

# Leadership Practices and Performance of School Heads in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas: Implications for School-Based Management

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## ABSTRACT

School leadership plays a critical role in shaping instructional quality, organizational effectiveness, and learner outcomes, particularly in contexts characterized by structural constraints and limited access to resources. In the Philippines, School-Based Management (SBM) positions school heads as key agents of decentralized governance, tasked with translating national policies into context-responsive school-level practices. This study examined the leadership practices and performance of school heads in public schools located in a Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area (GIDA), focusing on perception differences between teachers and school heads within the SBM framework. Employing a quantitative descriptive-comparative design, data were collected from 103 teachers and 13 school heads in the Asipulo District, Ifugao. Results reveal consistent perceptual gaps, with school heads rating both their leadership practices and performance significantly higher than teachers. While leadership practices were assessed by teachers as intensively practiced and performance as maturing, school heads rated both at the highest qualitative levels. The findings suggest that in GIDA contexts, leadership effectiveness under SBM is often experienced by teachers as procedural rather than transformative. The study highlights the need for participatory, instruction-centered, and context-sensitive leadership approaches to strengthen SBM implementation in geographically disadvantaged settings.

**Keywords:** GIDA, leadership practices, school-based management, school head performance, school leadership

## INTRODUCTION

School leadership is widely recognized as a central determinant of school effectiveness, second only to classroom instruction in its influence on learner outcomes. International research consistently demonstrates that effective school leaders shape instructional quality, foster professional collaboration, and create conditions that support sustained school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger & Wang, 2022). In decentralized education systems, these leadership responsibilities are intensified as authority, accountability, and decision-making are devolved to the school level.

In the Philippine education system, School-Based Management (SBM) operationalizes decentralization by granting school heads greater autonomy over planning, resource utilization, and stakeholder engagement (DepEd, 2016). SBM is anchored on the assumption that schools are best positioned to respond to local needs when empowered to make context-specific decisions. However, the effectiveness of SBM is largely contingent upon the leadership capacity of school heads to translate autonomy into meaningful instructional and organizational improvements.

These leadership demands are particularly complex in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), where schools operate under persistent constraints such as limited infrastructure, scarce instructional resources, teacher isolation, and reduced access to professional development (Rivera, 2022; Gonzales & Mendoza, 2022). In such contexts, leadership effectiveness cannot be assessed solely through policy compliance or administrative efficiency. Instead, it must be evaluated in terms of visibility, inclusivity, instructional relevance, and responsiveness to local realities.

Despite a growing body of international literature on school leadership and decentralized governance, empirical studies examining leadership practices and performance in GIDA contexts remain limited. Existing research often prioritizes principals' self-reports or system-level indicators, overlooking how leadership is experienced by teachers who enact policies at the classroom level (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2021). Understanding these perception gaps is critical, as misalignment between leadership intent and teacher experience can weaken trust, reduce professional engagement, and undermine SBM goals.

This study addresses this gap by examining leadership practices and performance of school heads in public schools located in a GIDA setting in the Philippines. By comparing teacher and school head perceptions, the study provides empirical evidence on how leadership is enacted and experienced under SBM in geographically disadvantaged contexts.

### **Statement of Objectives**

This study aimed to examine the leadership practices and performance of school heads in public schools under the School-Based Management framework in a Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Area. Specifically, it sought to:

1. determine the level of leadership practices of school heads as perceived by teachers and by school heads themselves; and
2. assess the level of performance of school heads under SBM as perceived by teachers and by school heads themselves.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is anchored on the premise that leadership effectiveness in decentralized education systems is shaped by the interaction between leadership practices, contextual conditions, and stakeholder perceptions. The conceptual framework draws from three interrelated perspectives: instructional and distributed leadership theories, School-Based Management as a decentralization framework, and contextual leadership in disadvantaged settings.

Instructional and distributed leadership frameworks emphasize that effective school leadership extends beyond administrative management to include direct engagement with teaching and learning, as well as the distribution of leadership responsibilities among teachers and stakeholders. These perspectives highlight the importance of participation, collaboration, and shared accountability in fostering school improvement.

School-Based Management provides the structural context within which leadership practices and performance are enacted. SBM assumes that increased autonomy at the school level enhances responsiveness to local needs, promotes stakeholder involvement, and improves organizational effectiveness. However, the realization of these outcomes depends on the school head's capacity to exercise leadership in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and instructionally focused.

The framework further recognizes the influence of geographic and socio-economic context, particularly in GIDA schools. Structural constraints such as limited resources, physical isolation, and restricted access to professional support mediate how leadership practices are implemented and how leadership performance is perceived. In this study, leadership practices and performance are viewed as outcomes shaped not only by formal authority and policy mandates but also by contextual realities and teacher experience.

Conceptually, the framework posits that school heads' leadership practices influence their performance under SBM, and that both are perceived differently by teachers and school heads. These perceptions provide critical indicators of how leadership is enacted and experienced in GIDA contexts. Understanding these dynamics offers insight into the extent to which SBM promotes shared leadership and effective school governance in geographically disadvantaged areas.

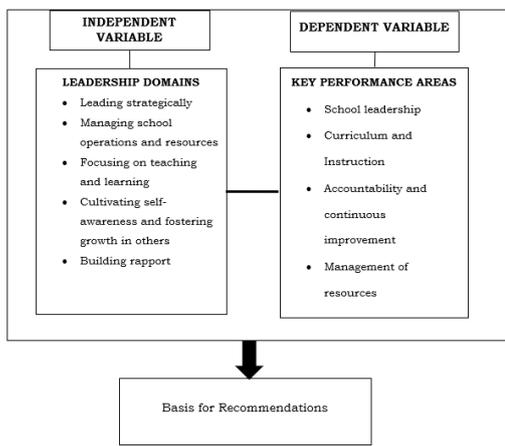


Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study

The study’s dependent variable comprises four SBM-aligned performance areas: school leadership, curriculum and instruction, accountability and continuous improvement, and resource management. These areas indicate how effectively school heads apply their leadership competencies, with literature showing that competent leaders enhance organizational effectiveness, instructional quality, and accountability (Leithwood et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021; Rivera, 2022). Performance is thus viewed as a direct outcome of leadership practices grounded in professional standards.

At the core of the paradigm is the proposed action plan, representing the study’s practical output. By examining the relationship between PPSSH leadership domains and SBM performance, the study aimed to produce evidence-based interventions to guide leadership development, policy implementation, and school improvement initiatives in GIDA contexts.

Overall, the conceptual paradigm offers a structured lens for understanding how PPSSH-defined leadership competencies influence SBM performance. It emphasizes that effective leadership is operational, measurable, and context-sensitive, playing a critical role in achieving quality education in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

School leadership has long been identified as a crucial determinant of school effectiveness, exerting a significant indirect influence on student learning through its impact on teachers, school climate, and organizational processes. International scholarship consistently positions leadership as second only to classroom instruction in shaping learner outcomes, emphasizing the role of school heads in setting direction, developing people, and redesigning organizational conditions to support teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Hallinger & Wang, 2022). In decentralized education systems, these leadership functions are further intensified as authority and accountability are transferred from central offices to individual schools.

School-Based Management (SBM) represents a major governance reform intended to improve educational quality by empowering schools to make context-responsive decisions. Under SBM, school heads are expected to function not merely as administrators but as instructional leaders, community mobilizers, and stewards of accountability (Bush & Ng, 2021). Studies indicate that when SBM is effectively implemented, it enhances teacher participation, strengthens stakeholder engagement, and improves school performance outcomes. However, research also warns that SBM often becomes procedural when leadership capacity is insufficient, resulting in compliance-oriented practices rather than meaningful school improvement (Aquino et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

Leadership effectiveness becomes more complex in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), where schools face persistent structural constraints such as limited resources, difficult terrain, teacher isolation, and restricted access to professional development. Research in rural and marginalized contexts shows that school heads in these settings assume expanded roles, often serving simultaneously as instructional leaders, crisis

managers, and community negotiators (Gonzales & Mendoza, 2022; Petalla, 2022). In such environments, leadership effectiveness is evaluated not only by policy adherence but by visibility, responsiveness, and the ability to mobilize limited resources to support instruction.

A recurring theme in leadership research is the presence of perception gaps between school heads and teachers. Empirical studies across diverse contexts reveal that school leaders frequently rate their practices and performance more favorably than teachers do, particularly in areas related to participation, instructional support, and shared decision-making (Brezicha et al., 2020; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2021). These gaps are consequential because teachers' perceptions of leadership significantly influence trust, motivation, and professional commitment. In SBM contexts, misalignment between leadership intent and teacher experience may weaken the very principles of shared governance and accountability that decentralization seeks to promote.

Participatory and relational leadership models offer important insights into addressing these challenges. Distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and trust-based leadership frameworks emphasize collaboration, transparency, and collective responsibility as foundations for sustainable school improvement (Tschannen-Moran, 2022; Tran et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that these approaches are particularly effective in resource-constrained and rural settings, where collaborative problem-solving and strong relational ties can compensate for material limitations. Despite this growing body of literature, empirical studies focusing on leadership practices and performance under SBM in GIDA contexts especially those incorporating both teacher and school head perspectives remain limited.

This gap underscores the importance of examining how leadership is enacted and experienced in geographically disadvantaged schools. By situating leadership practices and performance within the intersecting frameworks of SBM and GIDA, the present study contributes to international discussions on decentralized governance, leadership effectiveness, and equity in education.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study used a quantitative approach with descriptive-comparative and descriptive-correlational designs. The descriptive-comparative design compared the perceptions of leadership practices between school heads and teachers in areas such as strategic leadership, school operations, teaching and learning, self-awareness, and rapport. The descriptive-correlational design examined the relationship between leadership practices and school head performance in school leadership, curriculum and instruction, accountability, and resource management. Together, these designs provided insights into differences in perception and the impact of leadership practices on performance.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted in public elementary and secondary schools in District 1, Asipulo, Ifugao, which face challenges such as limited resources and geographic isolation. The researcher's familiarity with the local educational environment enabled a contextually informed assessment of leadership practices and performance.

### **Research Participants**

Participants included 103 teachers and 13 school heads during the Academic Year 2024–2025. The 13 school heads constitute the entire population of school heads in District I, Asipulo, Ifugao; however, their inclusion was still undertaken through convenience sampling, as participation depended on accessibility and willingness within the geographically isolated and disadvantaged (GIDA) context. Given the limited number of schools in the district, the small number of school heads reflects the actual administrative structure rather than a sampling limitation. Teachers had at least one year of service in their current assignment, and school heads had a minimum of one year of administrative experience to ensure adequate exposure to School-Based Management processes and leadership practices. Convenience sampling was employed primarily due to logistical and geographic constraints inherent in GIDA settings.

### Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Two adapted questionnaires were used: one for leadership practices (Dellomas & Deri, 2022) and one for school head performance (Cabigao, 2019). Both were validated by experts and approved by the Research and Ethics Committee. Questionnaires were distributed in person or online and completed within two to four weeks. Responses were reviewed for completeness and encoded for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed, while the Mann–Whitney U test and Spearman Rank-Order Correlation examined differences and relationships between leadership practices and performance. The results informed recommendations for improving leadership practices and school outcomes.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, ensuring respect, privacy, and trust throughout the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Table 1. Level of leadership practices of school heads as perceived by teachers and by school heads themselves

Leadership Practices	Classification	Mean	QD
Leading Strategically	Teacher	3.23	IP
	School Heads	3.66	MIP
Managing School Operations and Resources	Teacher	3.24	IP
	School Heads	3.81	MIP
Focusing on Teaching and Learning	Teacher	3.21	IP
	School Heads	3.72	MIP
Cultivating self-awareness and fostering growth in others	Teacher	3.17	IP
	School Heads	3.70	MIP
Building rapport	Teacher	3.14	IP
	School Heads	3.64	MIP

Legend: QD: Qualitative Description

1:00 – 1:49: *Very Poorly Practices (VPP)*

2:50 – 3:49: *Intensively Practiced (IP)*

1:50 – 2:49: *Poorly Practiced (PP)*

3:50 – 4:00: *Most Intensively Practiced (MIP)*

The results show a consistent pattern across all leadership domains, with school heads rating their own leadership higher than teachers did. In Leading Strategically, teachers assigned a mean rating of 3.23, while school heads rated themselves 3.66. Managing School Operations and Resources received the highest mean rating from school heads at 3.81, with teachers rating it 3.24. In Focusing on Teaching and Learning, teachers gave a mean of 3.21, while school heads rated themselves 3.72. For Cultivating Self-Awareness and Fostering Growth in Others, teachers' mean was 3.17 compared to 3.70 from school heads. Lastly, in Building Rapport, teachers assigned a mean of 3.14, while school heads rated themselves 3.64. In short, school heads consistently rated their leadership as Most Intensively Practiced, while teachers perceived leadership practices as Intensively Practiced across all domains, indicating a moderate level of leadership as experienced by teachers.

Table 2. Level of Performance as Assessed by Teachers (103) and School heads

Indicators	Classification	Mean	QD
School leadership	Teachers	3.24	IP
	School Heads	3.60	MIP
Curriculum and Instruction	Teachers	3.31	IP
	School Heads	3.69	MIP
Accountability and continuous improvement	Teachers	3.30	IP
	School Heads	3.81	MIP
Management of Resources	Teachers	3.21	IP
	School Heads	3.70	MIP

Legend: QD: Qualitative Description

1:00 – 1:49: Very Poorly Practices (VPP)

2:50 – 3:49: Intensively Practiced (IP)

1:50 – 2:49: Poorly Practiced (PP)

3:50 – 4:00: Most Intensively Practiced (MIP)

The comparison of school head performance across key domains shows that school heads rated themselves higher than teachers did. In School Leadership, teachers assigned a mean of 3.24, while school heads rated themselves 3.60. In Curriculum and Instruction, teachers gave a mean of 3.31, and school heads rated themselves 3.69. For Accountability and Continuous Improvement, teachers' mean rating was 3.30 compared to 3.81 from school heads. Lastly, in Management of Resources, teachers rated 3.21, while school heads gave themselves 3.70.

Overall, school heads consistently rated their performance as Most Intensively Practiced, whereas teachers perceived it as Intensively Practiced. This indicates a moderate level of performance as experienced by teachers, with school heads viewing their performance as higher across all assessed domains.

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal a consistent pattern across all leadership domains, with school heads rating their leadership higher than teachers did. In Leading Strategically, school heads perceived their leadership as Most Intensively Practiced, while teachers rated it as Intensively Practiced. The same pattern emerged in Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Cultivating Self-Awareness and Fostering Growth in Others, and Building Rapport. Overall, school heads consistently perceive their leadership as highly intensive, while teachers experience it at a moderate level, reflecting a gap in perception that aligns with previous studies on leadership evaluation mismatches (Montague, 2017; Kiral, 2017).

The domain of Managing School Operations and Resources received the highest mean from school heads, indicating confidence in operational management such as budgeting, resource allocation, and infrastructure oversight. However, teachers may not fully experience or observe these practices in their day-to-day instructional work, as leadership actions related to operations are often administrative and less visible. This supports the assertion of Netolicky (2020) and Bush and Ng (2019) that leadership effectiveness is strengthened when operational processes are transparent and participatory. In the context of this study, limited visibility may have contributed to teachers' more moderate ratings despite school heads' high self-assessments.

Perception gaps are particularly salient in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), where school heads face compounded challenges related to limited infrastructure, professional isolation, and resource constraints (Rivera, 2022; Gonzales & Mendoza, 2022). While these contextual challenges may necessitate a strong focus on administrative and compliance-oriented tasks, such emphasis can unintentionally reduce opportunities for instructional engagement and relational leadership. As noted by Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), leadership practices influence teaching and learning primarily when they are visible, consistent, and directly connected to classroom realities.

The assessment of school head performance followed a similar pattern, with teachers rating School Leadership, Curriculum and Instruction, Accountability and Continuous Improvement, and Management of Resources lower than school heads rated themselves. These findings suggest that school heads may overestimate the reach and impact of their initiatives. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) emphasized that leadership effectiveness is mediated through teacher motivation, trust, and professional engagement, underscoring the importance of aligning leadership actions with teacher experience.

Examining the performance domains further, School Leadership may be perceived by teachers as directive rather than collaborative, while efforts in Curriculum and Instruction may be experienced as aligned with policy requirements but insufficiently supportive of classroom practice. Accountability and Continuous Improvement initiatives, though necessary for SBM compliance, may be viewed as administrative obligations rather than tools for professional growth. Similarly, Management of Resources, while efficiently handled by school heads, may not always translate into tangible instructional support. These observations are consistent with Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015), who argued that misalignment between leadership intent and teacher perception can weaken relational trust and reduce collaborative engagement.

To strengthen the discussion, it is important to acknowledge methodological limitations that may have influenced these findings. The use of convenience sampling and reliance on self-reported survey data may have contributed to response bias, particularly in the self-assessment of school heads. Teachers' perceptions may likewise be shaped by individual expectations and experiences. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but suggest the need for cautious interpretation and further validation through additional research approaches.

From an SBM perspective, the findings reinforce the need to translate administrative leadership into teacher-centered and participatory practices. Strengthening feedback mechanisms, increasing transparency in decision-making, and expanding opportunities for instructional collaboration may help bridge perception gaps. In GIDA contexts, where leadership visibility and relational trust are especially critical, aligning school heads' self-perceptions with teachers' lived experiences can enhance leadership effectiveness, teacher engagement, and overall school performance.

In terms of policy and leadership development implications, the findings of this study carry important implications for educational policy and leadership development under the School-Based Management framework. Persistent perception gaps between school heads and teachers suggest the need for leadership standards and evaluation systems that incorporate multi-source feedback rather than relying solely on self-assessment or compliance indicators.

At the policy level, professional development programs for school heads particularly those assigned to GIDA schools should emphasize participatory leadership, instructional coaching, and relational trust-building alongside administrative competencies. Leadership training should be context-sensitive, recognizing the unique challenges of geographic isolation, limited resources, and teacher workload.

For school-level practice, principals are encouraged to strengthen mechanisms for teacher participation in decision-making, increase transparency in resource management, and prioritize visible instructional support. Establishing regular feedback channels can help align leadership intentions with teacher experiences, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of SBM implementation.

By addressing both structural and relational dimensions of leadership, policy-makers and practitioners can better support school heads in translating decentralized authority into meaningful improvements in teaching, learning, and school governance, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research titled Leadership Practices and Performance of School Heads in Geographically Isolated And Disadvantaged Areas: Implications for School-Based Management. The study was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings.

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