

Leading from the Margins: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences and Innovative Practices of School Leaders in North 1 District Division of Gingoog City

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and innovative leadership practices of school leaders assigned to geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, Philippines. Guided by transcendental phenomenology and informed by adaptive and distributed leadership perspectives, the study employed a qualitative research design involving five purposively selected school leaders from three public elementary schools and two public secondary schools. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews using a validated semi-structured interview guide and analyzed through bracketing, horizontalization, coding, thematic clustering, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. Three major themes emerged: emotional and professional growth through adversity, scarcity of resources and financial improvisation, and innovative leadership practices through collaboration and shared governance. The findings revealed that school leaders experienced geographical isolation, emotional distress, transportation difficulties, inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and instructional challenges. Despite these constraints, they demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness through personal financial sacrifices, external resource mobilization, community partnerships, school-based income-generating initiatives, and collaborative decision-making. The study concluded that leadership in geographically disadvantaged schools extends beyond conventional administration and requires sustained commitment, stakeholder empowerment, and context-responsive innovation. Strengthening leadership development, mentoring, psychosocial support, and community collaboration was recommended to address the challenges encountered by school leaders. The study aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by addressing educational disparities and emphasizing collaborative institutional support. Its sustainability contribution lies in informing educational governance, institutional resilience, community participation, and context-responsive policies that may help sustain equitable educational services in marginalized communities.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership; Community Engagement; Distributed Leadership; Educational Sustainability; Innovative Practices; School Leadership; Transcendental Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Educational leadership plays a significant role in improving instructional quality, organizational effectiveness, and equitable access to education. The responsibilities of school leaders have expanded beyond administrative supervision to include curriculum implementation, teacher development, resource management, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional innovation. These responsibilities become particularly challenging in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), where school leaders must sustain educational services despite environmental, logistical, and institutional constraints. Contemporary research emphasizes the importance of adaptive, instructional, and distributed leadership in promoting organizational resilience and sustainable school improvement (Harris et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Within this context, the present study examined the lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and innovative practices of school leaders assigned to geographically isolated public schools in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City.

School leadership has evolved into a multidimensional responsibility encompassing instructional improvement, organizational development, educational innovation, and community engagement. Effective school leaders establish institutional directions, support teacher development, strengthen collaboration, and create conditions conducive to continuous educational improvement. UNESCO (2024) emphasized that educational leadership is central to improving learning outcomes and strengthening educational systems, particularly when leadership responsibilities are supported by appropriate preparation, professional development, and institutional resources. Similarly, Harris et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of distributed leadership in developing collective organizational capacity and strengthening school improvement practices. Contemporary educational environments require school leaders to respond to complex challenges arising from curriculum reforms, technological developments, institutional expectations, and changing learner needs. The experiences of educational leaders during periods of disruption demonstrate the importance of flexibility, organizational resilience, and responsive decision-making in maintaining educational services (Dare & Saleem, 2022). Furthermore, transformational leadership contributes to school improvement by strengthening organizational commitment, facilitating collaborative practices, and promoting institutional change (Toprak et al., 2023). These leadership responsibilities become more demanding in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools, where geographical barriers, limited infrastructure, insufficient instructional resources, and restricted professional support may affect school operations. School leaders working under these conditions frequently perform overlapping administrative, instructional, and community-oriented responsibilities. Philippine research on school leadership has demonstrated that resource management, stakeholder participation, curriculum contextualization, and teacher support are important adaptive practices during educational disruptions (Famero, 2024). Related phenomenological research involving school heads in geographically isolated multigrade settings also identified logistical difficulties, emotional pressures, resilience, and community engagement as significant dimensions of leadership experience (Losa & Ederio, 2025). In North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, several public schools are situated in geographically remote communities characterized by mountainous terrain, difficult transportation conditions, and limited access to educational resources, as described in the study setting. These circumstances require school leaders to exercise resourcefulness, adaptability, and collaboration while maintaining instructional quality and implementing educational policies. Understanding their experiences is therefore essential to examining how leadership is practiced and sustained within marginalized educational environments.

Recent literature identifies several interconnected dimensions of educational leadership relevant to geographically isolated schools, particularly instructional leadership, distributed leadership, adaptive leadership, school-based management, and educational innovation. Instructional leadership emphasizes the responsibility of school leaders to improve teaching and learning through curriculum supervision, instructional monitoring, teacher mentoring, and professional development. Lai and Lien (2025) identified curriculum, instruction, and assessment management as central dimensions of principal instructional leadership. Similarly, Steinberg and Yang (2022) demonstrated the potential of structured principal professional development to strengthen teacher effectiveness and educational outcomes. These findings suggest the importance of continuous instructional support, particularly for teachers working in challenging educational environments. Distributed leadership emphasizes shared decision-making, collaboration, and collective responsibility among school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. Harris et al. (2022) explained that distributed leadership provides an organizational approach through which leadership responsibilities can extend beyond formally designated administrators. Meyer et al. (2023) further identified goal setting, teacher participation, collaborative structures, and motivational support as important leadership practices that facilitate organizational change. Likewise, Gningue et al. (2022) examined the relationship between teacher leadership and school climate, reinforcing the relevance of collaborative professional environments to school development. Adaptive leadership addresses the capacity of educational leaders to respond to uncertain and complex circumstances through flexible strategies and context-responsive decision-making. Dare and Saleem (2022) emphasized the changing responsibilities of school principals during educational disruptions, while Famero (2024) identified adaptive practices involving resource management, stakeholder engagement, curriculum contextualization, and teacher support among Philippine public school principals. These studies provide relevant perspectives for understanding how school leaders navigate challenges that cannot be adequately

addressed through routine administrative procedures. School-based management provides another important perspective by emphasizing participatory governance, school-level decision-making, and continuous organizational improvement. The Department of Education (2024c) institutionalized the revised School-Based Management System to strengthen decentralized decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, and school improvement. This governance framework is particularly relevant to schools that require localized responses to resource limitations and varying community needs. Educational innovation also emerges as a significant leadership dimension. Berkovich and Hassan (2024) examined principals' digital instructional leadership and its relationship with teachers' motivation and perceived student learning in online educational environments. Ninković et al. (2023) identified the importance of an innovative school climate in supporting technology integration, although their findings did not establish a significant direct relationship between principal support and technology integration. These studies indicate that educational innovation depends on organizational conditions and cannot be attributed exclusively to individual leadership practices. Collectively, the literature suggests that effective educational leadership involves the integration of instructional guidance, organizational adaptability, collaborative governance, and context-sensitive innovation. However, the relevance and application of these leadership dimensions may differ according to the geographical, institutional, and socioeconomic circumstances of individual schools.

Globally, educational leadership is increasingly recognized as an essential component of educational quality, inclusion, and institutional improvement. UNESCO (2024) emphasized that school leaders influence educational outcomes through instructional guidance, collaboration, organizational management, and the development of supportive learning environments. International evidence also underscores the importance of strengthening leadership preparation and institutional support to address inequalities affecting disadvantaged educational communities. In the Philippines, improving educational quality remains a national priority. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) reported that Filipino learners participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 performed below the OECD averages in mathematics, reading, and science. These findings highlight broader concerns regarding educational quality and equitable learning opportunities, although they do not independently establish the specific conditions of schools in North 1 District. In response to persistent educational challenges, the Department of Education introduced the MATATAG Curriculum through DepEd Order No. 010, s. 2024, which established policy guidelines for its implementation from Kindergarten to Grade 10 (Department of Education, 2024b). The reform emphasizes foundational learning competencies, curriculum decongestion, and improved instructional delivery. Subsequently, DepEd Order No. 012, s. 2024 introduced implementation flexibility to accommodate differences in school contexts, particularly concerning instructional schedules, teacher availability, and classroom resources (Department of Education, 2024a). The revised School-Based Management System further emphasizes school-level decision-making, stakeholder participation, continuous improvement, and institutional accountability (Department of Education, 2024c). Together, these policies highlight the responsibility of school leaders to translate national educational directions into practical school-level initiatives. At the local level, geographically isolated public schools in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, experience geographical and resource-related challenges that may complicate the implementation of national educational reforms. School leaders must coordinate instructional activities, manage limited resources, support teachers, engage community stakeholders, and maintain educational services despite difficult operating conditions. These contextual realities provide the foundation for examining how educational leadership is experienced and practiced within geographically marginalized communities.

The study was informed by three complementary perspectives: transcendental phenomenology, adaptive leadership, and distributed leadership. These perspectives provide philosophical, behavioral, and organizational lenses for understanding how school leaders experience and respond to the complexities of leading geographically isolated educational institutions. Transcendental phenomenology, associated with the scholarship of Clark Moustakas, provides the primary methodological and philosophical foundation of the study. This approach emphasizes understanding the meanings and essential structures of human experience through participants' personal descriptions. Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022) explained that phenomenological inquiry enables researchers to examine complex educational experiences through systematic description, reflection, and analysis of participants' lived realities. Accordingly, the present study focused on understanding how school leaders interpreted their experiences of geographical isolation, resource limitations, leadership responsibilities, and institutional challenges rather than measuring leadership performance. Adaptive leadership, associated with Ronald Heifetz, provides a behavioral perspective for understanding how school leaders respond to complex situations requiring adjustments beyond established administrative solutions. Within geographically isolated schools, adaptive leadership may involve contextualizing instructional activities, addressing resource constraints, managing organizational uncertainty, and developing alternative strategies for maintaining educational services. Contemporary Philippine research has identified resource management, stakeholder involvement, teacher support, and curriculum contextualization as important adaptive leadership practices during educational crises (Famero, 2024). Such perspectives are relevant to examining the coping strategies and innovative practices of school leaders operating under persistent institutional constraints. Distributed leadership, associated with James Spillane,

provides an organizational perspective emphasizing leadership as a collaborative practice involving administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. Harris et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of shared leadership processes and collective organizational responsibility, while Meyer et al. (2023) demonstrated how principal leadership can facilitate teacher collaboration and organizational change. In geographically isolated schools, this perspective helps explain how school leaders may mobilize available human resources, establish partnerships, and encourage shared responsibility in sustaining school operations. Together, these perspectives establish an integrated conceptual understanding of the phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology guides the examination of lived experiences and meanings; adaptive leadership informs the interpretation of responses to complex challenges; and distributed leadership provides a framework for understanding collaborative practices and stakeholder participation. Their integration supports a comprehensive exploration of the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, innovative practices, and leadership insights of school leaders in geographically isolated and disadvantaged communities.

Contemporary educational leadership research has substantially contributed to understanding instructional leadership, organizational improvement, teacher collaboration, professional development, and school governance. Studies have examined the relationships between leadership practices and school improvement processes (Meyer et al., 2023), distributed leadership and organizational capacity (Harris et al., 2022), principal professional development and educational outcomes (Steinberg & Yang, 2022), and transformational leadership in educational systems (Toprak et al., 2023). However, these investigations do not fully explain the meanings that school leaders construct from their personal experiences of managing geographically isolated educational institutions. Emerging Philippine research has also examined the experiences of school leaders working under challenging conditions. Famero (2024) explored adaptive leadership practices among public secondary school principals during the COVID-19 educational crisis, while Losa and Ederio (2025) investigated the lived experiences of school heads managing geographically isolated, clustered multigrade schools in the Division of Dinagat Islands. Although these studies offer important contextual insights, their specific research settings and areas of emphasis differ from the present investigation. The research gap therefore concerns the need for a context-specific phenomenological understanding of how school leaders in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, experience geographical isolation, interpret their leadership responsibilities, respond to institutional challenges, and develop adaptive and innovative practices. This investigation addresses the gap by examining the phenomenon from the perspectives of school leaders who directly experience these conditions. Specifically, the study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach involving five purposively selected school leaders assigned to geographically isolated public elementary and secondary schools during the first semester of School Year 2025–2026. Through in-depth interviews, the investigation explored their lived experiences, attached meanings, encountered challenges, coping mechanisms, innovative practices, and derived insights. Rather than evaluating administrative effectiveness or establishing statistical relationships, the study sought to develop a deeper understanding of educational leadership within marginalized communities.

The study primarily aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly its commitment to inclusive, equitable, and effective educational opportunities. By investigating the experiences of school leaders in geographically isolated and disadvantaged communities, the study addresses institutional and contextual challenges that may affect the continuity and quality of educational services. Its implications are particularly relevant to educational quality, supportive learning environments, and the professional development of educational personnel, consistent with the emphasis on effective educational leadership identified by UNESCO (2024). The study also supports the broader objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by examining educational challenges associated with geographical marginalization and unequal access to institutional resources. Understanding these conditions may inform more equitable leadership development programs and context-responsive educational support mechanisms. The findings may assist educational policymakers in recognizing the differentiated needs of schools operating in disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, the study relates to Sustainable Development Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) through its emphasis on collaborative leadership, stakeholder participation, and school-community partnerships. Research on distributed leadership demonstrates the importance of collective responsibility in strengthening organizational processes and supporting institutional change (Harris et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2023). These principles are relevant to educational environments where community engagement and resource mobilization form part of school leadership. The study's contribution to these goals is primarily educational, institutional, and policy-oriented. Its findings may inform strategies consistent with the SDGs, although the study does not directly measure SDG indicators or establish improvements in educational outcomes.

The study contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by highlighting the role of educational leadership in strengthening institutional resilience, equitable educational access, community engagement, and responsive governance in geographically isolated schools. It emphasizes adaptive decision-making, resource management, stakeholder collaboration, and instructional continuity as essential elements of sustainable school improvement. The revised School-Based Management System promotes decentralized governance and continuous improvement (Department of Education, 2024c), while contemporary studies highlight collaboration and adaptability in

educational leadership (Harris et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings may inform context-responsive leadership development, institutional support, and educational policies that address geographical disadvantages. Overall, the study provides insights into sustaining inclusive, equitable, and community-centered education in marginalized communities.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, to understand the lived experiences of school leaders in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs). Qualitative research facilitates an in-depth understanding of human experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural contexts (Hennink et al., 2020). The phenomenological approach was appropriate because the investigation focused on understanding participants' experiences rather than measuring leadership effectiveness or establishing relationships among variables. The study explored how school leaders interpreted their responsibilities, encountered challenges, developed adaptive and innovative practices, and derived meaning from their experiences. Consistent with Moustakas' (1994) approach, the researcher applied epoche or bracketing to minimize personal assumptions and biases. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document the researcher's reflections and support faithful representation of participants' narratives.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in five geographically isolated public schools in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, Misamis Oriental, Northern Mindanao, Philippines, during School Year 2025–2026. The participating schools comprised three public elementary schools and two public secondary schools located in remote and mountainous communities characterized by difficult transportation, limited infrastructure, and restricted access to educational resources. To preserve institutional anonymity, the participating schools were designated as Schools A, B, C, D, and E. These schools experienced varying geographical challenges, including steep mountain roads, impassable routes during heavy rainfall, lengthy walking distances, and river crossings. Such conditions affected school accessibility, resource delivery, instructional operations, and stakeholder engagement. North 1 District was purposively selected because its geographical and institutional characteristics provided an appropriate setting for investigating educational leadership under resource-constrained conditions.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The participants consisted of five school leaders assigned to geographically isolated and disadvantaged public schools in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City. Three participants were male, while two were female. They represented three public elementary schools and two public secondary schools. All participants were officially designated school leaders who had direct experience managing school operations, supervising teachers, implementing educational programs, and coordinating with community stakeholders in remote educational settings. Their firsthand experiences provided the primary source of qualitative information concerning leadership challenges, adaptive responses, coping mechanisms, and innovative practices within geographically marginalized communities.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to select five school leaders who possessed substantial firsthand experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This technique was consistent with the principles of transcendental phenomenology, which emphasize the richness and relevance of participants' experiences rather than statistical representation (Moustakas, 1994). The sample size was selected to facilitate detailed exploration of shared leadership experiences and the identification of meaningful themes. Participants were selected based on their official designation as public school leaders in geographically isolated schools, substantial experience in their current leadership context, direct involvement in school administration and stakeholder engagement, willingness to participate voluntarily, and ability to describe their experiences during in-depth interviews. School leaders assigned to non-geographically isolated schools, temporarily designated officers without substantial relevant experience, unavailable individuals, and those who declined or withdrew participation were excluded. The selection process ensured that all participants had direct and meaningful experience of educational leadership in geographically disadvantaged settings.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide designed to obtain detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. The instrument contained open-ended questions aligned with the study's research objectives and conceptual framework. It explored leadership experiences, meanings attached to those experiences, challenges encountered in managing remote schools, coping mechanisms, adaptive and innovative practices, and insights gained from leadership responsibilities. Follow-up and probing questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on significant experiences. The interview guide underwent content validation by three experts specializing in qualitative phenomenological research, educational

leadership and school administration, and language and research methodology. The validators evaluated the instrument's clarity, relevance, organization, comprehensibility, and alignment with the research objectives. Their recommendations guided the refinement of overlapping questions, simplification of technical language, inclusion of appropriate probing questions, and improvement of the interview sequence. The validated instrument was subsequently used during data collection, supplemented by audio recordings and field notes documenting relevant observations and contextual information.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic procedure beginning with the approval of the Dean of the Graduate School of Universidad de Dagupan. Formal permission was subsequently obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of Gingoog City, the Public Schools District Supervisor of North 1 District, and the respective school authorities. Qualified participants were identified according to the established inclusion criteria and personally invited to participate. Before the interviews, participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality safeguards. Written informed consent and permission for audio recording were secured. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at mutually convenient schedules in private and comfortable environments to encourage open discussion. The researcher used follow-up questions to clarify responses and obtain detailed descriptions while maintaining epoche or bracketing throughout the interviews. Field notes were also recorded to document non-verbal behaviors and contextual observations. Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed against the original recordings to ensure completeness and accuracy. Participants were contacted when clarification was necessary. The verified transcripts and accompanying field notes served as the primary materials for phenomenological analysis.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The qualitative data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological method, which emphasizes systematic examination of lived experiences to identify their essential meanings. The analysis began with verbatim transcription and repeated examination of interview recordings and transcripts to ensure familiarity with the participants' narratives. Throughout this process, the researcher practiced bracketing to minimize the influence of personal assumptions and prior experiences. The researcher subsequently conducted horizontalization by identifying significant statements related to the phenomenon and initially treating them as equally important. Relevant statements were coded, while redundant and overlapping expressions were eliminated. Related codes were organized into meaning units and clustered into emerging themes representing shared experiences, leadership challenges, coping mechanisms, and adaptive practices. These themes were supported by significant statements drawn directly from participants' narratives. Following thematic development, textural descriptions were formulated to explain what the participants experienced, while structural descriptions examined how geographical, institutional, organizational, and social conditions shaped those experiences. The textural and structural descriptions were integrated to establish the shared essence of educational leadership in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools. To strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by presenting selected participants with transcript summaries and preliminary interpretations for confirmation or clarification. Peer consultation with the research adviser further supported analytical consistency and methodological rigor. The resulting synthesis provided an understanding of the essential meanings and shared experiences of the participating school leaders.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical procedures intended to protect participants' rights, dignity, privacy, and welfare. Institutional permissions were secured before data collection, and participation was based on voluntary informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation, refuse to answer questions, or withdraw from the study without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through participant codes P1 to P5 and institutional pseudonyms Schools A to E. Identifying information was excluded from the research reports, while audio recordings, interview transcripts, field notes, and related documents were securely stored with access restricted to the researcher and dissertation adviser. All collected information was used exclusively for academic purposes in accordance with accepted research ethics and institutional guidelines.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Emotional and Professional Growth Through Adversity

3.1.1 Emotional Isolation and Psychological Adjustment

The findings revealed that school leaders experienced emotional and psychological challenges associated with geographical isolation, separation from family members, and unfamiliar working conditions. Participants described homesickness, emotional distress, overthinking, and difficulties adjusting to remote assignments. One participant expressed the stress of being separated from loved ones while managing expensive transportation and substantial administrative paperwork. Another emphasized the importance of physical, mental, and emotional strength in overcoming daily challenges. These experiences indicated that school leadership in remote

communities required continuous emotional adjustment alongside administrative and instructional responsibilities. These findings suggest that geographical isolation influences not only school operations but also the emotional well-being and professional experiences of educational leaders. The difficulties described by participants reflect the personal sacrifices associated with leadership assignments in remote communities. Losa and Ederio (2025) similarly identified emotional distress, isolation, personal sacrifice, and resilience among school heads managing geographically isolated multigrade schools in the Philippines. Dugasan et al. (2026) further emphasized that leadership in disadvantaged educational settings involves navigating challenges affecting personal well-being while maintaining institutional responsibilities. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing emotional resilience and professional support as relevant dimensions of educational leadership in geographically marginalized communities.

3.1.2 Geographical Challenges and Leadership Resilience

Participants identified difficult transportation conditions, mountainous terrain, flooding, landslides, and dangerous river crossings as recurring challenges affecting their daily leadership experiences. These geographical barriers limited their mobility, complicated school access, and made travel particularly difficult during adverse weather conditions. One participant described the constant danger posed by floods and landslides when traveling to and from the school. Despite these challenges, participants emphasized the need to remain physically and emotionally prepared to fulfill their leadership responsibilities. Their experiences demonstrated how geographical conditions shaped their daily decisions and required persistent adjustments to sustain school operations. These experiences illustrate how leadership in geographically isolated communities requires continuous adaptation to environmental and logistical constraints. The participants' perseverance reflects resilience developed through repeated exposure to challenging institutional circumstances. Dugasan et al. (2026) similarly found that school leaders in Philippine geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas demonstrated adaptability, resourcefulness, and commitment while managing difficult geographical conditions. Likewise, Losa and Ederio (2025) identified transportation difficulties, professional isolation, and adaptive coping practices among remote school heads. These findings suggest that leadership resilience is shaped by contextual demands, although individual perseverance does not eliminate the need for appropriate institutional and logistical support.

3.2 Scarcity of Resources and Financial Improvisation

3.2.1 Limited School Funding and Personal Financial Sacrifices

The findings indicated that insufficient financial resources affected the ability of participating schools to address immediate operational and instructional needs. Participants described instances in which school heads used personal funds to purchase necessary materials and prevent delays in school activities. Teachers were also reported to have voluntarily contributed portions of their personal bonuses to support learners' needs. These practices emerged from the perceived inadequacy of available school funds and the urgency of maintaining essential educational services. The participants' narratives demonstrated how resource scarcity created additional financial responsibilities for school personnel. These findings reflect the practical and personal consequences of limited institutional resources in geographically disadvantaged schools. The willingness of school heads and teachers to contribute financially demonstrates their commitment to sustaining educational services, but it also exposes the limitations of relying on personal sacrifices to address institutional needs. Famero (2024) identified resource management as an important adaptive leadership practice among Philippine public secondary school principals during educational disruptions. Similarly, Dugasan et al. (2026) found that resourcefulness and personal sacrifice were significant features of leadership in geographically isolated schools. These findings indicate that financial improvisation may help address immediate operational difficulties while underscoring the importance of sustainable institutional support.

3.2.2 Transportation Costs and Alternative Resource Mobilization

Participants reported that geographical distance and transportation difficulties increased the cost of delivering school supplies and other educational resources. These expenses complicated budget allocation and required school heads to reconsider financial priorities. To address resource shortages, participants described soliciting assistance from nongovernmental organizations, private donors, and personal contacts abroad. These efforts provided alternative avenues for obtaining support for school programs and learners' needs. The findings demonstrated that school leaders extended their resource mobilization efforts beyond regular institutional funding channels to respond to local educational requirements. These practices illustrate adaptive resource management in geographically isolated educational institutions. Rather than depending exclusively on available school allocations, participants sought external support to address immediate resource limitations. Famero (2024) identified stakeholder involvement and resource management as important adaptive responses among educational leaders confronting institutional challenges. Similarly, Dugasan et al. (2026) emphasized community engagement, external partnerships, and resourcefulness as relevant practices for sustaining school operations in resource-constrained environments. These findings suggest that external collaboration can supplement institutional resources, although such support does not necessarily resolve underlying funding and accessibility constraints.

3.3 Innovative Leadership Practices and Shared Governance

3.3.1 Community Engagement and Collaborative Decision-Making

The findings revealed that school leaders emphasized community participation as an important strategy for sustaining school programs and addressing institutional challenges. Participants described regular engagement in community activities, collaboration with parents and teachers, and opportunities for stakeholders to contribute ideas and participate in school-related decisions. One participant characterized the community as a significant catalyst for school improvement, emphasizing the value of maintaining active relationships with local stakeholders. These experiences demonstrated that school leaders viewed community members as partners in addressing educational concerns rather than merely recipients of institutional services. These findings reflect the principles of distributed leadership, wherein responsibility and participation extend beyond the school head to teachers and other stakeholders. Harris et al. (2022) emphasized that distributed leadership provides opportunities for shared responsibility and collective participation in school improvement processes. Meyer et al. (2023) likewise identified teacher involvement in decision-making, collaborative structures, and motivational support as relevant practices that facilitate organizational change. In geographically isolated schools, the participants' emphasis on stakeholder engagement illustrates how collaborative relationships can become practical mechanisms for responding to institutional challenges and strengthening shared responsibility.

3.3.2 School-Based Income-Generating Projects and Improvised Learning Resources

Participants identified the establishment of school-based projects, including *Gulayan sa Paaralan* and *Palaisdaan sa Paaralan*, as innovative responses to limited financial and instructional resources. These initiatives were described as income-generating and resource-support activities intended to address school needs while encouraging community participation. Participants also reported improvising instructional materials through the contributions and collaborative efforts of parents and teachers. The findings demonstrated how school leaders utilized locally available resources and stakeholder involvement to develop practical responses to school-level challenges. These practices suggest that innovation in resource-constrained schools may emerge through localized initiatives rather than dependence on expensive technologies or externally developed programs. By mobilizing existing resources, school leaders created alternative approaches to addressing instructional and operational requirements. Famero (2024) highlighted curriculum contextualization, resource management, and stakeholder involvement as adaptive leadership practices in Philippine schools. Likewise, Dugasan et al. (2026) identified innovation, community resource mobilization, and collaborative problem-solving as important responses to persistent institutional scarcity. The participants' initiatives therefore illustrate context-responsive innovation, although the study did not quantify their financial returns or direct effects on learner performance.

3.3.3 Recognition, Motivation, and Stakeholder Empowerment

The findings showed that participants used recognition and appreciation as strategies for encouraging teachers and parents to remain involved in school activities. School leaders described implementing recognition and award systems for stakeholders who actively participated in school programs. They also emphasized motivating teachers and parents through encouragement, emotional support, open communication, and consideration of their ideas and concerns. These practices reflected the participants' efforts to establish positive relationships and encourage continued cooperation despite geographical and financial constraints. These findings highlight the relational dimension of educational leadership, particularly the role of appreciation, communication, and shared participation in supporting organizational commitment. Meyer et al. (2023) identified motivational leadership and teacher participation as important elements of collaborative school improvement. Harris et al. (2022) similarly emphasized the importance of collective responsibility and interpersonal relationships within distributed leadership practices. The participants' experiences suggest that recognition and supportive communication were used to encourage stakeholder involvement and strengthen relationships within geographically isolated school communities.

3.3.4 Shared Commitment and Community-Centered Leadership

The participants' narratives further revealed that leadership practices in geographically isolated schools were characterized by shared responsibility, cooperation, and commitment to sustaining educational services. School heads relied on the participation of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders in mobilizing resources, implementing school programs, and responding to institutional challenges. Their experiences reflected a leadership approach in which collaboration and mutual support were important for maintaining school activities despite limited resources and difficult operating conditions. These findings reinforce the importance of understanding educational leadership as an organizational and community-centered practice rather than an exclusively individual responsibility. Harris et al. (2022) identified shared leadership and collective organizational responsibility as central elements of distributed leadership, while Dugasan et al. (2026) emphasized the relevance of inclusive communication, community partnerships, and collaborative problem-solving in disadvantaged educational settings. The findings suggest that shared commitment provided an important foundation for the participants' adaptive and innovative practices, although the qualitative design does not establish a causal relationship between these practices and measurable school outcomes.

3.4 Integrated Discussion of the Major Themes

The findings collectively demonstrated that the school leaders' lived experiences were shaped by the interaction of geographical isolation, emotional challenges, financial limitations, and community-based responses. Emotional and professional growth emerged through continuous adjustment to difficult working conditions, while resource scarcity encouraged financial improvisation and alternative resource mobilization. These experiences were closely connected to the development of innovative leadership practices involving collaborative decision-making, localized school projects, stakeholder recognition, and shared institutional responsibilities. From a phenomenological perspective, the common meaning emerging from the participants' narratives was that leadership in geographically isolated schools involved sustained commitment, adaptability, and collaboration under challenging circumstances. This interpretation is consistent with Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), who emphasized the importance of understanding the meaning and structure of lived experiences within their social contexts. Related Philippine studies also identified resilience, resourcefulness, and community engagement as significant dimensions of school leadership in geographically isolated environments (Losa & Ederio, 2025; Dugasan et al., 2026). Overall, the findings provide context-specific insights into how school leaders respond to educational marginalization through personal perseverance and collective action. The experiences also indicate the importance of institutional support so that educational continuity does not depend primarily on individual sacrifice and informal resource mobilization.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that educational leadership in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools requires resilience, adaptability, resourcefulness, and strong community collaboration beyond conventional administrative responsibilities. School leaders in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, encountered geographical barriers, emotional and professional challenges, inadequate financial resources, limited infrastructure, and instructional demands that influenced school operations. Despite these constraints, they demonstrated commitment to educational service through adaptive leadership, resource mobilization, innovative school-based initiatives, and shared decision-making. Their experiences emphasized the importance of stakeholder engagement, professional perseverance, and community trust in sustaining educational services. The findings highlighted that effective leadership in marginalized educational settings involves not only administrative competence but also collaborative problem-solving, contextual responsiveness, and sustained commitment to learners' welfare and community development.

Based on the findings, the Department of Education should strengthen context-responsive leadership development programs for school heads assigned to geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools, emphasizing adaptive and instructional leadership, resource mobilization, crisis management, community engagement, mentoring, and psychosocial support. School leaders should institutionalize collaborative decision-making, strengthen partnerships with teachers, parents, local government units, and community stakeholders, and sustain innovative practices that maximize available resources and support instructional improvement. Teachers should actively participate in school planning, professional learning communities, Learning Action Cell sessions, and stakeholder engagement activities to strengthen shared responsibility and educational service delivery. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar phenomenological inquiries in other geographically isolated districts, undertake comparative studies involving rural and urban school leaders, and explore the experiences of teachers, district supervisors, and other educational stakeholders to broaden understanding of educational leadership in disadvantaged communities.

The study was limited to the lived experiences of five purposively selected school leaders from geographically isolated public elementary and secondary schools in North 1 District, Division of Gingoog City, during School Year 2025–2026. Its qualitative phenomenological design emphasized in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than statistical generalization. Consequently, the findings were specific to the participating school leaders and their educational contexts and were not intended to represent all school leaders in other districts or educational settings.

5. Compliance with ethical standards

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study. The research adhered to established ethical principles, with institutional approvals obtained from the concerned academic and educational authorities, including the Schools Division Office of Gingoog City and North 1 District. All five school leaders provided written informed consent and participated voluntarily, with the right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Data were collected through non-invasive, semi-structured interviews while respecting participants' dignity and well-being. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes and school pseudonyms, and research records were securely stored with access limited to the researcher and dissertation adviser. All information was used exclusively for academic purposes to protect participants' privacy, rights, and welfare.

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