

Trailblazing School Leadership: A Study on Strategic Management Approaches in Sarangani's Private Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

Trailblazing leadership plays a vital role in addressing the evolving demands of educational management, particularly in private schools. However, limited studies have explored trailblazing leadership and strategic management among school principals in Sarangani Province. This study examined the level of trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches, as well as their differences and implications. Using a quantitative descriptive-comparative and correlational design, data were collected through a validated survey from 19 principals and 81 teachers across the seven municipalities of Sarangani Province. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, independent-samples t-test, and Pearson correlation coefficient (r).

The findings showed that respondents exhibited a very high level of trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches. Collaboration ranked highest among trailblazing leadership dimensions, while planning received the highest rating in strategic management. Correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches. However, significant differences were found between sectarian and non-sectarian schools, with sectarian schools obtaining higher mean scores in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The study concludes that private school administrators demonstrate strong trailblazing leadership and strategic management practices. However, trailblazing leadership alone does not significantly influence strategic management effectiveness. The significant differences between sectarian and non-sectarian schools suggest that school type may be associated with differences in the implementation of strategic management practices. The study recommends strengthening administrators' adaptability and monitoring practices, improving strategic management systems, and conducting further research on other factors that may influence strategic management effectiveness in private schools.

Keywords: trailblazing leadership, strategic management approaches, private school administrators, sectarian schools, non-sectarian schools, Sarangani Province

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational leadership has become increasingly complex as schools respond to rapid technological advancement, changing educational policies, increasing stakeholder expectations, and growing demands for quality education. School administrators are expected not only to manage daily operations but also to provide strategic direction that enables institutions to remain responsive, innovative, and sustainable. In private educational institutions, these responsibilities are even more demanding because school leaders must balance educational quality with organizational sustainability while responding to financial, social, and community expectations. Consequently, effective leadership and strategic management have become essential components of successful school administration.

Recent leadership literature emphasizes that effective school leaders possess the ability to inspire organizational change, foster collaboration, adapt to emerging challenges, and make informed decisions that support continuous school improvement. Contemporary leadership perspectives describe these competencies as characteristics of trailblazing leadership, a leadership approach that encourages innovation, strategic thinking, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than maintaining traditional administrative practices, trailblazing leaders

promote continuous improvement, empower stakeholders, and create organizational cultures capable of responding effectively to educational change.

Among the essential dimensions of trailblazing leadership are strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, and decision-making. Strategic vision enables school leaders to establish long-term institutional goals while aligning educational programs with the school's mission and future direction. Adaptability allows administrators to respond effectively to policy changes, technological developments, and unexpected challenges that affect school operations. Collaboration encourages shared leadership, stakeholder participation, and collective responsibility among teachers, parents, and community partners. Decision-making supports evidence-based leadership by ensuring that organizational decisions are transparent, participatory, and aligned with institutional objectives. Collectively, these leadership dimensions strengthen organizational effectiveness and contribute to sustainable school improvement.

Strategic management complements leadership by providing a systematic process through which schools formulate, implement, monitor, and evaluate institutional goals. In educational organizations, strategic management serves as a framework that guides resource allocation, policy implementation, curriculum development, and performance evaluation. Effective strategic management enables school leaders to translate organizational vision into measurable actions while ensuring accountability and continuous improvement. Previous studies have consistently emphasized that strategic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are essential processes for maintaining institutional effectiveness and educational quality.

Research likewise highlights the close relationship between leadership and strategic management. School leaders who communicate a clear vision, encourage collaboration, and promote organizational learning are generally more capable of implementing strategic initiatives successfully. Leadership practices that support teacher participation, professional development, and shared decision-making strengthen institutional commitment and facilitate the achievement of school goals. Similarly, adaptive leadership enables administrators to respond effectively to changing educational environments while maintaining organizational stability and instructional quality.

Within the Philippine educational system, private schools operate under unique organizational conditions that require flexible leadership and efficient strategic management. These institutions frequently encounter challenges related to enrolment fluctuations, financial sustainability, human resource management, policy implementation, and stakeholder engagement. Such realities require administrators to balance educational excellence with institutional viability while responding to local community needs. In provinces such as Sarangani, where schools operate in geographically and socioeconomically diverse communities, these leadership challenges become even more pronounced. School administrators must therefore demonstrate innovative leadership practices that are responsive to their institutional context.

Although leadership and strategic management have been widely investigated internationally, relatively few empirical studies have examined trailblazing leadership within Philippine private schools, particularly in Sarangani Province. Existing studies commonly focus on transformational, instructional, adaptive, or servant leadership, with limited attention given to trailblazing leadership as an integrated leadership framework. Furthermore, little evidence exists regarding whether trailblazing leadership is associated with strategic management practices or whether differences exist between sectarian and non-sectarian private schools. Addressing these gaps contributes to a better understanding of leadership practices in local educational settings and provides evidence that may support school improvement initiatives.

Guided by these considerations, the present study examined the level of trailblazing leadership demonstrated by private school administrators in terms of strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, and decision-making, as well as their strategic management approaches in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It further determined the relationship between these variables and examined significant differences between sectarian and non-sectarian schools. The findings provide practical implications for school administrators, educational policymakers, and leadership development programs aimed at strengthening strategic leadership within the Philippine private education sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-comparative and correlational research design to examine trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches among private school administrators in Sarangani Province, Philippines. The descriptive component determined the level of trailblazing leadership in terms of strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, and decision-making, as well as the level of strategic management approaches in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The comparative design examined differences in strategic management approaches between sectarian and non-sectarian private schools, while the correlational component determined the relationship between trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches.

The study was conducted in 19 private schools under the Schools Division of Sarangani, representing the municipalities of Alabel, Malungon, Maasim, Kiamba, Maitum, and Glan. These schools were selected because they represent diverse educational settings, organizational structures, and leadership practices within the province. Such diversity provided an appropriate context for examining leadership and strategic management practices across different private educational institutions.

The respondents consisted of 19 school principals and 81 teachers who met the established inclusion criteria. Principals were required to hold an official administrative position with at least three years of leadership experience and active involvement in strategic planning and school management. Teacher respondents were full-time faculty members with at least two years of teaching experience in their respective schools and direct participation in instructional and school improvement programs. A total enumeration sampling technique was employed to include all qualified principals and teachers from the selected schools. Although 202 teachers comprised the accessible population, only 81 satisfied the inclusion criteria and completed the survey during the data collection period.

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of two major sections: trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches. The instrument measured trailblazing leadership through four dimensions: strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, and decision-making. Strategic management approaches were assessed through planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating stronger demonstration of leadership and strategic management practices.

To establish content validity, the questionnaire was evaluated by three experts in educational management before data collection. Revisions were incorporated based on their recommendations to improve clarity, relevance, and content alignment. A pilot test was subsequently conducted, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95, indicating excellent internal consistency and confirming the reliability of the research instrument.

Prior to data collection, approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Graduate School and participating private schools. Respondents were informed of the study's objectives and provided informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Survey questionnaires were administered through face-to-face distribution in accessible schools, while Google Forms was utilized for geographically distant institutions to facilitate data collection.

The collected data were organized, coded, and analyzed using appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches. Independent-samples *t*-test was employed to examine significant differences between sectarian and non-sectarian schools, while Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*) was used to determine the relationship between trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches. All statistical analyses were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the levels of trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches among private school administrators in Sarangani Province, as well as the relationship between these variables and the differences between sectarian and non-sectarian schools.

The findings revealed that respondents perceived school administrators as demonstrating a very high level of trailblazing leadership ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.46$). This indicates that administrators consistently exhibit leadership practices characterized by innovation, strategic thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and sound decision-making. Among the four leadership dimensions, collaboration received the highest rating ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.41$), followed by decision-making ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.44$), strategic vision ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.46$), and adaptability ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.53$).

The prominence of collaboration suggests that school administrators value shared leadership, teamwork, and stakeholder participation in school governance. Collaborative leadership promotes trust, open communication, and collective responsibility among teachers and other stakeholders, resulting in stronger organizational commitment and improved institutional performance. These findings support the work of Mondal (2020) and Famero (2024), who emphasized that collaborative leadership enhances teacher engagement, strengthens professional relationships, and contributes to school improvement. Likewise, the concept of distributed leadership explains that leadership responsibilities shared among administrators, teachers, and stakeholders encourage innovation and improve organizational effectiveness.

Decision-making also received a very high rating, indicating that school administrators consistently make evidence-based, transparent, and participatory decisions. Effective decision-making enables administrators to respond appropriately to educational challenges while ensuring accountability and efficient resource utilization. This finding is consistent with Ahmed (2025), who emphasized that principals' decision-making capabilities significantly influence teacher performance and institutional effectiveness. Similarly, participative decision-making enhances organizational commitment by involving teachers in important school decisions, thereby improving the quality and acceptance of administrative actions.

Strategic vision and adaptability likewise received very high ratings, reflecting administrators' ability to establish long-term institutional goals while responding effectively to changes in the educational environment. These competencies have become increasingly important as schools face evolving curriculum reforms, technological advancements, and changing stakeholder expectations. The findings affirm previous studies indicating that visionary and adaptive leadership strengthens organizational resilience and promotes continuous school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Cahapay, 2021). Although adaptability obtained the lowest mean among the four dimensions, it remained within the "Very High" category, suggesting that administrators possess considerable flexibility but may further strengthen their responsiveness to emerging educational challenges.

The study also found that school administrators demonstrated a very high level of strategic management approaches ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.59$). Among its dimensions, planning obtained the highest mean ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.58$), followed by evaluation ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.62$), implementation ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.56$), and monitoring ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.59$). These findings indicate that strategic management practices are consistently implemented across the participating private schools.

The high rating for planning demonstrates that school administrators effectively align institutional goals with their vision and mission while involving stakeholders in the planning process. Strategic planning enables schools to anticipate future challenges, allocate resources appropriately, and establish measurable objectives that guide organizational development. This finding supports previous studies by Puri et al. (2023) and Kamara et al. (2024), which emphasize that effective planning serves as the foundation of successful educational management. The consistently high ratings across implementation, monitoring, and evaluation further indicate that administrators are committed to translating strategic plans into action while continuously assessing institutional performance and making necessary improvements.

To determine whether trailblazing leadership is associated with strategic management approaches, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted. The analysis yielded $r = 0.223$ with a p -value of 0.357, indicating no statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This finding suggests that although respondents rated both trailblazing leadership and strategic management approaches very highly, the degree of leadership demonstrated by administrators was not significantly associated with the level of strategic management practices implemented within their schools.

The absence of a significant relationship may be attributed to the influence of organizational and contextual factors beyond individual leadership practices. Strategic management in educational institutions is often shaped by institutional policies, governance structures, financial resources, organizational culture, and regulatory requirements. Consequently, effective strategic management may still be achieved through established organizational systems regardless of variations in administrators' leadership practices. This finding highlights the complexity of school leadership, suggesting that leadership alone does not fully explain the implementation of strategic management practices in private educational institutions.

The study further examined whether significant differences existed between sectarian and non-sectarian private schools in terms of strategic management approaches. Independent-samples t -test results revealed significant differences across all four dimensions: planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. In every dimension, sectarian schools obtained higher mean scores than non-sectarian schools.

These findings suggest that sectarian schools may benefit from more established governance systems, clearer organizational missions, stronger stakeholder support, and values-based leadership that reinforce strategic planning and institutional accountability. Many sectarian schools operate under well-defined organizational philosophies that emphasize long-term planning, shared leadership, and continuous organizational evaluation. These characteristics may contribute to more systematic implementation of strategic management processes. In contrast, non-sectarian schools often experience greater operational variability depending on available resources, enrolment stability, and institutional priorities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that private school administrators in Sarangani Province exhibit strong leadership and strategic management competencies that support effective school administration. Collaboration emerged as the defining characteristic of trailblazing leadership, while planning remained the strongest component of strategic management. Although no significant relationship was found between leadership and strategic management, the significant differences observed between sectarian and non-sectarian schools emphasize the importance of institutional context in shaping organizational practices. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on educational leadership by providing localized evidence from Philippine private schools and offer valuable insights for leadership development, policy formulation, and strategic planning initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the trailblazing leadership practices and strategic management approaches of private school administrators in Sarangani Province, Philippines. The findings revealed that school administrators demonstrated a very high level of trailblazing leadership across the dimensions of strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, and decision-making. Among these dimensions, collaboration emerged as the strongest leadership practice, highlighting administrators' commitment to fostering teamwork, shared responsibility, and stakeholder engagement. Likewise, administrators exhibited a very high level of strategic management practices, with planning receiving the highest rating, indicating that strategic goals, organizational direction, and institutional planning are consistently integrated into school operations.

Despite the high ratings in both trailblazing leadership and strategic management, the correlation analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This finding suggests that effective strategic management may not depend solely on the leadership practices of school administrators but may also be influenced by organizational structures, institutional policies, governance systems, resource availability, and contextual factors unique to each educational institution. The complexity of school management underscores the need to consider multiple organizational variables when examining leadership effectiveness.

The study also established significant differences between sectarian and non-sectarian private schools in terms of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Sectarian schools consistently obtained higher mean scores across all dimensions of strategic management, suggesting that institutional mission, governance structure, organizational culture, and stakeholder support may contribute to more systematic strategic management practices. These findings emphasize that leadership effectiveness should be understood within the broader institutional context in which school administrators operate.

The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on educational leadership by providing empirical evidence on trailblazing leadership within the Philippine private education sector. The study demonstrates that collaborative leadership, strategic planning, and evidence-based decision-making remain fundamental components of effective school administration. The results likewise provide valuable information for school owners, administrators, educational leaders, and policymakers in designing leadership development programs and strengthening strategic management systems that support continuous school improvement.

While the study provides important insights into leadership and strategic management practices, its findings are limited to selected private schools in Sarangani Province and may not be generalized to all educational settings. Future studies may include larger samples from other regions, incorporate public schools for comparison, or employ mixed-methods and longitudinal research designs to obtain a deeper understanding of how leadership practices influence strategic management over time. Further investigation of organizational culture, governance, institutional resources, and stakeholder participation is also recommended to better explain the factors that contribute to effective strategic management in educational institutions.

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