Office of Bataan. The Division may provide instructional materials and school-head and teacher training before full implementation of future reforms, and may set aside protected time within LAC sessions and INSET for unpacking competencies and preparing lesson plans such as ILAW. Technical assistance may be made responsive to what schools report, and reporting formats and timelines may be reviewed so that they remain realistic for the time schools have. The practices that principals developed on their

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own, such as learner profiling, school-made materials, and professional learning communities, may be documented and shared across the district, and newly assigned principals and officers-in-charge may be given mentoring from experienced school heads.

Public elementary school principals. Principals may conduct an early inventory of teacher readiness, learner needs, resources, and scheduling concerns before a reform takes hold, and may explain the basis of class programs, loads, and schedules in the manner of the principals in this study. Assessment results may be used as joint evidence for improving instruction and not for fault-finding, and observation may be presented as coaching. Where compliance is required at once, principals may set the pace of implementation by teachers' readiness, offering guidance and practical support before requiring further outputs, and may keep a feedback and monitoring system running from the beginning so that decisions are revised as problems emerge.

Teachers. Teachers may take an active part in LAC sessions and professional learning communities, share school-made materials and strategies, and raise concerns about workload and scheduling early and with proposed solutions. Learner profiles and assessment results may be used by teachers together as shared evidence of what learners need.

Parents and the school community. Parents and community partners may take up the specific roles that principals have identified for them, namely attendance, home reading, and cooperation with remedial and intervention programs, and may take part in school planning through the SPTA and other school bodies. The school may continue to recognize their contributions, as in the "Bigkis Bisig" activity.

Future researchers. Future studies may extend the inquiry to other districts and divisions, and to teachers, learners, and parents, so that the principals' accounts can be compared with those of the people they lead. Interview protocols may include probes for a concrete episode, such as a specific meeting, schedule change, teacher, or learner, to draw out transition-specific detail from participants whose accounts are general. Studies may follow principals beyond the early years of the rollout, compare appointed principals with officers-in-charge, or use mixed methods to examine how practices such as learner profiling and intervention scheduling relate to measured foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes.

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