

The Lived Experiences of School Leaders in Indigenous People Integrated Schools in Talaingod, Davao Del Norte: A Phenomenological Study

Ruel C. Lugatiman¹, Marleonie M. Bauyot²

¹Faculty, Department of Education-Division of Davao Del Norte

²Faculty, Ateneo De Davao University

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ABSTRACT

School heads in Indigenous People (IP) integrated schools face several challenges on their journey of providing quality education. A qualitative phenomenological research study examined the experience, coping mechanisms, and insights from 10 teachers assigned to the Talaingod District, Division of Davao del Norte. The participants were not residents of the school they had been assigned to. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted among five school leader- participants and six participants in in-depth interviews. The result shows that school heads in IP integrated schools have challenging jobs, struggling experiences in reaching schools, and building character. Sustaining physically healthy, helping one another and having positive work place are among the mechanisms of their ability to cope.

They've created a framework of professional development, leadership resilience, and resourcefulness. They were concluded to have developed a sense of commitment to their profession and willingness to continue their journey despite the difficulties they had encountered. The findings of this study may help the officials of the Division Office to provide additional payments and benefits or insurance to the school heads and teachers and a wellness program may be organized to destress them in remote areas. By cooperating with other government parties, school leaders can improve the way they manage their schools.

Keywords: Educational management, lived experiences, school leaders, IP integrated school, Remote areas, Talaingod

INTRODUCTION

No matter how far you are from the city, you deserve to receive a good education. This is the main reason why school heads and some schoolteachers spend a part of their lives teaching and bringing education to students in far-flung areas. Depending on where you're assigned, every experience is a different one. It's just that there are so many challenges you have to face.

The role of school leader is a challenging one, dealing with change in unpredictable times presents new challenges as well as increasingly delicate choices. Strong, mutually beneficial relationships with staff, students and the school community are a characteristic of highly effective headmasters. (Masters, 2018).

One of the biggest challenges of heading a far-flung school is its physical aspect. It's location. The majority of the headmasters and teachers working in such areas are situated within or near cities. When they go to remote schools, it negatively affects their health, particularly when they have to cross several rivers and mountains to go to school (Diaz, 2015).

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) 2017 released an update that there is a rotation of

school principals. This move came as part of MOE's yearly reshuffle exercise. First, it allowed schools to from new perspectives and enabled experienced principals to share best practices across schools. In addition, they would have the chance to take on new challenges and contribute by shaping and strengthening the work of the schools they're appointed to (Ang, 2018).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued policies on the reshuffling of school heads. The appointments of principals or school heads for both elementary and secondary levels shall be division-specific and not school-specific.

This means that they may be transferred to any district or schools within the division either rural or urban schools when the need arises. Transfers or Reassignment of Principals shall be every five years (DECS Order No. 7, s. 1999).

In addition, Circular No. 28 series of 1962 as promulgated by the Department Head states a maximum of 5 years is given for a school principal to manage a school.

However, there is an exemption to this rule. There is an existing policy that certain school officials, including elementary school principals, whose salaries are payable from the national funds are to be transferred upon completion of five years of service at one station to prevent a situation where they become stale and unchallenged by new situations and conditions and administrative problems accumulated.

In Davao del Norte, particularly in Talaingod District, there have been a lot of issues and concerns about the school leaders reshuffled and assigned in the Indigenous People Integrated Schools in far-flung areas. The researcher personally observed the issues and concerns that affect the leadership and performance of the school leaders in the school. The researcher was a teacher for almost eight (8) years at Tibucag Integrated School – Junior High School Department located in Km 23, Sitio Tibucag, Barangay Dagohoy, Talaingod, Davao del Norte.

This ongoing crisis has a serious impact on the leadership skills of the school leaders. Some principals may feel unhappy with the re-assignment to an Indigenous People Integrated School in far-flung areas. Seemingly, it is very challenging to handle an IP Integrated School for it has limited access such utilizing the resources and implementing the Projects, Programs, and Activities (PPAs) implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd).

This study also presents the real stories of school leaders on their assignment in different Indigenous People Integrated Schools in the Division of Davao del Norte, particularly in Talaingod District, thus this study will be conducted.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of school leaders in Indigenous People (IP) Integrated Schools in Talaingod, Davao del Norte in handling IP Integrated Schools in far-flung areas when they started their leadership and management career for at least one year.

This study aimed to gain insight from school leaders' perspectives to understand their lived experiences in handling IP-integrated schools as part of their duties and responsibilities. Defining the problems encountered in the initial phase of school leadership can help policymakers to solve these problems.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of school leaders handling Indigenous People Integrated Schools employed in the Division of Davao del Norte, particularly in the Talaingod District. The following will be the specific questions to be addressed in the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of school leaders being assigned in indigenous people-integrated schools?
2. How do school heads cope with the challenges they face being assigned in indigenous people-integrated schools?
3. What are the helpful insights shared by school leaders managing IP-integrated schools?

Theoretical Lens

This study is gleaned through Adaptive Leadership Theory by Willis Hawley (1976) who posits that educational organizations must adapt to changing realities is not unique to 21st-century- educational thinking. It must adopt an adaptive way of thinking and warn against a culture of innovation, which he considers ineffective in most cases. Adaptability, not innovation, should be the starting point for school policy and reforms.

Also, this study is supported by Kershner and Mc Quillan (2016) who stated that school culture shapes the trajectories of emergent systems.

Educational leaders must create a culture conducive to ongoing negotiations and reflective evaluation. An adaptive school culture with core values should allow freedom for the school community to realize these values.

METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach that sought to find out the lived pedagogical experiences, coping strategies, and insights of school leaders in IP Integrated Schools.

Qualitative research is generally defined as research using methods such as participants' observation, which results in a narrative, descriptive account of a setting or practice (Parkinson & Drislane, 2011).

In this study, a qualitative research design was appropriate because it delved into the actual experiences of the school leaders who are experiencing the phenomenon of handling the Indigenous Peoples Integrated Schools. Also, it sought to explore and understand their experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights.

Phenomenology is a research strategy in which the researcher identifies the nature of the human experience of a phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2009). Also, phenomenology looks for meanings in appearance and reaches essence through intuition and reflection of acts of consciousness that lead to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understanding (Moustakas, 1994).

This phenomenological study sought to discover the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of school leaders in Indigenous Peoples (IP) Integrated School of Talaingod District, Division of Davao del Norte.

Lastly, since this study utilized a qualitative-phenomenological design, participants' statements about their experiences and insights were identified, explored, and understood. Thus, this is the most appropriate research design for this study since it narrates the gathered data from the interviews.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were ten (10) school leaders who had experience in managing Indigenous Peoples (IP) integrated schools in Talaingod District, Division of Davao del Norte.

To determine the number of participants, purposive sampling was used. It is widely used and popular in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990; Palinkas, 2015).

Also, Creswell (2012) suggested that in having a phenomenological study, there should be at least 10 participants. In my study, I had seven (5) participants for the In-Depth Interview (IDI) and another seven (5) participants for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to share their lived experiences on managing IP-integrated schools and how they dealt with and coped with the challenges situation they encountered.

I identified the participants using the following selection criteria: school leaders such as Teachers-In-Charge, Head Teachers, and Master Teachers duly designated as school heads in the far-flung areas in the IP Integrated schools in Talaingod District, Division of Davao del Norte for at least one (1) year.

Data Analysis

After collection, the gathered data during the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were summarized, transcribed, translated, and analyzed. I followed the suggestions of Creswell (2009) who proposed the following steps in the process of data analysis:

First, the data was read thoroughly. I gained a general sense from the information and has reflected the overall meaning.

Second, the data were organized and prepared for data analysis. This involved transcribing and translating interviews, optically scanning material, and sorting and arranging the data into different types depending on the sources of information.

Third, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes like patterns in the data that are important or interesting. This involved coding or organizing related segments of data into categories.

Fourth, I generated a description of the setting or people and identified themes from the coding. I also searched for theme connections.

Fifth, I presented the data within a research report with the help of my research adviser and data analyst. After this, I interpreted the larger meaning of the data.

Boyatzis (1998) also described thematic analysis as a translator that speaks the languages of qualitative analysis, enabling researchers to use different research methods to communicate with each other. At the same time, qualitative coding is a reflective process and a way of interacting with and thinking about data. Coding allows the researcher to simplify and focus on certain characteristics of the data (Savage, 2000).

To solve them, I carefully classified and categorized the data after deep analysis. After the transcription, I continued to analyze the responses of the participants, formulate the main ideas and create themes.

Furthermore, results were documented and analyzed based on the theory used by the researcher. Major themes were extracted, explained, and written under each topic with relevant citations in support of themes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussions of the lived experiences of school leaders in IP integrated schools are presented in this chapter. Discussions also provided a wide range of explanations for the themes that have been developed instead of the objectives set out in this study.

Table 1: Major Themes and Core Ideas of the Lived Experiences of School Leaders in IP Integrated Schools

Themes	Core Ideas
<p style="text-align: center;">1. Challenging Job</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I considered it a challenge to manage a school that has three academic levels in the IP community setting. • I had difficulty managing the school's operations and utilizing its resources due to the distance. • I was not able to equally manage the three departments, so challenging indeed. • I had to face challenges in building partnerships with the stakeholders to help the school. • I was pressured when doing the liquidations and reports.
<p style="text-align: center;">2. Struggling Experiences in Reaching School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I experienced trauma in crossing rivers, climbing hazardous terrains, and surpassing unpassable areas due to landslides. • I encountered that my leadership style was challenged. • I was challenged to travel so far in the mountainous areas. • I experienced traveling on the worst road conditions. • I experienced crossing the flooded river and some men of the community helped me to cross together with my motorcycle.
<p style="text-align: center;">3. Building Character</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I learned how to build my character as a leader in handling an IP-integrated school. • I must possess the qualities of a school leader to influence my teachers. • I accepted my tasks to develop my leadership style being a school leader.

Challenging Job

School leaders play a key role in effectively managing and leading diverse teaching communities, which range from elementary to high school levels, within the framework of integrated education. The unique challenge is to foster cooperation between teachers with different methodologies and address the varied needs of students. The importance of the dynamic nature of the IP integrated school. The educational environment, where adaptability and flexibility are paramount. Role of school principals in fostering an inclusive collaborative culture, emphasizing the knowledge and cultural capital of international students in the class room, and developing organizational and teaching strategies based on recognition and inclusion educational community (Gomez-Hurtado, et al, 2020).

Struggling Experiences in Reaching School

Public school heads in IP integrated schools face physical discomfort due to long hours of travel, hiking up mountains, and crossing rivers to reach their schools far from their hometowns. This poses challenges for their daily commute. Moreover, school heads in remote areas face challenges such as dangerous journeys to school and harsh weather conditions. They must navigate tough terrain to reach their schools in far-flung communities.

Participants faced physical discomforts when reaching remote schools, especially due to tough terrain and poor weather conditions, making it challenging to serve these schools effectively. This is supported by Barcena (2018) who stated that challenges of being assigned to distant places, where inconvenient modes of transportation like "habal-habal" and even walking for long distances are common. The difficult terrain and weather conditions can make the journey even more challenging, with public school principals often resorting to trekking due to dangerous river crossings.

The physical challenges of heading a remote school, such as long distances, rivers, and mountains, can take a toll on teachers' health. Many educators live near cities and struggle with the commute to distant schools (Diaz, 2015).

Building Character

Effective leadership requires principals to develop significant character in managing integrated schools with three distinct curricula. Trust and respect in leadership are critical in that school principals must maintain high moral standards and commendable character to be trusted individuals in the school community. This includes demonstrating the ability to manage the curriculum and applying ethical concepts that promote a positive and inclusive educational environment.

The value of character in leadership and the difference between how leaders are recruited, selected, promoted, and developed and how much emphasis is placed on character and how it is used (Seijts et al, 2015)

Table 2: Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Ways of the School Leaders in Coping with the Challenges They Encountered in Leading IP Integrated Schools

Themes	Core Ideas
4. Sustaining Physically Healthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I should sustain to be physically healthy to endure my task as a leader. • I did exercises to keep myself healthy while being here far from home. • I had fun having an exercise routine to divert my mind from missing my family. • I also encouraged my teachers to do exercise habits for them to be physically fit.
5. Helping One Another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I advised them to continue helping one another so that no one would be left behind. • I saw them sharing ideas and practices to ease their burdens. • I extended my technical assistance for them to do better.
6. Having Positive Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I tried to maintain a good and positive working environment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I encouraged my teachers to have always a positive outlook at work. • I advised them to be relaxed and calm and avoid any arguments.
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Sustaining Physically Healthy

School heads in IP integrated schools are maintaining physical fitness while carrying out the noble profession of teaching. Despite challenges, they continue to nurture future professionals, showing dedication and sacrifice in their work. Their commitment to teaching in remote areas is admirable and inspiring.

The response highlighted the importance of physical fitness in dealing with challenges in remote areas. Daily exercise and eating green leafy vegetables were emphasized. Movement was also noted as vital for teachers' overall health and well-being, preventing mental health issues and promoting a sense of well-being (Bogaert et al., 2014).

Helping One Another

School principals assigned to IP integrated school each community survival techniques. School principals never consider a lack of teaching resources as an obstacle to providing quality basic education. Although there was a lack of teaching materials in these schools, school principals still found time and make this lack sufficient to give a better education to the students. In addition, school principals also conduct home visits to deal with students facing multiple absences and find solutions to address this problem.

Participants said that despite the lack of teaching resources, they are more innovative in providing quality education to distance learners. School leaders also experienced barriers to effective education, such as insufficient resources, insufficient financial support and lack of parental interest in their children's education (du Plessis and Mestry, 2019).

Teachers have to live with the various obstacles they encounter. Some of them even shared resources with students. They shared part of their salary to provide educational materials for students (Castigador, 2019).

Having Positive Workplace

School heads assigned to IP integrated schools have a positive work environment. School leaders always think that the work environment can have a big impact on how you feel about your work. This is also one of the reasons why they do well in a positive work environment.

School heads always strive to maintain a positive workplace to bring happiness and increase productivity and motivation. In sustaining a positive workplace, respect, trust, and cooperation are highly needed.

In their response, they mentioned that to maintain a positive workplace, they need to respect each other. Organizational positivity emphasizes what thrives and gives life to discover and promote the best in humanity, exemplified by the recent focus on positive practices, and behaviors that enhance positive employee impact and lead to organizational performance (Geue, 2018).

Table 3: Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights of the School Leaders in IP Integrated Schools

Themes	Core Ideas
7. Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I realized it is my training ground to develop my leadership. • I accept this designation as a challenge to do more and to be a better leader.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I considered it as a calling to serve the underserved community.
8. Leadership Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I must be strong and resilient to the challenges of being a leader. • I think it is a challenge for me to be trained in handling this situation. • I must be active and resilient as a leader.
9. Resourcefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I must find ways to reach stakeholders to help the school. • I must be not contented for what we have only. • I would find alternate ways on how to gain funds and support from stakeholders.

Professional Development

Participants highlighted the difficulties in appointing school principals in remote areas and the challenges they face in providing quality education. They emphasized the importance of falling in love with your work, continual professional development, commitment to values, and public service in order to be successful. Serving in education is seen as a way to serve humanity.

Participants in the interview acknowledge the high needs of the community for quality basic education. They feel the community needs their support to bring positive changes to the lives of children.

Teachers in mountain schools face challenges but also have positive experiences. They adapt, become complacent, and grow from different experiences, showing a desire to help remote communities (Conejos, 2019).

School heads in remote areas go above and beyond their duties, serving faithfully and wholeheartedly. They gain personal growth through their dedication. Their positive and negative experiences allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of their lives both inside and outside the institutions they served. Positive experiences bring them joy and happiness, while negative experiences have taught them how to deal with situations.

The participant's experience as a school head in a remote area led to personal growth, with lessons learned from undesirable experiences shaping his development. Richards and Farrell (2015) believe that teacher professional development is a long-term process that helps teachers define their teaching practice and personal identity.

Bilbao (2012) emphasized that diverse experiences help school heads understand their purpose in life, leading to passionate teaching. School heads in remote areas face challenges like difficult travel, community conditions, and learner situations.

Despite these difficulties, they find fulfillment in their work due to the support of the community and the sense of accomplishment. School heads in remote areas likely have longer career longevity there based on their experiences and satisfaction.

Leadership Resilience

The importance of establishing a framework for resiliency in schools is highlighted as a crucial policy recommendation to better navigate uncertainties. It is seen as a necessary guide for decision-making, problem-solving, and promoting creativity. The need for a strategic reference to handle unforeseen circumstances effectively.

The basic plans that influence the organization, content, and style of teaching are educational frameworks. These frameworks define the key elements, objectives, and criteria that teachers and students must follow and provide a methodical and consistent approach to training.

Educational frameworks outline the structure of instruction, guiding instructors and students in systematically achieving learning goals. Guidelines ensure a successful learning environment with curriculum, teaching, and assessment tactics (Benson, 2021).

RESOURCE FULNESS

The leader ensures a well-rounded approach to curriculum development, teaching methods, and assessment strategies by utilizing existing resources efficiently and forming community partnerships. They engage the school community and seek support from stakeholders to creatively solve educational challenges, emphasizing the importance of fostering community relationships for long-term success.

The prototype model for resourceful leadership includes having a vision for the school, a strong network of stakeholders, teamwork within the school community, and a willingness to learn. Principals with resourceful management styles were found to be more efficient and less stressed (Marwiang, et.al, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

School principals in IP integrated schools face challenges in their roles, stepping out of their comfort zone. Despite the difficulties, they remain dedicated to providing quality education that meets the needs of their students.

Participants in the study shared how they prioritize their careers in education, often putting their own lives and the well-being of their families at risk in order to provide education opportunities. School leaders are seen not just as educators, but as role models who uphold values and rights within their communities. Teaching is viewed as a calling that requires love and passion to be successful, as it not only shapes individuals but also society as a whole.

School heads should receive training and seminars before being assigned to manage remote schools. Without proper preparation, they may struggle to cope with the challenges they face, leading to poor management and potential hesitations to continue in their role. With the right training, school heads gain insights into what to expect and develop intrinsic motivation, including passion and dedication. By working together as a family, they can create a positive school climate that promotes student success.

Many school leaders in remote areas choose to stay in their positions despite facing challenges. Their dedication to serving students and the community outweighs any discomfort they may encounter. The personal and professional rewards of working in these areas can be transformative, making the difficult experiences worthwhile for these passionate educators.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Department of Education is considering a specialized orientation for school leaders in remote areas to better comprehend the unique challenges they face. Incentives and wellness programs are being suggested.

The study highlights the importance of school heads in IP integrated schools learning coping techniques from experienced peers. It suggests that by adopting these coping styles and seeking assistance from external

organizations, school leaders can better manage challenges such as a shortage of teaching materials and continue serving their communities effectively.

Teachers must remain dedicated to fostering positive relationships with students despite challenges. They should be creative in lesson presentations to engage students, especially in remote communities.

Students should value their education and respect the sacrifices teachers make to provide quality education. It is important to show appreciation for teachers.

Future researchers can benefit from this study by conducting quantitative research to identify factors that influence school heads to stay in remote areas. This information would help in developing programs to incentivize school heads in these regions and attract others to stay despite challenges. Additionally, qualitative research can be done to assess the needs of teachers in far-flung areas.

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