

The Hermeneutic Journey of Novice School Leaders Implementing National Curriculum Reforms

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of twenty novice school leaders in rural schools of Barobo District, Surigao del Sur, Philippines, as they implemented the Revised K–12 Curriculum (Matatag Curriculum) during School Year 2025–2026, the first full year of district-wide reform implementation. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, three dimensions of novice leadership were examined: (1) personal understandings, perceived challenges, and dilemmas; (2) strategies developed to manage logistical, instructional, and relational aspects of implementation; and (3) the influence of these experiences on emerging professional identity and educational philosophy. Data from twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews were analyzed through a seven-stage thematic framework. Findings revealed four major themes under the first dimension: the Burden of Dual Mandate, Existential Self-Doubt, the Compliance-Conscience Tension, and the Relational Barrier. Under the second dimension, participants employed Collaborative Professional Learning, Adaptive Resourcefulness, Relational Transparency and Community Partnership, and Motivation and Incentivization. The third dimension yielded Identity Transformation, Discovery of Leadership Character, a Collaborative and Servant Leadership Philosophy, and Reflective Practice and Situational Awareness as key developmental outcomes. Findings are discussed in relation to Hallinger and Kovačević's (2022) Instructional Leadership Theory, Weick's (2021) Sensemaking Theory, and Wenger and Wenger-Trayner's (2020) Situated Learning Theory. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on novice school leadership, curriculum reform implementation, and professional identity development in resource-limited rural educational contexts. Implications are drawn for leadership preparation programs, district-level mentoring systems, and professional identity development support for novice school leaders.

Keywords: Novice school leaders, Curriculum reform, Hermeneutic phenomenology, Sensemaking, Rural education

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of national curriculum reforms presents distinct challenges for novice school leaders, particularly in rural settings where resources, mentoring structures, and institutional support are limited. In the Philippines, the Revised K–12 Curriculum, known as the Matatag Curriculum under DepEd Order No. 10, s. 2024, reduces learning competencies by approximately seventy percent while concentrating attention on foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning. Implemented in phases beginning with School Year 2024–2025 for Kindergarten, Grades 1, 4, and 7, this reform fundamentally reshapes the leadership demands placed on school administrators (Department of Education Philippines, 2024).

Novice school leaders, those with three years or fewer of administrative experience, face a dual challenge: developing foundational leadership competence while guiding teachers and students through major instructional changes (Kılınç & Gümüş, 2021). Research by DeMatthews et al. (2023) shows that beginning principals frequently experience stress, uncertainty, and self-doubt during educational reforms, particularly when inadequately prepared for technical implementation demands. In rural settings, these pressures are intensified by

resource scarcity, geographic isolation, and the absence of accessible professional learning communities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2020).

Evidence from Barobo District, Surigao del Sur, illustrates these dynamics. Under the original K–12 Curriculum in 2023–2024, Grades 1, 4, and 7 in the district achieved Proficient status with a Mean Percentage Score of 75.45. During Phase 1 of the revised curriculum in 2024–2025, this declined to 72.29, signaling that policy intentions falter without effective school-level mediation. This decline draws attention to novice school leaders who, despite carrying responsibilities for teacher guidance, curriculum alignment, and accountability, operate with limited transition support in resource-constrained rural contexts.

This study aimed to examine the hermeneutic journey of novice school leaders across three dimensions: (1) the personal understandings, challenges, and dilemmas they encounter; (2) the strategies they develop to manage implementation demands; and (3) how these experiences shape their emerging professional identity and educational philosophy. Three theoretical frameworks anchor the study. Hallinger and Kovačević's (2022) Instructional Leadership Theory, further extended by Hallinger (2020), explains the core leadership practices through which school heads guide teaching and learning. Weick's (1995, 2021) Sensemaking Theory illuminates the interpretive processes through which leaders construct meaning from ambiguous reform demands. Wenger and Wenger-Trayner's (2020) Situated Learning Theory and Communities of Practice explains how novice leaders develop professional competence through authentic participation in real leadership communities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Novice School Leaders' Experiences and Challenges

New school leaders face distinct challenges transitioning from teaching to administration. Kılınç and Gümüş (2021), in a systematic review across international contexts, found that novice principals commonly struggle with time management, balancing multiple responsibilities, establishing authority, and supervising former colleagues. In rural contexts, Wieczorek and Manard (2020) found that novice principals face additional layers of difficulty including limited resources, geographic isolation, and the challenge of balancing administrative with instructional responsibilities.

Meyer and Patuawa (2020) found that small-school principals face particular difficulty making sense of their role due to contextual complexity and fewer professional networking opportunities. Orozco Gonzalez (2023) found that most novice principals in their study context lacked formal pre-appointment leadership training. In the Philippine setting, Castañeros et al. (2023) found that newly promoted school heads identified excessive paperwork, navigating school culture, and supervising teachers as their most pressing early challenges, with administrative demands consistently leaving insufficient time for instructional supervision.

Leadership Challenges During Curriculum Reform

Curriculum reform intensifies existing leadership challenges and introduces new demands. Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2023) found that curriculum implementation creates periods of increased uncertainty as leaders struggle to translate broad policy goals into context-specific actions. Liu and Yin (2024) documented that reforms frequently fail to account for the varying capacities of schools to implement change. Shaked (2022) found that curriculum implementation requires leaders to develop new competencies in instructional coaching, data analysis, and professional learning design, areas in which novice leaders often lack experience. The emotional dimensions of leading change present further challenges: DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that beginning principals experienced significant stress and self-doubt, while Ganon-Shilon and Becher (2024) found that principals must engage in both sensemaking and sensegiving during reform.

Sensemaking and Leadership Identity Development

Weick's (1995, 2021) sensemaking theory describes how organizational members construct plausible explanations for complex events to guide action. Brown (2024) found that beginning principals constructed

understanding by reflecting on strategy outcomes and revising mental models of effective leadership. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2021) found that principals vary meaningfully in how they perceive and enact shared sensemaking processes while engaging in strategic activities to gain teacher support during national reform implementation. Leadership identity development involves reconciling idealized visions of leadership with practical realities: Jerdborg (2024) found that novice principals' idealized leadership expectations quickly encounter complex organizational realities, while Lowell et al. (2024) found that curriculum implementation shapes leadership identity through organizational sensemaking.

Instructional Leadership in Rural Contexts

Rural school leadership carries distinctive characteristics shaped by resource limitations, geographic isolation, and community dynamics. Barbosa and Coneway (2023) found that rural school leaders serve multiple roles beyond instructional supervision. Tsai et al. (2024) documented challenges including teacher shortages, funding deficits, and restricted access to professional development. Klar et al. (2021) found that rural leaders develop creative strategies for teacher support including peer observation and technology-mediated professional connections. Huggins et al. (2021) found that developing the leadership coaching capacities of experienced school leaders significantly enhances the ability of less-experienced leaders to sustain continuous improvement efforts, particularly in rural contexts.

Professional Learning and Communities of Practice

Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2020) argued that professional learning is fundamentally social, occurring through value creation in social learning spaces where participants develop competence through genuine engagement with shared challenges. Hudson (2024) found that the most powerful leadership learning occurs when leaders engage with authentic problems through collaborative professional learning communities. Wang and Fan (2025) documented that communities of practice participants valued peer discussions, opportunities to observe other schools, and professional identity development through belonging and shared practice.

Synthesis

The literature reveals that novice school leadership challenges are both universal in their core features and contextually shaped in their manifestations, with rural settings adding geographic isolation, resource constraints, and relational complexity. During curriculum reform, these challenges intensify for all leaders but fall most acutely on novices who must simultaneously master administrative responsibilities and lead change. Mentoring, peer professional networks, and adaptive leadership strategies emerge consistently as critical supports, yet access to these resources varies widely across contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of novice school leaders implementing curriculum reform. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as conceptualized by van Manen (2023), combines descriptive phenomenology's focus on lived experience with hermeneutics' emphasis on contextual interpretation and meaning-making. This design was appropriate because it allows deep exploration of how leaders experienced and made sense of curriculum implementation while acknowledging that understanding emerges through dialogue and interpretation rather than objective description alone.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in rural elementary and secondary schools within Barobo District, Division of Surigao del Sur, Philippines, a municipality in the Caraga Region characterized by communities engaged primarily in agriculture and fishing. Twenty novice school leaders were selected through purposive sampling based on five inclusion criteria: (1) currently serving as a principal, head teacher, or teacher-in-charge with curriculum

supervisory responsibilities; (2) holding their current leadership position for three years or fewer; (3) actively leading Matatag Curriculum implementation in their school; (4) assigned to a school officially classified as rural within Barobo District; and (5) willing to participate in in-depth interviews throughout the data collection period. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants.

Table 1

Distribution of Research Participants

Participant Code	School	Position	Years in Role
P1	Amaga ES	Principal-I	1 year
P2	Cabacungan ES	Head Teacher-I	2 years
P3	Causwagan ES	Head Teacher-I	3 years
P4	Dapdap ES	Teacher-In-Charge	1 year
P5	Dinuyan IS	Head Teacher-I	1 year
P6	Dughan ES	Head Teacher-I	8 months
P7	Gamut ES	Teacher-In-Charge	1 year
P8	Luogaon ES	Teacher-In-Charge	2 years
P9	Maapod ES	Teacher-In-Charge	1 year
P10	Malindog ES	Head Teacher-I	3 years
P11	Mamis ES	Principal-I	2 years
P12	Rizal NHS	Head Teacher-I	2 years
P13	Sabang ES	Teacher-In-Charge	2 years
P14	San Roque ES	Head Teacher-I	3 years
P15	San Vicente ES	Principal-I	3 years
P16	Sinai ES	Teacher-In-Charge	2 years
P17	Sua ES	Head Teacher-I	1 year
P18	Sudlon ES	Head Teacher-I	1 year
P19	Unidad ES	Teacher-In-Charge	2 years
P20	Wakat NHS	Principal-I	1 year

Note. ES = Elementary School; IS = Integrated School; NHS = National High School.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes each, using a researcher-made interview guide validated by five experts from the Division of Surigao del Sur. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and supplemented by document review including school

improvement plans, curriculum timelines, and meeting minutes. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached across all twenty participants.

Data analysis employed a seven-stage hermeneutic phenomenological thematic framework: (1) identification of meaning units from verbatim transcripts; (2) clustering of meaning units by shared phenomenological content; (3) contextual and comparative analysis across all twenty participants; (4) development of master themes; (5) iterative hermeneutic interpretation; (6) narrative synthesis; and (7) maintenance of an audit trail with active reflexivity throughout.

Trustworthiness was addressed following Enworo (2023) through credibility (prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing), transferability (thick description), dependability (systematic audit trail), and confirmability (reflexivity documentation). Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the North Eastern Mindanao State University Research Ethics Committee. Participant identities were protected using codes P1–P20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are organized according to the three research dimensions. Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis are described and illustrated with participant accounts. All participant quotations are presented as spoken, with English translations provided where participants responded in Filipino or Bisaya.

Dimension 1: Personal Understandings, Perceived Challenges, and Personal Dilemmas

Analysis of the twenty participants' accounts revealed four major themes as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes: Challenges and Dilemmas

Category	Theme	Sub-themes
Personal Understandings	The Burden of Dual Mandate	Balancing administrative paperwork with curriculum supervision and classroom instruction
Perceived Challenges	Existential Self-Doubt	Overwhelm upon role entry; self-doubt about leadership adequacy; anxiety about guiding experienced teachers; doubt about instructional expertise
Personal Dilemmas	The Compliance-Conscience Tension	Following curriculum strictly despite doubts; torn between guidelines and learner needs; data-driven deviation from prescribed implementation
	The Relational Barrier	Prior collegiality undermining formal authority; veteran teachers resisting compliance using seniority

Theme 1: The Burden of Dual Mandate

The most structurally persistent experience reported across all twenty participants was the chronic displacement of instructional leadership by administrative obligations. P3 identified this imbalance directly:

“One of the biggest challenges I experienced was balancing administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership. I had to ensure that teachers were properly oriented, that classroom

implementation was monitored, and that sufficient learning resources were available, even with my limited experience.”

P18 described how administrative demands prevented classroom presence: “The biggest challenge is instructional supervision. I often find myself buried in administrative reports, which leaves little time to actually sit in classrooms and observe teachers.” P20 linked this overload directly to compromised assessment integrity, noting that teachers were compelled to pass students even when not yet ready, and that many children graduated from elementary school barely able to read. These findings align with DeMatthews et al. (2023), Castañeros et al. (2023), and Klar et al. (2021), all of whom documented that novice leaders struggle to protect instructional time when administrative demands dominate their schedules.

Theme 2: Existential Self-Doubt

Participants described a persistent interior experience of self-doubt, a sustained questioning of whether they were knowledgeable and ready enough to lead curriculum reform while learning the basic demands of their new role. P2 captured this: “Stepping into the role while simultaneously trying to understand and lead the implementation of the revised K–12 curriculum was both overwhelming and transformative. My limited experience made me more cautious and at times hesitant in making decisions.” P13 expressed it most directly:

“When the revised K–12 Curriculum was first explained to me, I felt both excitement and anxiety. Being new to the leadership role, the first thing that came to mind was: Can I implement this correctly?”

P18 described how self-doubt inhibited supervisory action: “I sometimes hesitate to point out weaknesses, especially for teachers who have been teaching for many years. I hesitate because I am unsure of my own expertise.” Not all participants experienced self-doubt as debilitating. P6 found that limited experience “pushed me to be more collaborative and open to learning.” These findings are supported by DeMatthews et al. (2023) and Kılınç and Gümüş (2021), who documented that new leaders commonly struggle with establishing authority and confidence when facing unfamiliar implementation challenges.

Theme 3: The Compliance-Conscience Tension

A morally weighted dilemma ran through multiple participants’ accounts: being caught between the institutional requirement to follow prescribed curriculum guidelines and the professional judgment that those guidelines were not adequately serving learners. P4 described how inexperience enforced orthodoxy: “Because I was new, I followed the guidelines strictly, even though I had doubts.” P10 arrived at the most decisive resolution:

“After considering the learners’ performances through implemented assessments, we believed it best not to implement the spiral progression approach due to poor mastery of topics and low learning performance of our learners.”

P11 traced the full developmental arc: “I initially prioritized compliance with the curriculum guide because I lacked confidence in deviating from it. However, when results did not improve, I realized that contextualizing the curriculum to learners’ needs was more critical.” This arc reflects Weick’s (1995, 2021) sensemaking process, the iterative construction of plausible interpretations through experience, reflection, and evidence, and aligns with Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2023) and Ganon-Shilon and Becher (2024).

Theme 4: The Relational Barrier

The difficulty of exercising supervisory authority over teachers who were more experienced or previously collegial emerged as a distinct dilemma. P15 described “familiarity conflict”: “Because of familiarity conflict, you hesitate to use your authority because they still see you as just a former colleague.” P16 described seniority-based resistance: “There was really a teacher who insisted, ‘Sir, I have been teaching for a long time; I do not need to comply with classroom observation.’” The relational barrier operated through familiarity conflict,

seniority resistance, and intersecting self-doubt, all producing the same practical outcome: instructional supervision was compromised precisely when most needed. Klar et al. (2021) and Castañeros et al. (2023) directly support these findings.

Dimension 2: Strategies Developed to Manage Implementation

All twenty participants developed specific, intentional strategies to address implementation demands, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes: Implementation Strategies

Category	Theme	Sub-themes
Logistical/ Instructional	Collaborative Professional Learning	Weekly and monthly LAC sessions; joint curriculum study; peer mentoring; Catch-Up Friday; best-practice sharing; data-driven competency unpacking
Instructional	Adaptive Resourcefulness	Video-recorded lessons as observation substitute; DLL checking as monitoring proxy; re-echoing training content; timetable adjustment
Relational	Relational Transparency and Community Partnership	SPTA meetings for curriculum orientation; quarterly competency lists for parents; explaining grading system; parent assemblies
Motivational	Motivation and Incentivization	Reward system for teachers; academic rewards for students; affective motivation; positive reframing of reform

Theme 1: Collaborative Professional Learning

Across all twenty participants, the most consistently reported strategy was the institutionalization of collaborative professional learning through Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, peer observations, and joint curriculum study. P18 described the collaborative session as a space where sharing struggles was as legitimate as sharing successes: “Not only good practices are shared; teachers also share their struggles in implementing the new curriculum, and right there, as a team and family, we help each other find solutions.” The uniformity of this strategy is itself significant. By making learning collective, novice leaders simultaneously built teacher curriculum competence without needing personal omniscience and established relational trust that reduced resistance. He et al. (2024) and Liu and Yin (2024) directly support this finding.

Theme 2: Adaptive Resourcefulness

When standard implementation conditions were unavailable, participants described pragmatic adaptive responses rather than paralysis. P17 described the most inventive adaptation: “One of my practical approaches when I am busy is to allow teachers scheduled for classroom observation to submit video recordings. But whenever I have free time, I enter classrooms for fleeting observations.” P13 articulated the underlying orientation: “My approach was pragmatic: if sufficient resources are not yet available, how can we effectively use the existing ones?” Lowell et al. (2024) found that leaders made similar modifications, and Weick’s (1995, 2021) sensemaking theory explains these adaptations as enactment: actors creating workable versions of their environment through action.

Theme 3: Relational Transparency and Community Partnership

Participants consistently described relational transparency with teachers, parents, and the community as essential infrastructure for curriculum implementation. P15 institutionalized parent engagement through quarterly

competency lists: “We gave a list of competencies every quarter to parents so they would be guided by the new curriculum.” P11 described transparent parent communication as a resistance-reduction mechanism: “We informed parents about the performance of their children so that at least they were aware and would not doubt the changes in the system.” Ganon-Shilon and Becher (2024) and Lin and Chen (2024) directly support these findings.

Theme 4: Motivation and Incentivization

Several participants recognized curriculum implementation as a motivational challenge and deliberately used incentives and positive reframing. P15 implemented a reward system for teachers completing classroom observations. P16 extended incentivization to learners, while P19 worked at the affective root: “We motivate learners and encourage them that they should love going to school.” Lowell et al. (2024) found that leaders who created conditions of shared purpose produced more sustained implementation outcomes than those who relied solely on compliance mandates.

Dimension 3: Influence on Emerging Professional Identity and Educational Philosophy

The reform experience produced lasting changes in how participants understood their role, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes: Professional Identity and Philosophy

Category	Theme	Sub-themes
Emerging Identity	Identity Transformation	From task executor to educational guide; from compliance enforcer to instructional leader; from manager to facilitator-supporter
	Discovery of Leadership Character	Discovering empathy and listening; resilience and optimism; humility and toughness; willingness to learn over perfectionism
Educational Philosophy	Collaborative and Servant Leadership Philosophy	Leadership as service and collaboration; empowering others; shared decision-making; learner-centered orientation
	Reflective Practice and Situational Awareness	Daily journaling; feedback collection; openness to suggestions; environmental scanning; alternating humanistic and authoritative approaches

Theme 1: Identity Transformation

The most widely shared developmental outcome was a fundamental shift from compliance and task management toward instructional guidance. P1 described the shift: “Before, I saw my role mostly as managing tasks, but now I realize it’s more about guiding teachers, supporting learners, and ensuring quality education.” P11 gave it its sharpest formulation:

“This experience has redefined my role from being a policy implementer to an instructional leader. I now see that my responsibility is not just to enforce curriculum guidelines but to ensure that teaching practices effectively respond to learners’ needs, especially when data shows gaps.”

Analysis reveals a three-stage developmental pattern: an initial compliance orientation; a transitional stage recognizing compliance was insufficient; and an emerging stage of facilitative, collaborative leadership. Ralebese, Jita, and Badmus (2025) and Brown (2024) directly support this developmental progression.

Theme 2: Discovery of Leadership Character

Participants discovered specific qualities of character through sustained challenges under real pressure, qualities discovered through doing rather than formal preparation. P12 articulated this: “I learned that it is not necessary to be perfect, but what is important is the willingness to learn and adjust. I am now more confident and open to collaboration.” P18 discovered empathy and listening: “I’ve stopped trying to have all the answers and started asking my veteran teachers for their perspectives.” DeMatthews et al. (2023) and Jerdborg (2024) documented that beginning principals develop character dispositions precisely through confronting and surviving reform pressures.

Theme 3: Collaborative and Servant Leadership as a Personal Philosophy

Participants developed a coherent leadership philosophy centered on collaboration, service, and empowerment of others, constructed from lived experience of what worked. P3 articulated the core: “I learned that leadership is not only about authority but also about service, collaboration, and adaptability.” P18 described the most distinctive element:

“Being a leader is not just about following DepEd Orders; it is about being a buffer for my teachers so they can focus on their students. I provide what teachers need inside the classroom so they would have nothing else to worry about.”

The consistency of collaborative and servant leadership across participants reveals that these orientations were discovered experientially rather than chosen ideologically. Lowell et al. (2024) and Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2020) provide direct theoretical grounding for these findings.

Theme 4: Reflective Practice and Situational Awareness

Participants described leadership development grounded in deliberate structured reflection and continuous reading of the school environment. P17 institutionalized reflection through daily journaling: “At the end of the day I write in a journal where I take time to reflect on what I accomplished that day.” P20 described systematic feedback collection: “I always ask for written feedback from teachers and parents every time we meet. My purpose is self-assessment.” Weick’s (1995, 2021) sensemaking theory and Brown (2024) provide direct grounding for these reflective practices as ongoing meaning-construction habits.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how twenty novice school leaders in rural Barobo District, Philippines, experienced and interpreted the implementation of the Revised K–12 Curriculum across three dimensions: personal understandings, challenges and dilemmas; coping strategies; and professional growth. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach provided rich, contextually grounded insights into how novice leaders make sense of curriculum reform at the intersection of administrative demands, relational complexity, and professional identity formation.

Findings revealed that curriculum reform is a demanding and emotionally complex experience for novice leaders. Administrative responsibilities often overshadow instructional leadership, while self-doubt, ethical tensions, and relational challenges collectively shape the hermeneutic journey. Participants developed four key adaptive strategies: collaborative professional learning, adaptive resourcefulness, relational transparency, and motivational incentivization. The reform experience also contributed significantly to professional growth, fostering a shift from compliance-focused management to instructional leadership, strengthening collaborative and servant leadership values, encouraging reflective practice, and shaping leadership identity through real-world challenges.

The findings suggest the need for leadership preparation programs that address balancing administrative and instructional responsibilities, for institutionalized peer mentoring systems at the district level, and for

professional learning opportunities that explicitly support leadership identity development. This study is limited by its focus on twenty novice leaders from a single district and by its reliance on leaders' perspectives alone. Future research may employ longitudinal and comparative designs and include multiple stakeholder perspectives to provide a broader understanding of novice leadership during curriculum reform.

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