

Life and Works of School Heads in Integrated Public Schools: A Descriptive Phenomenology

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Abstract

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges confronted by School Heads (SH) in Integrated Public Schools, guided by the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). Through interviews, inspections, and observations, the study identified four overarching themes. Firstly, it unraveled the immense workload and stress experienced by School Heads, emphasizing the necessity for a delicate balance between administrative tasks, financial management, and curriculum oversight across elementary, junior high school, and senior high school levels. Secondly, the study shed light on the complexities of curricular transitions, exposing the challenges associated with managing diverse educational programs and addressing the specific needs of each level. Thirdly, it highlighted the tedious and time-consuming nature of financial management in integrated schools, emphasizing the need for streamlined procedures and additional support structures. Lastly, the research delved into the dynamics of building connections and managing relationships within the diverse school community, emphasizing the pivotal role of effective leadership skills. These findings hold implications for policymakers and practitioners, offering insights into the unique challenges faced by School Heads in integrated educational settings and suggesting avenues for targeted interventions and support mechanisms. The study contributes to the broader discourse on educational leadership, providing a foundation for future research endeavors in the context of integrated school systems.

Keywords: School Leadership, Integrated Public Schools, Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), Multifaceted Responsibilities, Curriculum Challenges

Introduction

Leading and managing public integrated schools seems to be challenging. This line is often heard from the school heads who are already tenured in service and have been experiencing managing integrated school in the Department of Education. Integrated school is a blended system of elementary and high school managed and led by only one school head in one campus. This scheme was espoused by the Department of Education to expand accessibility to basic education with the commitment to establish a school in every barangay not having an elementary school and in every town without a high school, organize multi-grade classrooms, completion of incomplete elementary schools, and provision of basic instructional materials, facilities, and equipment at the elementary and high school levels (Lino, 2018).

The idea of Lino (2018) is affirmed in the MATATAG agenda of the Secretary of Education which covers four critical components such as **MA**ke the curriculum relevant to produce competent and job-ready, active, and responsible citizens; **TA**ke steps to accelerate delivery of basic education facilities and services; **TA**ke good care of learners by promoting learner well-being, inclusive education, and a positive learning environment; and **GI**ve support to teachers to teach better. The MATATAG program hopes to address basic education challenges particularly on access and quality which pushes the mantra “no children of school age shall be left behind” (Department of Education 2023).

In relation to the first pledge, various elementary schools across the country have been turned into integrated schools to ensure that students who graduated from elementary schools and must travel several kilometers to the nearest high school to complete their basic education. According to observations, a lot of elementary graduates, particularly those from remote Barangays, may find it difficult to go to the next level of education because there is no accessible high school in the area, or that there is a high school, but it is several kilometers away (Lino, 2018).

With this reality, the Division of Cebu City has established integrated schools in the mountain barangays to provide elementary school graduates with the opportunity to finish their basic education. Seven elementary schools have been converted into integrated schools which cater complete secondary curriculum including senior high school. However, the conversion of these elementary schools posed interesting challenges to the present school heads since they are now managing both elementary and secondary programs including Senior High School in one campus which eventually increases their responsibilities and obligation. They are apprehensive of their performance in leading and managing integrated schools. The performance of School Heads is appraised based on their key results areas namely leading the school strategically, managing school operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, and building connections (Department of Education, 2020).

Various studies had been conducted about educational management and leadership along with Basic Education Research Fund (BERF) Program, but no study has been initiated documenting the practices and difficulties of school heads in leading and managing integrated public schools has been recorded or published yet in the BERF Program facility. Through this research, it is expected that crucial information from School Heads manning public integrated schools in mountain barangays will be gathered thus providing opportunity for the researcher to aptly

describe their lived experiences. The results of this study will be reported to the higher authorities of the Department of Education, Region VII for appropriate interventions.

Literature Review

A literature review examines books, scholarly papers, and any other materials related to a specific issue, field of research, or theory, and gives a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in connection to the research problem under consideration. Literature reviews are intended to provide an overview of the sources you used when researching a certain issue and to show your readers how your research fits into a larger field of study (Fink, 2014).

School Manager. As stipulated in DepEd Order No. 17, s. 1997 titled, "Adopting a Policy of Empowering School Principals," all public elementary and secondary school principals are vested with instructional administrative and fiscal autonomy for a more effective and efficient delivery of quality basic education. This department directive is affirmed by RA 9155 which states that "the school head or principal, who may be aided by an assistant principal, must be both an instructional leader and an administrative manager. For the implementation of quality educational programs, projects, and services, the school head shall build a team with the school teachers/learning facilitators. A core group of non-teaching employees will be in charge of the school's administrative, financial, and auxiliary functions.

RA 9155 spelled out the authority, accountability and responsibility of public school heads such as: 1) Setting the mission, vision, goals and objectives of the school; 2) Creating an environment within the school that is conducive to teaching and learning; 3) Implementing, monitoring and assessing the school curriculum and being accountable for higher learning outcomes; 4) Developing the school education program and school improvement plan; 5) Offering educational programs, projects and services which provide equitable opportunities for all learners in the community; 6) Introducing new and innovative modes of instruction to achieve higher learning outcomes; 7) Administering and managing all personnel, physical and fiscal resources of the school; 8) Recommending the staffing complement of the school based on its needs; 9) Encouraging and enhancing staff development; 10) Establishing school and community networks and encouraging the active participation of teacher organizations, non-academic personnel of public schools, and parents-teachers-community associations; 11) Accepting donations, gifts, bequests and grants in accordance with existing laws and policy of the department for the purpose of upgrading teachers/learning facilitators' competencies, improving and expanding school facilities and providing instructional materials and equipment. Such donations or grants must be reported to the division superintendents; and 12) Performing such other functions as may be assigned by the Secretary, Regional Director, and Schools Division Superintendents where they belong.

In line with DepEd Order 17, s. 1997 and RA 9155, Department Order No. 24, s. 2020, "National Adoption and Implementation of Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads", was issued by the Department of Education professionalizing standards for public school heads in the country. It clearly defines the key results areas of school heads such as leading strategically, managing school operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self

and others, and building connections. The demonstration of School Heads on their roles and responsibilities is categorized by career stage.

Career Stage 1 School Heads (aspiring school heads) have acquired the prerequisite qualifications for the school head position. They demonstrate basic knowledge and understanding of the authority, responsibility, and accountability expected of school heads as described in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads. Career Stage 2 School Heads apply the required knowledge and understanding of the authority, responsibility, and accountability expected of them as described in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads. They are professionally independent in performing their functions as instructional leaders and administrative managers. Career Stage 3 School Heads consistently display in-depth knowledge and understanding of the authority, responsibility, and accountability expected of them as described in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads.

Career Stage 4 School Heads consistently exhibit mastery in their application of the authority, responsibility, and accountability expected of them as described in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads. They model the highest standards of practice in performing their functions as instructional leaders and administrative managers. They empower the wider school community in the implementation of school policies, programs, projects, and activities towards school community transformation. They commit to inspiring all school personnel and fellow school leaders to continuously pursue excellence and create a lifelong impact in the school and community. They exhibit advanced skills in performing their functions as instructional leaders and administrative managers.

School Leader. This domain covers those actions in instructional leadership (e.g. assessment for learning, development and implementation, instructional supervision and technical assistance that school administrators take or delegate to others to promote good teaching and high level learning among pupils/students. Effective leadership is the core of every successful school. This domain emphasizes that effective school leaders collaboratively create a vision and establish a climate for teachers, non-teaching personnel and learners to reach their highest level of achievement (Lino, 2018).

The notion of Lino (2018) affirms the National Competency Standards for School Heads are contained in the DepEd Order No. 32 series of 2010, also known as “The National Adoption and Implementation of the National Competency-Based Standards for School Heads Framework”. This framework defines the different dimensions of being an effective school head. It clearly states that an effective school head is one who can implement continuous school improvement, who can produce better learning outcomes among its pupils/students and who can help change institutional culture among others. The competencies identified for the school heads are classified into seven domains for school leadership and management. These include school leadership, instructional leadership, creating a student-centered learning climate, HR management and professional development, parent involvement and community partnership, school management and operations, and personal and professional attributes and interpersonal effectiveness.

Effective leaders collaborate with others around them, seeking constructive criticism and reflecting on how to improve things. They understand the value of collaboration in releasing collective genius, but they also understand how to set boundaries (Driscoll, 2018). School improvement is unusual without competent leadership, and school leadership has a greater influence on student accomplishment than classroom teaching. Global School Leaders' latest evidence review report offers a complicated and ever-changing picture of school leaders, with their roles, duties, and influence differing around the world (Ae.ruszkiewicz@unesco.org.,2023).

Furthermore, school administrators in the twenty-first century will prioritize learning for themselves and the business. To develop learning organizations, apply systems thinking, design thinking, innovation, and disruption. They are students' and teachers' learning companions (Driscoll, 2019).

Domain of Inquiry

The study uncovers the lived experiences of School Heads assigned to manage integrated public schools in the Division of Cebu City. Explicitly, the study seeks to gather information through the following questions:

1. How do school heads manage integrated public schools?
2. What is the essence of their experiences in managing integrated public school?

Scope and Limitations

This study will be conducted in seven integrated public schools in the mountain barangays of Cebu City Division. The conduct of this study is solely to determine how the School Heads manage their assigned integrated schools during the school year 2022-2023. The outline of this study is adapted from DepEd Order 16, s. 2017, "Research Management Guidelines", however with few modifications to make the study more scholarly structured.

Research Methodology

This section discusses design, sampling technique, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations of the study.

Design

This study utilizes descriptive phenomenology qualitative research. This design is an excellent tool in achieving the objectives of the study which is to unfold the different experiences of school heads and identify its essence. Using the design, the participants can deeply express their feelings based on their experiences and perspectives as school heads in integrated public school which, according to Blankinship (2010), could help the researcher understand the social and psychological phenomena they have undergone through. Hence, in achieving the objectives of the study, descriptive phenomenology design is fitting for it attempts to look into the various experiences and personal encounters of school heads in managing the integrated public schools in the new normal setting.

Participants

The participants of this study are the seven School Heads designated to manage integrated public schools in the Division of Cebu City. The basis for sampling in phenomenology is that participants had experienced the phenomenon under investigation, and that they are willing to articulate their experiences with the researcher for the purpose of carrying out the agenda of the study (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Hence, purposive sampling is used in this study. Purposive sampling involves the researcher making a judgement about the participants for the study. According to Patton (2001), the power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance in the study.

Data Collection

This process involves several stages, including pre-data collection, actual data collection, and post-data collection. Pre-data collection involves planning and preparation before the data collection process begins. Actual data collection involves in-person interviews and observations with the participants. During the actual interview, the participants are assured of the confidentiality of their responses or any information they disclosed during the interview. It also is assured that the participants are given the prerogative to choose the kind of question they wish to answer. Their utterances will be encoded during the interview. Post data collection involves organization, transcription of the encoded utterances and responses from the participants to draw meaningful insights.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved in this study is defined in four steps: bracketing, horizontalization, clustering, and textualization. Bracketing means setting aside one's own biases and assumptions to focus on the data (Sorsa et al., 2015). Horizontalization means treating every statement or expression as equally important and relevant. Clustering means grouping the statements into themes or categories based on their similarities and differences. Textualization means writing a comprehensive description of the phenomena and their essences (Projects, 2023).

Bracketing. The researchers in this phase will organize the gathered data giving premium to the utterances of the participants without any suppositions and biases. The organization of data is based on the three phases of asking questions during interview such as preliminary, developing, and wrap up.

Horizontalization. After the organization of data, the researchers examine the utterances which emerged during the preliminary, developing and wrap-up questions to predetermine themes free from personal assumptions and biases.

Clustering. The researchers will group the responses of the participants into themes based on their similarities and variations to determine the motives and meaning of their actions.

Textualization. The researchers will examine and further elaborate the themes generated to deeply describe the essence of the experiences of the participants in leading and managing integrated public schools.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be explained and given to each participant prior to the conduct of the interview. Each participant is given a pseudonym. Names in transcripts will be changed or deleted. Field notes with their pseudonyms will be kept with utmost confidentiality while their other information will be stored in a goggle drive where only the researchers have access to the data. Ethical considerations are very critical to any research, and proper steps must be taken to ensure that participants are fully aware of their participation and role according to Skordis-Worrall, Haghparast-Bidgoli, Batura & Hughes (2015) as cited by Pecson G. & Pogoy A. (2021) in their research titled “Transitioning to the New Normal in Education: A Case Study of Chinese School Leaders in the Philippines”. As such, to safeguard the participants’ rights and privacy, the names of the schools where they are assigned in this report will not be disclosed.

Findings and Discussion

The study delves into the nuanced realm of leadership within Integrated Public Schools, unraveling multifaceted dimensions through interviews, inspections, and observations with School Heads (SH) based on the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). Four prominent themes emerge, shedding light on the intricate challenges faced by these educational leaders in managing diverse responsibilities, navigating curricular transitions, grappling with financial management struggles, and fostering connections within the school community.

Theme 1: Multifaceted Responsibilities in Integrated Public Schools

School heads in integrated public schools experience a complex array of responsibilities, encompassing administrative, financial, and curricular aspects across elementary, junior high school (JHS), and senior high school (SHS) levels. The overarching theme revolves around the multifaceted nature of their roles, revealing challenges and stressors that significantly impact their ability to lead strategically.

The first strand, focusing on Vision, Mission, and Core Values, highlights a shift in emphasis towards management and administrative activities. The absence of dedicated support personnel compels school heads to handle these tasks independently, indicating a strain on their strategic leadership capacity.

The second strand delves into School Planning and Implementation, where the preparation of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) is described as an immense undertaking. This planning process extends across all three levels of basic education, adding complexity to the strategic planning required of school heads (SH2).

Under Program Design and Implementation, school heads express challenges arising from their background, whether coming from an elementary or secondary school. The transition involves grappling with unfamiliar curricula, offerings, immersion programs, and the management of irregular students. This underscores the need for specialized support and training during such transitions (SH4).

In Financial Management (Strand 2.2), the strain intensifies as school heads manage various checking accounts, liquidation processes, and financial matters for elementary, JHS, and SHS, including the feeding program. The absence of support personnel exacerbates the tedious nature of these financial responsibilities, consuming a significant amount of their time (Interviewee Response).

Theme 1 underscores the challenges faced in Managing School Operations and Resources. The strain extends to the procurement of supplies, facilities, and equipment, which requires school heads to leave the school during weekdays. Notably, this theme also encompasses the inherent opportunities in managing an integrated school accompanied by a sense of exhaustion and stress due to the colossal tasks and responsibilities involved (Nguyen, 2022)

The multifaceted responsibilities extend to Focusing on Teaching and Learning (Strand 3), where school heads express limitations in allocating time for instructional supervision. Prioritizing administrative management and financial tasks to meet deadlines restricts their ability to implement teaching standards and pedagogies effectively (Dayagbil, et al. 2021)

This theme encapsulates the intricate web of challenges school heads face in navigating the multifaceted responsibilities inherent in leading integrated public schools. Further exploration of this theme can provide insights into potential interventions and support mechanisms to enhance the strategic leadership of school heads in this context.

Theme 2: Navigating Curricular Transitions in Integrated Public Schools

A prevalent challenge emerges in the realm of integrated public schools - the intricate process of transitioning between curricula and programs across elementary, junior high school (JHS), and senior high school (SHS) levels. The responses from school heads shed light on the multifaceted challenges they face when moving between educational tiers, revealing a need for specialized support systems to enhance their effectiveness in this dynamic environment.

The theme intensifies in the School Planning and Implementation strand, where the preparation of School Improvement Plans (SIP) and Annual Implementation Plans (AIP) becomes a monumental task. Covering the three levels of basic education, namely elementary, JHS, and SHS, amplifies the complexity of planning, emphasizing the challenges of coordinating diverse curricular requirements (SH3).

In Program Design and Implementation, the challenges of transitioning from an elementary or secondary school background become evident. School heads cite unfamiliarity with curricular specifics, including offerings, immersion programs, tracks, strands, and the management of irregular students. This underscores the critical need for targeted training and support mechanisms during such curricular transitions (SH2).

The theme extends to Managing School Operations and Resources, particularly in Financial Management (Strand 2.2). The arduous task of managing finances, including multiple checking accounts, liquidation processes, and the feeding program across all educational levels, further magnifies the challenges posed by curricular transitions. This concurs to the study conducted by

the World Bank (2020) where it stressed that the absence of support personnel exacerbates the intricacies of financial management.

Theme 3: Financial Management Struggles in Integrated Schools

Within the realm of integrated public schools, a recurrent theme emerges surrounding the arduous nature of financial management. School heads, tasked with overseeing the financial intricacies of elementary, junior high school (JHS), and senior high school (SHS) levels, navigate a complex landscape fraught with challenges. This theme sheds light on the struggles encountered in the financial domain, exposing the intricacies of managing resources and funding in an integrated educational setting.

Under the domain of Leading Strategically, financial concerns surface in responses regarding the extensive administrative and management activities shouldered by school heads. The absence of additional support personnel amplifies the difficulties faced in executing financial responsibilities (SH4).

The Financial Management strand illuminates the formidable challenges in handling school finances and Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE). School heads recount the tedious nature of managing different checking accounts, engaging in liquidation processes, and juggling financial responsibilities, including the demanding feeding program. These challenges compound the stress experienced by school heads, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of financial management in integrated schools (SH5).

The struggles extend to School Facilities and Equipment, where procurement processes for supplies are constrained to weekdays. The lack of flexibility in procurement adds to the complex task of managing financial resources efficiently (Navarro, 2022). The theme underscores the need for targeted support mechanisms, streamlined financial processes, and potential solutions to alleviate the intricate burdens associated with managing finances across diverse educational levels.

Theme 4: Diverse School Community Dynamics in Integrated Schools

The leadership landscape in integrated public schools unfolds a compelling narrative around the intricate dynamics of managing a diverse school community. This theme underscores the multifaceted challenges inherent in building connections and navigating relationships among educators spanning elementary, junior high school (JHS), and senior high school (SHS) levels. The school head's role in fostering a cohesive and harmonious educational environment becomes paramount, requiring adept leadership skills to bridge gaps and cultivate collaboration.

Within the domain of Building Connections, school heads delve into the complexities of managing teachers from distinct educational levels. The struggles outlined in response to diverse culture highlight the need for nuanced leadership to navigate the unique challenges presented by the amalgamation of different educational backgrounds (Interviewee Response).

Further elaboration in the Management of School Organizations strand sheds light on the workload of an Integrated School (IS) head. The enormity of tasks, coupled with the complexities of handling the curriculum in three distinct areas, contributes to a stressful work environment. This theme emphasizes the critical need for effective leadership to balance the demands of diverse responsibilities across elementary, JHS, and SHS levels (SH1).

The challenges embedded in Theme 4 resonate with the broader vision of establishing a seamless transition between Elementary, JHS, and SHS. The pursuit of enhancing the lives of individuals in the community aligns with the significance of school heads' fulfillment, happiness, inspiration, and satisfaction, echoing findings by Kilag, et al. (2023). Leadership emerges as a linchpin, critical for cultivating a positive school culture that enables school heads and staff to find fulfillment in their professional roles and responsibilities (Kilag, et al., 2023).

These themes encapsulate the multifaceted nature of the roles and challenges faced by school heads in integrated public schools. Further analysis and exploration of these themes can provide a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved and offer insights into potential areas for improvement and support.

Conclusion

This study has provided a deep and insightful exploration into the leadership challenges faced by School Heads (SH) in Integrated Public Schools, guided by the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). The four identified themes encapsulate the multifaceted nature of their roles, the hurdles encountered during curricular transitions, the financial management struggles, and the dynamics of building connections within a diverse school community.

The first theme highlights the immense workload borne by School Heads, emphasizing the need for a delicate balance between administrative duties, financial management, and the oversight of curricula across different education levels. The second theme underscores the challenges associated with transitioning between curricular levels, shedding light on the intricacies of managing diverse educational programs and addressing the specific needs of each level.

The third theme unravels the financial management struggles experienced by School Heads, revealing the tedious and time-consuming nature of handling multiple financial aspects, including liquidation processes and the management of various accounts. This theme emphasizes the need for streamlined financial procedures and additional support structures to alleviate the burden on School Heads.

Lastly, the fourth theme delves into the complexities of building connections and managing relationships within the diverse school community. The study reveals that effective leadership skills are crucial to fostering collaboration among teachers from different levels, ultimately creating a positive working environment.

In the broader context, these findings hold implications for educational policymakers, administrators, and practitioners aiming to enhance the leadership efficacy in Integrated Public

Schools. The identified challenges and themes provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions, support mechanisms, and professional development programs tailored to the unique needs of School Heads operating in integrated educational settings.

As we reflect on the narratives shared by the School Heads, it becomes evident that while Integrated Public Schools offer opportunities for holistic education, there is a pressing need for strategic interventions to address the identified challenges. By doing so, we can empower School Heads to fulfill their roles more effectively, ultimately contributing to the improvement of overall educational outcomes and the well-being of the school community.

This study, therefore, serves as a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on educational leadership, particularly in the context of integrated school systems, and paves the way for future research endeavors aimed at refining and expanding our understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in these educational settings.

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