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LEADING THROUGH COMPLEXITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of school administrators in leading through complexity and examined how they navigate administrative challenges within their respective schools. Specifically, it investigated the organizational demands they encountered, how they interpreted and responded to challenging situations, the coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies they employed, the contingency plans they developed, the conflicts they experienced and resolved, and the leadership practices they considered effective in managing complex administrative situations. The study used a qualitative research approach with a descriptive phenomenological design to understand the meanings and essential experiences of school administrators in addressing administrative challenges. Eleven (11) purposively selected administrators from public elementary and secondary schools in the Mariveles District, Schools Division of Bataan, participated; their administrative experience ranged from six (6) to twenty (20) years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using phenomenological procedures and thematic analysis to identify significant statements, formulate meanings, and develop themes from the participants' narratives. School administrators experienced leadership complexity through competing organizational demands, simultaneous responsibilities, limited resources, policy requirements, technological challenges, time constraints, and interpersonal concerns. Their decision-making processes were shaped by learner welfare, institutional policies, ethical considerations, verification of information, and consultation with relevant stakeholders. To manage administrative pressures, they employed structured prioritization, emotional regulation, reflection, spirituality, and professional support systems. In responding to unexpected situations, they practiced adaptive contingency planning by preparing alternative strategies, following established protocols, maintaining communication, and adjusting decisions according to changing circumstances. Complex conflicts were addressed through active listening, dialogue, mediation, consultation, transparency, and adherence to institutional policies. Effective leadership practices were characterized by open communication, data-informed instructional leadership, shared responsibility, professional collaboration, integrity, compassion, and reflective practice. School administration is a complex, human-centered leadership process that requires the integration of professional competence, ethical judgment, adaptability, resilience, and compassion. Effective leadership depends on administrators' ability to interpret challenging situations, make responsible decisions, maintain constructive relationships, and balance organizational demands with the needs of the school community. In response to the findings, a five-day capacity-building program entitled **LEAD (Leadership, Ethics, Adaptive Planning, and Digital Leadership)** was proposed to strengthen administrators' competencies in ethical and evidence-based decision-making, emotional resilience, adaptive planning, conflict resolution, collaborative leadership, and responsible technology integration. The program incorporates experiential learning, case analysis, simulation exercises, peer consultation, and school-based action planning, with implementation monitoring at 30, 60, and 90 days.

Keywords: *Administrative Challenges, Descriptive Phenomenology, Educational Leadership, Lived Experiences, School Administrators, Thematic Analysis*

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The pursuit of inclusive and equitable quality education, as outlined in United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), relies fundamentally on the stability and resilience of educational institutions. At the forefront of this global mandate are school administrators, who must exercise strong leadership to respond to varied and complex operational circumstances in the educational system. Achieving these global standards at the local level requires school administrators to perform many functions that keep schools running smoothly while addressing the diverse needs of learners, teachers, parents, and external stakeholders. They continually face a wide range of institutional challenges and dilemmas that test their managerial and supervisory skills.

The complex nature of school leadership requires administrators to assume diverse roles in addressing the organizational and operational demands of educational institutions. Educational leaders must continuously balance competing priorities and respond strategically to the needs of various stakeholders while ensuring the effective delivery of quality education. As instructional leaders, they also carry a wide scope of administrative responsibilities: improving the physical aspects of the school, protecting the welfare of learners and teachers, building strong community ties, addressing concerns about the learner-teacher ratio, managing limited financial and human resources, resolving issues among the school's internal and external stakeholders while promoting positive linkages with the community, and maintaining the good reputation of the institution.

School administrators also need the personal strength to handle difficult situations and to make ethical decisions amid the implementation of changing educational programs and unexpected educational crises. The complexities of these functions often generate pressure that calls for resilience, adaptability, and strong leadership skills. Successfully overcoming these challenges is significant in nurturing a school environment that promotes quality instruction, meaningful learning, and continuous school improvement.

Executing these multifaceted duties often exacts a significant psychological toll on school leaders. Because educational administration is highly relational and involves building harmonious relationships with the school community, leaders inevitably experience conflicts with stakeholders and absorb organizational stress and tension (Ghamrawi et al., 2023; Neves et al., 2023). Administrators are therefore compelled to rely on coping mechanisms and adaptive leadership strategies, which can lead to emotional and physical exhaustion (Leavy et al., 2024). Technological advancement and the use of digital tools have further shaped how administrative problems manifest within institutions, and school administrators face expectations to adapt to educational reforms and trends, often with limited operational resources and training (Leavy et al., 2024; Neves et al., 2023). When these pressures remain unresolved, school leaders may end up handling ethical dilemmas in isolation (Ammann & Schratz, 2023).

Beyond coping, effective crisis management is another essential aspect of school leadership, particularly when administrators confront unexpected and complex situations that may disrupt school operations. Examining how school leaders analyze crises, identify challenges, and develop appropriate responses offers valuable insight into the administrative practices used to manage and prevent the recurrence of such difficulties. Tokel (2018), for example, interviewed 12 principals and directors in the Central Secondary Schools of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and, through content analysis, identified the nature of the crises they usually experienced, the hindrances they faced in overcoming them, and the contingency plans they later adopted to avoid recurrence; the study also offered suggestions for resolving crises in schools. Its findings indicate that crisis response in schools is seldom a single decision-making act. It is a multi-faceted process that begins with acknowledging the crisis, progresses through reducing its immediate effects, and ends with institutionalizing the lessons gained so that similar problems are less damaging in the future. For a study focused on lived experience, this framing is useful because it suggests that

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administrators do not simply "handle" a problem and move on; they carry forward a range of coping mechanisms shaped by each incident they have survived.

Understanding how school administrators respond to the complexities and conflicts they encounter is likewise essential to examining how they cope with the demands of educational leadership. Previous qualitative research has highlighted the lived experiences of school leaders and the strategies they use to navigate challenges and conflicts within the educational system. Refugio (2025), in a qualitative study titled "Navigating Turbulence," investigated the lived experiences of public school administrators and the coping and conflict-resolution strategies they used in addressing conflicts in the educational system. The findings showed that socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and institutional dilemmas contributed to the coping strategies school leaders employed. The study concluded that these experiences underscored the importance of continuous professional development, culturally responsive strategies, and access to support systems, with conflict resolution serving as a critical function of leaders in public schools. This viewpoint reinforces the idea that an administrator's ability to manage crises is not solely a matter of individual skill but is deeply embedded in the social and cultural dimensions of the community the school serves. Any framework for understanding administrators' lived experiences of crisis must therefore account for the local context in which those crises unfold.

Becoming a school leader is not only about position and title but also about how leaders make sense of their everyday leadership experiences. Focusing only on the surface-level outcomes of administrative tasks overlooks the professional judgment and problem-solving strategies that shape effective leadership (Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Ghamrawi et al., 2023). By exploring these underlying mechanisms, a study can provide deeper insight into how school administrators maintain their schools' direction, strengthen collaboration within the organization, and protect their well-being while managing emerging institutional crises.

Although educational research has uncovered various leadership models (e.g., transformational, transactional, and instructional leadership), these models often describe leadership through standardized competencies and behavioral lists (Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Neves et al., 2023). Consequently, they may not fully capture what school administrators personally experience in the field and how they respond to unpredictable educational crises (Ammann & Schratz, 2023). Several studies have investigated effective leadership styles rather than how administrators apply practices to manage the complexities of their roles and functions (Ghamrawi et al., 2023; Harris & Jones, 2022). Much of the literature on the roles of school administrators also assesses leadership effectiveness quantitatively, measuring outcomes in terms of performance and behavior (Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Hallinger, 2024). Although this research provides empirical evidence of leadership effectiveness, it offers limited knowledge of the narratives of administrators' lived experiences.

A phenomenological approach addresses this gap by providing descriptive accounts of administrators' experiences in managing schools and of how they leverage those experiences for effective leadership practice. Rather than focusing mainly on leadership theories and concepts, phenomenology seeks to understand how school administrators experience, interpret, and make sense of the challenges they encounter in their daily work. It illuminates how cognitive, emotional, and relational factors influence their decision-making, their responses to crises, and their adaptation to complex situations (Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Ghamrawi et al., 2023). Investigating these lived experiences contributes to the body of knowledge on administrators' strategies for sustaining school operations, strengthening organizational relationships, and promoting institutional growth while navigating the complex demands of educational leadership. The present study therefore seeks to bridge the gap between leadership theory and the real scenario of administrative approaches by capturing the leadership practices of school administrators through their lived experiences, and thereby providing a holistic understanding of how leaders uphold institutional success despite interconnected challenges.

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The study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Complexity Leadership Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. Complexity Leadership Theory provides a lens for understanding how school administrators respond to dynamic, interconnected, and unpredictable organizational challenges. Sensemaking Theory explains how administrators interpret ambiguous situations, construct meaning, and use that understanding to guide their decisions and actions. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping offers a perspective for examining how administrators appraise challenging situations, evaluate available resources, and employ coping strategies in responding to administrative demands and pressures. Taken together, these anchors provide complementary perspectives for understanding how administrators make sense of complexity, respond to challenges, cope with demands, make decisions, resolve conflicts, and develop adaptive practices within their school contexts.

Review of Related Literature

The literature reviewed covers three contexts, namely global, ASEAN, and Philippine/Department of Education (DepEd)-related literature, and centers on school administration and educational leadership, the complexity of contemporary school leadership, the administrative difficulties school administrators experience, leadership practices in addressing those difficulties, decision-making and problem-solving, collaboration and distributed leadership, and the professional preparation and support of school leaders. The review aims not only to establish what is known about school administration but also to identify areas that remain insufficiently explored. Attention is given to literature published from 2020 to 2026, reflecting the changing demands placed on school administrators by educational reforms, the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing accountability requirements, technological developments, workforce concerns, and shifting stakeholder expectations.

School administration, leadership, and complexity

School administration has evolved from a predominantly managerial function into a complex leadership responsibility involving instructional improvement, organizational development, personnel management, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and policy implementation. Contemporary administrators are expected to manage daily operations while providing direction for teaching and learning and responding to changing educational, social, and organizational conditions.

The UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5* (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024) emphasizes that leadership is central to educational quality and identifies four broad dimensions of effective educational leadership: setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people. The report notes that principals need a broad repertoire of skills, including planning, implementation, supervision, assessment, problem-solving, communication, and relationship-building, as well as the use of data, prioritization, team mobilization, and people development. It further observes that principals in many education systems spend substantial amounts of time on management tasks, which illustrates the continuing tension between administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership, and it identifies weaknesses in leadership preparation and development across education systems. Effective leadership therefore depends not only on the personal qualities of administrators but also on the systems of preparation, professional development, and support available to them, and it requires administrators to perform multiple interconnected functions rather than merely execute administrative procedures.

In the Philippine context, DepEd formally recognized this expanded conception of school leadership through the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) under DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020 (Department of Education, 2020). The standards establish expectations for school heads across domains of school leadership, strategic management, operations, human resource management, teaching and learning, community engagement, and personal and professional development, and they provide a framework for developing school leaders' pedagogical, management, and leadership competencies. The PPSSH reflects the multidimensional nature of the school

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administrator's role: administrators are expected to address instructional concerns while also managing people, resources, policies, and relationships, so difficulties may emerge from the intersection of these responsibilities.

The concept of complexity has become increasingly relevant in educational leadership. Schools operate as interconnected systems in which decisions in one area influence other aspects of school functioning. A staffing problem, for example, may simultaneously affect teacher workload, instructional quality, school climate, and student outcomes, and a policy change may require adjustments in personnel deployment, resource allocation, communication, and stakeholder engagement. UNESCO (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024) recognizes that school leaders must operate in increasingly complex environments and need competencies that extend beyond traditional administrative skills. The same complexity appears in Southeast Asia: a study of novice principals in Thailand describes school leadership as involving contextual challenges and complexities that require leaders to respond to the particular circumstances of their schools, and it highlights leadership as a practice influenced by organizational and contextual conditions rather than a fixed set of behaviors (Chongcharoen, 2024). This literature supports the premise that administrators' practices cannot be adequately understood without considering the complex contexts in which they occur. Administrators may employ different strategies depending on the nature of the difficulty, the people involved, the available resources, the organizational culture, and institutional expectations.

Administrative difficulties are problems and demands that interfere with or complicate the effective performance of school leadership responsibilities. They may include personnel concerns, workload, resource limitations, policy implementation, stakeholder conflicts, accountability requirements, technological changes, and organizational problems. Recent literature indicates that workload and time pressure remain significant concerns for school leaders. Saputra et al. (2023), for example, examined principals' experiences of time pressure and described "time poverty" as a complex condition arising from the multitude of responsibilities inherent in educational leadership, in which accumulated organizational demands make it difficult to allocate adequate time to competing responsibilities. Administrative workload is also evident in the Philippine education system. DepEd Order No. 002, s. 2024 sought to remove administrative tasks from public school teachers and to clarify the distinction between teaching and administrative responsibilities (Department of Education, 2024). This policy has implications for administrators because responsibilities previously performed by teachers required corresponding adjustments in school-level administrative processes and personnel roles. A grounded-theory study by Fernandez and Barazon (2024) examined school administrators' perspectives and coping mechanisms in response to this policy shift and highlighted the significance of organizational adjustment and coping in managing changing responsibilities. Administrative difficulties therefore should not be understood solely as individual problems; they may also reflect systemic, organizational, and policy-level conditions, and administrators may be managing difficulties that originate not within the school alone but from broader institutional structures.

Global literature on school leadership

Globally, school leaders face multiple pressures associated with accountability, educational reform, teacher shortages, technological change, student diversity, and growing stakeholder expectations. Recent international evidence also points to growing workload and well-being pressures among school principals: Australian evidence, for instance, reported substantial concerns among principals about excessive workloads, violence, threats, and deteriorating working conditions. These findings show that contemporary school leadership involves not only instructional and organizational responsibilities but also the management of increasingly difficult social and workplace conditions. The global literature therefore reinforces the argument that school administration is increasingly characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and competing demands, and that understanding it requires examining not only leadership competencies but also the lived experiences, interpretations, and decision-making processes of administrators.

Ammann and Schratz (2023) explored school leadership through a phenomenological research approach in European educational contexts. They examined how school leaders interpret their responsibilities, manage institutional

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expectations, and respond to complex situations in daily school operations, and they emphasized that leadership cannot be fully understood through competencies and performance indicators alone because it is shaped by personal meanings, relationships, and lived experiences. Administrative challenges are thus not merely technical concerns; they involve personal judgment, relationships, emotions, and contextual factors, which supports the use of phenomenology in the present study.

Harris and Jones (2022) examined adaptive leadership among school leaders in the United Kingdom during periods of disruptive change, focusing on how administrators responded to uncertainty, changing educational demands, and organizational challenges. Effective leaders demonstrated flexibility, collaboration, and the ability to modify strategies as situations emerged. Because administrators frequently encounter unpredictable problems that require immediate decisions and contingency planning, adaptive leadership offers an important perspective on how school leaders develop coping mechanisms and problem-solving strategies while maintaining school operations. Hallinger (2024) examined educational leadership in increasingly complex educational environments and emphasized that contemporary school leaders must respond to multiple demands involving policy implementation, technological developments, resource management, and stakeholder relationships. He argued that leadership research must consider complexity, context, and continuous adaptation rather than focus only on traditional leadership models, which is consistent with the view that administrators experience interconnected challenges rather than isolated problems.

Leavy et al. (2024) investigated the professional experiences of female high school principals in Utah, United States, including how they managed administrative responsibilities, organizational expectations, and personal pressures. The findings highlighted the importance of resilience, leadership development, and support systems in sustaining effective leadership, and they emphasize the human dimension of school administration: how administrators respond emotionally and professionally to difficult situations and develop strategies for managing leadership pressure.

Foreign studies on challenges, coping, crises, conflict, and effective practices

Experiences of school leaders in managing challenges. Today's school leader works in an environment of uncertainty, competing demands, organizational constraints, stakeholder expectations, regulatory pressures, and rapidly changing educational conditions. Research in various nations shows that administrative challenges are not technical problems with pre-established answers; they are shaped by environmental, social, cultural, and organizational factors that call for flexibility, judgment, collaboration, and intentional leadership. Korumaz et al. (2020) conducted a descriptive phenomenological study of the experiences of school principals in Istanbul with change management in their schools. Three major themes emerged: barriers to change, options, and processes. The principals viewed change management as a teaching process, and the problems they encountered were organizational structures, parents' expectations, and teachers' resistance; despite these impediments, they saw change as an opportunity to develop the institution. Administrators thus perceive complexity as both limitation and opportunity, and leadership includes the ability to reframe unfavorable conditions as potential for advancement.

In a study of newly appointed secondary school administrators in Guyana, Medford and Brown (2022) found adjustment and context to be relevant. The principals struggled to understand the existing school culture, to build relationships, and to lead changes that would improve teaching and learning, and they found that successful leadership did not depend solely on administrative authority. Lived experience is important in building an administrator's ability to negotiate difficult institutional conditions: before real change can occur, administrators must first understand the culture, expectations, linkages, and informal practices of the institution. Bayeni and Bhengu (2018), in a study of three school principals in South Africa, showed the connection between administrative procedures and contextual reality. The principals were caught between the pressures of government policy and the realities of their local schools, and they had to examine policies and determine how they could be applied in a particular setting. Policy thus became a matter of discussion, compromise, and judgment rather than obedience, and the point where formal expectations and actual reality collide emerged as one of the most difficult administrative circumstances, especially when administrators

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must translate their efforts into equity and inclusiveness. DeMatthews et al. (2021) studied primary school principals recognized as successful inclusive leaders in a low-income Mexican American immigrant community in the United States. The principals grappled with the intertwined issues of disability, racism, immigration status, language, and family background and, although committed to establishing inclusive schools, behaved differently according to their ideals and circumstances. Complicated administrative challenges are therefore multidimensional and cannot be solved through a single leadership style.

Taken together, these studies imply that operational problems are not the main influence on the lived experiences of school leaders. Complexity arises from the interaction of organizational culture, policy requirements, stakeholder expectations, social conditions, institutional arrangements, and resistance to change. Understanding administrative complexity therefore means understanding how administrators perceive, interpret, and make meaning of difficult situations, which reinforces the phenomenological approach of this work.

Coping and decision-making strategies. International studies of educational leaders describe adaptation, sensemaking, teamwork, contextual judgment, and dispersed responsibility as important strategies for coping with adverse conditions. In his research on principals conducting school development projects in England, Constantinides (2023) underlined the importance of sensemaking when administrators face uncertainty, ambiguity, and disruptions to established norms. Principals responded to the changing organizational reality through problem solving, building trusting relationships, and professional engagement with diverse stakeholders, which strengthened organizational flexibility and receptiveness to change. Decision-making is therefore not just an individual cognitive activity; it is shaped by relationships and shared understandings of institutional settings.

Adaptive leadership is another pertinent notion. Alene et al. (2025) used a qualitative phenomenological technique to study the adaptive leadership strategies of secondary school administrators amid a quality education crisis in Ethiopia and concluded that adaptive leadership is a situational strategy in which administrators look for responses that match different conditions. Some adaptation tactics were relatively well practiced, such as stepping back to examine problems more holistically and returning responsibility to educators, while other habits, such as protecting leadership voices and managing distress, needed further development. Complex problems call for flexibility rather than rigidity. Such flexibility may also require leaders to hold two alternative impressions of a situation at once. Gottfredson and Crane (2025) argued that as the business world becomes more complex, leaders need better-developed personal capabilities, notably cognitive complexity and self-complexity. Cognitively complex leaders can process complex information and incorporate multiple perspectives into their decisions, and leaders who understand the different aspects of their roles and identities are better equipped to face challenges and adapt to change. For school administration, this implies that the ability to decide well in difficult situations depends partly on resisting simplistic interpretations of complex problems.

Distributed leadership has also been identified as an important strategy for solving institutional difficulties. Educational leadership can be seen as a collaborative effort rather than a top-down one (Nadeem, 2024). Its main concepts include a common vision, clearly defined responsibilities, distributed decision-making, professional learning communities, effective communication, ongoing professional development, and appreciation of stakeholders' contributions; potential challenges include resistance to change, unclear roles and responsibilities, and difficulty in creating trust. Distributed leadership allows administrators to tap the knowledge and abilities of others in dealing with challenging situations. Distributed and transformative leadership styles are likewise vital for promoting teamwork, creativity, and supportive school environments, and data-driven decision-making strengthens institutional governance (Chen & Meng, 2025); competent administrators should combine professional judgment with evidence, cooperation, and stakeholder participation rather than rely on personal power alone. In their study of public secondary schools in Faisalabad, Pakistan, Parveen et al. (2022) found that different leadership styles can influence teacher job performance and suggested that administrators may need to mix leadership styles according to the circumstances their schools face;

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no single style suits every situation, and the response may differ with the nature, urgency, and people involved in an administrative issue. To summarize, the literature points to school leaders' engagement with sensemaking, contextual adaptability, teamwork, dispersed accountability, use of evidence, and flexible leadership in making tough decisions, which offers a useful starting point for investigating the coping mechanisms and decision-making processes of administrators.

Crisis management and contingency planning. Institutional crises are a particular kind of administrative complexity because they typically involve decision-making under ambiguity, lack of information, time constraints, and heightened stakeholder expectations. The literature reviewed shows substantial discussion of change management and adaptive leadership but fewer studies that target school administrators and formal contingency planning directly, which leaves room for qualitative investigation of administrators' experiences in designing and implementing contingency plans. Alene et al. (2025) found that successful interventions in a quality education crisis rested on contextualized solutions rather than generic techniques: understanding the nature of an adaptation challenge, staying on track with the problem, sharing responsibilities, and balancing local realities with policy frameworks. These behaviors are relevant to contingency planning because crises force administrators to revisit normal operations and to provide alternative routes of action. A phenomenological study of K-12 administrators' experience of crisis, from the viewpoint of school counselors, identified cooperation, communication, social-emotional concerns, data collection, and role definition as its main components; administrators said, "Our experience was more than crisis management." Administrators' capacity to manage personnel, clarify duties, communicate effectively, and deploy specialized expert support shapes institutional response to critical events. In the wider leadership literature, resilience and adaptation are viewed as core qualities: leaders in complex organizations must manage complexity and multiple perspectives with agility and resilience (Gottfredson & Crane, 2025), and change can be an opportunity but also invites opposition and organizational barriers (Korumaz et al., 2020). Efficient contingency responses are thus more than alternative strategies. They require administrators who can understand what is happening as it happens, marshal available resources, keep the organization going, and reverse judgments when the situation changes. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature reveals surprisingly little about the specific contingency plans administrators construct before, during, and after institutional crises.

Conflict and negotiation. Conflict arises in school administration from clashing expectations, power, policy requirements, stakeholder interests, and organizational agendas. Bayeni and Bhengu's (2018) South African principals, sandwiched between government policy demands and the contextual reality of their schools, had to assess whether standards could realistically be put in place under local circumstances; policy implementation became a process of negotiation and compromise among stakeholders, and settlement may involve balancing opposing but legitimate requests rather than choosing one side. Constantinides (2023) identified the relational aspect of conflict: principals adapted to new organizational conditions more readily when relationships were based on trust and professional partnership, so that conflict resolution is fundamentally about building relationships. Once trust and channels of communication are established, the parties are more likely to engage in problem solving. Power relations also affect complex administrative settings. Abu-Shawish and Ghamrawi (2025) studied middle leaders promoting teacher leadership amid conflicting role expectations and power relations and found that leaders used a blend of centralized and dispersed strategies, mindful of organizational micropolitics and informal power dynamics; conflicts in schools do not result only from formal organizational processes, and informal power, collegial relationships, conceptions of authority, and teacher agency may be crucial both to the emergence of conflict and to how administrators handle it. Resistance to change may likewise produce institutional conflict. In their study of inclusive education, Rivana et al. (2024) found that the barriers principals experienced were lack of training, lack of resources, and reluctance to adapt, and that competent leaders had to work with teachers and parents, understand the budget, provide professional support, and advocate inclusive policies. DeMatthews et al. (2021) similarly found that principals in inclusive schools require many approaches to confront social and structural issues. Complex conflicts are therefore

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often linked to broader concerns about resources, values, organizational culture, and stakeholders' views. Yet little attention has been devoted to administrators' accounts of the most difficult dispute they have faced in their careers and the nuances of how it was eventually resolved.

Effective practices for complex situations. Global research identifies common approaches to managing complexity: communication, cooperation, relationship building, adaptation, reflective leadership, shared accountability, professional growth, stakeholder involvement, and context-based decision-making. In a study of the border-bridging leadership of head teachers in Scotland, Constantinides (2025) illustrated that school leadership is about developing and keeping meaningful relationships across organizational boundaries, which supports teamwork and organizational development and requires interpersonal competence as administrators work across groups, hierarchies, and institutional interests. Instructional leadership is partly a balancing act among competing elements: principals in a study by Ralebese et al. (2025) were involved in formulating the school mission, managing the instructional program, giving teachers feedback, creating pleasant school environments, and conducting reflective activities such as meetings and retreats, and they used introspection, monitoring, social cohesiveness, and communication to keep the institution on track during reform implementation, reconciling personal and professional beliefs with policy obligations. Sustainable leadership practice is furthered through professional development and mutual empowerment. Ghamrawi et al. (2024) examined a professional development model in private schools in Beirut and identified the growth of teacher leadership through research-informed improvement, ongoing professional learning, reciprocal empowerment, conceptual awareness, and collaborative metacognition. The model moved away from top-down leadership and empowered teachers to participate actively in their own professional learning, so administrators need not manage every organizational response but can enhance institutional capacity by increasing the leadership capacity of others. Distributed leadership supports this role by promoting shared vision, collaborative learning communities, clearly defined roles, ongoing professional development, open communication, and collaborative decision-making (Nadeem, 2024); Constantinides (2023) stresses trust in relationships and teamwork; and Alene et al. (2025) highlight the need to adjust to different scenarios. Effective leadership in complexity is not about one approach but about the capacity to select and blend techniques as circumstances warrant. One means of handling complexity is context-responsive collaborative leadership, the deliberate integration of situational judgment, communication, stakeholder engagement, evidence, reflection, and adaptive decision-making. Effective administrators do not see administrative challenges as isolated incidents; they look at the institutional framework, the individuals involved, the available resources, the probable results, and the larger policy implications before deciding what to do.

Summary of the foreign literature. The international studies present school administration as a challenging leadership job. Principals face organizational transformation, institutional culture, policy execution, stakeholder expectations, resource shortages, resistance, inclusiveness, power, instructional reform, and a fast-changing environment (Bayeni & Bhengu, 2018; Korumaz et al., 2020; Medford & Brown, 2022). Leadership in complex situations is adaptable, cognitively flexible, collaborative, relationship-based, and characterized by shared accountability (Alene et al., 2025; Constantinides, 2023, 2025; Gottfredson & Crane, 2025; Nadeem, 2024). Decision-making cannot be reduced to one type of leadership or a prescribed administrative formula. Administrators must strike a balance between the power of the center and the participation of the field, between policy goals and the realities of the setting, between urgent institutional demands and the long-term ramifications of decisions, and between individual judgment and collective knowledge. Good administration is typically contextual, relational, introspective, and adaptive.

ASEAN literature on school leadership

School administrators in Southeast Asia operate within educational systems undergoing rapid transformation due to technological advancement, policy reforms, resource constraints, and changing stakeholder expectations. ASEAN literature highlights that school leaders must develop adaptive leadership approaches, strengthen communication systems, manage limited resources, and build collaborative relationships to sustain school effectiveness.

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Leadership development and administrative experiences. Ismail (2024) used a phenomenological design to examine how 21 novice school principals in Malaysia develop leadership efficacy during their early years of appointment. Leadership efficacy developed through personal experiences, organizational support, and professional relationships, and capabilities were shaped by continuous interaction between individual characteristics and institutional environments. Like the present study, it recognizes that effective school leadership is influenced by resilience, organizational support, and the ability to adapt to complex situations. Tahir et al. (2023) examined the views of 557 Malaysian principals on continuing professional development programs and identified mentoring as an important development need because it gives principals access to the knowledge, skills, and guidance of experienced school leaders. Managing administrative difficulties therefore requires more than formal qualifications; administrators may benefit from mentoring, experiential learning, professional networks, and opportunities to learn from other school leaders.

Policy environments and pressures. Indonesian literature shows that school principals operate within changing policy environments. Kartika et al. (2023) examined principals' responses and challenges in implementing Indonesia's policy on appointing teachers as school principals and identified challenges in the availability of qualified teachers for principal positions and in the implementation of the policy; administrative leadership is strongly influenced by policy implementation and leadership preparation, and administrators must interpret and implement policies while addressing practical constraints within their schools. Pestalozi et al. (2026) explored, through a phenomenological approach, the experiences of Indonesian public senior and vocational high school principals regarding informal pressures associated with their roles. Principals encountered bureaucratic pressures, community expectations, institutional demands, and moral conflicts that influenced their decision-making and leadership experiences, which highlights the hidden complexities behind administrative leadership. Kistoro and Roviana (2023), in a qualitative phenomenological study of principals in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, identified challenges related to research competency, time management, administrative workload, and limited institutional support in conducting school action research, demonstrating that administrators manage multiple responsibilities beyond daily school operations.

Leadership approaches and strategies. Safwandi et al. (2026) investigated teachers' perceptions of the leadership practices of secondary school principals in Indonesia through a phenomenological approach, exploring transformational, instructional, distributive, and servant leadership. Effective leadership involves trust-building, communication, professional support, delegation, and attention to teacher development, so addressing school challenges calls for relational leadership approaches. Suriansyah and Aslamiah (2022) examined the strategies Indonesian principals used to improve school quality and emphasized visionary leadership, teacher empowerment, collaboration, and community involvement. Tan and Goh (2022) investigated distributed leadership practices among school leaders in Singapore, including how administrators share responsibilities, empower teachers, and build collaborative decision-making structures; effective leadership required teamwork, trust, and collective responsibility, since complex school problems often require collaboration among administrators, teachers, and stakeholders.

Digital transformation, reform, and crisis. Loan and Thuy (2026), in a comparative qualitative case study of school principals in Vietnam and Malaysia, found that digital decision-making, technological adaptation, and organizational support were essential competencies among contemporary school administrators; technological change has become an emerging administrative challenge. Nguyen and Tran (2024) examined how Vietnamese school leaders managed curriculum changes, teacher adaptation, stakeholder expectations, and institutional adjustments in implementing educational reforms and found that successful implementation required collaborative leadership, effective communication, and continuous professional learning. Thammasit and Charoensuk (2023) examined how Thai school leaders managed educational challenges during periods of disruption, with leadership responses involving communication, resource management, teacher support, and stakeholder collaboration; crisis management is an essential component of administrative leadership because administrators decide under pressure while balancing multiple organizational responsibilities. A UNESCO (2023) report highlighted leadership challenges across Asia-

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Pacific countries, including ASEAN nations, following the COVID-19 pandemic, including learning recovery, teacher capacity development, digital transformation, resource allocation, and institutional resilience, and it emphasized the need for stronger leadership preparation and support systems. ASEAN school administrators face interconnected challenges that require resilience, strategic planning, and adaptive leadership practices.

Taken together, the ASEAN literature indicates that school administrators are confronted with challenges involving policy implementation, professional preparation, organizational demands, technological change, and contextual complexity. These findings provide a regional basis for examining administrative difficulties within the Philippine setting.

Philippine and DepEd-related literature

Policy context. In the Philippine context, school administrators face diverse and complex challenges brought about by changing educational policies, limited resources, technological demands, stakeholder expectations, and evolving instructional requirements. Recent Philippine studies highlight that school leaders must demonstrate adaptability, resilience, effective communication, collaboration, and strategic decision-making to sustain school operations and promote continuous improvement; phenomenological studies have increasingly been used to understand how administrators personally experience these challenges and develop strategies to address them. DepEd is one of the country's largest government organizations, with school administrators responsible for implementing national policies within diverse school contexts, which makes the Philippine setting particularly important for examining administrative difficulties. The adoption of the PPSSH in 2020 (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020) represents a major policy development: it establishes professional expectations for school heads across multiple competency domains and provides a framework for leadership development, performance assessment, and professional growth. More recent DepEd reforms demonstrate the changing nature of school administration. In 2025, DepEd announced efforts to implement a one-school, one-principal policy, citing data that thousands of public schools lacked formal school heads, and it aims to address leadership gaps by prioritizing the promotion and reclassification of qualified Head Teachers and Teachers-in-Charge into principal positions. DepEd also reported in 2025 that it was sustaining the hiring of 7,062 school-based administrative support staff to help remove non-teaching tasks from educators and provide clerical and administrative support to school heads, which demonstrates institutional recognition that administrative workload and staffing capacity affect how schools are managed. Furthermore, the National Assessment for School Heads (NASH), introduced in 2025 following the refocusing and renaming of the National Qualifying Examination for School Heads, is a developmental assessment tool that emphasizes the identification of areas for improvement among aspiring school leaders. These policies suggest that DepEd recognizes the need for competent, adequately supported, and professionally prepared school administrators. However, policy standards and assessment systems do not necessarily explain how administrators themselves experience and navigate difficult situations in their daily work, a distinction that is central to the present phenomenological study.

Lived experiences and administrative challenges. Phenomenological studies provide particularly relevant evidence of how Philippine administrators experience and respond to complex administrative situations. Cahapay (2022) examined the leadership practices of Philippine school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic using a phenomenological design and found that principals demonstrated adaptive leadership by maintaining collaboration, ensuring educational delivery, and making decisions despite limited guidelines and resources, in the face of unprecedented disruptions involving learning continuity, stakeholder communication, and institutional decision-making. Villanueva and Buenbrazo (2023) explored, with nine school administrators in the Division of Ozamiz City, the challenges encountered during the implementation of new normal education, including difficulties associated with distance learning, instructional supervision, stakeholder communication, parental involvement, and the implementation of alternative learning systems; administrators are required to adapt their leadership and management practices when established systems are disrupted. Evangelio and Villocino (2023) examined the challenges of school

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administrators through a phenomenological study and emphasized the multifaceted nature of administrators' responsibilities and the difficulties they experience in performing their leadership roles, demonstrating the value of phenomenology in examining subjective experiences, coping mechanisms, and realizations. Uy et al. (2023), in a descriptive phenomenological study of the administrative-supervisory leadership of school principals during the pandemic in Toledo City, Cebu, found that administrators relied on planning, communication, collaboration, and adaptive leadership in managing instructional supervision, organizational concerns, stakeholder coordination, and crisis responses.

Hungo et al. (2024) explored, through a descriptive phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of teacher-principals in Leyte and Southern Leyte who managed simultaneous teaching and administrative responsibilities. Challenges involved instructional management, teaching strategies, behavior management, learner concerns, technology integration, parental communication, and workload management, while participants used prioritization, planning, and stress-management strategies. School leaders respond to complexity by integrating administrative judgment, instructional leadership, and personal coping mechanisms. Eyana et al. (2024) examined the supervisory roles of school heads in a public stand-alone senior high school in Region XI using a phenomenological case study. Participants identified limited resources, curriculum demands and changes, teacher retention, parental and community involvement, and infrastructure concerns as major challenges, and the study concluded that school heads need strategic plans and stakeholder support; administrative complexity emerges from the interaction of resources, instructional, human-relations, and community concerns. Dayanan and Baynosa (2025) explored the supervisory practices and challenges of school heads through qualitative phenomenology and identified employee supervision, instructional leadership, and administrative management as major areas of practice, with complex employee dynamics, participatory barriers, and difficulty in administrative management as major challenges, reinforcing that administrators operate across multiple leadership domains rather than within a single function. Lago et al. (2024) investigated the conflict-management strategies of stand-alone senior high school administrators through hermeneutic phenomenology, examining their lived experiences, the causes and nature of workplace conflict, coping mechanisms, and strategies for managing conflicts. Macula (2025) explored the lived experiences of public elementary school heads in Governor Generoso North District, Davao Oriental, and identified challenges involving teacher motivation, staff well-being, innovation, instructional leadership, and student outcomes; school heads responded through emotional resilience, self-regulation, delegation, trust-building, and collaboration with peers and communities, which indicates that effective responses to administrative complexity frequently involve both personal resilience and distributed leadership.

Duray (2025) investigated the lived experiences of public school heads navigating educational reforms and found that administrators responded to policy changes, teacher resistance, funding limitations, technological demands, and curriculum reforms through mentoring, collaboration, strategic planning, and community engagement. Administrative challenges often arise from policy implementation and organizational change, and administrators must translate policies into practice and create solutions based on their school realities. Almagro et al. (2025) studied the lived experiences of elementary school heads in Negros Oriental regarding school governance and found challenges involving limited resources, administrative workload, stakeholder management, and leadership authority, to which school heads responded through professional development, collaboration, adaptability, and community partnerships. Jimenez et al. (2025), in a transcendental phenomenological investigation of principals' lived experiences, found that effective leadership involved adaptability, communication, collaboration, inclusivity, continuous improvement, and authenticity, and that leadership practices develop through administrators' experiences and interpretations and are shaped by relationships, values, and responses to challenges as well as by authority. Barnes et al. (2025) explored the experiences of school heads in managing generational differences among educators in Digos City, Davao del Sur, and highlighted the importance of inclusive leadership and adaptive strategies in addressing communication gaps and maintaining harmonious relationships among teachers; managing people and relationships is among the most complex

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responsibilities of administrators. Gumilao and Dagondon (2026) used hermeneutic phenomenology to study how school heads in Region IX balanced instructional leadership and administrative responsibilities and found tensions between instructional demands, administrative requirements, policy implementation, and personal leadership values, with themes of role conflict, moral decision-making, and translating policies into practical realities. This closely aligns with the present study and confirms that school leadership requires continuous interpretation, decision-making, and adaptation to institutional pressures.

Decision-making, resources, and governance. Asuque (2025) explored the decision-making journeys of school heads in Cataingan East District, Masbate, through interviews with 15 school heads in a rural, resource-constrained context, and identified contextual challenges, personal and professional experiences, leadership strategies in low-resource settings, and stakeholder engagement as important dimensions of decision-making. Decisions are shaped not only by formal policies but also by experience, context, available resources, and relationships with stakeholders. Ortiz et al. (2025) investigated instructional leadership styles and administrative challenges among school heads and teachers in Philippine public secondary schools and found that distributed instructional leadership was extensively utilized while resource management remained a significant challenge; delegation and shared leadership can enhance participation while also creating additional coordination and resource-management demands. Awyan and Quines (2024) examined distributed leadership, participation in decision-making, teamwork, and organizational commitment among public school teachers, reinforcing the importance of shared leadership and participatory decision-making. Perez (2023), examining leadership challenges confronting Filipino principals, identified interconnected challenges including socioeconomic disparities, systemic DepEd concerns, curriculum challenges, political involvement, religious diversity, and regional conflict, and proposed distributed leadership and collaboration among education stakeholders as strategies for responding to these multifaceted challenges. Resource constraints are a recurring source of complexity. Anino et al. (2025) conducted a phenomenological inquiry into school heads' experiences in managing limited resources in Davao de Oro and Davao City and identified budgeting and planning difficulties, competing priorities, personal sacrifices, unpredictable emergencies, emotional and professional struggles, and insufficient funds as major themes, which shows that resource management involves both technical decisions and personal experiences. Panga et al. (2025) explored principal leadership and school improvement in a public secondary school in Camarines Sur and found that the principal encountered limited financial resources, insufficient instructional materials, high staff workload, and inconsistent stakeholder participation, and responded with participatory planning, open communication, professional development, and inclusive decision-making; administrators combine strategic, relational, and participatory approaches when confronting multiple simultaneous challenges.

Instructional leadership and supervision. Aquino et al. (2021) examined school heads' leadership practices and teachers' performance and emphasized information sharing, supportive relationships, mentoring, and developmental practices, which suggests that leadership is not limited to administrative control but includes building relationships and facilitating professional growth. Godes and Dioso (2024) connected school heads' instructional supervisory practices with teacher performance in Monkayo West District and highlighted school heads' role in monitoring and supporting classroom instruction. Capillanes (2025) found that school heads in a Philippine school division demonstrated high instructional leadership, particularly in curriculum-related activities, although coaching and data-driven strategies received comparatively less attention; administrators may need to balance traditional supervisory responsibilities with emerging expectations involving coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and professional development. Salvanera and Tumalon (2024) investigated school heads' educational management and leadership in public elementary schools in Bohol, covering mission and educational values, teaching and learning, learning resources, community engagement, and instructional and organizational leadership, which shows that Philippine school leadership encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions. Dagatan and Tudlasan (2025) examined school heads' leadership and teachers' performance in Mandaue City and further supported the relationship between leadership practices and instructional effectiveness.

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Leadership styles, teacher outcomes, and organizational climate. A substantial body of Philippine research has investigated how leadership styles influence teachers and organizational outcomes. Uy (2024) examined autocratic, delegative, democratic, servant, and transformational leadership among public secondary school teachers in Misamis Oriental, and democratic and servant leadership emerged as particularly relevant to managing teacher performance. Catanus (2024) found participative leadership to be prevalent and teacher performance generally very satisfactory in a Philippine component city. Barangai (2024) found high levels of transformational leadership practices and teacher morale in the Division of Lanao del Sur, but teacher morale appeared to be a stronger predictor of teacher performance than school heads' transformational leadership, suggesting that administrators should consider employees' emotional and professional needs rather than rely exclusively on formal leadership behaviors. Abellanosa (2025) examined laissez-faire, democratic, autocratic, transformational, and transactional leadership among school heads in Surigao del Sur in relation to teacher performance ratings. Dinglasa and Lantaka (2025) reported dominant transformational leadership and a positive relationship between leadership style and teacher performance in Zamboanga City. Pasturan (2025) found in Pilar District that democratic leadership was associated with improved motivation and job satisfaction through collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making, whereas laissez-faire leadership was associated with weaker outcomes. Ramirez and Capili (2024) emphasized, for Tuguegarao City, the role of leadership in the work environment, job satisfaction, and teacher morale, with implications not only for performance but for employee retention and organizational stability. School administrators must also manage organizational change and innovation: Gabutan et al. (2024) found positive relationships among school heads' leadership quality, supportive organizational climate, conducive learning environments, and teacher innovativeness in Misamis Oriental, Olasiman and Torreon (2024) found a significant relationship between leadership practices and teachers' teaching accomplishments in Bohol, and Simbre et al. (2023) demonstrated in a mixed-methods study that school heads' leadership styles are associated with the school climate experienced by learners, so that leadership decisions have effects beyond teachers and administrative operations.

Leadership practices, collaboration, and professional development. Effective administrators require a repertoire of practices, including decision-making, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, delegation, conflict management, resource management, and strategic planning. UNESCO's 2024/5 report (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024) emphasizes that effective principals use data, prioritize, plan, implement, supervise, assess, solve problems, communicate effectively, mobilize teams, and develop people, which corresponds closely with the practices administrators employ in responding to difficulties; the PPSSH likewise provides a competency framework that requires administrators to integrate several leadership functions in daily practice. Administrative leadership is therefore best understood as a repertoire of practices rather than a single leadership behavior. Administrative difficulties are also often too complex for one individual, so administrators may need to engage teachers, department heads, coordinators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders in identifying problems and developing solutions; collaboration may be especially important when problems exceed an administrator's individual authority or expertise. Finally, leadership development is an important theme, because policies, technologies, educational expectations, and organizational conditions continually change. Tahir et al. (2023) found that Malaysian principals identified mentoring as a particularly important development need; DepEd's PPSSH established a framework for professional learning and development for Philippine school heads; and the 2025 introduction of NASH reflects the government's emphasis on identifying and developing the leadership readiness of aspiring school heads. Administrators' ability to manage complexity is thus influenced not only by individual experience but also by professional preparation, mentoring, continuing development, and organizational support.

Synthesis of the reviewed literature

The reviewed literature reveals several converging ideas. First, school administration has become increasingly complex: administrators are expected to manage instructional concerns, personnel, resources, policies, stakeholder relationships, and organizational improvement simultaneously, and global literature, particularly UNESCO's recent

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work, emphasizes the broad repertoire of competencies required. Second, ASEAN literature demonstrates that school leadership is strongly shaped by context; studies from Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand indicate that administrators encounter challenges involving leadership preparation, policy implementation, professional development, and contextual complexity. Third, the Philippine/DepEd context shows an ongoing effort to strengthen school leadership through professional standards, leadership assessment, staffing reforms, and administrative support; the PPSSH, NASH, the one-school, one-principal initiative, and administrative-support staffing reforms all indicate that school leadership capacity is a significant concern in the Philippine education system. Fourth, Philippine studies show that school administrators face interconnected challenges involving limited resources, workload, curriculum changes, teacher concerns, stakeholder expectations, conflict, technology, and organizational change (Adalid et al., 2026; Eyana et al., 2024; Ortiz et al., 2025; Villanueva & Buenbrazo, 2023), and that they respond through a combination of strategic planning, participatory decision-making, delegation, communication, collaboration, instructional supervision, resource prioritization, emotional resilience, and stakeholder engagement (Anino et al., 2025; Asuque, 2025; Macula, 2025; Panga et al., 2025). Fifth, effective leadership in Philippine schools is increasingly relational and adaptive: democratic, participatory, distributed, servant, transformational, and collaborative approaches appear repeatedly (Catanus, 2024; Dinglasa & Lantaka, 2025; Uy, 2024), yet no single leadership style is sufficient for all situations, since the nature of the challenge, the availability of resources, the characteristics of teachers and stakeholders, and the institutional context influence which approach administrators employ.

Research Gap

Much of the available literature examines leadership competencies, leadership standards, professional development, policy implementation, or particular categories of administrative challenges. Many Philippine studies are quantitative and relate leadership styles to outcomes such as teacher performance, motivation, job satisfaction, retention, or school climate, while other qualitative studies examine specific challenges such as supervision, conflict, resource management, or new normal education. Comparatively fewer studies provide an integrated phenomenological account of how school administrators themselves make sense of multiple, simultaneous, and interconnected administrative challenges and how they decide which leadership approaches to employ. Four gaps justify the present study, particularly its phenomenological orientation.

1. **A phenomenological gap.** Existing literature frequently examines school leadership through surveys, competency frameworks, policy analyses, or literature reviews. There remains a need for deeper qualitative inquiry into administrators' lived experiences of managing complex administrative difficulties.

2. **A contextual gap.** International and ASEAN studies provide valuable insights, but their findings cannot automatically be transferred to Philippine public schools because educational policies, organizational structures, resource conditions, and community contexts differ.

3. **A practice gap.** Standards such as the PPSSH describe what school heads are expected to do, but they do not necessarily reveal how administrators respond when confronted with competing demands, limited resources, interpersonal concerns, policy changes, and unexpected problems.

4. **An integration gap.** Administrative difficulties are often interconnected rather than isolated. An administrator may simultaneously manage personnel concerns, resource limitations, policy requirements, stakeholder expectations, and instructional priorities, so the complexity of these experiences needs to be understood rather than examined independently.

The international literature adds further gaps. Many foreign studies focus on specific administrative problems such as organizational change, inclusion, curriculum reform, policy implementation, teacher leadership, or quality education,

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rather than on administrators' whole lived experience across complex administrative problems. Although leadership strategies have been developed, few studies examine how administrators build coping mechanisms and make judgments in extremely difficult situations. Very little empirical attention has been paid to the specific contingency plans administrators use in response to institutional crises. Few studies ask administrators to describe the most difficult dispute of their careers, why it was difficult, and how it was managed. Finally, many effective leadership tactics are presented in isolation, and it remains necessary to discover which practices administrators who have dealt with the consequences of severe educational settings themselves consider most relevant.

By adopting a phenomenological perspective, the present study moves beyond identifying prescribed leadership techniques and seeks to understand complexity from the standpoint of administrators who have personally confronted it. It examines their lived experiences, coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies, contingency responses, most complex conflicts and their resolution, and the practices they consider effective. In doing so, it may provide a more integrated, holistic Philippine perspective on adaptive, contextual, and experience-based educational leadership, showing how administrators interpret, endure, negotiate, and ultimately manage administrative complexity within actual school environments.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in three complementary theories: Complexity Leadership Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. Together, they provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how school administrators experience complex problems, interpret uncertain situations, make decisions, employ coping mechanisms, and develop practices for managing future institutional crises. Because the study uses a phenomenological design, the theories were not used to predict or measure relationships among variables. They served as sensitizing lenses that guided the researchers in interpreting participants' lived experiences while allowing themes and meanings to emerge from their narratives.

Complexity Leadership Theory

The primary theoretical foundation is Complexity Leadership Theory, developed by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007). The theory views organizations as complex adaptive systems composed of individuals and groups whose interactions continuously influence organizational practices and outcomes. Leadership therefore does not come solely from the authority or personal qualities of one leader; it also emerges through relationships, collaboration, adaptation, and collective problem-solving within the organization.

Schools are complex organizations because administrators must simultaneously manage instructional programs, school personnel, learners' needs, limited resources, government policies, parental expectations, community partnerships, and unforeseen crises. These concerns are interconnected, so addressing one problem may create consequences in other areas of school operations, and administrative challenges cannot always be resolved through fixed procedures or purely hierarchical decisions.

The theory identifies three interrelated leadership functions. *Administrative leadership* refers to formal managerial responsibilities, including planning, organizing, allocating resources, enforcing policies, supervising personnel, and maintaining school operations. *Adaptive leadership* refers to the ideas, adjustments, and solutions that emerge as people respond to changing conditions, unfamiliar problems, and competing demands. *Enabling leadership* creates the conditions that allow administrative structures and adaptive responses to work together, and it includes encouraging collaboration, facilitating communication, building trust, and supporting innovation. In the present study, administrative leadership is evident in how administrators apply policies, assign responsibilities, manage resources, and implement contingency plans; adaptive leadership is reflected in how they adjust decisions when established procedures are insufficient; and enabling leadership is demonstrated when they engage teachers, parents, learners,

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local government units, and other stakeholders in resolving institutional challenges. The theory supports the exploration of administrators' responses to complex conflicts and dilemmas and suggests that effective school leadership balances institutional requirements with flexible, context-sensitive, and collaborative responses. It is particularly relevant to the study's questions on administrators' lived experiences, decision-making strategies, contingency plans, complex conflicts, and effective leadership practices.

Sensemaking Theory

The study is also supported by Sensemaking Theory, primarily associated with Weick (1995). Sensemaking is the process through which individuals interpret unclear, unexpected, or confusing situations and construct meanings that guide their actions. People make sense of events by examining available information, drawing on previous experiences, interacting with others, and creating plausible explanations of what is happening.

School administrators frequently decide in situations where information is incomplete, stakeholder expectations conflict, and the consequences of available choices are uncertain. Before they can respond, they must determine what is happening, why the situation occurred, who is affected, which issues require immediate attention, what actions are available, and what consequences may follow from each decision. Sensemaking is not purely an individual cognitive activity. It is also social, because administrators interpret situations through communication with teachers, learners, parents, supervisors, and community stakeholders, whose perspectives may confirm, challenge, or reshape an administrator's initial understanding of a problem. Weick et al. (2005) explained that sensemaking involves turning uncertain circumstances into situations that people can understand and act upon. In school administration, this may occur when an administrator gathers information, consults stakeholders, reconstructs the sequence of events, evaluates possible explanations, and selects a defensible course of action.

The theory is relevant to a phenomenological study because it focuses on how administrators personally interpret their experiences. Two administrators may encounter similar problems yet understand and respond to them differently because of their previous experiences, leadership values, institutional environments, and relationships with stakeholders. Sensemaking Theory therefore helps explain the meanings administrators attach to complex events and how those meanings shape their decisions and actions.

Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

The third foundation is the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to this theory, stress does not arise solely from an external event but develops through a transaction between the individual and the environment. A situation becomes stressful when a person evaluates it as harmful, threatening, challenging, or beyond the resources available to manage it. The theory describes two major appraisal processes: *primary appraisal*, in which an individual determines whether a situation is irrelevant, beneficial, threatening, harmful, or challenging, and *secondary appraisal*, in which the individual evaluates the resources and possible actions available to manage the situation.

Following these appraisals, individuals employ coping mechanisms of two broad kinds. *Problem-focused coping* involves taking direct action on the source of the problem, such as gathering information, consulting stakeholders, revising plans, reallocating resources, clarifying responsibilities, negotiating solutions, and implementing school policies. *Emotion-focused coping* involves managing the emotional effects of a difficult situation, such as seeking emotional or spiritual support, regulating emotions, reflecting on the situation, temporarily distancing oneself from the problem, or accepting circumstances that cannot be changed immediately. Administrators may also reappraise a situation after implementing a response, which enables them to determine whether the strategy succeeded, whether adjustments are necessary, and what lessons should be incorporated into future contingency plans.

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The theory applies because the study examines not only administrators' decisions but also the psychological and emotional dimensions of managing school-related challenges. Administrative conflicts may expose school leaders to stress, uncertainty, criticism, ethical pressure, and emotional exhaustion, and the theory provides a lens for understanding how administrators evaluate these demands, mobilize personal and organizational resources, and protect their well-being while fulfilling their duties.

Integration of the theories and relationship to the research questions

The three theories provide interconnected perspectives on how school administrators respond to challenges and carry out their leadership responsibilities. Complexity Leadership Theory serves as the overarching lens by emphasizing that leadership occurs within complex, interactive, and constantly changing organizational systems, in which administrators balance formal authority with adaptation, collaboration, and responsiveness to institutional demands. Within this environment, Sensemaking Theory explains how administrators interpret ambiguous, unexpected, or challenging situations: they gather information, consult stakeholders, identify possible causes, and analyze the potential consequences of different courses of action, and so develop a clearer understanding of the problem and appropriate responses grounded in the available evidence and context. At the same time, the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping explains how administrators evaluate the demands of the situation and assess the resources available to address them. This appraisal influences their coping and decision-making approaches, which may include formal administrative actions, adaptive problem-solving, collaboration with colleagues, stakeholder consultation, resource mobilization, conflict resolution strategies, and emotional self-regulation.

The framework assumes that administrators operate within a dynamic school environment of policies, people, resources, relationships, and changing circumstances. As they encounter administrative challenges, they first interpret the situation through sensemaking, then assess its demands and available resources through appraisal and coping, and finally exercise leadership by implementing appropriate responses. After acting, they evaluate the outcomes of their decisions and reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies, and the lessons drawn may contribute to improved procedures, contingency plans, stronger stakeholder relationships, enhanced professional learning, and more effective leadership practices. Accordingly, administrative challenges are viewed not as isolated problems but as opportunities through which administrators construct meaning, exercise leadership, strengthen coping capacities, and develop context-responsive practices that enhance school effectiveness.

The framework guides the inquiry in relation to each research question. It examines administrators' lived experiences within the complex organizational, relational, and institutional conditions of their schools. It explores their coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies through their interpretations of challenges, personal appraisals, available resources, and responses to pressure. Contingency plans are viewed as outcomes of reflection, organizational learning, and adaptation to previous challenges. The framework examines the most complex conflicts administrators encountered by exploring how they interpreted the causes of those conflicts, managed competing demands, involved stakeholders, and evaluated the outcomes of their decisions. Significant administrative practices are understood as practices developed through accumulated experience, collaborative action, coping mechanisms, reflection, and continuous adaptation. Overall, the framework recognizes school administrators as meaning-making and adaptive leaders whose approaches are shaped not only by formal policies and professional competencies but also by their experiences, relationships, emotions, values, resources, and school contexts. It therefore supports the phenomenological aim of understanding the essence and meaning of administrators' lived experiences without restricting their narratives to predetermined leadership categories.

Conceptual Framework

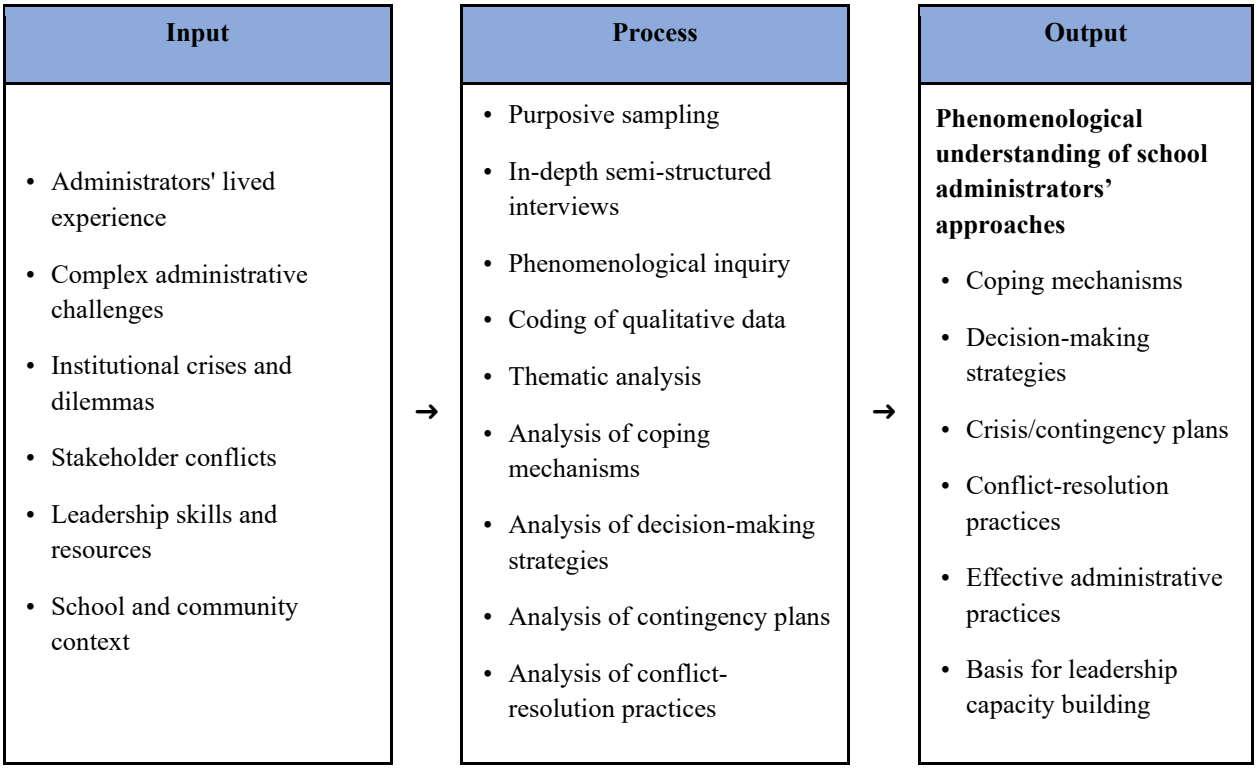
The conceptual framework of the study is anchored in the phenomenological exploration of how educational leaders navigate and manage operational complexities. It is organized using the Input–Process–Output (IPO) model (Figure

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1), with attention to administrators' lived experiences, coping and decision-making strategies, contingency plans, conflict resolution, and effective administrative practices.

Figure 1. **Conceptual framework of the study using the Input–Process–Output (IPO) model**



The *Input* identifies the experiences, challenges, and contextual factors that serve as the focus of the investigation. The *Process* explains how these experiences were explored through interviews and interpreted through phenomenological analysis. The *Output* presents the resulting understanding of the approaches school administrators use in addressing administrative challenges, including insights that may inform leadership development and improved administrative practices. The findings may also provide insights into effective practices and serve as a basis for leadership capacity-building initiatives by helping to identify areas where administrators may benefit from additional training, professional development, and institutional support, with the aim of strengthening school leadership and administrators' capacity to respond to complex educational situations. Overall, the framework provides a systematic guide for examining the lived experiences of school administrators and understanding how they navigate the complexities of educational leadership, and it connects participants' actual experiences with the analytical procedures of the study and the practical implications of its findings.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

The main objective of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences and administrative approaches of school administrators in leading through complexity and addressing administrative challenges. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the school administrators' lived experiences in dealing with challenging issues in their respective schools?

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2. In providing solutions to various challenges in schools, what coping mechanisms or decision-making strategies do administrators employ?
3. What effective contingency plans do administrators implement when confronted with an institutional crisis or dilemma?
4. What is the most complex conflict the administration has faced during its entire tenure, and how was it resolved?
5. What significant practices do administrators consider to be effective in managing complex situations in the school?
6. What enrichment training program may be developed based on the findings of the study?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are expected to benefit learners, teachers, parents and guardians, the community, school administrators, and future researchers.

Learners. Learners may benefit directly from the expertise of school administrators in providing a school community that promotes quality education and a safe learning environment. How administrators make decisions and handle complex issues has a positive impact on learners' well-being.

Teachers. Teachers gain more transparency into administrative decisions as they learn how administrators decide in difficult situations, which promotes stronger trust, cooperative communication, and coordinated instructional support.

Parents and guardians. Parents trust school administrators who ensure the delivery of quality education and a safe, child-friendly learning environment. Administrators' ability to implement school operations effectively and to promote stronger home–school partnerships cultivates mutual respect and shared responsibility for learners' welfare.

Community. Families, organizations, the private sector, local government units, and other external stakeholders may establish stronger partnerships with schools when administrators evidently have the leadership capability to provide problem-prevention and conflict-resolution strategies that benefit learners' welfare. The community will also be motivated to support schools' initiatives and programs and to promote harmonious ties when administrators manage conflicts effectively and successfully.

School administrators. The results may offer other administrators valuable insights into practical mechanisms for resolving school conflicts while sustaining effective leadership, and they may serve as a reference in crafting capacity-building training for handling interpersonal and organizational challenges.

Future researchers. The study contributes to the literature on the challenges of school administrators by applying a phenomenological approach to administrative practice under complexity, and its findings can serve as a reference for future studies.

Scope and Delimitation

The study was delimited to the lived experiences of school administrators from public elementary and secondary schools in Bataan, particularly in the District of Mariveles. It collected qualitative data on administrators' lived experiences and practices in resolving the problems and challenges of school, gathered primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, and analyzed using established phenomenological procedures to draw out essential meanings and shared patterns

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across participants' lived experiences. To organize the human experiences elicited by the instrument, the researchers used coding and thematic analysis of the descriptive data (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were purposively selected public elementary and secondary school administrators who had served for a minimum of three to five years, to ensure that they had encountered a considerable number of complex administrative challenges in performing their leadership duties. Because participants were intentionally chosen for their involvement in the phenomenon under investigation, purposive sampling was appropriate (Patton, 2015). The central theme concentrated on administrators' lived experiences in managing schools' operational challenges. The study did not seek to measure the effectiveness of specific administrative practices quantitatively; it aimed instead at an in-depth understanding of the meanings and experiences attached to those practices. The narrative accounts of administrators are expected to help future researchers who investigate similar phenomena, and the insights generated may serve as a valuable reference for educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers interested in understanding and addressing the complexities of school administration.

Definition of Terms

Table 1 presents the key terms of the study, each with its conceptual meaning and the sense in which it is used here.

Table 1. **Key terms used in the study**

Term	Conceptual meaning	Meaning in this study
Adaptive Leadership	Adaptive leadership refers to a leadership approach that enables individuals and organizations to respond to complex challenges by learning, adjusting, and mobilizing people toward appropriate solutions.	Adaptive leadership serves as a theoretical lens for understanding how administrators adjust their leadership practices when conventional solutions are insufficient to address administrative difficulties.
Administrative Approaches	Administrative approaches refer to the methods, strategies, principles, and courses of action used by administrators in planning, organizing, coordinating, directing, and evaluating school activities and in responding to organizational concerns.	Administrative approaches refer to the various methods and strategies employed by school administrators to understand, address, and manage administrative difficulties, including decision-making, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, delegation, conflict management, resource management, and adaptive responses to changing school conditions.
Administrative Difficulties	Administrative difficulties refer to problems, obstacles, or demanding situations that school administrators encounter in carrying out their managerial, instructional, organizational, and leadership responsibilities.	Administrative difficulties refer to the challenges experienced by school administrators in areas such as personnel management, resource allocation, policy implementation, decision-making, conflict management, stakeholder relations, workload, and school operations.
Administrators	Administrators are individuals who are responsible for directing, coordinating,	Administrators refer to public school leaders who have formal administrative responsibilities and who directly experience

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	managing, and supervising the activities of an organization.	and manage administrative difficulties within their respective schools.
Administrators' Practices	Administrators' practices refer to the actions, strategies, approaches, and behaviors employed by school administrators in carrying out their leadership and management responsibilities.	Administrators' practices refer to the ways school administrators respond to, manage, and address administrative difficulties through decision-making, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, delegation, conflict management, resource management, and other contextually appropriate strategies.
Collaboration	Collaboration refers to the process through which individuals work collectively, share knowledge and responsibilities, and contribute to achieving common goals.	Collaboration refers to the ways administrators work with teachers, department heads, school personnel, parents, community members, and other stakeholders to identify, address, and resolve administrative difficulties.
Complexity	Complexity refers to a condition characterized by multiple interconnected factors, changing circumstances, uncertainty, and challenges that cannot always be addressed through simple or predetermined solutions.	Complexity refers to the interconnected and changing conditions encountered by administrators while managing competing demands, organizational concerns, stakeholder expectations, policy requirements, resource limitations, and other administrative difficulties.
Coping Mechanism	Coping mechanisms refer to the strategies, behaviors, and responses employed by school administrators to manage, adapt to, and deal with stressful, challenging, or complex administrative situations.	Coping mechanisms specifically refer to the ways administrators regulate their responses, seek support, solve problems, adapt their practices, and utilize available personal and organizational resources when confronted with administrative difficulties.
Decision-Making	Decision-making is the process of identifying alternatives, evaluating available information, and selecting an appropriate course of action.	Decision-making refers to the processes administrators use when determining appropriate responses to administrative difficulties, including the consideration of available information, policies, resources, stakeholder perspectives, and contextual conditions.
Educational Leadership	Educational leadership refers to the process of influencing, guiding, supporting, and mobilizing members of an educational organization toward the achievement of shared educational goals.	Educational leadership refers to the leadership practices demonstrated by administrators in directing school operations, supporting teaching and learning, developing personnel, managing relationships, and responding to administrative difficulties.

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Experiences	Lived experiences refer to individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to events and situations encountered in their lives.	Lived experiences refer to personal experiences, perceptions, feelings, reflections, and meanings that administrators associate with managing administrative difficulties in their schools.
Operational Difficulties	Operational difficulties refer to problems or obstacles that affect the day-to-day functioning, coordination, implementation, and delivery of organizational programs, services, and activities.	Operational difficulties refer to challenges experienced by school administrators in managing the routine and organizational operations of their schools, including scheduling, staffing, resource allocation, coordination of school activities, implementation of programs, communication, documentation, and other concerns that affect the smooth functioning of school operations.
Phenomenological Approach	Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach concerned with understanding and describing the meanings and essence of individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon.	The phenomenological approach is used to explore and understand the lived experiences of school administrators in managing administrative difficulties and to identify the common meanings and essential structures emerging from their experiences.
Problem-Solving	Problem-solving refers to the process of identifying a problem, examining its causes, considering possible alternatives, and implementing an appropriate response.	Problem-solving refers to the strategies administrators employ to understand, address, and resolve administrative difficulties encountered in their schools.
School Administration	School administration refers to the process of planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, and evaluating school activities and resources to achieve educational goals.	School administration refers to the management and leadership functions performed by administrators in overseeing school programs, personnel, resources, operations, and stakeholder relationships.
School Administrators	School administrators are educational leaders responsible for managing school operations and providing leadership for the achievement of educational goals.	The term refers specifically to the qualified public-school administrators who serve as participants and have direct experience in managing administrative difficulties in their schools.
Stakeholder Engagement	Stakeholder engagement refers to the process of involving individuals or groups who have an interest in or are affected by an organization's activities and decisions.	Stakeholder engagement refers to the ways administrators communicate and work with teachers, learners, parents, community members, local government representatives, and other education stakeholders in addressing administrative difficulties.

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Strategic Management	Strategic management refers to the systematic process of establishing goals, analyzing conditions, allocating resources, implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes to achieve organizational objectives.	Strategic management refers to the approaches administrators use to anticipate challenges, establish priorities, allocate available resources, implement appropriate actions, and monitor responses to administrative difficulties.
Technical Difficulties	Technical difficulties refer to problems that arise from limitations in technical knowledge, skills, procedures, systems, equipment, or technological resources required to perform a particular task effectively.	Technical difficulties refer to challenges experienced by school administrators in dealing with technical systems, digital platforms, information and communication technologies, data management, school facilities and equipment, administrative procedures, and other specialized tasks that require knowledge or technical competencies.
Transformational Leadership	Transformational leadership refers to a leadership approach in which leaders inspire and motivate followers to pursue shared goals, embrace change, and develop their capabilities.	Transformational leadership provides a supporting theoretical perspective for examining how administrators motivate personnel, promote collaboration, encourage innovation, and lead school communities through administrative difficulties.

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METHODS

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research approach with a descriptive phenomenological design. Qualitative research is appropriate when a study seeks to explore meanings, experiences, perceptions, and processes from the perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and it yields rich, contextualized descriptions that cannot always be adequately represented through numerical measures (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The phenomenological method was particularly suitable because the study sought to explore and understand the lived experiences of school administrators in dealing with complex administrative challenges in their respective schools.

Phenomenology is concerned with how individuals experience and make meaning of a phenomenon, examining participants' experiences from their own perspectives rather than merely measuring predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify phenomenology as an approach that describes the common meaning of several individuals' lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon, and it is appropriate when researchers intend to understand the shared experiences of individuals who have experienced a common phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological inquiry seeks the essence and meaning of human experiences through systematic descriptions of participants' lived experiences, and it seeks to understand the structure of experiences through the descriptions of those who have directly encountered the phenomenon. Giorgi (2009) explained that descriptive phenomenology aims to describe the psychological structure and essential meaning of experiences based on participants' accounts, and van Manen (2016) emphasized exploring the meaning of lived experience and how individuals experience a phenomenon in their everyday world.

The phenomenon investigated was administrative complexity as experienced by school administrators in addressing challenging institutional situations. The study sought to understand how administrators make sense of difficult circumstances, assess available resources, cope with pressure, make decisions, manage conflicts, implement contingency plans, and develop practices they consider effective. These aspects are consistent with phenomenological inquiry because the focus is not simply on what administrators do but on how they experience, interpret, and give meaning to what they do (van Manen, 2016). Descriptive phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on how administrators encounter, perceive, respond to, and make sense of administrative difficulties within their school contexts. Rather than measuring the frequency or magnitude of administrative challenges, the study aimed to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of participants' firsthand experiences and to identify the common meanings and essential structures underlying them. Consistent with descriptive phenomenology, the researchers strove to bracket, or set aside, their personal assumptions and preconceived notions in order to remain attentive to participants' descriptions of the phenomenon. The design thus enabled the researchers to capture the complexity of school administration as administrators experience it and to derive a deeper understanding of the essence of leading through complexity and addressing administrative challenges.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary technique for gathering data. Semi-structured interviews provide predetermined questions or topics while allowing participants room to elaborate on their experiences and researchers to ask follow-up questions when necessary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) described qualitative interviewing as a method for understanding the world from participants' points of view and obtaining descriptions of their lived experiences, and Patton (2015) notes that qualitative interviews are particularly useful for obtaining detailed information about participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of events. This flexibility is important in phenomenological research because participants may identify significant aspects of their experience that were not anticipated in the original guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The technique was appropriate because the phenomenon involves personal experiences that structured questionnaires may not adequately capture, and administrators' narratives can provide detailed descriptions of how they understand

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and respond to complexity involving people, policies, resources, conflicts, institutional expectations, and changing circumstances. Interview questions were organized according to the research questions and were open-ended to encourage detailed narratives rather than responses limited to predetermined choices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Appropriate probing questions encouraged participants to clarify, expand, and give concrete descriptions of their experiences, which helps uncover deeper meanings, emotions, perceptions, and reflections underlying initial responses (Patton, 2015).

The theoretical perspectives presented in Section 1.4 (Complexity Leadership Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping) served as complementary interpretive lenses and were not treated as variables for statistical testing. They provided perspectives for interpreting how administrators understand complex situations, evaluate demands and resources, cope with stress, make decisions, and adapt their practices (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Overall, the qualitative phenomenological design, supported by in-depth semi-structured interviews and systematic thematic analysis, was considered appropriate for uncovering the meanings, patterns, and essential features of school administrators' lived experiences.

Research Locale and Participants

The population comprised elementary and secondary school administrators from public schools in the Mariveles District, Schools Division of Bataan. The researchers identified the total number of school administrators in the target population, determined those who met the inclusion criteria, and then selected the final participants. Approximately eight to eleven administrators were to be invited, or until data saturation was reached; eleven administrators participated.

Purposive sampling was used. It is a non-probability technique in which participants are deliberately chosen because they possess particular characteristics, experiences, or knowledge relevant to the research problem (Campbell et al., 2020). It was appropriate because not every school employee has direct experience of the phenomenon; the researchers needed participants who had personally experienced administrative complexity and had been involved in making decisions, addressing conflicts, implementing contingency measures, and managing institutional challenges. In qualitative phenomenological research, the richness, relevance, and depth of participants' experiences matter more than a large number of respondents (Patton, 2015), and purposive sampling enabled the selection of information-rich participants who could give meaningful descriptions of administrative complexity.

The inclusion criteria were as follows. The participant had to be a school administrator in a selected public elementary or secondary school within the study locale, with a minimum of three to five years of administrative experience; to have direct experience in handling challenging administrative issues, conflicts, crises, or institutional dilemmas; and to be willing to participate voluntarily, share relevant experiences during the interview, and give informed consent. Participant selection continued until the collected information was sufficiently rich and recurring themes began to emerge, and the final number of participants was determined in consultation with the research adviser on the basis of the adequacy of the information obtained.

Table 2 presents the background of the eleven participants as they described it in their answers to the opening question on their experience and current responsibilities. Consistent with the ethical safeguards, participants are identified only through assigned codes, and the names of their schools are withheld.

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Table 2. Profile of the participants

Participant	Position as stated	Years as school head
P1	Head Teacher III/OIC-School Principal	9 years
P2	Elementary School Head	20 years
P3	School Principal	15 years
P4	School Administrator	15 years
P5	School Administrator	6 years
P6	Elementary School Principal	13 years
P7	School Principal	8 years
P8	School Administrator	14 years
P9	School Principal	8 years
P10	Head Teacher/Officer-in-Charge	12 years
P11	School Principal	15 years

The participants held various school leadership positions, including Head Teacher III/Officer-in-Charge (OIC)-School Principal, Elementary School Head, School Principal, and School Administrator. Their reported experience as school heads ranged from six (6) to twenty (20) years, and several had served in school administration for more than a decade. This variation in length of experience is analytically significant because it reflects the diverse professional backgrounds from which participants drew in describing their challenges, decision-making processes, conflicts, and administrative practices.

Research Instrument

Description of the interview guide

A researcher-made semi-structured interview guide was the primary research instrument. It was constructed from the specific problems of the study, the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the review of related literature (Section 1). The guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences in their own words, designed to elicit detailed descriptions rather than yes-or-no responses. It had two major parts. Part I gathered the basic professional profile of participants (administrative position, type or level of school, and length of administrative service), which was used only to provide context for their narratives and not to measure leadership performance quantitatively. Part II contained the semi-structured interview questions, organized according to the research questions of the study.

For the first research question, the interview explored administrators' lived experiences in dealing with challenging issues, and participants were encouraged to describe significant administrative challenges, the circumstances surrounding them, how they experienced the situations, and how these experiences affected their work. For the second, it examined the coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies they employed, with questions on how they assessed difficult situations, gathered information, consulted stakeholders, selected courses of action, managed

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pressure, and evaluated the outcomes of their decisions; this reflected the dimensions identified in Section 1.4 as important to understanding administrators' responses (sensemaking, appraisal of demands and resources, adaptive problem-solving, consultation, collaboration, resource mobilization, conflict resolution, and emotional self-regulation). For the third, the interview focused on contingency plans implemented during institutional crises or dilemmas, asking participants to describe the situation, the contingency measures developed or implemented, the people involved, the adjustments made during implementation, and the lessons learned, in line with the framework's view of contingency planning as connected with reflection, organizational learning, and adaptation. For the fourth, participants described the most complex conflict encountered during their tenure and how it was managed and resolved, including its causes, the stakeholders involved, the actions taken, the challenges encountered, and the lessons learned. For the fifth, participants were asked about significant practices they consider effective in managing complex situations, why they consider them effective, and how those practices developed through their administrative experience. The semi-structured format allowed the researchers to maintain consistency in addressing the research questions while giving participants room to raise experiences that had not been anticipated, and follow-up or probing questions were used when necessary to clarify responses and obtain richer descriptions. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription, and field notes documented relevant observations and contextual information.

Construction of the interview guide

The quality of data in a qualitative study depends largely on the researcher's ability to ask questions that elicit rich, relevant, and meaningful descriptions of the phenomenon. In phenomenological research, the guide should encourage participants to describe their lived experiences, perceptions, feelings, reflections, and the meanings associated with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), so the instrument was developed to align with the purpose, statement of the problem, research questions, and theoretical framework. The researchers reviewed literature on school administration, administrative complexity, leadership, decision-making, coping mechanisms, crisis management, conflict resolution, contingency planning, collaboration, sensemaking, and adaptive leadership. Construction followed four steps: (1) the major concepts and areas of inquiry reflected in the five research questions were identified; (2) relevant literature and theoretical perspectives were examined to determine concepts that help frame the questions; (3) open-ended questions were formulated to encourage detailed descriptions of actual experiences; and (4) the questions were reviewed to ensure that they were clear, non-leading, relevant, and appropriate for phenomenological inquiry. The questions were grouped by research question: lived experiences with challenging administrative issues; coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies; contingency plans and adaptive responses; the most complex conflicts and their resolution; and practices considered effective. They were predominantly open-ended because phenomenological interviews seek detailed descriptions rather than brief or predetermined responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers avoided questions that were leading, judgmental, overly restrictive, or suggestive of a preferred response, and avoided unnecessarily technical language so that participants could understand the questions easily and respond naturally. Probing questions were used when necessary (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Content validation

Content validation determined whether the interview questions adequately represented the areas covered by the research questions and were appropriate for obtaining information relevant to the phenomenon. Although qualitative guides do not undergo validity testing in the manner of standardized quantitative instruments, expert review is an important procedure for establishing the appropriateness, relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of researcher-developed questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The initial guide was submitted to a panel of three experts selected for their expertise in educational administration, qualitative research, school leadership, research methodology, or related fields; preference was given to individuals with relevant academic qualifications and

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professional experience in educational leadership and research. The validators received the research title, statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and the proposed guide.

A validation matrix showing the correspondence among the research questions, major areas of inquiry, interview questions, and theoretical perspectives was prepared to ensure that every research question was adequately represented in the guide. Validators examined each question against six criteria, namely relevance, clarity, alignment, appropriateness, phenomenological suitability, and non-leading nature, and judged the guide's overall comprehensiveness (Table 3). Relevance referred to the extent to which a question related directly to the research problem, the research questions, and the phenomenon. Clarity concerned whether questions were understandable, specific, and free from ambiguous wording. Alignment assessed whether each question corresponded to the particular research question it was meant to address. Appropriateness determined whether questions suited school administrators and the context of the study. Phenomenological suitability examined whether questions encouraged participants to describe their actual lived experiences, perceptions, feelings, reflections, and the meanings they attributed to them. The non-leading criterion ensured that participants could freely express their perspectives without being directed to predetermined answers.

Table 3. Criteria used by the validators to evaluate the interview guide

Criterion	Description
Relevance	The question is directly related to the research question and phenomenon.
Clarity	The question is clearly and easily understood by the participants.
Alignment	The question directly addresses the intended research question.
Appropriateness	The question is suitable for school administrators and the research context.
Phenomenological Suitability	The question encourages descriptions of lived experiences and meanings.
Non-leading	The question does not suggest or imply a preferred answer.
Comprehensiveness	The interview guide adequately covers the important dimensions of the phenomenon.

Validators rated each criterion on a four-point scale: 4 = Highly Appropriate, 3 = Appropriate, 2 = Needs Revision, and 1 = Not Appropriate. A space for comments and recommendations was provided for every interview question, and the researchers used both the ratings and the qualitative comments in revising the instrument. Questions identified as unclear, repetitive, irrelevant, leading, or insufficiently aligned with the research questions were revised, reworded, combined, or removed, and questions were added where validators judged that an important dimension of the phenomenon was not adequately represented. After the validators' recommendations were incorporated, the revised guide was submitted for a second review when necessary to ensure that the identified concerns had been addressed.

Pilot interview and finalization

Following expert validation and revision, the guide was subjected to a pilot interview with an individual who had characteristics similar to those of the intended participants and who was not included in the actual. The purpose was not to test the instrument statistically but to determine whether the questions were understandable, sufficiently open-ended, logically sequenced, and capable of eliciting detailed descriptions of administrative experiences. The pilot also

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allowed the researchers to identify questions that were repetitive, difficult to understand, overly broad, or unable to generate meaningful responses, and to assess the flow and approximate duration of the interview. Pilot testing can improve the quality and practicality of qualitative interview protocols (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The guide was revised on the basis of the pilot observations when necessary, and the final version was used in the data-gathering process.

The final semi-structured guide comprised an introductory section, participant profile questions, five major areas corresponding to the research questions, and appropriate probing questions (Table 4). It served as a framework rather than a rigid questionnaire. It maintained sufficient flexibility for follow-up questions based on participants' responses, consistent with semi-structured interviewing in which the researcher follows a predetermined set of topics while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences they consider important (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), and it ensured that all participants had the opportunity to discuss the same major areas while individual experiences and perspectives emerged naturally. The guide was designed to ensure direct correspondence between the research questions and the data-gathering process. Its questions were intentionally open-ended and experience-focused so that participants would provide rich descriptions rather than state opinions, which is consistent with the phenomenological objective of understanding the meanings and essential features of lived experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016).

Table 4. **Interview guide**

Part and focus	RQ	Interview question	Probing questions
Part I Opening questions (participant background and context)	—	a. Please tell us about your experience as a school administrator and your present administrative responsibilities. b. How would you describe your experience of managing the different demands and responsibilities of your position? c. When you think about administrative complexity in your school, what situations or experiences immediately come to mind?	—
Part II Lived experiences in dealing with challenging administrative issues	RQ1	1. Kindly mention and describe the different challenges that you personally experienced in your school.	• Can you tell me more about that experience?
Part III Coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies	RQ2	2. When faced with a difficult administrative situation, how do you usually cope with the demands and pressure?	• What alternatives did you consider? • Would you handle the situation differently today? Why?
Part IV	RQ3	3. What contingency plans or alternative strategies did you develop in addressing challenges in school?	• What prompted you to change your original plan?

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Contingency plans and adaptive responses			
Part V Complex conflicts and conflict resolution	RQ4	4. Kindly describe the most complex conflict you have encountered as a school administrator.	• What made the conflict particularly difficult?
Part VI Effective administrative practices	RQ5	5. Based on your experiences, what administrative practices have been most effective in dealing with complex situations?	—
Part VII Closing question	—	6. Is there anything else about your experiences in dealing with complex administrative situations that you believe is important for us to understand but which we have not asked?	—

Data Gathering Procedures

Data gathering followed established research ethics and institutional requirements. Ethical considerations are particularly important in qualitative research because the researcher interacts directly with participants and obtains personal accounts of their experiences, perceptions, and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Approvals and access. First, the researchers secured the endorsement and approval of the research adviser and the appropriate officials of the Graduate School and ensured that the proposed methodology and instrument had undergone the required review and approval processes. Institutional approval before data collection is an important component of responsible research practice because it ensures that the procedures comply with institutional and ethical requirements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers then submitted a formal request to the Schools Division Superintendent of the Division of Bataan, through the appropriate channels, for permission to conduct the study in selected public elementary and secondary schools within the Mariveles District, which ensured that the study followed the administrative requirements of the Department of Education and the participating schools. Upon approval, they coordinated with the concerned District Supervisors and School Heads and submitted a formal request to the concerned school authorities for permission to identify and invite qualified administrators. Establishing appropriate access to research sites and participants matters in qualitative research because researchers must balance the requirements of the study with the institutional context and responsibilities of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Recruitment, information, and consent. Potential participants were identified through purposive sampling against the inclusion criteria; in phenomenological research, participants should have firsthand experience of the phenomenon and be capable of rich description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). They were informed of the purpose and objectives of the study, the nature of their participation, the interview process, and the expected time commitment. The researchers explained that participation was voluntary, that participants could decline any question or withdraw without penalty, and that their decision would not affect their professional status or their relationship with the researchers or their institution; voluntary participation and the right to withdraw are fundamental ethical principles in research involving human participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were also informed of the measures taken to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Because they were administrators discussing potentially sensitive experiences, the researchers took particular care to protect information that could identify participants, schools, colleagues, learners, or other individuals mentioned during the interviews (Creswell &

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Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before each interview, informed consent was obtained, covering the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Permission to audio-record was requested separately, with an explanation of how recordings would be stored, accessed, transcribed, and eventually disposed of under the approved protocol, and only participants who consented both to participate and to be recorded were interviewed.

Interviews. Interviews were scheduled according to participants' availability and convenience and, where possible, held in a private, quiet, and comfortable setting in which participants could describe their experiences freely; a suitable environment encourages open and detailed accounts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015). During each interview, the researchers used the validated semi-structured guide, asked the prepared questions, and used probing questions whenever clarification or elaboration was needed, thereby balancing consistency across participants with flexibility to explore emerging issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were encouraged to give concrete examples of challenging situations, decisions made, coping mechanisms employed, contingency plans implemented, conflicts managed, and practices found effective, so that the researchers could understand the meanings and essential features of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded to preserve responses accurately and to facilitate complete transcription and analysis; recording also allows the researcher to focus more fully on the interaction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Field notes documented observations, contextual information, nonverbal cues when appropriate, and initial reflections that could contribute to interpreting participants' narratives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Transcription and data management. After each interview, the researchers transcribed the recorded responses accurately and reviewed the transcripts against the original recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness. Repeated engagement with the transcripts allowed them to become familiar with participants' accounts before systematic coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Giorgi, 2009). Participants were assigned codes or pseudonyms, and names of participants, schools, or other identifying information were not unnecessarily disclosed in the presentation of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, consent forms, and other research materials were stored securely: electronic files were protected by passwords and access controls, physical documents were kept in a secure location, access was limited to the researchers and authorized persons, and data were retained and disposed of according to the requirements of the Graduate School, applicable institutional policies, and the approved protocol.

Analytic and credibility procedures. The transcripts were organized and prepared for analysis (Section 2.5). Participants may be asked to review summaries or interpretations through member checking, which gives them an opportunity to clarify, correct, or elaborate on interpretations of their accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research adviser or a qualified peer reviewer was also to review the coding process and emerging themes; peer examination provides an additional perspective and may help identify inconsistencies, unsupported interpretations, or potential researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers maintained an audit trail documenting important decisions during data collection and analysis, including interview schedules, field notes, transcription procedures, coding decisions, category and theme development, and revisions to interpretations, which contributes to dependability and confirmability by showing how findings were developed from the original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The entire procedure respected the rights, dignity, privacy, autonomy, and welfare of participants. Because discussions of administrative conflicts or difficult experiences may cause discomfort, participants were allowed to decline any question or discontinue the interview when necessary; ethical sensitivity is particularly important in phenomenological research because the method requires participants to share personal experiences and the meanings associated with significant events (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

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Data Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using qualitative procedures. Analysis was based on participants' narratives and focused on identifying the meanings, patterns, and themes that emerged from their lived experiences in dealing with administrative challenges, using systematic coding, categorization, thematic analysis, and phenomenological interpretation. The phenomenological analysis was guided by the principles of Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994): identifying significant statements, determining their meanings, organizing related meanings into themes, and synthesizing the themes to describe the essential meaning of participants' experiences. Thematic analysis followed the phases of familiarization with the data, coding, developing themes, reviewing themes, and interpreting patterns relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Recordings were first transcribed accurately and reviewed several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses, and the researchers read the transcripts carefully to become familiar with the descriptions, experiences, perceptions, decisions, coping mechanisms, conflicts, and practices shared. Significant statements and meaningful expressions directly related to the research questions were identified and highlighted, with particular attention to statements that described participants' lived experiences, and these served as the basis for initial coding. Codes were assigned to significant statements according to the meanings participants expressed; similar or related codes were grouped into categories; and the categories were examined for recurring patterns, similarities, differences, and relationships among participants' experiences, from which themes were developed.

The analysis proceeded by research question. For the first (lived experiences), the narratives were analyzed to identify common experiences, circumstances, challenges, and meanings associated with administrative complexity, with attention to how administrators described difficult situations, understood the circumstances, and were influenced by these experiences in their actions and perspectives. For the second (coping mechanisms and decision-making strategies), responses were examined for the ways administrators responded to difficult situations, managed pressure, assessed resources, consulted stakeholders, evaluated alternatives, and made decisions, and similar mechanisms and practices were grouped into categories and synthesized into themes. For the third (contingency plans), descriptions of situations that required alternative plans were analyzed for how administrators developed, implemented, modified, and evaluated contingency measures, together with the lessons learned and their contribution to organizational learning and future preparedness. For the fourth (the most complex conflict), narratives were analyzed for the nature and causes of the conflict, the individuals or groups involved, the actions undertaken, and the strategies used to reach resolution, and recurring conflict-management approaches, challenges, and lessons were synthesized into themes. For the fifth (effective practices), participants' reflections on the practices, strategies, and approaches they found useful were grouped and interpreted to determine the common leadership and administrative approaches emerging from their experiences.

The emerging themes were then interpreted using the three theoretical perspectives in Section 1.4. Complexity Leadership Theory helped interpret how administrators responded to interconnected and changing organizational demands through adaptation, collaboration, and leadership; Sensemaking Theory helped explain how they interpreted ambiguous situations, gathered information, consulted stakeholders, and determined courses of action; and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping helped interpret how they appraised challenging situations, assessed resources, employed coping strategies, and reassessed their responses. The theories were interpretive lenses rather than variables for statistical testing: the researchers allowed themes to emerge from participants' actual narratives before relating them to the framework, which is consistent with a phenomenological design that seeks the meaning of lived experiences rather than statistical relationships among variables. Finally, the researchers synthesized the major themes and subthemes into a comprehensive description of how administrators experience and respond to administrative complexity, including how they interpreted challenges, coped with pressure, made decisions, developed

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contingency plans, resolved conflicts, collaborated with stakeholders, and developed effective practices, in order to identify the essential meanings and common patterns underlying their experiences of leading through complexity.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was approached through the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* was strengthened through careful interviewing, prolonged engagement with the data, clarification of participants' responses, appropriate validation of interpretations, and member checking, in which participants were given the opportunity to review or clarify selected interpretations to verify that the researchers' interpretation reasonably represented their intended meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Dependability* was supported through systematic documentation of the research procedures, and *confirmability* through an audit trail and by grounding interpretations in participants' actual statements; the researchers kept interview protocols, field notes, transcripts, coding decisions, categories, themes, and analytic reflections as documentation showing how findings were developed from the interview data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Transferability* was addressed by providing sufficiently detailed descriptions of the research context and participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher-made interview guide was also reviewed by experts in educational management and qualitative research to ensure that the questions were clear, relevant, and aligned with the objectives of the study, and the validators' suggestions were considered in improving the instrument before its final use. Through expert review and systematic analysis, the instrument was able to generate meaningful data aligned with the research questions and purpose of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers observed established ethical principles throughout the study to protect the rights, dignity, privacy, safety, and welfare of all participants. Necessary permissions and approvals were secured from the appropriate authorities and offices before data collection; the study was conducted in accordance with applicable institutional research policies and ethical standards, and no data gathering began until the required approvals had been obtained.

Before participating, each participant was given clear and sufficient information about the purpose of the research, the nature and procedures of the semi-structured interview, the expected duration of participation, the use of audio recordings, the potential benefits and minimal risks, and how data would be handled and reported. Participants had adequate opportunity to ask questions and clarify concerns before giving informed consent, and consent was obtained voluntarily and without coercion, undue influence, or pressure. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants had the right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage without penalty, disadvantage, or negative consequence, and they could choose not to answer any question they considered uncomfortable, sensitive, or inappropriate. The researchers respected these decisions and did not exert pressure to obtain information or to prolong participation.

Because the study involved administrators sharing lived experiences of administrative challenges, the researchers took particular care to protect participants from possible emotional, professional, social, or reputational risks. Interview questions were presented respectfully and focused only on information relevant to the research objectives; participants were not required to disclose information that could unnecessarily identify individuals, schools, or other persons involved in particular incidents; and the researchers maintained a non-judgmental and respectful environment throughout. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants' real names, school names, and other identifying information were not disclosed in the research report, presentations, publications, or other outputs unless explicit permission was obtained and disclosure was ethically justified. Codes or pseudonyms were assigned in transcripts, notes, and reports, and particular care was taken when presenting quotations so that participants' identities could not reasonably be inferred.

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All information gathered was used strictly for academic and research purposes. Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, consent forms, and other documents were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers and authorized persons; electronic files were protected by appropriate security measures; physical documents were kept in a secure location, and data were retained only for the period required by applicable institutional policies and were thereafter securely disposed of to prevent unauthorized access or disclosure. The researchers upheld integrity, honesty, and transparency in analysis and presentation: participants' responses were represented accurately and were not altered, fabricated, falsified, or taken out of context; direct quotations were presented faithfully while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality; and relevant sources were acknowledged appropriately, with plagiarism, misrepresentation, and any form of research misconduct avoided. Finally, the researchers ensured that the study was conducted with respect, fairness, beneficence, and non-maleficence, and that findings were reported objectively and used solely to deepen understanding of how school administrators experience and address administrative challenges.

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RESULTS

This section presents the results for the five research questions that were answered through the interviews (RQ1–RQ5); the sixth research question, which concerns the proposed enrichment program, is addressed in Section 4.4 and Appendix B. Twenty-three themes emerged from the analysis: five for RQ1, five for RQ2, four for RQ3, four for RQ4, and five for RQ5. Each theme is presented with the participants' verbatim excerpts, followed by the researchers' interpretation and related literature. Participants are identified by the codes P1 to P11 (Table 2). To protect confidentiality, the names of people, schools, and places that appeared in the excerpts were replaced with bracketed descriptors; apart from these replacements and minor corrections of spacing and punctuation, the excerpts are reproduced as given in the transcripts.

Participants' accounts were drawn from the same interviews and often touched on more than one research question. Consequently, a participant may appear under several themes, and an excerpt that supports more than one theme is quoted only once and cross-referenced where it recurs.

Research Question 1: Lived Experiences in Dealing with Challenging Administrative Issues

Five themes emerged from participants' accounts under this research question.

Theme 1: Balancing Competing Demands Through Prioritization, Delegation, and Teamwork

Asked how they experience the many demands of their position, several participants described school leadership as a continuous balancing act that they manage by prioritizing, delegating, listening, and relying on others.

Leading a school really comes down to a constant balancing act between keeping the administrative gears turning and putting people first. As an OIC, you are always weighing competing demands: making sure every peso is accounted for under COA and DepEd Order No. 008, s. 2019, while keeping your eyes on the real goal—driving learning recovery in the classroom through BEDP 2030. It means shifting away from rigid, top-down directives and moving toward decisions backed by real evidence. For me, navigating this balance comes down to clear, simple systems: keeping our work grounded in the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) and fiercely protecting our teachers' core time so administrative paperwork never gets in the way of good teaching. (P1)

I would describe it as challenging but meaningful. There are days when several concerns come at the same time—reports and deadlines, teacher concerns, learner needs, parent complaints, and unexpected situations. I have learned to prioritize, delegate, communicate with my team, and remain calm when problems arise. My 20 years of experience have taught me to be patient, flexible, and understanding. I have also learned that I do not have to handle everything alone; teamwork and trust in my teachers are very important. (P2)

No job is easy, but one can learn to manage the various demands and responsibilities of being a school principal. At first, managing all the demands and responsibilities feels overwhelming because everything is new. There are many tasks, people to attend to, and problems to solve every day. I admit I don't know it all yet, and I feel pressured sometimes. But I take things one at a time, listen to advice, learn from my mistakes, and keep trying my best. Little by little, I am getting better at balancing everything and handling this role. (P3)

As a school administrator, I learned to apply the value of prioritization because there are days when you have to deal with various demands and concerns. I prioritize urgent matters while ensuring that important school operations and instructional supervision are not neglected. Proper time management, delegation, teamwork, and collaboration with the teaching and non-teaching personnel helped me with these demands. (P5)

Managing these demands requires constant prioritization and emotional resilience. The role is dynamic—one hour involves strategic academic planning, and the next requires troubleshooting a facility issue or mediating a concern

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between staff and parents. I view it as a balancing act between urgent operational tasks and long-term instructional goals. (P9)

I can say that managing different responsibilities is challenging but rewarding. I handle them by prioritizing what is important, listening to my teachers and learners, and working together as a family. As a motherly leader, I always try to understand people's concerns and make decisions with fairness, compassion, and the welfare of everyone in mind. (P11)

Our lived experience is balancing many demands, working within limits, navigating people and policies, making hard choices, staying calm amid surprises, and growing stronger through every challenge. It is difficult work that tests our capacity, but also builds deep experience, resilience, and a strong sense of service. (P3)

The excerpts show that the balancing of demands is described less as a single skill than as a set of habits. P1 balances keeping "the administrative gears turning" with "putting people first," while P9 describes moving in one hour from "strategic academic planning" to "troubleshooting a facility issue." P2, P5, and P11 name prioritizing as the first response, and P2, P5, and P3 add that delegation, teamwork, and trust in colleagues make the load manageable. P3's admission that "I don't know it all yet" and that they "feel pressured sometimes" shows that the balance is achieved gradually and with honesty about one's limits.

This theme is supported by the studies of Hallinger (2024), Hungo et al. (2024), and Kistoro and Roviana (2023) because these works describe school leaders who must manage interconnected demands, workload, and time pressure by prioritizing, planning, and managing stress. This is consistent with P1, P2, P5, P9, and P11, who described balancing urgent and long-term tasks through prioritization and teamwork.

Theme 2: A Role that is Challenging and Exhausting Yet Fulfilling and Purposeful

Participants described their experience of administration in strongly evaluative terms, pairing words for difficulty and fatigue with words for meaning and purpose.

I have been serving as a school administrator for 6 years. I can say that my experience as a school administrator is really 60% challenge and 40% opportunity for growth. My present administrative responsibilities involve managing school operations, monitoring the curriculum, promoting the professional growth of teachers, and addressing the needs of learners in all aspects of their well-being. (P5)

1. Serving as.... Elementary School Principal is indeed a challenging profession, truly survival of the fittest. Above all, I believe a leader must have a good and big heart for every learner, every teacher, and the entire school we serve. My responsibilities cover academic leadership, staff supervision, resource management, stakeholder partnership, and program implementation, all guided by compassion and service. (P6)

Challenging and fulfilling (P8)

If you're going to ask about my experiences as a school administrator, there are a lot of challenges. I don't know if I can say that I've had all the experiences. But there are a lot. (P4)

Managing these demands is never easy, but having a big heart makes all the difference. It helps me stay patient, understanding, and firm yet kind even under pressure. Challenges become lighter when you genuinely care for your people, because what you do, you do with love and purpose. (P6)

Tiring yet fulfilling. I usually experience physical and mental exhaustion from my role as a school manager and as a school leader, but I also feel deeply happy and purposeful. (P7)

I would say it is really exhausting and tiring, especially meeting deadlines (P8)

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The work is not heavy in the way carrying a sack is heavy. It is heavy the way carrying water is heavy — it shifts, it spills, and you cannot put it down to rest. (P10)

I think its about wellness leave and possibly take a long leave. Come back relax and recharge (P8)

The paired descriptions are consistent across participants of different backgrounds. P5's estimate of "60% challenge and 40% opportunity for growth," P7's "Tiring yet fulfilling," and P8's "Challenging and fulfilling" all hold difficulty and fulfilment together. P6 grounds endurance in a "big heart," while P10's image that the work "is heavy the way carrying water is heavy" conveys a weight that cannot be set down. P8's mention of wellness leave, and of coming back to "relax and recharge," indicates that exhaustion is real enough to prompt thoughts of rest. P4's remark that there are "a lot of" challenges reflects the same recognition without elaboration.

This theme is supported by the studies of Leavy et al. (2024), Macula (2025), and Pestalozi et al. (2026) because these studies present school leadership as demanding emotionally and professionally while also sustained by resilience and support systems. This matches P5, P7, and P8, who described their work as tiring or challenging yet fulfilling.

Theme 3: Administrative Complexity in the Use of Technology in Performing Leadership Roles

When asked what comes to mind when they think of administrative complexity, participants pointed to many concerns on the use of technology and digital platforms in performing their leadership roles.

As a school head, one of the challenges I encounter is my limited knowledge and skills in using technological tools. Although I recognize that technology can help me prepare reports, analyze school data, and develop plans, I sometimes find it difficult to use these tools effectively. I need to attend more training and seminars to understand how technology can be integrated into my administrative responsibilities. Sometimes, I rely on my teachers who are more knowledgeable about technology to assist me. (P5)

One of the major challenges I experience is the lack of reliable internet connectivity and technological resources in our school. There are times when I cannot access online platforms because of slow internet connections. This affects my ability to complete reports, communicate with teachers, and manage school-related activities efficiently. Even if I want to maximize the use of technology, our limited resources sometimes prevent me from doing so. (P9)

My concern in using technology is the accuracy and reliability of the information it provides. There are instances when digital tools generate information that is not completely appropriate for our school situation or does not align with DepEd policies and guidelines. As a school head, I still need to verify the information before using it in official reports, memoranda, and school improvement plans. I believe that AI can assist us, but human judgment and accountability must remain our responsibility. (P7)

Another challenge is the resistance of some teachers and school personnel to adopting new technologies. Some are comfortable with traditional ways of preparing reports, communicating, and managing school activities, so they are hesitant to use digital platforms. Introducing these technologies requires patience, encouragement, and continuous technical assistance. As a school head, I need to demonstrate their benefits and provide opportunities for staff to develop their confidence and skills. (P4)

Another challenge I encounter is the difficulty of encouraging some teachers and personnel to embrace technology in their daily work. Some are comfortable with traditional ways of preparing reports, communicating, and managing school activities, while others are hesitant because they lack confidence in using digital tools. As a school head, I need to provide guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for professional development to help them adapt. I believe that successful technology integration requires not only available resources but also the willingness of school personnel to learn and change. (P6)

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One of the challenges I experience is the increasing number of digital reports and online platforms that we are required to use in managing the school. Sometimes, the same information needs to be entered into different systems, which consumes much of my time. Instead of focusing on instructional supervision and supporting teachers, I spend hours completing online reports and checking submitted data. I believe that integrating these platforms and providing a more streamlined reporting system would help school heads perform their responsibilities more efficiently. (P1)

Participants' accounts show that technology added a distinct layer of complexity to their leadership roles. P5 reported limited knowledge and skills in using technological tools and the need to attend more training and seminars on how technology can be integrated into leadership roles. P9 explained that limited resources and unreliable internet connectivity affect the ability to accomplish reports, communicate with teachers, and manage school activities. P7 stressed the need to verify AI-generated information, holding that human judgment and accountability must remain the school head's responsibility. P4 and P6 described the difficulty of encouraging teachers and personnel who are comfortable with traditional ways to adopt digital tools, and P6 added that successful technology integration requires not only available resources but also the willingness of school personnel to learn and change. P1 described the increasing number of digital reports and online platforms that school heads are required to use, with the same information often entered into different systems.

This theme is supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), which emphasizes the importance of capacity building in digital education. Similarly, Okunlola (2024) identified inadequate training as one of the barriers to effective digital leadership among high school leaders.

Theme 4: Scarce Resources, Aging Facilities, and Learning Gaps Behind Learners' Outcomes

A recurring concern was the gap between what schools are expected to deliver and what is available, and the weight administrators carry when learner outcomes fall short.

When I think about complexity, two main hurdles immediately stand out: helping our students recover from post-pandemic learning losses with limited funding and supporting our teachers through sweeping policy changes. For instance, when our baseline data for SY 2025–2026 showed that 65.5% of our learners were at the Emerging Level in Math and 59% needed English literacy interventions, we were hit with the full weight of the problem. It wasn't just a matter of fixing reading or math scores; it was an administrative puzzle that touched everything from teacher workload and resource allocation to professional development and real anxiety within our school community. (P1)

A recurring theme in my experience is the gap between what is expected and what is available. I am tasked with delivering quality education, improving facilities, and sustaining meaningful programs — yet I often operate with limited funding, insufficient personnel, and aging resources. I navigate the quiet struggle of stretching every resource, finding creative workarounds, and ensuring operations function despite these constraints. Frustration is a familiar feeling, yet it is accompanied by a deepening resourcefulness: necessity has become my constant teacher, and resilience grows alongside every challenge I encounter. (P3)

The key challenges I face are: first, building strong and trusting relationships between the school and the community; second, inadequate facilities — many classrooms need repair, and we lack essential equipment; third, guiding teachers in embracing and initiating meaningful changes in teaching practices; and fourth, addressing the persistent presence of non-readers and non-numerate learners, rooted in child labor, broken families, and limited support at home. (P6)

I personally experienced several challenges in our school. One of the major challenges I encountered was the limitation of resources and infrastructure. I had to deal with the need to upgrade our computer laboratory, secure stable internet connectivity, and maintain aging school facilities despite limited government or institutional funding. Another challenge I experienced was managing staffing and workload balance. I had to ensure that teachers were able to perform their teaching responsibilities while also complying with administrative reporting requirements and

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educational standards. At times, I observed that the demands of these responsibilities could contribute to teacher stress and burnout, which made it necessary for me to help manage workloads and provide support whenever possible. I also experienced challenges in aligning parents' expectations with our school guidelines and educational policies. Some parents had expectations that did not always correspond with established school procedures or policies, so I needed to communicate clearly with them, listen to their concerns, and explain the reasons behind our decisions while ensuring that we continued to follow official guidelines. (P9)

Our MOOE is computed on enrolment, but our costs are not. We have classrooms that need repair that I have been endorsing for three years. I have learned to fundraise, to write proposals to the LGU, to ask alumni — things no one trained me for, but a spontaneous decision to address the needs of the physical facility. (P10)

Receiving our baseline assessment results early in SY 2025–2026 was a genuine reality check. Seeing that 65.5% of our children were struggling with basic numeracy and over half lacked early literacy skills hit hard. As a school administrator, it honestly shook my confidence and made me question if we were doing enough. I felt the weight of that responsibility deeply—not just because SDO Bataan was watching, but because these numbers represented our students' futures. It was the moment I realized that keeping up with routine administrative tasks wasn't going to cut it; I had to roll up my sleeves and step up as a true instructional leader. (P1)

A clear example was when we assessed our learners and found a significant number struggling to read and do basic math — many from families facing hardship, where children had to work or lacked guidance at home. It deeply affected me as an administrator; I felt the weight of responsibility knowing that behind every statistic was a child whose future was at risk. It humbled me and made me realize that our school cannot succeed alone — we truly need everyone beside us to make a real difference. (P6)

P3 names "the gap between what is expected and what is available," P10 notes that "Our MOOE is computed on enrolment, but our costs are not," and P9 and P6 list aging facilities, connectivity, and equipment needs. Their responses are practical: P10 describes learning to fundraise, write proposals to the LGU, and ask alumni, and P3 speaks of "creative workarounds." The second cluster concerns learners. P1 recalls baseline results as "a genuine reality check" that "shook my confidence," and P6 speaks of being humbled because "behind every statistic was a child whose future was at risk." P6 also traces non-readers and non-numerate learners to child labor, broken families, and limited support at home, and P1 links the learning-recovery problem to teacher workload, resource allocation, and anxiety in the school community.

In both clusters the administrators move from appraisal to action. Scarcity prompts resourcefulness and outside partnerships, and the learning data prompt a shift toward instructional leadership, which P1 describes as stepping up from routine administrative tasks.

This theme is supported by the studies of Anino et al. (2025), Almagro et al. (2025), Panga et al. (2025), and Eyana et al. (2024) because these works document budgeting difficulties, insufficient funds, insufficient instructional materials, aging infrastructure, and workload among school heads, and the participatory and community-based strategies they use in response. This mirrors P10's fundraising and LGU proposals and P9's constraints on facilities and funding.

Theme 5: Sensitive and High-Stakes Incidents: Child Protection, Safety Threats, Public Accusation, and Fire

The most vivid accounts of challenging situations involved incidents in which learners' safety, a teacher's reputation, or the school's facilities were at stake.

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The situations where every option available to me is wrong in some way. A teacher who is loved by students but has been chronically absent because she is caring for a sick husband. If I follow the rules strictly, I destroy a family. If I look away, I am unfair to the more than a hundred other teachers who come to work sick. (P10)

One of the most challenging administrative issues I encountered was handling a child protection case involving the alleged sexual abuse of a learner by her stepfather. As a school head, I had to balance the need to protect the learner, maintain confidentiality, follow proper procedures, and coordinate with the appropriate authorities and support persons. It was a very sensitive situation because the learner's safety and emotional well-being were involved. (P2)

There was a situation where a learner disclosed that she was being sexually abused by her stepfather. When I learned about it, I felt deeply concerned and saddened because I knew that the child was in a very vulnerable situation. I had to remain calm and avoid reacting emotionally so that I could respond appropriately. As the school head, I immediately focused on the learner's safety and followed the school's child protection procedures. I coordinated with the appropriate personnel and authorities and ensured that the information was handled with confidentiality. The experience was emotionally difficult for me, but it reminded me that, in situations like this, the school must be a safe place where children can speak and feel protected. (P2)

There was a time when there was an active attacker in the school. They experienced it. I wasn't in school. The active attacker Yes. He was attacked by a... I don't know. He was drunk. I don't know if he was looking for [a colleague]. At that time, he wasn't there. He wanted to ask something. What he did was, in one room, the room was... I don't know if it's called a law unit. It's a makeshift room. Yes, it's a makeshift room. He really attacked him. It's a good thing that [a teacher] You know her, right? Yes, I know her. When she saw him going in, because the gate back then was made of wood. The floor was also made of wood. So, it's easy to get in. So, when she saw him like that, they immediately closed the door. They closed the table and the doors. The water was inside the room. Until that person calmed down. He calmed down. But their nervousness... So, those things are a big thing. Yes. It's a big thing that there are people who also know their responsibilities. They also know those things. It's a big thing. They were activates back then. There were new teachers. (P4)

A parent came to the school accusing one of our male teachers of inappropriate behavior toward a Grade 9 girl. She came angry, she came loud, she came with relatives, and she came already having posted about it in social media. The corridor filled with students watching. The teacher in question had been with us eight years, well-regarded, with no prior record. (P10)

One of the most difficult experiences I had was the school fire. I remember receiving a call telling me that there was a big fire in the school. I did not know what to do at first, and I became very worried and emotional because I was thinking about the school, the students, and my accountability as the principal. Many facilities were damaged, including areas used by our special programs. We had to continue with shifting because the school was not yet fully repaired. My biggest worry was my accountability, but I immediately reported what happened. I was thankful because the teachers, the LGU, and other people supported us and reassured me. That experience was very difficult, but it taught me to remain strong and continue doing my responsibility even during a crisis. (P11)

My response was guided by child protection policies and procedures, my responsibility as a school head, and my 20 years of experience in school administration. The welfare and safety of the learner were my primary considerations. I was also guided by the support of our school personnel and the appropriate authorities involved in handling the case. Most importantly, my personal commitment to protecting children influenced my decisions. I realized that being a school administrator is not only about managing teachers, programs, and resources. It also means being prepared to respond appropriately when a learner is in danger. The experience strengthened my commitment to making the school a safe, caring, and protective environment for every child. (P2)

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The strongest was the Child Protection Policy itself. In a moment when my emotions were unreliable, the procedure was a handrail. I have come to believe that policy is not bureaucracy — it is what protects you from your own panic and from your own bias. (P10)

These accounts share a moment in which the administrator had to act before feelings had settled. P2 "had to remain calm and avoid reacting emotionally" after a learner's disclosure of abuse, P10 faced an angry parent, relatives, a social media post, and a watching corridor, and P11 received a call about the school fire and "became very worried and emotional" while thinking of accountability. P4 recounts an active attacker incident in which teachers closed the door and the table until the person calmed down. P10's dilemma, in which following the rules strictly means "I destroy a family" while looking away is unfair to "more than a hundred other teachers," shows that some situations offer no costless option.

What guided them was procedure and people. P10 describes the Child Protection Policy as "a handrail" that "protects you from your own panic and from your own bias," and P2 cites child protection policies, personal commitment, and the support of personnel and authorities. P11's immediate reporting and the support of teachers and the LGU reassured them.

This theme is supported by the studies of Tokel (2018), Cahapay (2022), and Pestalozi et al. (2026) because they show that crisis response is a staged process of acknowledging the crisis and limiting its effects, that principals decide under uncertainty with collaboration, and that moral conflicts and pressures shape leaders' decisions. This is consistent with P2, P10, and P11, who responded through procedure, reporting, and support.

Research Question 2: Coping Mechanisms and Decision-Making Strategies

Five themes emerged from participants' accounts under this research question.

Theme 1: Difficult Decisions Under Scarcity: Reallocating Funds, Deploying Personnel, Rescheduling Events, and Shifting Classes

The difficult decisions that participants chose to describe largely involved distributing limited money, people, time, or space among competing needs.

One of the tougher calls I had to make was reallocating our limited School MOOE budget within the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP). Different grade levels were asking for physical upgrades and equipment, but our baseline reading and math data made it clear where the real emergency was. I chose to put our funding where it was needed most: decodable reading books, hands-on math kits, and teacher training through Project RISE-Ed and Project READy Alion. In the end, the choice came down to three things: what the data was telling us, keeping our spending aligned with DepEd guidelines under DO 008, s. 2019, and doing what would directly help our students learn. (P1)

Reallocating departmental funding during mid-fiscal year to address urgent structural repairs was a tough decision. Before making it, I evaluated student safety risks, alignment with educational standards, budget compliance guidelines, and the potential impact on affected department programs. (P9)

1One difficult decision was rescheduling the District Sports Meet due to sudden weather disturbances — our biggest annual event that our learners, coaches, and community had worked so hard for. I carefully weighed several factors: the safety of our learners and participants first and foremost; the potential risks of pushing through despite bad weather; the impact on our participating schools and neighboring barangays; SDO Bataan guidelines and weather updates; and the reality that postponement would mean additional costs, adjustments, and inconvenience for everyone. Ultimately, the welfare of our children always comes first — a decision guided by a big heart that prioritizes safety over any event. Alternatives considered: Pushing through with strict safety protocols, holding a shortened version, or moving to a

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much later date. • Why this approach: Safety cannot be compromised; rescheduling balanced care for our people with respect for everyone's hard work. (P6)

I remember dealing with the reassignment of teachers to other grade level/program while there will be shortage of manpower if I transfer certain staff considering their educational attainment and field of specialization. At the end of the concern, I put emphasis on the needs of the students under the SNED Program. (P7)

One difficult decision I had to deal with involved student shifting and regularizing classes. I considered the effect of shifting on the students because they could lose valuable learning time. Instead of simply looking at one group, I considered how many students would be affected and which option would have more positive effects. In general, before I make a decision, I consult with my colleagues and department heads. I ask them if they think the proposed action would be better or if they have another idea. I weigh all the information before deciding. (P11)

P1 and P9 both describe reallocating limited funds, P1 within the School MOOE and Annual Implementation Plan and P9 mid-fiscal year for urgent structural repairs. In each case the choice was made by naming what mattered most: P1 by "what the data was telling us," Alignment with DepEd guidelines, and direct help to students, and P9 by student safety risks, educational standards, budget compliance, and effects on affected programs. P6 rescheduled the District Sports Meet because of weather, weighing safety first against additional costs and inconvenience, and considered alternatives before concluding that "Safety cannot be compromised." P7 weighed manpower shortages, educational attainment, and field of specialization against the needs of learners in the SNED Program, and P11 weighed how many students would be affected by shifting and which option would have "more positive effects." Across the five accounts, learners' safety or learning is the deciding criterion when resources cannot satisfy all claims.

This theme is supported by the studies of Asuque (2025), Anino et al. (2025), and Panga et al. (2025) because they show that decisions of school heads in resource-constrained contexts turn on competing priorities, insufficient funds, and stakeholder engagement. This mirrors the budget and scheduling decisions of P1, P6, P9, and P11.

Theme 2: Putting Learners' Safety and Welfare First: Deciding Through Procedure Rather Than Emotion

One participant's account of a child protection case shows most clearly how administrators decide when a learner's safety is at stake.

One of the most difficult decisions I had to make was handling a child protection case involving a learner who disclosed abuse by her stepfather. It was emotionally difficult because I knew that the decision I made could greatly affect the child and her family. Before acting, I considered the learner's immediate safety, her rights and welfare, the school's policies and procedures, and the need to maintain confidentiality. I also consulted the appropriate personnel and made sure that I did not act based only on my emotions. As a school head, I had to remain calm, fair, and responsible while making sure that the learner was protected. (P2)

The support of my teachers, school personnel, and the Child Protection Committee was very important. I also relied on our DepEd policies and child protection guidelines to make sure that my decision was appropriate and focused on the learner's safety and welfare. I consulted with the proper authorities and people who had experience in handling sensitive cases. Personally, I also drew strength from my years of experience as a school head, from my faith, and from the people I trusted. Their support helped me remain calm, think carefully, and make a decision that would protect the learner while following the proper procedures. I chose that approach because I believed it was the most responsible thing to do for the learner. As a school head, I have a duty to protect the child, maintain confidentiality, and make sure that the matter was handled properly and carefully. Honestly, it was very difficult and emotionally heavy. I tried to remain calm and focused on what needed to be done. I talked with trusted colleagues, followed the guidelines, and prayed for wisdom and strength. I reminded myself that the learner needed adults who would remain calm and protect her. I learned that being a school head is not only about managing teachers, programs, and school

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operations. There are times when we have to deal with very sensitive situations that require courage, compassion, and careful decision-making. The experience taught me to listen carefully, act responsibly, and always put the learner's safety and welfare first. I would still follow the same basic approach, but with the experience I have gained, I would be more confident and prepared in handling the situation. I have learned the importance of responding promptly, coordinating with the appropriate people, protecting confidentiality, and providing a supportive environment for the learner. Most importantly, I would make sure that the child feels safe, heard, and protected (P2)

P2 states the factors considered: the learner's immediate safety, rights and welfare, the school's policies and procedures, and confidentiality, together with consultation so as not to act "based only on my emotions." P2 adds the sources of support: the teachers, school personnel, and Child Protection Committee, DepEd policies and child protection guidelines, the proper authorities, and personal strength drawn from experience, faith, and trusted people. P2 would follow the same basic approach with more confidence and readiness in the future, and would respond promptly, coordinate, protect confidentiality, and "make sure that the child feels safe, heard, and protected." The excerpts combine problem-focused coping (procedures, coordination, confidentiality) with emotion-focused coping (calm, prayer, trusted colleagues).

This theme is supported by the studies of Tokel (2018) and Pestalozi et al. (2026) because they show that decisions in crises proceed from acknowledging the problem to limiting its effects, and that moral conflicts and pressures shape how leaders decide. This is consistent with P2's decision to follow procedure, consult, and put the learner's safety first.

Theme 3: Anchoring Decisions on Policies, Ethics, and Transparency in the Face of Doubt or Accusation

Two participants described decisions made when their actions or integrity had been questioned, and both anchored their decisions on rules, openness, and verifiability.

I decided to oversee the operations of the school canteen. At the end of each school year, the report submitted by the canteen manager consistently shows a zero balance in its earnings. A group of teachers does not believe that the canteen yielded no income, even though some of their colleagues have signed the monthly financial reports. I find their reaction puzzling, especially since they themselves have affixed their signatures to these documents. I have also granted them permission to conduct monthly audits, so they may verify the accuracy of the submitted financial reports. In arriving at this decision, I carefully weighed several important factors to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability throughout the process. First, I considered the school's financial policies and regulatory guidelines. I ensured that every action I took aligned with established government standards and financial management rules, so that the canteen's operations would remain compliant, legal, and clearly governed. Second, I considered the principle of transparency and public trust. Recognizing that the canteen is a school facility meant to serve the entire community, I believed it was essential that all financial matters be open to verification and visible to stakeholders. Trust could only be sustained if information was shared openly — hence my decision to make reports accessible and invite independent review. Third, I considered the need for clarity and verifiability. I acknowledged that questions and doubts might naturally arise when reports consistently show zero earnings. Therefore, I judged that the most responsible course was not merely to submit reports, but to provide a structured way for concerned parties to verify accuracy themselves — through monthly audits — so that facts could be confirmed and doubts resolved objectively. Fourth, I weighed consistency and fairness in procedure. I noted that some of the same teachers expressing doubt had already signed the monthly financial reports. I considered it important to address this apparent inconsistency calmly and professionally, if their concern might stem from misunderstanding rather than dishonesty — and that offering them the means to verify facts themselves was the fairest and most respectful way to clarify the situation, without casting blame. Finally, I considered the broader goal of maintaining harmony and shared purpose within the school. My decisions were guided not only by what is procedurally correct, but also by what could help restore confidence, build mutual understanding,

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and demonstrate that I have nothing to hide. I chose to lead by example — showing that accountability is not a burden, but a shared responsibility, and that openness is the surest path to restoring trust. (P3)

As I recall, filing an administrative case to people who made false statement about me. It will distract the good governance and objectives as a leader. (P8)

Several important people, resources, and forms of support guided me as I reached my decision. First and foremost were established financial policies, government guidelines, and accounting standards that govern school funds and canteen operations. These official rules served as my primary reference — providing clear, objective standards to follow, ensuring that my decision was grounded in compliance, legality, and accepted public accountability rather than personal preference. I also drew strength and clarity from my core values of integrity, transparency, and fairness. These principles reminded me that the most honorable path is always openness — even when facing doubt or opposition — and that offering others the chance to verify facts themselves is the surest way to demonstrate good stewardship, while upholding the trust placed in my care. Experienced colleagues, mentors, and fellow school heads provided invaluable perspective and reassurance. I consulted with those who have long experience in school administration and financial management, seeking their counsel on proper procedure and how best to respond calmly when questions arise. Their shared wisdom reminded me that concerns such as these are not unique, and that adherence to process, paired with patience, is the most reliable way forward. The school's audit and supervisory systems also served as a vital support. The very fact that monthly reports were signed and recorded created a documented, consistent record — a reliable basis for review and verification. By offering the concerned teachers' permission to conduct their own monthly audits, I was able to rely upon these established procedures as a neutral, objective path toward clarity, rather than engaging in debate or speculation. Finally, faith and personal reflection sustained me throughout. In moments of uncertainty, I turned to quiet prayer and contemplation, seeking wisdom and the grace to respond with patience and goodwill. This inner support helped me set aside personal feelings of frustration or confusion, and guided me toward a decision that prioritized fairness, transparency, and the best interests of the entire school community. Together, these supports — official guidelines, personal principles, trusted counsel, established procedures, and spiritual strength — enabled me to decide calmly and confidently: to remain open to verification, to uphold accountability, and to trust that truth and transparency would eventually prevail. (P3)

P3 decided to oversee the school canteen after a group of teachers doubted a zero-balance report that some of them had signed and granted them permission to audit monthly. The stated factors were financial policies and regulations, transparency and public trust, clarity and verifiability, consistency and fairness in procedure, and the restoration of harmony. P3 names the sources of support as financial policies and accounting standards, core values, experienced colleagues, the audit and supervisory system, and faith. P8 describes a different situation, filing an administrative case against people who made false statements, and the reason given is that doing otherwise "will distract the good governance and objectives as a leader."

In both accounts the administrator turns a personal challenge into a matter of procedure and evidence. Offering others the means to verify facts is a way of interpreting a conflict as a question of information and relying on established rules works as a problem-focused response to a threat to one's integrity.

This theme is supported by the studies of Bayeni and Bhengu (2018), Chen and Meng (2025), and Alene et al. (2025) because they show that policy implementation requires judgment in local contexts, that data-driven and participatory decisions strengthen governance, and that adaptive leaders balance local realities with policy frameworks. This is consistent with P3 and P8's reliance on rules, evidence, and transparency.

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Theme 4: Consulting Others So That Decisions Are Not Made Alone

Consultation with older teachers, external stakeholders, seasoned school heads, and life coaches was described as a normal part of deciding.

When I came to school, I asked teachers who are older than me. I asked for their opinion. I do not rely only on my own decision-making or my own understanding. I asked them. So, I know what is right. Because it is hard to make a simple So, I asked them. And, of course, when there are older than me, I ask what I always pray for. I also ask for their opinion. Even if they are older than me, I ask for their I ask for their I asked if than me, for their And, I give them You just have to arrange all the documents and then everything else will follow. (P4)

In making decisions there are so many factors that should be taken into considerations. You need to involve the parents, barangay, municipality, PTA. As a school leader, I need to convince them all to agree with my school projects. There are several times that I have to swallow my pride in dealing with external stakeholders. There are some conflicts with them that I just have to let go for the welfare of our students. I chose not to argue with their wrong process because we are the recipient of their projects. I always think of what is best for our learners. (P5)

I also consult and seek the advice of other seasoned school heads when faced with a difficult situation. Consultation with fellow principals is also helpful because they have experienced similar administrative situations. I also rely on DepEd orders, school policies, and other official documents when making decisions. (P5)

Seasoned school administrators and life coaches helped me in making decisions aside from the proven studies that are applicable in my role as a school manager (P7)

High-ranking officials, trusted friends, and seasoned administrators helped me make the decision because their advice, guidance, and experiences provided valuable perspectives, while their support gave me greater confidence in choosing the most appropriate course of action. (P8)

P4 explains that upon arriving at a school they asked teachers who were older for their opinions, and states, “I do not rely only on my own decision-making or my own understanding.” P5 lists the parents, barangay, municipality, and PTA whose agreement is needed for school projects and describes having to “swallow my pride” and let some conflicts go “for the welfare of our students.” P5 adds consultation with seasoned school heads who have faced similar situations, and reliance on DepEd orders and school policies. P7 credits seasoned administrators, life coaches, and “proven studies,” and P8 credits high-ranking officials, trusted friends, and seasoned administrators whose advice “provided valuable perspectives” and gave greater confidence.

The participants treat consultation as a source of correctness and confidence, and as a means of gaining the cooperation of those on whom the school depends. This reflects the social nature of sensemaking, in which understanding is formed through conversation with others.

This theme is supported by the studies of Awyan and Quines (2024), Panga et al. (2025), and Nadeem (2024) because they link participatory decision-making, open communication, and shared leadership to more effective school leadership. This matches P4, P5, P7, and P8, who consulted others before deciding.

Theme 5: Networks of Support Behind the School Head: Committees, Supervisors, Teachers, Community, and God

Participants described a wide network of people and resources that supported them in deciding and in coping, and several said that they do not walk alone.

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The hardest part of being a school head is that you are held accountable for everything. When faced with complexities, I calm myself and find ways to handle the situations in the best way possible. Seeing the success of the learners, teachers and the school in general is enough to compensate all the efforts you exerted to achieve your goals. (P5)

So, the projects back then, if you were forced to do something, you were able to do it because of the strong support. The strong support. That's it. (P4)

My School Review Committee—including [a Master Teacher II and an Administrative Officer II]—provided invaluable technical screening and operational support. I also relied on our Master Teachers and Reading Coordinator [name withheld] to lead peer-coaching sessions during Project READy Alion workshops. Division-level L&D programs, specifically the Division Roll Out of the Instructional Leadership Training (ILT), supplied the conceptual frameworks needed to design our school-based interventions. (P1)

So, that's one thing. Aside from your commitment, that's another factor. And then, the community that you have. Because, in [place withheld], although it's just a community, they are really supportive in all of your programs. So, that's why what my dad told me, he said that if we have a big project, we should support it. (P4)

My greatest support comes first from God, who gives me wisdom and strength. Then from my dedicated teachers and staff — who stand beside me and share the load; our parents and SPTA officers, who trust and support our programs; the [barangay name withheld] officials, who partner with us for the welfare of our children; our stakeholders like AFAB and 1Bataan, who provide resources and opportunities; and most importantly, the learners themselves — their smiles, dreams, and potential are my greatest inspiration to keep going. I never walk alone. Would I handle it differently today? No — I would choose the same path. Experience has only strengthened my conviction: when we lead with a big heart and put people first, we make the right decisions. (P6)

I heavily relied on our school department heads, division administrative officers, the Parent-Teacher Association executive board, and guidelines from government education policies. (P9)

My Head Teachers, who would remind me when I am rushing. My guidance designates, who reads people better than any of us. My non-teaching personnel, who are more detail-oriented than I am, and the three principals I mentioned. My Public Schools District Supervisor, whom I have learned to call early rather than late (P10)

My teachers, department heads, and colleagues are very important sources of support. I always consult with them and ask for their ideas. During difficult situations, I also appreciate the support of the LGU and other stakeholders. During the school fire, for example, the LGU was very supportive and responded immediately. Aside from these people, my own experiences as a school administrator and my faith in God also help me when I need to make difficult decisions. (P11)

P1 relies on a School Review Committee, Master Teachers, a Reading Coordinator, and Division-level training. P6 names God first, then teachers and staff, parents and SPTA officers, barangay officials, stakeholders, and learners, and says, "I never walk alone." P9 relies on department heads, division administrative officers, the PTA board, and government policies. P10 lists Head Teachers who remind them when rushing, a guidance designate who reads people well, detail-oriented non-teaching personnel, fellow principals, and a District Supervisor whom they call "early rather than late." P11 relies on teachers, department heads, colleagues, the LGU, experience, and faith. P4 speaks of strong support, commitment, and a supportive community. Support is spread across levels from the school to the division, and across formal and informal sources.

This theme is supported by the studies of Almagro et al. (2025), Macula (2025), Aquino et al. (2021), and Duray (2025) because they show that school heads rely on collaboration, community partnerships, peers, mentoring, and

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supportive relationships to address difficulties. This is consistent with P1, P6, P10, and P11's descriptions of layered support.

Research Question 3: Contingency Plans and Adaptive Strategies

Four themes emerged from participants' accounts under this research question.

Theme 1: Always Having a Plan B and Plan C: Preparing Alternatives Before Problems Arise

Several participants described contingency planning as a standing practice and not a response to a single event.

Over the years, I have learned to always have an alternative plan because not everything happens as expected. For learner concerns, I make sure there are clear procedures for referral, intervention, and follow-up. For conflicts involving teachers, parents, or learners, I prioritize open communication, consultation, and mediation. I also make sure that important school policies, records, and contact persons are readily available when urgent decisions are needed. For unexpected situations such as emergencies, staff shortages, or limited resources, I coordinate with my team and stakeholders and adjust our plans based on what is most practical. I have learned that flexibility and teamwork are very important in managing school challenges. (P2)

I developed several contingency plans and alternative strategies to handle school challenges. First, I prepared ahead for foreseeable problems — such as staff shortages, facility issues, or budget delays — by defining roles clearly and setting aside a contingency budget. I also assessed risks regularly so I could respond calmly rather than react under pressure. Second, I built flexible systems: I delegated responsibilities, trained staff to share the workload, and kept records open for review so things could continue smoothly even when I was not available. Third, I followed policies faithfully but stayed creative in how I applied them, adjusting methods without compromising standards. Finally, I kept communication open to spot concerns early and reviewed every situation afterward to improve my approaches. In short, I combined advance preparation, flexibility, transparency, and continuous learning to keep operations stable and fair amid challenges. (P3)

We developed backup plans for school activities. I learned that having Plan B and sometimes even Plan C is necessary in school administration. I also involve the school team in planning for the actions that will help address the problem in the school or before implementing major activities. (P5)

Plans are not always perfect, there times that what we plan does not meet the goals, so, plan B and Plan C should always be available. Like the Pandemic time, face to face class is not available so we sort to a new platform called Jun TV. a partnership with the barangay. Do not rely on one plan alone always come up with contingency (P6)

P2 states, "I have learned to always have an alternative plan because not everything happens as expected," and lists procedures for referral and follow-up, mediation, accessible policies, records and contact persons, and coordination with stakeholders. P3 prepares for staff shortages, facility issues, and budget delays through defined roles, a contingency budget, regular risk assessment, delegation, open records, and review after every situation. P5 keeps backup plans and involves the school team, and P6 says that Plan B and Plan C should always be available, citing the pandemic, when face-to-face classes were unavailable and a new platform, Jun TV, was pursued in partnership with the barangay. The accounts show contingency planning built on anticipation, and on relationships that can be activated when plans fail.

This theme is supported by the studies of Harris and Jones (2022), Cahapay (2022), and Uy et al. (2023) because they show that effective leaders remain flexible, collaborate, and adjust strategies as conditions change, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. This mirrors P6's pandemic platform and the alternative planning of P2, P3, and P5.

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Theme 2: Pivoting When the First Approach Fails: Adaptive Redesign, Feedback, and Openness to Change

Other participants described contingency as the willingness to change an approach once it proves unworkable, supported by feedback from those affected.

When we first rolled out Project RISE-Ed, the initial feedback was clear: teachers were stressed about fitting research into their already packed schedules and felt intimidated by all the academic jargon. My original idea was to run a series of traditional, formal lectures, but it quickly became obvious that wasn't going to work. So, I pivoted. I restructured the project into a much friendlier two-phase approach: we kicked off with a simple, hands-on one-day workshop, and then followed up with step-by-step coaching built right into our regular SLAC sessions. Taking off the pressure and offering direct support made research feel manageable—and far more like a natural part of their daily routine. (P1)

These experiences taught me that administrative plans need to be dynamic, not set in stone. An effective leader builds flexibility right into project proposals from day one. That's why we built feedback loops directly into the early rollout of both Project RISE-Ed and Project READy Alion. By checking in with our teachers early on, we could easily tweak our timelines, adjust training topics, and shift resources to where they were actually needed before rolling everything out on a larger scale. (P1)

They taught me that static plans fail quickly under pressure. Adaptability, open communication with faculty, and maintaining a transparent risk-management protocol are far more effective than sticking rigidly to an initial strategy. (P9)

I have learned to change my approach when I see that the first approach is not working. I do not believe that I have to insist on one plan simply because it was my original decision. I am open to suggestions from my colleagues, and sometimes we agree to study an issue first before implementing it. During the pandemic and after the school fire, we had to adjust our plans and arrangements so that school operations and learning could continue despite the situation. (P11)

These experiences taught me that I have to be flexible and prepared to adjust. Unexpected challenges can happen anytime, so I should not be afraid to change my approach when necessary. I have also learned the importance of consultation, open communication, and having people around me whom I can work with. The pandemic and the school fire showed me that a school administrator cannot handle every challenge alone. Support from teachers, colleagues, the LGU, and other stakeholders is very important. (P11)

P1 describes changing a plan for Project RISE-Ed when teachers were stressed and intimidated: the original idea of formal lectures gave way to a one-day workshop followed by coaching within SLAC sessions. The lesson P1 draws is that "administrative plans need to be dynamic, not set in stone," with feedback loops built into early rollout. P9 similarly concludes that "static plans fail quickly under pressure." P11 says, "I do not believe that I have to insist on one plan simply because it was my original decision," and adds that in the pandemic and after the school fire the school adjusted its plans so that operations could continue. These accounts show that adaptation was informed by feedback from those affected, and that revising a plan is treated as sound judgment.

This theme is supported by the studies of Harris and Jones (2022), Alene et al. (2025), and Korumaz et al. (2020) because they show adaptive leaders modifying strategies as situations emerge, situational responses that match different conditions, and change management as a learning process with barriers. This is consistent with P1, P9, and P11, who changed course in response to feedback and circumstances.

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Theme 3: Grounding Contingency in Laws, Protocols, and Prepared Communication

For some participants, contingency meant having legal bases, written protocols, and current documentation ready before a crisis.

I used to localize and contextualized in addressing challenges in school by taking int consideration that principles as embedded in R.A. 9155 "Governance of Basic Education Act 0f 2001. (P7)

I developed contingency plans by equipping myself with relevant laws, policies, and orders as bases for school memoranda and decisions, while consistently following established standards and processes to address challenges effectively. (P8)

We have a crisis communication protocol. One spokesperson — me. A holding statement drafted in advance for three scenarios: an incident involving a learner, an incident involving personnel, and a disaster. Teachers know they do not speak to media or post online, and they know that is protection for them, not censorship. (P10)

These experiences have taught me that true preparation means more than just following routine — it means being ready when things do not go as planned. I learned that advance planning and clear records are my strongest defense: when guidelines are set, roles are clear, and documents are complete, I can remain calm even when doubts or surprises arise. I also realized that flexibility is just as important as preparation: rules must be upheld, but I must be willing to adjust how I apply them and find creative solutions when resources are limited. Most importantly, I learned that transparency and openness are the best safeguards against mistrust. Keeping information accessible and inviting independent review protects my integrity and builds confidence, even when questions are raised. Above all, I have come to understand that no plan is perfect, but with preparedness, honesty, and a willingness to learn — I can navigate any unexpected challenge with steady purpose and integrity. (P3)

That you cannot predict the specific crisis, only its category. I stopped trying to imagine every scenario and started building capabilities — a team that can communicate fast, documentation that is always current, relationships that are already warm before I need them. (P10)

P7 localizes and contextualizes challenges with the principles of R.A. 9155, and P8 equips themselves with relevant laws, policies, and orders as bases for memoranda and decisions. P10 describes a crisis communication protocol with a single spokesperson and prepared holding statements for three scenarios, and explains to teachers that the rule protects them "not censorship." P3 adds that advance planning and clear records are "my strongest defense," and P10 concludes that one cannot predict the specific crisis "only its category" and therefore builds capabilities, including a team that communicates fast, current documentation, and relationships that are "already warm."

Here contingency planning is institutional. Legal grounding and documentation give administrators something to rely on when circumstances are uncertain, in line with the administrative leadership function of Complexity Leadership Theory.

This theme is supported by the studies of Tokel (2018), Uy et al. (2023), and Bayeni and Bhengu (2018) because they show contingency plans adopted after crises, planning and communication in administrative-supervisory leadership, and the need to interpret policy for local conditions. This is consistent with P7, P8, and P10's grounding of contingency in laws, protocols, and communication.

Theme 4: Resourceful Improvisation Under Pressure and Scarcity

Two participants described contingency in terms of improvised arrangements that made it possible to keep operating when conditions were inadequate.

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Because the pressure was on me that I have to approve it. I was also pressured by the barangay because they were asking me to follow up. The parents were asking me, the PTA, because they know that [a former school head] left it. So they are hoping that I will be pushed. So I said, whatever happens, I have to approve it. Now, when I told them, Sir, if ever, because it's on the budget, the back-up was also from [an official]. He argued that there is a budget of P10 million worth of classrooms. Through LSB? Yes. But what the region argued was, there should be a building. He said, you are the only ones who can approve that there is no building. If you have a school in [place withheld], I don't remember what school it is. They already have it. So it's just a formality. How can we start? So, I thought of a way. I said, we have ancillary rooms. Can we use that for the preparation of Junior High School classes while there is no building? But the truth is, our ancillary rooms, our ICT, we are not yet classified there. Our science room is also classified. We are not yet classified there. But because I need to approve it, I said, think about it, what are you going to do? I lied. I said, we don't use those rooms. Even the VRR. So I said, may I see the rooms? So we went around. At that time, I don't know if the class was suspended or not. There were no people in the school at that time. When they arrived, I was embarrassed. We went around. I said, when are you going to use this? When there are ICT classes, although no one saw the computer, I said, I borrowed a laptop for pictures because we don't have a computer there. Where else do you use this? During SLUX, or meetings, if you are going to use this as a classroom, where are you going to have a meeting? Where are you going to use this? I said, sir, we could use the covered court. I said that. It's hot there, not air-conditioned. They will force you that you can't. Then I said, sir, we can use this. We can put an electric fan. That's how it is. I can say that. I can say that. I can answer every question. Is your science lab? We don't have that. We don't have that. There are people who go to science class. He said, okay. If there are two types of grade 7, you have one in ICT, and you have one in science lab. Where will they go to class if they go to science class? If they are going to use that. That's how they ask. You are just ready to answer. You already have a contingency in your mind. On that day, on that time. (P4)

We established flexible shift scheduling during facility maintenance, maintained emergency resource reserves for urgent hardware/facility needs, and created a roster of external community volunteers for technical support. (P9)

P4 describes pressure from the barangay, parents, and the PTA to approve Junior High School classes when a building was not yet available, and how they proposed using ancillary rooms, borrowed a laptop for pictures, suggested the covered court, and prepared answers in advance so that they could "answer every question." The account includes P4's candid statement that they said the rooms were not used for other purposes. P9 lists flexible shift scheduling during facility maintenance, emergency resource reserves, and a roster of community volunteers for technical support.

Both accounts show resourcefulness under constraint. P4's account also shows the pressure on administrators to secure approval from several parties at once, and readiness to answer every question is presented as the contingency itself. These are cases of adaptive leadership in which existing spaces, reserves, and volunteers are recombined.

This theme is supported by the studies of Cahapay (2022), Anino et al. (2025), and Panga et al. (2025) because they show principals deciding despite limited guidelines and resources, unpredictable emergencies and insufficient funds, and participatory planning with community involvement. This is consistent with P4 and P9's improvised arrangements.

Research Question 4: The Most Complex Conflicts and How They Were Resolved

Four themes emerged from participants' accounts under this research question.

Theme 1: Conflicts Born of Change, Policy, and Competing Expectations

Several of the most complex conflicts began when new policies, revised procedures, or differing expectations placed teachers, parents, and the school at odds.

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A real point of friction came up when we began reassigning non-teaching duties to align with DO 002 and DO 005, s. 2024. Shifting administrative tasks away from teachers naturally created some tension and discomfort, especially for staff used to the old way of doing things. At the same time, a few parents expressed worry over changes to our remedial reading schedules under Project READy Alion, fearing that pulling their children for extra support might unfairly label them as "slow learners. (P1)

A major disagreement between faculty members and parents regarding assessment policy changes. Parents felt the new rubric was overly strict, while teachers felt lowering standards compromised academic integrity. (P9)

There is a faction among teaching and non-teaching personnel in the workplace and certain policies that are required to be imposed at the school while other existing policies are currently applied. (P7)

One of the most complex conflicts I encountered involved a disagreement between a teacher and a parent regarding how a learner's behavior was being handled. Both sides had strong feelings, and I could understand where each was coming from. As a school head, it was difficult because I needed to support my teacher while also making sure that the learner's rights, safety, and welfare were protected. It reminded me that conflicts in school are not always simple because they involve emotions, different perspectives, and responsibilities. (P2)

In P1's account, reassigning non-teaching duties under DO 002 and DO 005, s. 2024 caused "tension and discomfort" among staff, while some parents feared that remedial reading would label their children as slow learners. P9 describes a disagreement in which parents found a new assessment rubric "overly strict" while teachers felt that lowering standards "compromised academic integrity." P7 refers to a faction among teaching and non-teaching personnel and to the tension between required policies and existing ones. P2's conflict was between a teacher and a parent over how a learner's behavior was being handled, with the administrator needing to support the teacher while protecting the learner's rights, safety, and welfare. In each case both sides held legitimate concerns, and the administrator stood between them. P2 states that conflicts "involve emotions, different perspectives, and responsibilities."

This theme is supported by the studies of Bayeni and Bhengu (2018), Rivana et al. (2024), and DeMatthews et al. (2021) because they show that conflict in schools arises from clashing policy demands, resistance to change, and the differing interests of stakeholders. This is consistent with P1, P2, P7, and P9, whose conflicts involved new policies, revised procedures, and differing expectations.

Theme 2: Limited Resources, Competing Priorities, and Grievances That Accumulate Over Time

Two participants described conflicts that looked small or practical on the surface but rested on scarcity and long-standing grievance.

The most complex conflict I faced was balancing limited school funds with the urgent needs of our learners and staff, alongside differing expectations from teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. Some stakeholders expected immediate facility repairs and additional programs, while others prioritized classroom supplies and sports development — all with insufficient budget to do everything at once. Tensions arose when some felt their concerns were not being prioritized, while others misunderstood how funds could legally be used. It was a conflict of priorities, expectations, and limited resources — and every decision directly affected people I deeply care about. (P6)

It began over something small — the use of the multipurpose hall and the scheduling of activities. But underneath it was years of accumulated grievance: one department felt the other received more resources, more recognition, more of my attention. There was a senior teacher on one side who had been passed over for a head teacher item, and she became the center of gravity for all the resentment. (P10)

P6 describes limited funds set against the urgent needs of learners and staff, with some stakeholders expecting facility repairs and additional programs and others prioritizing classroom supplies and sports development. Tensions arose

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when some "felt their concerns were not being prioritized" and others "misunderstood how funds could legally be used." P10's conflict "began over something small," the use of the multipurpose hall, but "underneath it was years of accumulated grievance" about resources, recognition, and attention, centering on a senior teacher who had been passed over for a head teacher item.

These accounts show that the visible issue is often not the real one. P6 frames the conflict as "a conflict of priorities, expectations, and limited resources" in which "every decision directly affected people I deeply care about," while P10's account shows the administrator recognizing that grievance had built up around perceived unfairness.

This theme is supported by the studies of Abu-Shawish and Ghamrawi (2025), Anino et al. (2025), and Almagro et al. (2025) because they describe informal power dynamics and micropolitics in schools, and stakeholder management under limited resources. This matches P6 and P10, whose conflicts involved scarce resources and underlying grievances.

Theme 3: Conflicts That Challenge the Administrator's Decisions, Judgment, and Integrity

Some participants described their most complex conflicts as those in which they themselves, or their decisions, were the subject of complaint, doubt, or rumor.

The most complex conflict involved a teacher who made a complaint against me regarding performance assessment. I had to address the concern carefully because I wanted to resolve the issue without creating further tension among the teachers. The challenges that I have are more human challenges because in terms of operations everything is under control. (P5)

The most complex conflict I encountered as a school administrator involved having my decisions challenged while ensuring that school policies and procedures were properly followed. It also tested my professional relationships with colleagues, requiring me to remain calm, respectful, and objective while addressing disagreements and finding a fair resolution. (P8)

One of the difficult conflicts I have experienced is dealing with resistance to administrative decisions. There are times when teachers do not immediately agree with what I want to implement. It is difficult because I know that I cannot please everyone. As a leader, I have to make decisions, but I also have to consider the concerns of the people who will be affected by those decisions. (P11)

One teacher was frequently reported to me — it was said that she often loitered at the canteen even during class hours, and that her students were noisy and undisciplined. (P3)

Because of the repeated complaints against her, I decided to conduct informal observations. I often passed by her classroom. I also spoke with her students about her teaching and whether she treated them well. I discovered that the accusations made against her were unfounded. From that time on, I have kept a close watch over the teacher who had been the subject of these complaints. I met with the teacher who had been the subject of these reports. I verified that the allegations were nothing more than rumors. I instructed her to continue fulfilling what I expected of her as an educator. Should similar complaints arise in the future, I would personally ascertain and demonstrate that such claims are without basis. (P3)

if I may think of a specific difficult administrative decision that you had to make. Okay, later, to [name withheld]. He's in [place withheld]. He's in [place withheld]. It's not far. It's a mile away. It's a mile away. I told you, I've experienced a lot and I've had a lot of experiences. Maybe, what I chose here is if you need to decide because, of course, it's a factor, especially when it comes to travel. You don't have a lot of teachers. You need a lot of teachers. But, you need to decide if you're going to let the teacher go or not. Why do I need to let the teacher go? Because the

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teacher is involved with the student. So, let the teacher go. So, the teacher is a high school teacher that I borrowed from a compilation. (P4)

So, what I did was, I didn't want to let go. I told him, [a school head], I'm going to return this picture to you. Of course, I asked him, what's the reason? Do you need a teacher? Who's going to teach you? That's how it is. I was forced to tell him, Sir, just give it to us. Because, of course, I don't want, even if he's my teacher, I don't want him to do that. I don't want this issue to spread. So, that's it. There's no, there's no, Sir, okay, let's move it. So, you need to find a teacher. So, I requested, at that time, [an official], Sir, give me a new FSD so that I can hold him. Why? What happened? You'll tell me later. You'll tell me later. Yes, right? How do you protect him? You'll tell me later. So, it's easy to say, we solved it. (P4)

P5's conflict involved a teacher's complaint about performance assessment, and P5 observed that "The challenges that I have are more human challenges because in terms of operations everything is under control." P8 describes "having my decisions challenged" while ensuring that policies were followed, and P11 describes resistance to decisions and the recognition that "I cannot please everyone." P3's conflict began with repeated reports that a teacher loitered in the canteen and that her students were noisy. P3's response was to verify the reports through informal observation and by speaking with her students, which showed that "the accusations made against her were unfounded." P4's transcribed account concerns a decision about whether to release a teacher who was involved with a student, and P4's stated concern was that the issue not spread; the transcript is reproduced as recorded.

The excerpts show that conflict is experienced as personal and also professional, since it tests the administrator's fairness and relationships. P3's response, verifying before acting and then meeting the teacher, is the clearest example of a conflict being converted into an investigation of facts.

This theme is supported by the studies of Dayanan and Baynosa (2025), Lago et al. (2024), and Constantinides (2023) because they identify complex employee dynamics in supervision, conflict-management strategies among school administrators, and trust-based professional relationships as central to resolving disputes. This is consistent with P3, P5, P8, and P11, who faced challenges to their decisions and judgment.

Theme 4: The First Response: Pausing, Staying Calm, and Listening Before Acting

Asked how they first responded to the conflict, most participants described restraint, listening, and control of their own emotions.

My first response was to remain calm and listen to both sides. I talked to the people involved separately so I could understand what really happened before making any decision. I avoided making conclusions based only on one person's account. I also reviewed the relevant school policies and focused on what would be fair and in the best interest of the learner. (P2)

I felt the weight of the situation — overwhelmed that I could not please everyone. My first response was to pause and listen. I called a general assembly where everyone could openly share their concerns without judgment. I did not make promises I could not keep; instead, I acknowledged every person's feelings and validated that their needs mattered. I remained calm, set aside my own emotions, and reminded myself: a leader with a big heart listens first before solving problems. (P6)

Initially, I chose to remain silent and composed so that I could carefully understand the situation without reacting emotionally. I used the time to think logically and assess the facts before deciding on the most appropriate response. (P8)

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I immediately called for a neutral consultation session, listening actively to both sides without taking immediate positions. I focused on de-escalating emotions and anchoring the discussion strictly around student learning outcomes and established division guidelines. (P9)

I initially respond by listening and consulting with the people involved. I do not immediately force my decision. I ask them what they think and whether they have a better idea. Sometimes I tell them, "Let's study this first," especially if they have concerns about the implementation. I also try to manage my emotions because I do not want anger to affect the way I communicate or make decisions. (P11)

I respond to the conflict with utmost care and professionalism. I believe that every concern in the concern can be resolved. As an administrator you have to be flexible and extra vigilant to address those challenges that you will encounter as you perform your leadership roles. (P5)

My initial reaction was to feel displeased, for I could not believe that a teacher would abandon her responsibilities toward her learners and squander her time on trivial matters. (P3)

As I told you, our kids have a strong support system. And, [a teacher], he's a pastor. They're really oriented to us. That's why, when it comes to that, I don't talk to them. Because, I might get scolded. [a teacher] is like that. So, of course, the teacher is older than me. I call him brother. So, how do I talk to him? And, what complicates the situation is he's not with us. And, he has a kid. And, I have a kid when he was born. Something like that. So, they're not married. Yes, he's married. So, right? That's why, you need to move. (P4)

P2 remained calm and talked to the people involved separately, avoiding "conclusions based only on one person's account." P6 felt "overwhelmed that I could not please everyone," paused, and called a general assembly where concerns could be shared without judgment. P8 "chose to remain silent and composed" in order to think logically before acting, and P9 called a neutral consultation session and focused on "de-escalating emotions." P11 listens and consults, and tries to manage emotions so that anger does not affect communication. P5 responded with "utmost care and professionalism." P3 was honest about an initial reaction of displeasure, which then gave way to the personal verification of facts described in Theme 3. P4's transcribed answer deals with the difficulty of speaking to an older teacher who is also a relative of a colleague. Appraisal of a threatening situation precedes and shapes coping. Managing one's own reaction is presented as part of resolving the conflict, not separate from it.

This theme is supported by the studies of Constantinides (2023), Macula (2025), and Uy et al. (2023) because they show that trust and communication help principals through conflict, that self-regulation and trust-building are used by school heads, and that communication and collaboration are relied on in difficult situations. This mirrors P2, P6, P8, P9, and P11, who paused and listened before acting.

Research Question 5: Effective Practices, Lessons Learned, and Reflections

Five themes emerged from participants' accounts under this research question.

Theme 1: Open Communication, Active Listening, and Consultation as Core Practices

The practice named most often by participants was communicating openly, listening first, and consulting before deciding.

For me, the most effective practices are open communication, active listening, proper documentation, consultation, and timely decision-making. I always try to understand the situation first before deciding. I also believe in working with my teachers and stakeholders because complex problems are easier to manage when people work together. Most importantly, I always consider the welfare of the learners and make sure that my decisions are consistent with school policies. (P2)

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I used active listening, open communication, and mediation to understand the concerns of both parties. I also referred to school policies and reminded everyone of their responsibilities toward the learner and their commitment to the school. Through respectful dialogue, we were able to reach an understanding and agree on appropriate actions moving forward. (P5)

For me, open communication, consultation, collaboration, emotional management, and flexibility are very effective. Before I make a decision, I consult with my department heads and colleagues. I ask for their ideas and consider what will be better for the school community. I also try to create an environment where teachers do not feel excessively pressured. I believe that when people are comfortable and respected, they can perform better. (P11)

Regular communication and consultation with the persons concerned have been very effective in preventing small concerns from becoming bigger problems. I also find policy-based decision-making and timely intervention important. When people understand why a decision was made, they are generally more willing to cooperate with the school administration. (P5)

Over time, I have developed three core practices: first, “Listen first, decide later” — I never rush to judgment; I hear all sides before deciding; second, “Plan A and always have a Plan B” — flexibility is not weakness, it is wisdom; and third, “Celebrate small wins” — acknowledging every effort keeps morale high, especially during tough times. To other school administrators, I strongly recommend: build your community partnerships today, not tomorrow, lead with both firmness and kindness, and never forget that your greatest strength is not your authority — it is your heart for the people you serve. (P6)

I have developed the practice of always consulting with my colleagues, listening to different ideas, and studying an issue before implementing a decision. I have also learned to manage my emotions and to remain open when someone disagrees with me. I treat teachers as colleagues rather than subordinates. I would encourage other school administrators to practice open communication and to make their teachers feel that they can speak honestly. If someone tells me that I am wrong, I do not get angry because I consider that person’s feedback as an opportunity for me to learn. (P11)

After 20 years as a school head, I have developed the practice of staying calm, listening carefully, documenting important matters, and consulting the right people before making difficult decisions. I have also learned to anticipate possible problems and prepare alternative solutions. I would recommend these practices to other school administrators because we cannot always prevent challenges, but we can prepare ourselves to respond to them with patience, fairness, and good judgment. (P2)

P2 lists open communication, active listening, proper documentation, consultation, and timely decision-making, and tries to understand a situation before deciding. P5 names active listening, open communication, mediation, and reference to school policies, through which both parties “were able to reach an understanding.” P11 adds collaboration, emotional management, and flexibility, and consults department heads and colleagues before deciding. P5 finds that regular communication and consultation keep small concerns from becoming bigger problems and that people cooperate more when they understand why a decision was made. P6 summarizes the approach as “Listen first, decide later,” and P2 and P11 recommend staying calm, documenting, and consulting.

Participants treat communication as both preventive and corrective, since it stops small concerns from growing and helps resolve those that have. The link to the first-response theme in Part 4 is clear: the practices that participants recommend are those they used in their most complex conflicts.

This theme is supported by the studies of Constantinides (2023), Ralebese et al. (2025), and Aquino et al. (2021) because they show that trust-based relationships, communication, and information sharing are features of effective

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school leadership. This is consistent with P2, P5, P6, and P11's emphasis on communication, listening, and consultation.

Theme 2: Transparency, Verification of Facts, and Leading with Integrity

Two participants placed particular emphasis on transparency, personal verification of facts, and integrity as the practices that hold up under doubt.

From my experiences, the most effective administrative practices are verifying facts personally before acting, ensuring that I base my decisions on what I observe and confirm, rather than on rumors or repeated complaints. Treating people fairly and listening directly to those concerned has also proven essential — giving others the chance to be heard protects both truth and dignity. Transparency and openness build trust, while consistency and calmness prevent emotion from guiding decisions. Most importantly, leading with integrity and reserving judgment until facts are clear has been my strongest guide. These practices keep me steady, fair, and respected, even in the most complex and difficult situations. (P3)

Through my experiences, I have developed several steady practices that guide me as an administrator. I have learned to investigate and verify facts personally before making judgments, relying on my own observations and direct conversations rather than on hearsay or repeated complaints. I practice listening to all sides fairly and giving everyone the chance to be heard, so that no one is judged unjustly. I also uphold transparency and openness, sharing information and inviting verification so that trust is built rather than assumed. Additionally, I strive to remain calm and consistent, setting aside personal feelings to act with integrity and fairness. I would highly recommend these practices to other school administrators facing similar challenges. Verify facts before acting, because rumors can appear true even when they are not. Listen directly and speak openly, because misunderstandings grow in silence. Protect the dignity of those you lead, especially when accusations are unproven. And above all, lead with integrity and patience — ensuring that your decisions are always based on truth, fairness, and what serves the best interests of the school community. (P3)

From these experiences, I have learned valuable lessons that guide my leadership. First, facts must always be verified personally before making judgments — because rumors and repeated complaints can appear true even when they are not. Second, transparency and openness are the surest ways to build trust, whether in financial matters or in how we treat one another. Third, every person deserves to be heard and treated fairly, especially when accusations are made against them. Fourth, I must set aside my own feelings and reactions, so that wisdom and integrity guide my decisions rather than emotion. Finally, I learned that truth and patience are stronger than suspicion or argument — when I act honestly, follow proper procedure, and verify facts myself, I can remain steady even when others doubt me. Above all, I have learned that leadership is not about gaining everyone's approval; it is about upholding what is right, fair, and true — no matter what challenges may arise. (P3)

There is one more thing I believe is essential to understand: leadership often means standing firm even when you are misunderstood. Many difficulties arise not because something is wrong, but because people do not have full information or choose to believe what they prefer to think. I have learned that I cannot force others to trust me, nor can I convince everyone through words alone. What matters most is that I remain true to my own integrity, even when others doubt or oppose me. It is important to realize that rumors and doubt will sometimes come — and that this is not a sign of failure, but part of the work. What truly defines my leadership is not whether everyone agrees with me, but whether I continue to act fairly, transparently, and honestly — regardless of approval. Finally, I have learned that patience and faith are vital supports. I do not need to settle every doubt immediately or prove myself to those who refuse to examine the facts. If I act with integrity, follow proper procedure, and serve with sincere purpose — truth will prevail in its own time, and my consistent conduct will eventually speak louder than any complaint or suspicion. (P3)

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It is important to understand that dealing with complex administrative situations requires resilience and an open mind, while anticipating possible challenges and preparing appropriate solutions. I have also learned to be ruthlessly consistent in applying policies and procedures, because fairness, firmness, and consistency help maintain trust and professionalism in the school. (P8)

The most effective practices I've used are: leading with transparency and open communication — keeping everyone informed builds trust even in difficult times; inclusive decision-making — involving teachers, parents, and stakeholders means we solve problems together, not alone; proactive partnership building — nurturing relationships with the community, [barangay name withheld], and AFAB long before we actually need help; and compassionate leadership — having a big heart reminds me that behind every challenge are people with real needs, not just problems to be fixed. (P6)

P3 names verifying facts personally, treating people fairly, transparency, consistency, calmness, and integrity, and recommends: "Verify facts before acting, because rumors can appear true even when they are not." P3's lessons include that "truth and patience are stronger than suspicion or argument." P3's closing reflection is that leadership "often means standing firm even when you are misunderstood." P8 describes being "ruthlessly consistent in applying policies and procedures" because "fairness, firmness, and consistency help maintain trust and professionalism." P6 also lists "leading with transparency and open communication" as effective.

The excerpts tie transparency and verification to the earlier experiences of P3 in Parts 1 and 2, in which teachers' doubts and rumors challenged the administrator. What P3 presents as lessons are the practices that follow from those experiences, and the accounts of P3 and P8 together show consistency as a form of trust-building.

This theme is supported by the studies of Constantinides (2023), Chen and Meng (2025), and Jimenez et al. (2025) because they link trust, evidence-based governance, and authenticity to effective leadership. This is consistent with P3, P6, and P8's emphasis on transparency, verification, and consistency.

Theme 3: Data-Informed Instructional Leadership and Learning-and-Development Models

Participants who spoke of instructional practices described using data to guide decisions and building school-based programs that can be replicated.

These core leadership principles come down to four clear strategies. First, we practice data-driven instructional leadership by grounding our decisions in actual student assessment results—like the RMA, CRLA, and Phil-IRI—ensuring we address real classroom needs rather than relying on guesswork. Second, we cultivate structured professional learning communities through our regular SLAC sessions, creating a supportive space for continuous coaching, peer mentoring, and hands-on action research. Third, we maintain strategic resource alignment by ensuring every peso of our School MOOE budget directly funds the reading and math targets in our Annual Implementation Plan. Finally, we prioritize protecting teacher time by strictly upholding workload guidelines, shielding our educators from administrative burdens so they can keep their full focus on classroom instruction. (P1)

Distributed Leadership: Empowering department heads and committee chairs to handle operational decision-making. o Data-Informed Decision Making: Rooting solutions in objective data, division orders, and clear operational metrics rather than subjective opinions. o Transparent Communication: Maintaining regular, open updates with faculty, staff, and parent stakeholders. (P9)

To support teacher development and classroom success, I developed two highly recommended practice models: Project RISE-Ed (Research, Innovation, and Scholarly Engagement for Education) and Project READy Alion. Project RISE-Ed is a structured, low-cost (₱1,000) two-phase framework designed to demystify action research and empower educators to address classroom challenges using scientific methods. Complementing this, Project READy Alion

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operates as a cascading Learning and Development (L&D) model that translates Division-level instructional leadership training directly into targeted literacy interventions for K–3 learners. (P1)

The most important lesson is that data creates clarity, but empathy drives execution. High-level metrics mean little without empowering the teachers who deliver daily instruction. When you support teachers through capacity building, protect their core teaching time, and supply necessary learning materials, remarkable academic recovery follows. These gains reflect the hard work of our entire school community at [school name withheld]. Through our targeted math interventions, we managed to shrink the number of students at the Emerging Level from 65.5% down to just 10.9%, while seeing our Proficient and Highly Proficient learners jump from 12.5% to 68.1%. We saw that same momentum in literacy: our English reading proficiency leaped from 41% to 88%, completely clearing out Low Emerging placements across all grade levels. On the Filipino reading side, our Phil-IRI results showed 62.04% of students reaching Independent Reader status, capped off by our Grade 6 class hitting a 0% frustration rate. Seeing our effort recognized by SDO Bataan—when the Schools Division Superintendent presented us with an official Certificate of Recognition during the August 2026 MANCOM meeting—was a proud moment that validated every step of our journey. (P1)

I have learned that school administrators should devote most of their time to instructional supervision and strengthening teaching and learning practices, while also ensuring that essential administrative responsibilities are properly managed. I have also learned that developing leadership capacity through relevant trainings and seminars is important because it equips school leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to manage complex administrative situations effectively. (P8)

I would like to emphasize that administrative complexity in public school management should not be viewed as an obstacle, but as a driver for innovation. When faced with systemic challenges like learning gaps or limited resources, structured L&D applications—such as Project RISE-Ed and Project READy Alion—show that high-impact improvements are achievable even on modest budgets. True school leadership is about creating sustainable systems where data, policy, and human empathy converge to help every learner thrive. (P1)

P1 describes four strategies: data-driven instructional leadership, structured professional learning communities through SLAC, strategic alignment of School MOOE with reading and math targets, and protection of teacher time. P1 also presents Project RISE-Ed and Project Ready Alion as recommended practice models, and reports improvements in math, English reading, and Phil-IRI results as well as recognition from SDO Bataan. P9 names data-informed decision-making, and P8 concludes that administrators should devote most of their time to instructional supervision and that leadership capacity is developed through trainings and seminars. P1's closing reflection is that administrative complexity should be seen "as a driver for innovation."

This theme illustrates the shift, first seen in Part 1, from routine administration toward instructional leadership. The outcomes that P1 reports are the participant's own figures and are presented as such. P1's statement that "data creates clarity, but empathy drives execution" shows that the participant treats evidence and people as complementary.

This theme is supported by the studies of Ralebese et al. (2025), Capillanes (2025), and Chen and Meng (2025) because they connect principals' instructional leadership, coaching, and data-driven decision-making with school improvement and note that these areas need greater attention. This is consistent with P1, P8, and P9's use of data and instructional supervision.

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Theme 4: Shared Leadership: Delegation, Teamwork, and Inclusive Decision-Making

Participants repeatedly described leadership as something that is shared with teachers, staff, and the community.

o Distributed Leadership: Empowering department heads and committee chairs to handle operational decision-making. o Data-Informed Decision Making: Rooting solutions in objective data, division orders, and clear operational metrics rather than subjective opinions. o Transparent Communication: Maintaining regular, open updates with faculty, staff, and parent stakeholders. (P9)

P6's excerpt under Theme 2 of this section also bears on this theme and is not repeated here.

Based on my experiences, overall cohort leadership has been most effective in dealing with complex situations because it promotes collaboration and shared responsibility, while allowing administrators and colleagues to work together toward practical and appropriate solutions. (P8)

In as much as I would like to perform all the duties in school, it is not possible. I learned to delegate some tasks with close supervision. I also recommend building a strong leadership team because a principal cannot effectively manage a school alone. (P5)

One important lesson I have learned is that school leadership is a shared responsibility. A principal may provide direction, but successful school management depends on the cooperation of teachers, learners, parents, and other stakeholders. Complex situations become more manageable when there is trust, open communication, and a common commitment to the welfare and success of the learners. (P5)

I developed a '360-Degree Feedback Protocol' before rolling out major administrative or policy changes. I strongly recommend this to fellow principals: consult teachers, administrative staff, and parent-community leaders early to identify potential friction points before finalizing plans. (P9)

P9 names distributed leadership as a practice, empowering department heads and committee chairs, and developed a "360-Degree Feedback Protocol" to consult teachers, staff, and parent-community leaders before major changes. P6 lists inclusive decision-making and proactive partnership building. P8 credits "overall cohort leadership" for collaboration and shared responsibility. P5 has learned to delegate with close supervision and recommends building a strong leadership team, and in the closing reflection states that "school leadership is a shared responsibility." The participants present shared leadership as both a practical necessity, since one person cannot do everything, and a value.

This theme is supported by the studies of Nadeem (2024), Awyan and Quines (2024), Ortiz et al. (2025), and Ghamrawi et al. (2024) because they show that distributed leadership, participation in decision-making, and shared responsibility support teamwork and teacher leadership. This is consistent with P5, P6, P8, and P9's shared approaches.

Theme 5: Reflective Practice, Visibility, and Self-Control

A group of participants described personal disciplines, such as reflection, being present, and controlling one's reactions, as practices that sustain their leadership.

Reflective practice and conflict mediation. (P7)

I learned to apply the basic principle in leading an institution which is the legal and ethical considerations. I also develop self-control in dealing with hard people because there were recent disadvantages and negative outcomes every time I reacted to situation aggressively. (P7)

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Being visible before there is a problem. I am in the corridors every morning. Teachers and learners tell you things in passing that they would never put in a letter. Most of the crises I have avoided were avoided because someone mentioned something casually. (P10)

A Friday reflection — thirty minutes, alone, where I write down what happened that week, what I decided, and what I would do differently. Four years of notebooks now. It is where my institutional memory lives, and it is also where I notice my own patterns. (P10)

P6's excerpt under Theme 1 of this section also bears on this theme and is not repeated here.

P7 names "Reflective practice and conflict mediation" and says that reacting aggressively led to "disadvantages and negative outcomes," so they developed self-control. P10 describes being visible in the corridors every morning, since people tell an administrator things "in passing that they would never put in a letter," and keeps a weekly thirty-minute Friday reflection in notebooks, which is where "my institutional memory lives." P6's three practices include "Plan A and always have a Plan B" and "Celebrate small wins."

These practices are personal and habitual and function as early-warning and learning systems. Visibility lets P10 detect concerns before they become crises, and written reflection turns each week into material for learning.

This theme is supported by the studies of Gottfredson and Crane (2025), Macula (2025), and Ralebese et al. (2025) because they show that resilience, self-regulation, reflection, and monitoring help leaders manage complexity. This is consistent with P6, P7, and P10's reflective and self-regulating practices.

Distribution of the Themes Across Participants

Table 5 shows how the 23 themes were distributed across the 11 participants. Support for individual themes ranged from 1 participant (RQ2 Theme 2) to 8 participants (RQ4 Theme 4), the latter being the first response to conflict: pausing, staying calm, and listening before acting. Across participants, P6 contributed to the largest number of themes (12 of 23), followed by P9 (11), while P2, P7 and P10 each contributed to 7. Every participant contributed to themes under at least four of the five research questions, which indicates that the themes were not the product of a few accounts.

Table 5. Distribution of the 23 themes across the 11 participants

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	n
RQ1. Lived Experiences in Dealing with Challenging Administrative Issues												
T1. Balancing Competing Demands Through Prioritization, Delegation, and Teamwork	●	●	●		●				●		●	**6**
T2. A Role that is Challenging and Exhausting Yet Fulfilling and Purposeful				●	●	●	●	●		●		**6**
T3. Administrative Complexity in the Use of Technology in Performing Leadership Roles	●			●	●	●	●		●			**6**
T4. Scarce Resources, Aging Facilities, and Learning Gaps Behind Learners' Outcomes	●		●			●			●	●		**5**

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T5. Sensitive and High-Stakes Incidents: Child Protection, Safety Threats, Public Accusation, and Fire		●		●						●	●	**4**
RQ2. Coping Mechanisms and Decision-Making Strategies												
T1. Difficult Decisions Under Scarcity: Reallocating Funds, Deploying Personnel, Rescheduling Events, and Shifting Classes	●					●	●		●		●	**5**
T2. Putting Learners' Safety and Welfare First: Deciding Through Procedure Rather Than Emotion		●										**1**
T3. Anchoring Decisions on Policies, Ethics, and Transparency in the Face of Doubt or Accusation			●					●				**2**
T4. Consulting Others So That Decisions Are Not Made Alone				●	●		●	●				**4**
T5. Networks of Support Behind the School Head: Committees, Supervisors, Teachers, Community, and God	●			●		●			●	●	●	**6**
RQ3. Contingency Plans and Adaptive Strategies												
T1. Always Having a Plan B and Plan C: Preparing Alternatives Before Problems Arise		●	●		●	●						**4**
T2. Pivoting When the First Approach Fails: Adaptive Redesign, Feedback, and Openness to Change	●								●		●	**3**
T3. Grounding Contingency in Laws, Protocols, and Prepared Communication			●				●	●		●		**4**
T4. Resourceful Improvisation Under Pressure and Scarcity				●					●			**2**
RQ4. The Most Complex Conflicts and How They Were Resolved												
T1. Conflicts Born of Change, Policy, and Competing Expectations	●	●					●		●			**4**
T2. Limited Resources, Competing Priorities, and Grievances That Accumulate Over Time						●				●		**2**
T3. Conflicts That Challenge the Administrator's Decisions, Judgment, and Integrity			●	●	●			●			●	**5**
T4. The First Response: Pausing, Staying Calm, and Listening Before Acting		●	●	●	●	●		●	●		●	**8**

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RQ5. Effective Practices, Lessons Learned, and Reflections												
T1. Open Communication, Active Listening, and Consultation as Core Practices		●			●	●					●	**4**
T2. Transparency, Verification of Facts, and Leading with Integrity			●			●		●				**3**
T3. Data-Informed Instructional Leadership and Learning-and-Development Models	●							●	●			**3**
T4. Shared Leadership: Delegation, Teamwork, and Inclusive Decision-Making					●	●		●	●			**4**
T5. Reflective Practice, Visibility, and Self-Control						●	●			●		**3**
Themes supported (of 23)	**8**	**7**	**8**	**8**	**9**	**12**	**7**	**9**	**11**	**7**	**8**	

Note. ● = the participant's account supported the theme; n = number of participants supporting the theme; T1–T5 = themes within each research question (RQ), numbered as in Section 3.

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DISCUSSION

Summary of Principal Findings

The study explored how school administrators experience, understand, and respond to complex administrative challenges within their leadership contexts. Eleven administrators from public elementary and secondary schools in the Mariveles District, with six to twenty years of experience as school heads, took part, and thematic analysis of their interviews generated twenty-three themes across the five areas of inquiry. School administration emerged not merely as a technical function involving compliance, supervision, and management of resources, but as a dynamic process in which administrators interpret complex situations, make ethical decisions, maintain relationships, and sustain school operations despite uncertainty. Effective school leadership, as participants described it, emerges from the integration of professional knowledge, personal values, collaborative relationships, and adaptive responses. Six principal findings were drawn from the narratives.

Finding 1. School administrators experience complexity through competing demands, limited resources, and interconnected responsibilities. Administrators described school leadership as a continuous balancing process involving instructional supervision, administrative requirements, stakeholder concerns, policy implementation, and unexpected situations, and they experienced complexity as multiple concerns occurring simultaneously rather than as isolated problems. Managing competing demands required prioritization, delegation, teamwork, and careful judgment, and administrative work meant balancing immediate operational concerns with long-term educational goals (Section 3.1).

Finding 2. Difficult decisions were guided by learner welfare, policies, ethics, and available evidence. Challenging decisions commonly involved limited resources, personnel concerns, safety issues, and conflicting stakeholder expectations. Decision-making was influenced by institutional policies and guidelines, ethical considerations, consultation with colleagues and stakeholders, available information and evidence, and the consequences for learners and the school community. Decision-making in complex situations required both rational analysis and moral responsibility (Section 3.2).

Finding 3. Administrators cope with leadership pressure through emotional regulation, reflection, spirituality, and support systems. Administrative pressure affected participants emotionally and professionally, yet they developed coping mechanisms that enabled them to continue performing their roles: pausing before responding, reflection and self-assessment, prayer and spirituality, seeking advice from trusted colleagues, maintaining perspective, and recognizing personal limitations. Administrators viewed resilience not as the absence of difficulties but as the ability to continue leading despite challenges (Sections 3.1 and 3.2).

Finding 4. Effective contingency planning requires flexibility, alternative strategies, and preparedness. Administrators developed contingency plans to address unpredictable situations and emphasized having alternative options, clear procedures, and flexible systems. They highlighted that effective administrators prepare Plan B and Plan C strategies, assess possible risks, establish communication channels, distribute responsibilities, and adjust approaches as circumstances change. Adaptability was an essential characteristic of effective school leadership (Section 3.3).

Finding 5. Conflict management centered on communication, transparency, mediation, and maintaining relationships. Participants identified interpersonal concerns as among the most challenging aspects of administration. Conflicts often involved differing expectations, resistance to change, misunderstandings, and concerns among teachers, parents, learners, and stakeholders. Administrators responded through open communication, listening to different perspectives, mediation, fairness and consistency, transparency, and relationship-building; conflict management was not simply resolving disagreements but rebuilding trust and maintaining organizational relationships (Sections 3.4 and 3.5).

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Finding 6. Effective leadership practices emerged from shared leadership, consultation, compassion, and continuous learning. Participants identified practices that helped them manage complex situations: collaboration with teachers and stakeholders, consultation with experienced leaders, delegation of responsibilities, reflective leadership, adherence to ethical principles, and balancing firmness with compassion. Leadership requires both professional competence and genuine concern for people (Section 3.5).

Interpretation in Light of the Theoretical Framework

Taken together, the findings depict the lived experience of leading a school through complexity. Many concerns arrive at once, resources are limited, policies change, relationships are tested, and the personal cost is real. Administrators nevertheless described a consistent set of responses: prioritizing and delegating, consulting and communicating openly, grounding decisions in policy and evidence, preparing alternatives, and reflecting and drawing on faith and support to remain steady. These responses are consistent with Complexity Leadership Theory in that administrators combined administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions rather than relying on authority alone. Their reliance on policy, procedure, and documentation reflects administrative leadership; their pivots, revised plans, and improvisation reflect adaptive leadership; and their consultation, shared leadership, and stakeholder partnerships reflect enabling leadership.

A recurring finding is administrators' reliance on sensemaking before acting. In the child protection case, the canteen doubts, the school fire, and the conflicts with teachers and parents, participants first sought to understand what was happening, who was affected, and what procedures applied. Policies, mentors, and consultation served as reference points that kept decisions fair and defensible, and the verification of facts, seen in P3's accounts and in the neutral consultation session described by P9, was a way of turning uncertainty into something that could be acted upon. This supports the use of Sensemaking Theory as a lens for interpreting the data.

The findings also show the psychological and emotional dimension of administration, which the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping helps explain. Administrators appraised many situations as both threatening and challenging; coped through problem-focused actions such as structured prioritization and the use of procedures, and through emotion-focused actions such as pausing, prayer, and reflection; and reappraised their responses afterward, as seen in revised plans and the lessons they drew. At the same time, the closing reflections of P9 and P10 qualify an overly individual reading of these results: the emotional labor of administration is heavy and largely unrecognized, and participants point to peer mentorship and support systems as needs that the school system has yet to meet.

Synthesis Across the Research Questions

On the lived experience of complexity (RQ1), administrators described their role as a balancing of competing demands that is both exhausting and fulfilling. Complexity was felt as simultaneous concerns, policy demands, technological demands, and time pressure; scarce resources and learning gaps weighed on them; and sensitive, high-stakes incidents were among the hardest experiences they described. On coping and decision-making (RQ2), difficult decisions were mostly about distributing limited funds, personnel, time, and space; learners' safety and welfare guided decisions made through procedure rather than emotion; policies, ethics, and transparency anchored decisions under doubt; and consultation and a wide network of support stood behind decisions. On contingency planning (RQ3), administrators kept Plan B and Plan C, pivoted when the first approach failed, grounded contingency in laws, protocols, and prepared communication, and improvised under scarcity.

On complex conflict (RQ4), the most complex conflicts arose from change and competing expectations, from scarce resources and accumulated grievance, and from challenges to the administrator's own decisions and integrity, and the administrators' first response was to pause, stay calm, and listen before acting. On effective practices (RQ5), participants identified open communication, active listening, and consultation; transparency, verification of facts, and

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integrity; data-informed instructional leadership and school-based learning-and-development models; shared leadership; and reflective practice, visibility, and self-control. The practices administrators recommend are largely those they used in their most complex conflicts, and the shift first seen in RQ1, from routine administration toward instructional leadership, recurs in the practices administrators consider effective.

Administrators' accounts of effective practice also converge with the wider literature reviewed in Section 1.2: prioritization and planning in managing workload (Hallinger, 2024; Hungo et al., 2024), adaptive and flexible leadership (Alene et al., 2025; Harris & Jones, 2022), distributed leadership and participatory decision-making (Awyan & Quines, 2024; Nadeem, 2024), trust-based communication in conflict (Constantinides, 2023), and data-informed instructional leadership (Capillanes, 2025; Chen & Meng, 2025).

Implications: A Proposed Capacity-Building Program (RQ6)

In response to the findings, a capacity-building program, *Leadership Beyond Complexity: An Enhanced Capacity-Building Program for Adaptive, Ethical, and Resilient School Administration*, was proposed. It is delivered as a five-day training entitled **LEAD (Leadership, Ethics, Adaptive Planning, and Digital Leadership)** and is intended to strengthen school administrators' competencies in ethical and evidence-based decision-making, emotional resilience, adaptive planning, conflict resolution, collaborative leadership, and responsible technology integration. The program adopts a practical, experience-based approach that combines case analysis, simulation exercises, peer consultation, role-playing, and school-based action planning, with implementation monitored at 30, 60, and 90 days. It aims to help administrators make evidence-informed and policy-guided decisions, prepare alternative responses to unexpected situations, maintain constructive relationships with stakeholders, and develop sustainable coping and support mechanisms, while promoting shared leadership, compassion, accountability, and continuous professional learning. Its intended long-term contribution is to strengthen administrators' capacity to maintain effective school operations, protect learner welfare, support school personnel, and respond constructively to complex and changing educational demands.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. The study involved eleven purposively selected administrators from public schools in a single district, so the findings describe the meanings of these participants' experiences and are not intended for statistical generalization; transferability rests on the descriptions of context and participants provided. Several responses were brief or incomplete, which limits the depth of some themes. Some excerpts, notably those of P4, are reproduced as transcribed and are difficult to interpret in places, and the themes for the fourth research question describe the sources of the conflicts and administrators' first responses more fully than their final resolutions. The interpretations also remain subject to member checking. The training program is a proposal derived from the findings and has not been implemented or evaluated, and its success indicators and budget are planning targets to be validated by the training management team.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn.

1. School administration is fundamentally a complex, human-centered leadership process. Administrators do not merely implement policies or manage resources; they interpret situations, negotiate competing expectations, and make decisions that affect the welfare of learners, teachers, and communities.

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2. Effective administrative decision-making is strengthened when leaders combine professional knowledge with ethical judgment. Policies provide structure and accountability, but leadership effectiveness depends on how administrators interpret and apply them within real school contexts.

3. Resilience among school administrators develops through reflective practice, supportive relationships, and personal values. Successful leadership does not mean eliminating challenges but developing the capacity to respond constructively to uncertainty.

4. The experiences of administrators confirm the importance of adaptive leadership. The ability to revise plans, seek feedback, and respond to changing circumstances allows schools to remain functional despite unexpected challenges.

5. School leadership is relational. Trust, communication, collaboration, and shared responsibility are the foundations for addressing administrative complexity.

Overall, the study concludes that effective school administrators lead through the integration of competence and compassion. Their effectiveness emerges from the ability to balance organizational demands with human needs, leading with both professional judgment and genuine care. The findings reinforce the understanding that administrators rely on sensemaking, policies, consultation, transparency, dialogue, mediation, shared leadership, and reflection when navigating complexity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed.

For school administrators. School administrators may strengthen their leadership capacity by continuously developing skills in strategic decision-making, conflict management, emotional regulation, adaptive planning, and collaborative leadership. They are encouraged to establish reflective practices that allow them to evaluate decisions, recognize leadership challenges, and improve future responses.

For schools and educational institutions. Schools may establish stronger support mechanisms for administrators through mentoring programs for new school heads, leadership coaching, administrator wellness initiatives, professional learning communities, and structured peer-support networks. Such programs may help reduce leadership isolation and strengthen administrative capacity.

For education authorities. Educational authorities may consider providing continuous leadership development programs, practical training in crisis management and conflict resolution, clearer administrative support systems, and mechanisms that recognize the emotional demands of school leadership. Administrators require not only technical preparation but also institutional support.

For future researchers. Future researchers may explore the leadership experiences of administrators in different educational contexts, conduct comparative studies of beginning and experienced school leaders, validate quantitatively the emerging leadership model, and develop and evaluate intervention programs based on administrators' coping and decision-making strategies.

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