

Strengths of School-Based Management: A Thematic Study of Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement in Level 3 Schools

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the strengths of School-Based Management (SBM) implementation in Level 3–recognized public secondary schools in the Schools Division of Samar. Guided by Appreciative Inquiry, the research focused on practices that enabled these schools to achieve advanced SBM status. Data were generated through semi-structured, positively framed interviews with school heads and analyzed using thematic analysis. Six interrelated strengths emerged: (1) enhancement of academic performance, (2) active and collaborative stakeholder engagement, (3) distributed and visionary leadership, (4) transparency in school governance, and (5) empowerment for shared decision-making. Findings are interpreted through decentralization and distributed leadership theories and situated within prior empirical studies on SBM and shared governance. Results indicate that inclusive leadership structures, strong stakeholder coalitions, and transparent decisionmaking are critical conditions for sustaining effective SBM. These strengths align with the policy intent of Republic Act No. 9155 and relevant Department of Education issuances. The study provides evidence-based insights for schools seeking to strengthen SBM implementation and advance learner-centered, accountable governance.

Keywords: School-Based Management, Appreciative Inquiry, Distributed Leadership, Stakeholder Engagement, Public Secondary Schools

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has been widely adopted as a strategy for improving school effectiveness, accountability, and stakeholder participation. In the Philippines, School-Based Management (SBM) was institutionalized through Republic Act No. 9155 (Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001), granting schools autonomy in decision-making, resource management, and instructional leadership while emphasizing shared governance with internal and external stakeholders. Anchored in the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda, SBM aims to create responsive, transparent, and learner-centered schools that reflect community needs.

To operationalize SBM, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced a validation and accreditation system recognizing varying levels of functionality. Level 3 schools represent advanced implementation, demonstrating exemplary practices in leadership, curriculum delivery, accountability, and community participation (DepEd Order No. 83, s. 2012; DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2015). Despite strong policy support, literature often emphasizes implementation challenges and compliance gaps, with limited empirical focus on the strengths present in high-performing SBM schools.

In the Samar Division, only a small proportion of public secondary schools have attained Level 3 SBM recognition, highlighting the need to understand what differentiates advanced implementers. Examining these schools provides insights into effective governance practices that can inform capacity-building and policy refinement.

This study addresses the gap by exploring the strengths of SBM implementation in Level 3 public secondary schools in Samar using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. By foregrounding successful practices and leadership strategies as narrated by school heads, the study contributes empirical evidence to the discourse on effective decentralized school governance and offers transferable lessons for schools seeking to enhance SBM implementation.

Background Of the Study

School-Based Management is grounded in decentralization theory, which posits that devolving authority to the school level enhances responsiveness, efficiency, and accountability. In the Philippines, RA 9155 and DepEd policies promote shared leadership, participatory planning, and community engagement as mechanisms for improving learner outcomes. Level 3 SBM-accredited schools exemplify these principles through sustained practices across governance, instruction, and resource management.

Prior studies have documented barriers to SBM implementation, but fewer have examined positive deviance—how certain schools succeed despite systemic constraints. This study uses Appreciative Inquiry to surface strengths, leadership practices, and collaborative mechanisms enabling advanced SBM performance, complementing deficit-focused perspectives in existing research.

Purpose Of the Study

The study aims to explore and analyze the strengths of SBM implementation in Level 3-accredited public secondary schools in the Samar Division. Specifically, it seeks to identify leadership practices, stakeholder engagement strategies, and governance mechanisms that support sustained school improvement and align with national education policies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative design grounded in Appreciative Inquiry was employed to focus on effective SBM practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school heads and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.

Population and Sampling

Complete enumeration was used, involving school heads from all Level 3-recognized public secondary schools in the Samar Division.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before data collection, the researcher obtained ethical clearance and institutional approvals from the Schools Division Superintendent, endorsed by the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies and the academic adviser. Letters of consent were sent to the identified school heads, who confirmed their willingness to participate.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face at the schools or online via Google Meet, Messenger, or Google Forms, based on participant preference and availability. Responses were audio-recorded with consent for accurate transcription. Semi-structured, open-ended questions encouraged participants to share insights on the strengths, leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, and governance mechanisms that supported Level 3 SBM implementation. A safe and open environment was maintained to ensure candid and in-depth responses.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework. The researcher first familiarized herself with the data by reading transcripts repeatedly. Initial codes were generated line by line to capture meaningful segments, which were then organized into broader themes. Theme validity and reliability were ensured through expert review by two methodologists and a content specialist and further verified by three academic experts. Themes were defined and labeled to clearly represent central concepts, and the final report synthesized the findings with illustrative quotes to provide a coherent, comprehensive analysis addressing the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was established through the careful selection of information-rich participants—school heads from Level 3 SBM-recognized schools—who could provide in-depth, experience-based insights. Prior to the main

data collection, the interview guide was pilot tested to refine the questions for clarity, consistency, and alignment with the research objectives. Probing questions were also used during the interviews to deepen understanding and elicit comprehensive responses.

Transferability was supported by providing thick, contextual descriptions of the participants' experiences and the school environments in which SBM was implemented. This allowed readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar educational settings.

To ensure dependability, the researcher maintained a detailed audit trail, documenting the research process from data collection to analysis. The use of a thematic analysis approach provided a consistent and transparent procedure for identifying and interpreting recurring patterns in the data.

Confirmability was reinforced through the triangulation of sources and the practice of member checking. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions and validate the accuracy of their statements. This helped reduce researcher bias and ensured that the interpretations reflected the participants' intended meanings.

Overall, these trustworthiness measures ensured the rigor, authenticity, and reliability of the qualitative findings in the study.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to initiating the research, proper protocols were followed to obtain permission from the relevant authorities for data collection. The research study received approval from the Schools Division Superintendent of the DepEd SDO of Samar, Region VIII. Once approval was granted, the researcher sent out letters to selected secondary school principals, outlining the study and requesting their participation. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and why they were chosen as respondents. To ensure a safe and trusting environment, all participants were assured that their confidentiality would be strictly maintained. A coding technique was employed to anonymize their identities, which was also applied during the transcription of the data, and the collected voice records were retained for one year before being securely disposed of.

Additionally, the researcher obtained certification from the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) of Samar State University to confirm that the study met all required ethical research standards

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six themes captured the strengths of SBM implementation in Level 3 schools. Findings are interpreted through decentralization and distributed leadership frameworks and situated within local and international empirical literature.

1. **Enhancing Academic Performance.** Participants linked SBM practices—such as School Learning Action Cells (SLACs), targeted in-service training, and School Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adjustment (SMEA)—to sustained academic gains. International research supports that school-level autonomy combined with strong instructional leadership improves learner outcomes (Caldwell, 2005; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). Philippine studies similarly indicate that SBM contributes to achievement when autonomy is paired with professional collaboration and data-informed planning (Villarin et al., 2020).
2. **Active and Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement.** High levels of parental and community participation reflect the SBM principle of shared governance. This aligns with evidence that meaningful stakeholder engagement enhances school accountability and resource mobilization (Gertler, Patrinos, & Rubio-Codina, 2012). Stakeholders moved beyond consultation to active participation in planning, implementation, and monitoring, reinforcing community ownership (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2015).
3. **Distributed and Visionary Leadership.** Leadership practices reflected a distributed model where authority and responsibility were shared among school heads, teachers, and stakeholders. This supports distributed leadership theory, which posits that dispersed leadership strengthens organizational capacity and innovation (Spillane, 2006; Garcia & Reyes, 2018). International SBM literature also emphasizes that visionary yet shared leadership sustains reform initiatives (Bush & Glover, 2014).

4. **Transparency in Governance.** Transparent financial and planning processes fostered trust and accountability among stakeholders, mirroring global SBM findings that transparency enhances stakeholder confidence and reduces conflict (World Bank, 2018). In the Philippine context, adherence to DepEd financial disclosure policies operationalizes accountability mandates under RA 9155.
5. **Empowerment for Shared Decision-Making.** Empowering teachers and school governing councils enhanced professional agency and reduced hierarchical constraints. Empirical studies indicate that such empowerment is associated with higher teacher commitment and more sustainable school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020). These findings affirm that empowerment is cultural as well as structural, requiring trust and consistent practice.

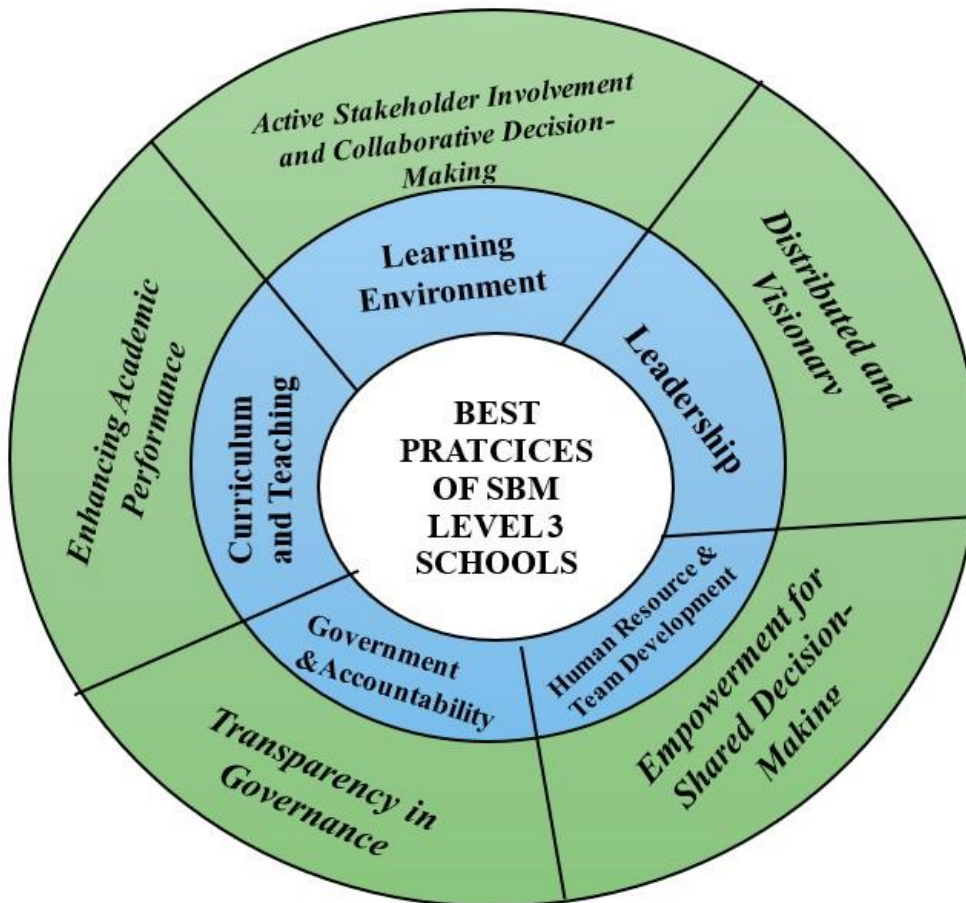


Figure 1. Summary of the Thematic Analyses

Collectively, these themes demonstrate how SBM policies are enacted through relational, leadership, and governance mechanisms. SBM practices in Level 3 schools operate as integrated systems translating decentralization principles into sustained school improvement.

Implications Of the Study

Effective SBM extends beyond compliance to institutionalization of participatory leadership, transparency, and empowerment. Capacity-building initiatives should prioritize leadership development, stakeholder engagement frameworks, and context-responsive evaluation systems to support schools aspiring to higher SBM levels.

CONCLUSION

The strength of School-Based Management lies in the quality of relationships, leadership practices, and governance processes cultivated at the school level. Level 3–recognized schools in Samar exemplify how shared leadership, inclusive participation, and transparent decision-making sustain academic performance and community trust. Aligning with RA 9155 and relevant DepEd policies, these practices offer a viable model for advancing decentralized, learner-centered education. Future research should incorporate perspectives of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders to further strengthen the empirical base of SBM research.

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