
Braving the Distance: A phenomenological Study on The Leadership Competence of the School Heads in Last Mile Settings

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Abstract — The study explores the leadership competence of school heads operating in last-mile contexts-characterized by geographical isolation, resource scarcity, and institutional support limitations that exacerbate the demands of educational leadership. Underpinned by a focus on understanding how school heads experience, interpret, and sustain their leadership roles within these demanding contexts, the research design is descriptive phenomenological. Data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions where feasible, and systematic review of school documents. Participants were purposively sampled based on predefined criteria for last-mile service. The interview guide was validated through strong content validity indices and a pilot-tested structure for clarity and appropriateness; while its credibility was further enhanced through bracketing, iterative coding, thematic clustering, member checking, and document-based triangulation. Leadership in last-mile schools was found to be manifested as a moral vocation characterized by adaptive decision-making, resilience amidst scarcity, and deep relational engagement with teachers, learners, and communities. Persistent logistical, material, human resource, and bureaucratic challenges were encountered by the school heads in this study; these were overcome through collaboration, improvisation, and emotional maturity. This persistence was nurtured through learner progress, aspirations for community upliftment, and sound spiritual anchoring. The study concludes that leadership in last-mile settings requires moral purpose, contextual adaptability, and sustained system support, and recommends that programs on leadership development integrate mentoring and context-responsive capacity-building as strategies to optimize leaders' effectiveness in remote environments.

Keywords: Last Mile Schools, Phenomenology, Leadership Competence, Lived Experiences, Adaptive Leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in geographically isolated and underserved school settings has gained international interest because of its pronounced impact on issues of equity, teacher morale, and learner outcomes, particularly where resource scarcity and infrastructural constraints heighten the responsibilities borne by school heads. Despite evidence that leadership in remote contexts can substantially improve learning conditions, few studies explore the meaning-making processes and the lived experiences of leaders serving in the last mile. This study sought to describe how school leaders experience their leadership journey, navigate with persistent setbacks, and manage a sense of purpose while working in a marginalized environment. A descriptive phenomenological design was employed for data collection, through in-depth interviews, feasible focus group discussions, and document reviews, using a content-valid semi-structured instrument. Data analysis followed rigorous phenomenological procedures: bracketing, iterative coding, thematic clustering, and member checking-augmented by document-based data triangulation to increase credibility. Results show leadership being enacted as a moral and mission-driven vocation through adaptive decision-making, relational engagement, and resilience in logistical barriers, resource limitations, and emotional strain. School leaders source meaning from progress in students, upliftment in communities, and faith in personal self, which collectively nurture their commitment to service amidst chronic adversity. The study, therefore, concludes that last-mile leadership demands moral purpose, contextual adaptability, and increases systemic supports. Capacity-building programs should, therefore, incorporate mentoring and context-responsive development to better equip aspiring leaders for work in remote and underserved environments.

Literature Review

Phenomenological scholars, including Moustakas (1994), van Manen (1990), and Creswell and Poth (2018), anchor this study's methodological orientation through procedures such as epoché, horizontalization, and imaginative variation suitable for uncovering the shared meanings of lived experience in research about leadership. Contemporary methodological investigations (Sheehan, 2019; Alhazmi et al., 2021) likewise demonstrate how phenomenology discloses how educators navigate reform, shifting expectations, and contextual constraints, thereby supporting the use of a descriptive phenomenological design to examine leadership competence in last-mile schools.

Empirical work conducted in marginalized and rural settings consistently portrays leadership as relational, adaptive, and deeply context-bound. Philippine and regional phenomenological studies in multigrade, Indigenous, and resource-poor schools (Bojos et al., 2025; Lugatiman & Bauyot, 2021; Anino & Chieng, 2022; Ramos, 2025) depict school heads as instructional guides, community anchors, and managers who negotiate chronic scarcity and policy pressures. International rural leadership literature (Roberts & Downes, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Halsey, 2025; Guenther et al., 2024) similarly emphasizes adaptability, resource mobilization, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness while noting the need for mentoring and place-based preparation. Recent phenomenological theses and dissertations frame leadership as identity work, meaning-making, and emotional labor enacted amidst reform or crisis (Burwell, 2022; Storch, 2022; Torres, 2023; Mastantuono, 2025; Carter, 2024). However, only a limited number of studies are concentrated on policy-defined last-mile schools characterized by extreme remoteness, very small enrollments, and substantial infrastructural gaps. This study addresses that gap by employing phenomenology to investigate how school heads in these settings construct meaning, enact leadership across strategic, instructional, managerial, and community domains, and sustain their vocation amidst persistent isolation, scarcity, and fragmented support systems.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to highlight the essence of leadership competence among school heads assigned to Last Mile public schools. Seven participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: formally designated as school heads assigned to a Last Mile public school, completed at least one school year in their current assignment, and gave informed consent to participate in the in-depth interview; those who did not meet any of these categories were excluded. These data were gathered through two instruments: a semi-structured interview guide anchored on national leadership competence domains-strategic leadership, operational management, instructional leadership, professional development, and community engagement-and a document review checklist covering School Improvement Plans, coaching and observation records, logistical communications, and

partnership documentation. The nine interview questions ranged from general to reflective questions and were validated by three experts, yielding I-CVI and S-CVI indices of 1.00; a pilot interview was conducted confirming clarity and cultural sensitivity. Upon institutional approval, individual interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms, lasting 60-90 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, and supported by field notes; small group conversations were conducted whenever possible. Document collection followed school protocols and included only nonsensitive or anonymized material stored in encrypted, coded files. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's method, which began with repeated immersions, bracketing, and memoing, followed by the extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, thematic clustering with full audit trails, and synthesis into textural, structural, and composite descriptions. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation with school documents, brief respondent checks with teachers or community partners, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions.

Research Design

The phenomenological method adopted for this study was a descriptive design to explore the nature of leadership competence as school principals experienced it in Last Mile public schools. This study, based on Husserlian philosophy, aimed at understanding how participants perceived, interpreted, and gave meaning to their leadership in contexts shaped by isolation, scarcity, and fragmented support. It followed basic phenomenological processes: bracketing in an attempt to suspend suppositions, horizontalization to identify salient statements, and forming and clustering meaning units to provide integrated textural and structural descriptions. Other supportive literature was drawn from Moustakas (1994), Giorgi (2009), and Creswell & Poth (2018). This design was necessary for this research since one cannot meaningfully obtain any deeper realities of Last Mile leadership through superficial observation and measurement. Phenomenology made possible the inductive emergence of thematic statements derived from first-person accounts into a nuanced, contextually grounded description of just how leadership competence is enacted under the persistence of constraints. This is in full agreement with van Manen's views, 2016, on a focus on meaning constitution, experiential depth, and the situated character of human affairs.

Local and Context

The study focused on public schools that have been formally identified by the Department of Education as Last Mile Schools, characterized by small student populations, difficult accessibility, and intermittent electricity supply plus spotty internet connection. They were prone to seasonal hazards, resulting in a very lean staffing. Records at the division and school levels—such as School Improvement Plans, class observation records, coaching logs, facilities and logistics reports, and communication logs—served as contextual sources, providing background information necessary to understand the lived experiences of the participating school heads.

Sample of the Study

The sample consisted of seven school principals selected through the purposive sampling technique because of their first-hand and continuous leadership experience of Last Mile public schools, which are characterised by isolation, resource scarcity, and complex operational needs. The inclusion criteria were that participants formally be designated heads of schools in Last Mile Schools, completed a minimum of one full year in their current roles, and be willing to participate in in-depth interviews and provide reflective narratives. Participants who failed to meet these criteria were excluded. The final sample size was determined by considerations of information power and thematic saturation; thematic saturation was reached at the seventh interview, where no new themes emerged. For contextual accuracy, supplementary clarifications were sought from teachers, parents, or community members identified by participants to corroborate particular routines or specific leadership practices, which were not considered part of the formal sample.

Instruments

Two main tools will be used in this regard. Firstly, a semi-structured interview guide shall help obtain narratives of leadership practice across five competence areas defined by national standards of leadership: strategic leadership, operations and resource management, instructional focus, professional development of self and others, and relationship-building. Prompts shall study decisions, actions, challenges, supports, and consequences in specific situations. Secondly, a

checklist for document review shall assist in the systematic review of School Improvement Plans, observation and coaching documents, records regarding logistics and communications, and partnership agreements in order to support and confirm interview data and identify explicit, routinized patterns.

Measures

The semi-structured interview guide was designed to ensure rich, reflective narrative responses from school heads in Last Mile schools. It consists of nine open-ended questions, tailored according to the research questions of the study, and sequenced in a way that the questions move from being more general to more specific to allow for development of rapport and introspection. Questions are phrased in a neutral way to reduce response bias. Predetermined probes to clarify and expand participants' accounts support the phenomenological goal of describing lived experience. To establish content validity, three experts in educational leadership and qualitative research evaluated each item on a 4-point relevance scale. Item and scale CVI was 1.00, demonstrating perfect agreement on relevance and adequacy of the instrument. A pilot interview with a school head similar to the intended sample further assessed the clarity, flow, cultural sensitivity, and ability of the guide to elicit meaningful reflection; only minor recommendations were made, aimed at refining probing skills. These procedures collectively supported the conclusion that the interview guide is valid and appropriate in format and content, and ready for full use.

Procedure

Data collection commenced following the required institutional clearances and an induction by the researcher that explained the purpose of the study, the procedure to be used, the risks and benefits, and protection measures. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the study. In-depth individual interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on accessibility and participant preference. Interviews lasted about 60–90 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and were supported by field notes to contextualize and record non-verbal information. Focused group discussions were held, where possible, to obtain

collective practices with strict confidentiality. Document collection followed the school's standard procedure and was limited to non-sensitive or anonymized materials, including plans for improvement, monitoring notes, communication records, and partnership documents. Digital files, transcripts, and recordings were stored in encrypted password-protected folders labeled with coded identifiers to protect confidentiality and maintain data integrity throughout the research process.

Data Processing

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. Repeated listening to audio-recorded interviews was performed first, after which verbatim transcription and accuracy verification against the original recordings were done, supplemented with reflexive memoing to bracket assumptions and record initial insights. The text was then divided into significant statements (both quoted and paraphrased) about participants' leadership routines, challenges, relationships, resource constraints, and adaptive strategies; these were entered onto a coding matrix in accordance with the horizontalization process. Significance statements were subsequently reduced to meaning units, sorted into thematic clusters that reflect the core dimensions of leadership competence in last-mile contexts, with an audit trail maintained showing analytic decisions taken in this regard. For each participant, textural descriptions-what was experienced-and structural descriptions-how the experience came about in light of contextual constraints-were drafted and reduced iteratively through comparison. These were integrated into a synthesized essence that reflects the shared structure of the phenomenon across all participants. Triangulation was used to enhance credibility: selected school documents, such as improvement plans, monitoring notes, communication logs, and partnership records, were used to corroborate interview accounts. Complementing these was the conduct of brief follow-up conversations with teachers, parents, or community partners in order to corroborate specified leadership practices. All triangulation procedures were documented in detail on the audit trail in accordance with the interests of methodological transparency and rigor.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School Heads' and Teachers' Experiences and Meaning-Making of Their Leadership in Last Mile Schools

The phenomenological approach of Colaizzi (1978) was used as a guide for the contents disclosed by seven school heads and their teachers in the hinterland schools of Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental, from which four main thematic structures surfaced, viz, Leading Beyond Boundaries, Nurturing Resilience Amid Scarcity, Building Bridges with the Community, and Finding Meaning in Service. All these themes put together indicate that leadership competence within LMS is not about administrative function per se but is a moral, adaptive, and relational practice within geographical isolation and disadvantageous locations.

Guihulngan City is nestled in the northern part of Negros Oriental. With 33 barangays, many of its barangays are mountainous and hard to reach, like Linatuyan, Hilaitan, Sandayao, Trinidad, and Hibaiyo. Going to these upland barangays from the city proper often involves long motorcycle rides along treacherous roads, but equally long traversing rivers and footpaths. Schools in the area face continuing concerns with irregular transportation service, unstable electricity, and erratic communication signals. These environmental contexts set the realities of the school heads and teachers assigned to what the Department of Education labels as Last Mile Schools—schools located in far-flung and resource-poor communities.

Observation Protocol Results

The following table summarizes the observation protocols conducted across the five Last Mile Schools. It captures key leadership behaviors exhibited by school heads, the contextual realities observed onsite, and the thematic structures supported by each observed action.

Observation Site	Date	Duration	Key Behaviors Observed	Supporting Theme
Sandayao ES	September 18, 2025	4 hours	School head personally distributed learning modules via motorcycle; conducted an impromptu parent dialogue under a mango tree; repaired a broken learner's desk; coordinated with barangay officials.	Leading Beyond Boundaries; Building Bridges with the Community
Hilaitan ES	September 22, 2025	3.5 hours	Conducted multi-grade demonstration teaching; provided emotional reassurance to a fatigued teacher; guided learners on safe river crossing; monitored community-supported school garden.	Nurturing Resilience Amid Scarcity; Human Resource and Teacher Welfare Challenges
Linantuyan ES	September 25, 2025	5 hours	Led community clean-up; facilitated reading sessions under makeshift shelter; documented classroom deterioration; shared mobile data with teachers.	Geographical and Logistical Hardships; Resource and Infrastructure Constraints
Hibaiyo ES	September 28, 2025	4 hours	Prepared instructional materials manually; coached a beginning teacher; mediated parent conflict regarding attendance; initiated prayer with teachers.	Spiritual Anchoring as Inner Strength; Building Bridges with the Community
Trinidad ES	April 2, 2025	3 hours	Organized recognition activity; initiated dialogue with community elders; repurposed scrap materials into shelves; assisted an anxious learner.	Leadership as Legacy and Purpose; Aspirations for School and Community Upliftment

RESULTS

School Heads' and Teachers' Experiences and Meaning-Making of Their Leadership in Last Mile Schools

Utilizing Colaizzi's 1978 phenomenological framework, the lived experiences of seven school heads and their teachers in the hinterland schools of Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental, are presented as four main thematic structures, namely: Leading Beyond Boundaries, Nurturing Resilience Amid Scarcity, Building Bridges with the Community, and Finding Meaning in Service. Taken together, these themes show that leadership competence in Last Mile Schools is not about management; instead, it is a moral, adaptive, and relational practice within a place of geographic isolation and disadvantage.

Guihulngan City is located in the northern part of Negros Oriental and has 33 barangays; many are mountainous and hard to reach, such as Linantuyan, Hilaitan, Sandayao, Trinidad, and Hibaiyo. Going from the city proper to these upland areas requires long and winding motorcycle rides through rough terrain, occasionally even across rivers and foot paths. For schools in these areas, the problems always seem to be about unstable transportation, irregular electricity, and poor communication signals. These create the landscape for the experiences of school heads and teachers serving in what the Department of Education terms as Last Mile Schools-institutions located in the most distant and under-resourced communities.

Leading and Teaching Amid Scarcity and Boundaries

Text rewritten:

Leadership in Last Mile Schools was characterized more by a lived moral commitment than by formal titles or routine administrative duties. Heads and teachers described leadership as shaped by isolation, hardship, and shared responsibility, frequently manifested in acts such as

transporting learning materials across rivers—“It’s not part of my job description, but it’s part of my responsibility as a leader” (P04, L22–24)—or in coordinating difficult travel so that every pupil received modules on time, with the school head taking the river route and the teacher taking the mountain path (P07, L10–12). These narratives, corroborated by classroom observations and reflexive notes that captured pride, humor, and fatigue, depict leadership as an identity grounded in service, empathy, and the distribution of burdens. This kind of leadership, however, constantly faced persistent constraint because of scarcity. Participants regularly conducted classes beneath trees during leaks—“this is our training ground for resilience” (P03, L31–33)—and relied on pre-laminated visuals or charged lamps in barangay outposts because materials and electricity were unreliable: “We charge our lamps and radios... when our solar panels malfunction” (P06, L14–16). Observational data supported this resourcefulness: teachers improvised tools, repurposed spaces, and co-constructed learning with communities, resonating with adaptive and servant leadership theories and with resource-mobilizing practices documented in related research. Throughout these accounts, scarcity served not only as a constraint but also as a spark to creative problem-solving, moral purpose, and deep relational leading. Triangulated evidence from the interviews, observations, and reflexive entries suggests resilience in remote schools is both a personal and collective activity. Leaders mediated family concerns, supported teachers, repaired infrastructure, and safeguarded learning in the midst of environmental disruptions, while teachers revealed similar resolve through instructional improvisations. The narratives reveal an intertwining of leadership and teaching in shared endurance and emotional labor and service ethic that surpasses hierarchical boundaries. Yet participants also highlighted the limits of resilience: adaptability arose out of necessity rather than choice, revealing structural chasms which individual sacrifice repeatedly compensates for. While scarcity triggered creativity and solidified community connections, it also underlined the urgent requirement for context-responsive institutional support, stronger infrastructure, and leadership development capable of preparing educators for complex, high-need contexts. By the end, these lived experiences present leadership in Last Mile Schools as courage enacted in practice—an everyday act of converting limited resources to meaningful learning opportunities, pursued with steadfast commitment and pronounced moral clarity.

Community-Rooted Leadership and Meaning-Making in Last Mile Schools

Community engagement and personal purpose emerged as foundational and inseparable elements of leadership for all seven participants, who described their work as sustained not by resources but by relationships. School survival depended on community collaboration; for example, one school head noted, "Our school fence was built through bayanihan. Parents brought bamboo, and the LGU donated nails. We make things happen even without funds" (P01, L18–20). Teachers likewise framed engagement as relational care rather than obligation, explaining, "We visit homes on weekends... leadership here means being part of their lives" (P05, L27–29). These accounts, corroborated by observations of collective labor and reflexive notes on emotional reciprocity, illustrate how school and community co-own educational progress—a lived form of *pakikipagkapwa* that aligns with transformational leadership and DepEd's vision of inclusive governance. Simultaneously, participants found profound meaning in service amidst adversity, grounding their leadership identity in purpose rather than position. One leader reflected, "I may not have luxurious facilities, but seeing my learners walk kilometers... makes me realize that my purpose is here" (P02, L41–43), while a teacher stated, "When I see the children waiting by the roadside, I know my sacrifices are worth it" (P06, L22–24). These expressions, reinforced by observations of daily perseverance, reflect meaning-making and moral purpose leadership theories, indicating that resilience arises not from material sufficiency but from relationships, faith, and the learners' determination.

Taken together, these triangulated insights suggest that leadership in Last Mile Schools is essentially collective and morally anchored. Community partnerships fill systemic gaps through collective ingenuity and mutual care, and educators find emotional strength in the commitment of students and the support of families. Yet these stories also reveal resilience's limits: it is precisely community spirit that compensates for structural lack, and meaning-making that sustains leaders in the main absence of regular institutional support. The findings imply that effective development of leadership for remote schools should embed community organizing, empathetic communication, and reflective practice, and policy interventions should reinforce rather than rely upon local networks as a proxy for state support. In the end, leadership in such contexts is not

defined by administrative metrics but by the ability to bridge isolation with solidarity, transform scarcity into collective strength, and redefine educational service as an act of common hope.

Challenges Encountered by School Heads in Their Leadership Practice and How They Navigate These Experiences

The experiences of seven school administrators and teachers in Guihulngan’s mountainous Last Mile Schools illuminate leadership as a quotidian practice of endurance, adaptation, and moral purpose in the face of difficult terrain, limited resources, precarious teacher welfare, and substantial bureaucratic demands. The narratives speak of roads transformed into “a river of mud,” educators crossing several hours before dawn, and classrooms sustained through improvised materials—conditions that require resilience, empathy, and creativity rather than formal authority. These leaders, despite persistent strain, remain firmly moored within a still strong sense of calling, transforming dearth into resourcefulness and isolation into connection. Their accounts highlight a need for context-sensitive standards of leadership, mitigation of administrative burdens, and increased infrastructural and psychosocial support. Leadership in last-mile contexts emerges as an embodiment of educational justice, sustained through purpose and commitment in communities situated at the system’s most remote periphery.

Geographic Hardship and Resource Scarcity as Structural Conditions of Leadership

The seven participants consistently portrayed leadership in Guihulngan’s Last Mile Schools as shaped by dual pressures emanating from geographic isolation and chronic material scarcity—pressures that together redefine daily realities and emotional landscapes. Travel to school often involved crossing rivers, negotiating steep trails, or walking long distances when roads became impassable; as one school head remarked, “I travel two hours by motorcycle, then walk another hour... when it rains, the road turns to mud” (P03, L12–15). Teachers similarly reported collapsed footbridges that forced them to rely on riverbeds “just to check if the children are safe” (P06, L18–20). These narratives align with DepEd’s 2019 characterization of last-mile

geographic marginalization and corroborate the claim of Murillo and Román 2021 that terrain operates as a structural determinant of educational inequality. Compounding these challenges were profound gaps in infrastructure and resources—bamboo-walled classrooms, tarpaulin roofs, and unreliable electricity—that forced frequent improvisation by teachers. Participants thus observed: “We still use bamboo walls... our computer lab exists only in the paperwork” (P01, L33–36) and “We charge our phones and projectors in the barangay hall when electricity fails” (P04, L19–21). This finding is aligned with those of Cabaraban 2021, Delos Santos 2022, whose work suggests that isolation and scarcity permeate all leadership decisions in remote Philippine schools.

These cross-cutting adversities notwithstanding, the participants showed context-responsive and adaptive leadership that transformed environmental constraints into catalysts for ingenuity and collective action. The school heads coordinated with barangay authorities in finding safer travel routes, transferred classes to community halls when the weather was bad, and tapped bayanihan to repair roofs or construct fences—modest responses that nonetheless reflect Dugan’s (2017) notion of environmentally attuned leadership and Heifetz and Linsky’s (2017) framework of adaptive leadership in resource-poor contexts. Underlying this creativity, however, was an emotional toll: the participants’ voices conveyed fatigue, tempered resolve, and steely moral commitment to protecting learning. Crucially, their experiences shed light on policy gaps that show how reporting requirements, timelines, and procurement systems assume mobility and access that last-mile conditions cannot ensure. Triangulated evidence thus points to urgent systemic needs: context-sensitive leadership preparation, targeted infrastructure investment, differentiated administrative expectations, and comprehensive wellness and logistical support given to educators who consistently transcend institutional provisions. Narrative portrayals of leadership as an act of endurance and moral purpose-keeping education going not because conditions allow it, but simply because learners in the farthest reaches deserve no less.

Human Resource Strain and Emotional–Bureaucratic Burdens of Leadership

The seven participants revealed that leadership and pedagogy in Guihulngan’s Last Mile Schools are essentially informed by turmoil in human resources and the psychological burden

attached to isolation. Teacher retention proved to be a precarious, highly personal issue as many educators battled loneliness, illness, and bodily fatigue due to traveling daily. Thus, one school head mentioned, “It’s hard to convince teachers to stay... some walk two hours daily or live in makeshift quarters” (P05, L22–25), while a teacher revealed, “I love teaching here, but it’s lonely sometimes... when someone gets sick, we have to hike for help” (P02, L17–19). Their narratives are supported by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) who reported exhaustion and psychosocial burden in remote settings to show that isolation impacts not only operations but also identity and morale. Against this backdrop, school heads extended their practice as leaders beyond administrative tasks by checking on teachers during storms, providing affective assurances, and, in the words of one participant, becoming “anchors” to their staff. Their approaches were indicative of emotionally intelligent leadership cf. (Goleman et al., 2013) and Fullan’s (2020) moral imperative; that is, sustaining personnel in last-mile schools demands deep empathy, relational commitment, and continuing emotional labor.

Simultaneously, these human resource challenges combined with a significant bureaucratic load imposed on already infrastructurally challenged school heads. Reporting and digital compliance became physically exhausting tasks in weak signal, unstable electricity upland barangays. One school head reported, “I climb a hill with my laptop just to send forms before the deadline” (P03, L38–40), while one teacher remembered seeing the head “staying up late with a flashlight to finish reports” (P06, L30–32). These narratives align with the contention of Berkovich and Eyal (2021) regarding the emotional costs of leadership as administrative pressures diverted attention from instructional and pastoral concerns. To mitigate these realities, school heads utilized adaptive strategies (e.g., requesting flexibility in deadlines, reassigning tasks, drawing on faith, family, and peers) that align with the transformational leadership framework of Ahn et al. (2020) and the resilience framework of Leithwood et al. (2020). Taken altogether, these triangulated narratives point to an imperative for context-sensitive retention policies, a lessening of administrative loads, psychosocial support mechanisms, and leadership development that centers emotional intelligence and well-being. The participants' narratives of leadership in remote areas are ultimately an act of compassion and moral persistence, not supported by optimal conditions

but by the unyielding commitment of people who would ensure continuity of educational provision in the very contexts where systemic support is least available.

Hopes, Aspirations, and Sources of Meaning That Sustain School Heads in Their Leadership Work

Specifically, the phenomenological analysis reveals that, despite the adversities entailed with isolation and scarcity, seven school heads in Guihulngan City's most remote hinterland sustained leadership through enduring hope, moral conviction, community solidarity, and an unwavering belief in education as a transformative force. Four interrelated thematic structures emerged from their narratives as shaping their meaning: hope anchored on learners' progress, aspirations for the advancement of school and community, spiritual anchoring as inner strength, and leadership as legacy and a call. The themes depict how meaning and motivation are intertwined in sustaining leadership competence amidst conditions characteristic of schools situated in the Last Mile.

Guihulngan's upland barangays, Hilaitan, Sandayao, Hibaiyo, and Linantuyan impose physical and emotional solitude on educators. Experiences of despair, however, were not portrayed. On the contrary, quiet optimism and conviction that hardship contributes to something larger than individual comfort culminated in the consistency of their voices. For one school head, it was observing students traversing long distances each morning as a reminder of why he had stayed; the students' perseverance had become his source of hope. For another teacher, every small achievement of learners—such as being able to fluently read a sentence or solve a problem in mathematics independently—was like a sign that the future could still change.

These expressions reflected the participants' larger hopes for their schools and communities. Many talked about visions of solidly built classrooms, relevant learning spaces, and secure paths to school. Their desires further extended beyond physical changes; they envisioned communities in which schooling broke poverty and isolation cycles. In their stories, the classroom was not solely a place of learning but served as a pathway toward the uplifting of the whole

community. The participants wore these hopes with moral authority, as if their leadership was motivated less by short-term success than by a vision of what the schools might one day become.

Spirituality emerged as a persistent thread within their narratives. Participants drew on the spiritual resources of praying before long journeys, finding strength in faith to persevere during times of exhaustion, or entrusting safety to divine guidance as one navigated treacherous pathways. Their spirituality was not framed as an escape but, rather, as a kind of inner anchoring—an enabling source of strength that allowed their endurance in uncertainty. Within the narratives, the researcher had a sense of how this spiritual anchoring deeply informs emotional resilience. Faith offered comfort but also clarity—the reminder that being in the hinterlands served something larger than daily troubles.

For many participants, leadership had become a matter of legacy and purpose. They spoke about the wish to leave behind something durable—something like a school culture of empathy, a newly built classroom via community collaboration, or a generation of learners who find their confidence through education. One participant wished that one day, children would look back and think about the struggles of the teachers. These reflections help explain that the role of leading remote schools is not just an administrative task; it is a highly personal calling directed at contributing to something enduring.

The implications of these meaning-making structures are great. First, they suggest that for leadership in marginalized contexts, internal motivations are more potent than external incentives in sustaining it. These dimensions of hope, aspiration, faith, and sense of legacy hold aspects of leadership that are almost invisible when considered from the perspective of typical performance metrics. The dimensions, therefore, should be recognized within leadership development programs that often focus on technical and managerial competencies and neglect the emotional and spiritual underpinning of resilience. The experiences shared here first and foremost underline the significance of relational and value-based leadership. Policy initiatives towards the support of Last Mile Schools should embed reflective practice, narrative sharing, and psychosocial support to help leaders articulate and maintain the meanings that keep them committed. Thirdly, participants' aspirations underscore the need for ongoing investment in rural educational infrastructure. Hopes

for better infrastructure and community development point to systemic deficits that call for long-term policy concern. Finally, the stories shed light on a deep moral dimension: for Last Mile Schools, leadership has to do with burdens taken up on behalf of the learners and the communities, not with privileges accrued. Meaning-making for them reorganizes isolation as purpose, scarcity as resourcefulness, and hardship as hope. Collectively, these stories affirm that the competence of leadership in marginalized schools is ultimately measured not by material plenty but by the depth of purpose, the resilience, and the humanity with which leaders serve.

Hope Rooted in Learners' Progress and Aspirations for Community Upliftment

Across all seven participants, hope emerged as a salient emotional anchor anchored in the quiet perseverance of learners who battled poverty, distance, and difficult terrain to attend school. Throughout, leaders described how observations of students walking barefoot through mud or carrying their own chairs reframed struggle as purposeful effort. One school head mentioned: "Every time I see my pupils walking barefoot on muddy roads... their determination keeps me going; if they don't give up, why should I?" (P04, L41–43). A teacher added: "Our learners may be poor, but they are eager... they remind us that hope can exist even without resources" (P02, L29–30). Such accounts-echoed in observation notes documenting children's resilience and reflexive entries recording the emotional impact of such moments-align with Fullan's (2020) moral imperative and Leithwood et al.'s (2020) relationally anchored conception of resilience. For leaders, modest successes like improved attendance, emerging reading skills, or a child offering themselves as a volunteer for the first time proved to be moral motivation that reframed struggle as meaningful work, consonant with Gallagher et al.'s (2021) notion of "hope-as-agency," wherein perseverance is sustained through emotional investment in learner progress.

This sense of hope extended naturally into long-term aspirations for the school and its surrounding barangays, revealing leadership identities oriented toward community upliftment rather than mere institutional compliance. As one school head articulated, "My dream is to see our learners finish high school and return as teachers... that's when I'll know my purpose has been

fulfilled” (P05, L52–54), while another expressed a desire for basic dignity in schooling, hoping her learners would one day have “proper classrooms and a library so they no longer feel left behind” (P03, L44–46). These visions resonate with transformational and transformative leadership theories (Bass & Riggio, 2019; Shields, 2013), as participants connected educational improvement to generational and community change. Observation notes corroborated how aspirations translated into strategy-leaders mobilizing parents for bayanihan projects, integrating livelihood activities into curricula, and persistently advocating for resources. Taken together, these triangulated insights indicate that within Guihulngan’s Last Mile Schools, hope is not abstract but enacted: a future-oriented, community-rooted force that sustains leaders’ moral resolve and converts adversity into shared purpose.

Spiritual Anchoring and Leadership Purpose

Spiritual grounding was thus a significant source of resilience for all seven participants, acting as the inner structure that supported leaders through isolation, fatigue, and chronic adversity. Practices of prayer, reflection, and shared faith rituals yielded emotional stability; for instance, one school administrator explained, “When I am tired or overwhelmed, I pray... this is not just work—it is a calling” (P06, L33–35), while another teacher explained, “Our faith keeps us strong... we pray not only for protection but for wisdom to lead despite all challenges” (P02, L41–43). Observation notes captured how leaders commence each day with short communal prayers, while reflexive entries described spirituality as an “invisible scaffolding” which regulates emotional strain. These findings support servant leadership theory (Eva et al., 2019), in positing that humility and moral grounding enhance genuine influence, and Wong’s (2020) emphasis on meaning-making as a buffer against adversity. Faith provided personal comfort and facilitated collective emotional coherence, reinforcing a shared culture of hope binding teachers, learners, and leaders. Within this frame, spirituality served as both the inner compass (Leithwood et al., 2020) and a shared resource underpinning daily school functioning.

Interwoven with spiritual anchoring was a strong sense of purpose and legacy—the belief that leadership in LMSs extended beyond administrative duties to constitute a moral and generational calling. One leader shared, “When I retire, I want to be remembered not for awards but for the lives I’ve touched” (P07, L48–50), while another articulated, “Every learner who graduates is a piece of my dream fulfilled” (P03, L53–55). These declarations, coupled with observations of leaders celebrating minor learner milestones and reflexive notes that document pride pertaining to community progress, align with transformational and moral leadership conceptualizations (Bass & Riggio, 2019; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Participants understood their work as stewardship, the shaping of futures within barangays marked by poverty, distance, and systemic neglect. It was this sense of purpose that ultimately anchored them through administrative burdens, geographic hardship, and emotional strain. This echoes the messages from Fullan (2020) and Shields (2013) to present a view of leadership that is quintessentially human yet founded upon service, hope, and the quest for a legacy that outlives tenure. United, faith and purpose formed a twin anchorage that converted hardship to meaning, sustained leaders whose principal resource was not material support but sure moral conviction.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that in the Last Mile Schools, leadership is lived as a moral, service-oriented vocation with school heads taking on many responsibilities to ensure learning reaches the most marginalized children. Various narratives suggest that notions of leadership competency are spoken through compassion, persistence, and steadfastness of purpose against enduring constraints. Challenges to be faced range from difficult terrain to unsatisfactory facilities, human resource pressures, and bureaucratic demands, all of which emphasize the complexity of leading an isolated institution where adaptability, ingenuity, and emotional maturity determine whether or not the school will survive. School heads source their strength from student gains and aspirations for community uplift and spiritual moorings; they envision leadership as a legacy of hope and social reformation. These findings highlight a contextualized leadership support framework positioned around mentoring, peer networks, capacity building in adaptive and community-engaged leadership, and strengthened psychosocial and logistical support systems. In sum, this study confirms that in leadership development, moral purpose, contextual sensitivity, and building resilience should be much more overtly combined if education systems are to create mechanisms attuned to the realities of last-mile leadership.

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