



Challenges and Practices of Instructional Leadership: A Qualitative Inquiry of Principals’ and Teachers’

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges and practices of instructional leadership from the perspectives of school principals and teachers, highlighting their importance in enhancing teaching quality and student outcomes. A qualitative approach was employed, involving focus groups and interviews with five principals and seven teachers, to ensure diverse representation. Thematic analysis was guided by the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS). Key challenges identified include balancing administrative and instructional roles, maintaining consistent leadership practices, utilizing data effectively for informed decision-making, engaging the community and parents, managing resource limitations, and adapting to ongoing educational changes. Effective practices highlighted include engagement and collaboration, data-driven improvements, ongoing professional development, and active parental involvement. The findings emphasize the need to address these challenges while implementing effective practices to establish a strategic instructional leadership framework. This framework aims to enhance teaching practices, foster collaboration among stakeholders, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes, contributing to sustainable educational success.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Lead Editor:

Marie Paz E. Morales, PhD

Received:

January 6, 2025

Revised:

May 26, 2025

Accepted:

June 2, 2025

KEYWORDS:

achievement, Instructional leadership, school principals, teachers practices,

Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as a vital driver of national development, yet many countries continue to face structural challenges that undermine equity and quality in learning opportunities. While international large-scale assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) highlight persistent gaps in student performance, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, these results only reflect broader systemic issues such as teaching quality, professional development, and leadership effectiveness. In the Philippine context, these challenges are evident not only in assessment outcomes such as the 2023 National Achievement Test (NAT) but also in concerns regarding the capacity of school leaders and teachers to foster meaningful instructional improvement.

Instructional leadership plays a critical role in addressing these educational challenges. The Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) emphasize the importance of instructional leadership as a core domain essential for improving teaching and learning processes. Effective instructional leadership fosters a collaborative culture, guides professional development, and aligns instructional practices with school improvement goals. Research shows that when school leaders and teachers engage in shared decision-making and continuous learning, instructional quality and student outcomes are more likely to improve (Hallinger, 2011). However, much of the existing literature overlooks the nuanced, context-specific realities of instructional leadership, particularly from the perspectives of those directly involved in school operations. These gaps—including insufficient exploration of causality (Hallinger, 2011) and limited generalizability of findings (Yin, 2018)—underscore the need for further research into the lived experiences and practices of school leaders and teachers.

This qualitative study explores the challenges and practices of instructional leadership as perceived by principals and teachers. It aims to contribute to enhancing educational outcomes in the Philippine basic education system by generating in-depth, contextually relevant insights that may inform policy implementation and leadership development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Literature Review

Instructional leadership is widely recognized as a critical driver of school improvement and student success. However, its definition, scope, and practical application remain subjects of ongoing debate. In this study, instructional leadership is understood through the lens of Hallinger's (2000) model, which frames it as the principal's role in defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and fostering a favorable school climate. This model, influential in both theory and practice, underpins much of the research on effective leadership behaviors and provides a valuable framework for analyzing leadership in diverse educational settings. Yet, as scholars have noted, translating these leadership ideals into everyday school practices—especially in resource-constrained environments—presents complex challenges (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013).

While instructional leadership is often presented as a means of enhancing teaching and learning, empirical studies reveal persistent gaps between leadership ideals and realities in schools. Community-driven and collaborative leadership models, although widely promoted, often encounter structural barriers that limit their full implementation. The study by Semon et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of data-informed collaboration among teachers; however, such collaboration assumes a school culture where data literacy and trust are well-established—conditions that are not uniformly present, particularly in under-resourced public schools. Similarly, Eden et al. (2024) advocate for the involvement of parents and communities in instructional leadership processes to improve student socio-emotional well-being and academic performance. Yet, these recommendations often overlook enduring difficulties such as socioeconomic inequality, parental illiteracy, and restrictive government policies that hinder meaningful stakeholder participation. These findings expose a recurring tension between the theoretical promise of participatory leadership and the structural inequities that complicate its day-to-day practice.

A careful balancing of pedagogical guidance and administrative demands often characterizes instructional leadership in practice. Studies by Shujau-Abdul-Raheem (2023) and Gatama et al. (2023) underscore the importance of curriculum leadership, teacher capacity building, and instructional supervision as central responsibilities of school principals. However, these studies frequently assume the presence of supportive administrative conditions—ample time, professional autonomy, and sufficient resources—which are often lacking in many public school systems. Principals are often burdened with heavy bureaucratic workloads, which limit their ability to focus on instructional matters. Moreover, while distributed leadership and teacher empowerment are championed by scholars such as Musengamana et al. (2024) and Hsieh et al. (2023), research remains divided on the long-term sustainability of these practices, especially in contexts where policy support and capacity-building mechanisms are weak or inconsistent. These contradictions suggest that while collaborative leadership is valued in principle, its effectiveness in practice hinges on sustained institutional commitment and coherence across leadership efforts.

Empirical studies using tools such as the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) reveal both convergence and divergence in how instructional leadership is perceived and enacted across different settings. In the Philippine context, Arrieta et al. (2020) and Torrato et al. (2023) report a general agreement among principals and teachers regarding the importance of core instructional leadership functions but also highlight inconsistencies in areas such as classroom visibility and performance monitoring—both of which are essential for continuous instructional improvement. Comparative research from other countries (Awan et al., 2022; Lingam et al., 2021) introduces further complexity by pointing to the influence of gender, geographical location, and cultural expectations on leadership practices. These studies raise an essential question regarding the localization of global leadership models: how can international frameworks be adapted to reflect the realities of specific sociocultural and institutional environments without losing their conceptual integrity?

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that while instructional leadership is theoretically positioned as a lever for school improvement, its practical enactment is marked by tensions between managerial expectations, systemic constraints, and the unique characteristics of local contexts. This gap between prescriptive leadership models and on-the-ground realities points to the need for more context-sensitive research. Specifically, there is limited qualitative evidence capturing the lived experiences of school principals and teachers as they navigate the challenges and demands of instructional leadership within the Philippine public school system.

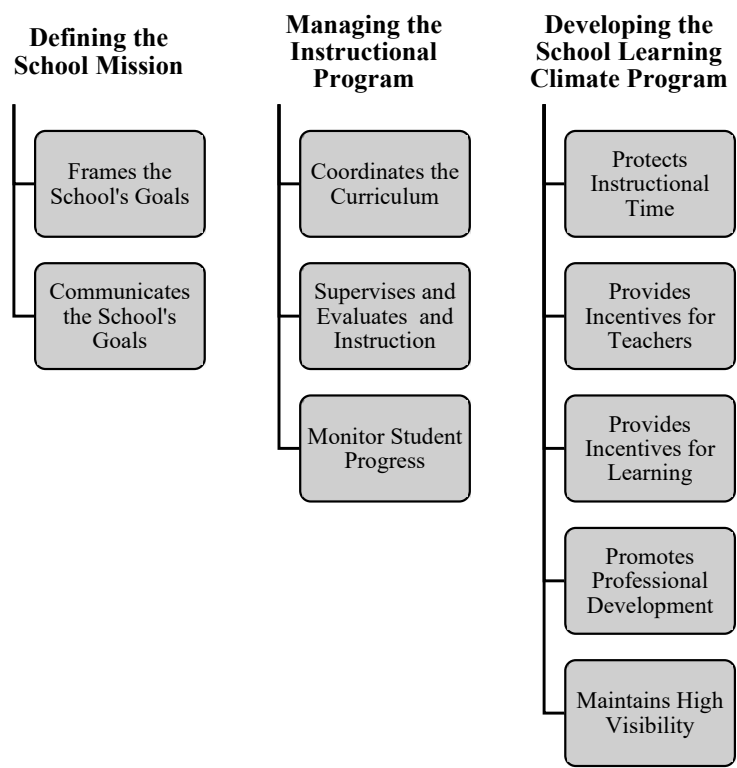
This study aims to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of these key stakeholders, generating grounded insights into the adaptive practices and structural challenges that shape instructional leadership in this setting.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), a well-established framework used extensively

Figure 1

PIMRS Framework



in international research to describe and assess the instructional leadership behaviors of school heads. The PIMRS model conceptualizes instructional leadership along three key dimensions: (1) Defining the School Mission, (2) Managing the Instructional Program, and (3) Developing the School Learning Climate. Each of these dimensions encompasses specific leadership functions, offering a structured lens through which the behaviors and practices of school principals can be systematically explored.

While the study primarily employs PIMRS as its guiding framework, the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) is acknowledged in the conceptualization process to ensure cultural and contextual relevance. The PPSSH, developed by the Department of Education, articulates the expected competencies of Filipino school leaders across five domains, several of which correspond conceptually with the leadership functions outlined in PIMRS. The decision to reference PPSSH in the framework was based on its role as the official national policy document governing school leadership standards rather than as an analytical tool in this study.

Table 1

Alignment of PIMRS and PPSSH

PIMRS	Leadership Functions	Study Objectives	PPSSH
Defining the School Mission	Framing school goals Communicating school goals	To examine how principals and teachers define and communicate instructional goals	Domain 1
Managing the Instructional Program	Supervising and evaluating instruction Coordinating curriculum - Monitoring student progress	To identify specific practices and limitations in curriculum leadership and instructional supervision	Domains 2 and 3
Developing the School Learning Climate	Protecting instructional time Promoting professional development Maintaining visibility Incentivizing achievement Enforcing standards	To explore strategies and challenges in sustaining a supportive instructional environment	Domains 4 and 5

The alignment presented between PIMRS and PPSSH is conceptual and intended to demonstrate theoretical compatibility rather than serving as an empirical basis for analysis. This alignment is informed by existing literature (DepEd Order No. 024, s. 2020; Hallinger, 2011) and by the need to situate internationally validated constructs within the Philippine educational leadership context. However, it is essential to clarify that the study's data collection, coding, and thematic analysis processes were explicitly guided by the PIMRS

model, not the PPSSH framework. Therefore, while the PPSSH provides contextual depth, it was not directly utilized in the analytical phase or in interpreting the findings.

The study integrates PIMRS with Philippine realities, recognizing that cultural and institutional factors influence instructional leadership practices. Filipino school principals often hold multiple roles, which can impact their focus on instructional leadership functions—cultural values like *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* influence leadership practices, such as visibility and stakeholder engagement. The study uses a conceptual framework grounded in PIMRS and contextual references to the PPSSH to explore instructional leadership practices among Filipino school leaders while remaining sensitive to local educational conditions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore and understand the lived experiences of school principals and teachers regarding instructional leadership practices in large and mega public secondary schools in the Schools Division Office of Isabela, Region II. Phenomenology, as a research approach, seeks to capture the essence of participants' firsthand experiences of a specific phenomenon—in this case, instructional leadership as it is interpreted, negotiated, and practiced in real school settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990).

The choice of phenomenology is justified by the study's aim to reveal rich, descriptive insights into how school leaders and teachers perceive and enact instructional leadership in the Philippine basic education context—an area shaped by contextual, cultural, and systemic influences. This methodological approach enables the uncovering of shared meanings, tensions, and adaptive practices that may not be evident in more structured, quantitative studies.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select information-rich participants based on their roles, gender, and length of service. A total of twelve participants were involved, comprising five school principals and seven teachers who were purposively selected from large and mega public secondary schools. The deliberate focus on these school types reflects the study's intent to explore leadership practices within complex, high-enrollment environments where school heads face heightened demands for managerial, instructional, and operational coordination. In contrast, smaller schools typically encounter different leadership challenges, such as multi-grade teaching, limited staffing, and closer teacher-student relationships, which may not necessitate the same scale of organizational and instructional leadership. Thus, the emphasis on large and mega schools ensures the investigation remains centered on the unique leadership complexities present in such expansive educational settings.

Table 2*Participant Criteria and Conditions*

Participant	Role	School Type	Gender	Years of Service
SP1	Principal	Mega	F	More than 15
SP2	Principal	Large	F	More than 15
SP3	Principal	Large	F	5–9
SP4	Principal	Mega	M	5–9
SP5	Principal	Mega	M	More than 15
T1	Teacher	Large	M	5–9
T2	Teacher	Mega	M	5–9
T3	Teacher	Mega	M	5–9
T4	Teacher	Large	F	5–9
T5	Teacher	Mega	F	10–15
T6	Teacher	Mega	F	5–9
T7	Teacher	Large	F	5–9

The sample size aligns with qualitative research standards for phenomenological inquiries, where depth of understanding is prioritized over numerical representativeness (Polkinghorne, 1989). Moreover, this size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new themes emerged during the analysis.

Focus Groupings: Individual interviews were conducted with all five principals to obtain detailed, role-specific perspectives. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with the seven teacher participants, divided based on their school type and availability, ensuring balanced and manageable group dynamics.

Instruments

The study utilized semi-structured interview guides and FGD protocols specifically crafted to align with the research objectives and the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) domains: (1) Defining the School Mission, (2) Managing the Instructional Program, and (3) Developing the School Learning Climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Each section of the instrument included open-ended questions designed to draw out participants' detailed accounts and reflections on instructional leadership within their respective roles. Sample prompts included inquiries about goal-setting processes, curriculum supervision, instructional coordination, and practices that promote a positive learning environment.

Instrument Development and Validation: The instruments were constructed based on an extensive review of literature related to instructional leadership and validated frameworks

such as PIMRS. To ensure content validity, the draft instruments were evaluated by a panel of three experts in educational leadership and qualitative research. Their feedback prompted revisions to enhance clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity. A pilot test involving two public school principals (*not part of the main sample*) was conducted to check the clarity and flow of the items. Minor adjustments were made based on pilot feedback, particularly in refining the phrasing and sequencing of questions to encourage open and reflective responses. While statistical reliability measures are not applicable in qualitative research, these steps enhanced instrument credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

Data collection took place over two months and adhered to established ethical protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The five principals (school heads) underwent individual in-depth interviews, while the seven teachers participated in two separate focus group discussions (FGDs), with each session lasting 60 to 90 minutes. Due to logistical and health considerations, all sessions were conducted via a secured online video conferencing platform.

Each session was audio-recorded with the participant's consent, and detailed field notes were kept to capture non-verbal cues, participant dynamics, and contextual factors that enriched data interpretation.

Data Analysis Framework

This study employed thematic analysis, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), to explore and interpret the qualitative data. Recognizing that qualitative analysis is not a strictly linear or one-directional process, the research followed an iterative, reflexive,

Figure 2

Data Analysis Phases



and cyclical approach. As the analysis progressed, the researcher moved back and forth between phases to refine codes, re-examine the data, and ensure the authenticity and depth of the themes. To reflect this, Figure 2 presents the modified thematic analysis process as a cyclical model, emphasizing that the phases are interconnected rather than sequential.

The six phases of thematic analysis were systematically applied to ensure a rigorous and trustworthy examination of the qualitative data. The first phase, familiarization with the data, involved the researcher transcribing all individual interviews with five principals and two focus group discussions with seven teachers. These transcripts were read repeatedly to immerse in the content, while reflective memos were written to capture emerging ideas related to instructional leadership practices and challenges. During the second phase, generating initial codes, manual open coding was conducted on printed transcripts. Meaningful units, such as phrases or sentences that expressed the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of the participants concerning instructional leadership, were assigned codes. These codes remained flexible and were revised as the researcher's understanding of the data evolved.

In the third phase, searching for themes, related codes were clustered into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns in the data. Tools such as mind maps and theme tables were utilized to visualize these relationships. The fourth phase, reviewing themes, entailed checking the identified themes against the entire dataset to ensure they authentically represented the participants' narratives.

In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, each theme was carefully defined to capture its core meaning. The final phase, producing the report, involved weaving the themes into the study's findings, substantiating each with direct quotes from both principals and teachers to ensure authenticity and alignment with the research objectives and questions.

The analysis was verified through various strategies, including intercoder agreement, member checking, peer debriefing sessions, and reflexivity. Two independent coders reviewed data for consistency, and participant validation confirmed key themes accurately. Peer debriefing helped identify potential biases and alternative interpretations. Researchers acknowledged their positionality as educators and scholars, minimizing personal biases and authentically representing the voices of participants .

Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was strictly observed throughout the research process. The study obtained clearance from the appropriate Institutional Research Ethics Committee with an approval code of 2024 – 096 -OUSCREREC and adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in all transcriptions and reports to protect the identities of participants . Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions. All digital files, including recordings and transcripts, were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

Results and Discussion

This paper examined the challenges and practices of school principals in instructional leadership. This implies understanding the challenges that impede successful management in educational environments and recognizing the primary practices employed by principals to enhance instruction.

Table 3

Challenges Faced by School Principals and Teachers in Instructional Leadership

Codes / Verbatim Responses	Categories	Themes	Theme Description
<i>"One of the biggest challenges we face is balancing administrative responsibilities with instructional leadership." (SP1)</i>	Competing Roles	Balancing Responsibilities	School leaders struggle to allocate sufficient time between managerial tasks and instructional leadership responsibilities.
<i>"Setting aside dedicated time for instructional planning with teachers is essential but challenging." (SP4)</i>	Time Allocation	Balancing Responsibilities	Difficulties in prioritizing and dedicating time for instructional leadership amidst administrative workloads.
<i>"Maintaining consistency in implementing our school-wide goals is tough, especially with varying teaching styles." (SP2)</i>	Implementation Gaps	Ensuring Consistency	Variability in teachers' methods and preferences hinders the unified execution of school-wide instructional strategies.
<i>"Engaging teachers in decision-making processes fosters ownership and reduces resistance." (SP3)</i>	Resistance to Change	Ensuring Consistency	Teacher reluctance to adopt new initiatives creates inconsistencies in instructional implementation.
<i>"Regular data analysis sessions align everyone toward improving student achievement." (SP3)</i>	Collaborative Data Use	Data-Driven Instruction	Systematic interpretation and sharing of student data foster collective efforts for instructional enhancement, but this practice remains inconsistent.
<i>"The challenge lies in making teachers understand the importance of using student performance data effectively." (SP5)</i>	Effective Use of Data	Data-Driven Instruction	Teachers require capacity-building to interpret and apply data-driven decisions to improving teaching practices and outcomes.
<i>"Getting parents and the community to support our instructional strategies is quite a challenge." (SP1)</i>	Stakeholder Involvement	Community and Parental Engagement	Low parental and community involvement limits the effective implementation of school programs.
<i>"The lack of resources sometimes hinders our efforts." (T1)</i>	Material Constraints	Overcoming Resource Limitations	The scarcity of instructional materials and equipment hampers teaching effectiveness.
<i>"Having an open line of communication with our principal helps us get creative with what we have." (T3)</i>	Creativity with Available Tools	Overcoming Resource Limitations	Collaboration and creativity in utilizing limited resources mitigate instructional challenges arising from resource shortages.
<i>"There is a constant need to adapt to new initiatives while managing our regular teaching load." (T6)</i>	Instructional Transitions	Adaptability to Change	Frequent changes in policy and curriculum demand flexibility.
<i>"Providing one-on-one support during these transitions has been helpful." (T5)</i>	Support During Transitions	Adaptability to Change	Personalized mentoring and support systems help ease the adjustment period for staff transitioning to new instructional practices or reforms.

Balancing Responsibilities. This theme highlights the enduring tension school principals experience between administrative management and instructional leadership. SP1’s account of struggling to “balance administrative responsibilities with instructional leadership” mirrors the challenge articulated by Rodrigues and Lima (2021), who emphasized the necessity for intentional time management to avoid the dominance of managerial duties over pedagogical leadership.

In the Philippine context, the complexity is magnified by principals’ multifaceted roles—not only as instructional leaders but also as property custodians, welfare officers, and community liaisons (Pana, 2024). This contrasts sharply with ASEAN counterparts such as Singapore and Malaysia, where distributed leadership models assign routine managerial tasks to middle leaders, thereby protecting the principal’s instructional role (Lingam et al., 2021).

However, while distributed leadership appears effective elsewhere, its transferability to the Philippine setting faces barriers such as understaffing and unclear role delineations—raising concerns over whether such models can be implemented without additional systemic support.

The MATATAG Curriculum emphasizes the strengthening of foundational skills, which requires strong, focused instructional leadership. To realize this, DepEd must introduce clear role definitions and a formal delegation system that lightens principals’ administrative load—possibly through the appointment of administrative officers—so school heads can concentrate on curriculum leadership.

Ensuring Consistency. Despite existing structures for collaboration, SP2 and SP3 noted enduring resistance to instructional alignment, as individual pedagogical preferences disrupt consistency. This finding echoes Lingam et al. (2021), who reported similar challenges in fostering coherence across ASEAN schools, suggesting this is a regional—not merely local—phenomenon. While *pakikipagkapwa* (collegiality) promotes a harmonious work culture, it may also hinder open critique of teaching practices, resulting in surface-level agreement but underlying pedagogical divergence—paralleling Hallinger’s (2018) findings on unspoken resistance within hierarchical school systems. The MATATAG Curriculum’s success hinges on the uniform delivery of its restructured content. Establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) focused on curriculum unpacking and lesson study is necessary to bridge practice gaps and ensure more profound instructional coherence beyond collegial consensus.

Data-Driven Instruction. SP3’s concern about the inconsistent application of data-driven teaching mirrors Semon et al.’s (2022) observation that data remains underutilized without formalized systems and capacity-building. Compared with Thailand’s centralized, government-led data practices (Lingam et al., 2021), the Philippine school system reflects fragmentation, with principals and teachers exhibiting varying competencies in data interpretation.

Although the PPSSH framework mandates data-driven decision-making, its implementation in practice is hindered by teachers' limited training in data literacy, highlighting a disconnect between policy prescriptions and field realities. The MATATAG Curriculum provides a critical window to embed structured, school-wide data-use protocols and regular capacity-building programs. Without these, the curriculum's intended instructional shifts may not materialize into measurable learning gains.

Community and Parental Engagement. As SP1 and T7 shared, parental engagement remains episodic and passive, despite the rich cultural value of bayanihan. This finding contrasts with Vietnam and Malaysia, where structured and continuous parental involvement is institutionalized within school systems (Lingam et al., 2021). Eden et al. (2024) confirmed that active parental partnership directly correlates with improved academic and socio-emotional outcomes. There is an apparent mismatch between the Philippines' cultural potential for community involvement and the lack of formalized structures to sustain it. Current practices remain event-driven rather than strategically integrated into school governance. The MATATAG Curriculum's whole-child development vision necessitates the creation of institutionalized parent education programs, volunteer schemes, and family engagement frameworks—aligned with local cultural practices—to deepen home-school partnerships.

Overcoming Resource Limitations. SP1 and T3 highlighted chronic shortages in instructional materials and infrastructure—a limitation also reported in Aina and Abdulwasiiu (2023) as common to low-resource educational environments. Compared to wealthier ASEAN neighbors like Brunei and Singapore (Lingam et al., 2021), Philippine public schools suffer from significant resource inequity. While teacher creativity and peer-led initiatives are valuable stopgaps, they risk normalizing resource scarcity rather than prompting systemic investment—masking the state's responsibility to provide adequate support. The MATATAG Curriculum, which promises improved learning experiences, cannot succeed without targeted, equitable resource allocation. Government action to prioritize funding for marginalized schools—complemented by expanded public-private partnerships—should be integral to its rollout plan.

Adaptability to Change. SP6 described reform fatigue from constant curriculum shifts—a tension also noted by Hallinger and Truong (2016), who observed that rapid, top-down reforms in ASEAN countries often overwhelm educators, leading to resistance rather than innovation. However, SP5's mention of mentoring as a buffer reflects Yosief et al.'s (2022) finding that supportive school cultures can enhance adaptability. Reform efforts like MATATAG may unintentionally exacerbate fatigue if rolled out without adequate teacher preparation and adaptation periods—undermining the very improvements they seek. To avoid this, phased implementation plans, ongoing mentoring, and differentiated professional development tailored to teacher readiness are essential features that should accompany the MATATAG reforms to sustain educator engagement.

As shown in Table 4, the research findings highlight several best practices that school leaders employ to enhance instructional leadership despite the challenges they face. These practices not only foster a supportive educational environment but also promote collaboration and improve student outcomes.

Table 4

Most Practiced Instructional Leadership Strategies by School Principals and Teachers Despite Challenges

Codes / Verbatim Responses	Categories	Themes	Theme Description
<i>"Setting aside dedicated time for instructional planning with teachers has significantly improved our academic outcomes." (SP3)</i>	Time Management Strategies	Balancing Administrative and Instructional Roles	Allocating specific time slots for instructional planning despite administrative demands to strengthen teaching quality.
<i>"Frequent classroom visits allow us to provide timely feedback to teachers." (SP2)</i>	Instructional Supervision Practices	Balancing Administrative and Instructional Roles	Conducting regular classroom observations to enhance instructional support and teacher development.
<i>"Engaging teachers in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to our school-wide goals." (SP5)</i>	Participatory Decision-Making	Engagement and Collaboration	Involving teachers in shaping school policies to promote shared responsibility and commitment.
<i>"Teamwork during LAC sessions helps us address common instructional challenges." (T4)</i>	Collaborative Teamwork	Engagement and Collaboration	Utilizing professional learning communities, such as LAC sessions, to foster collaboration and mutual problem-solving among staff.
<i>"Regular LAC sessions align everyone toward improving student achievement." (SP3)</i>	Data Utilization Practices	Data-Driven Instruction	Employing data discussions during LAC sessions to inform instruction and improve learning outcomes.
<i>"We use performance data in staff meetings to identify which teaching strategies work best." (T2)</i>	Evidence-Based Decision-Making	Data-Driven Instruction	Applying student assessment data in collaborative settings to refine teaching methods.
<i>"Clear communication makes it easier to align our lesson plans with school-wide goals." (SP4)</i>	Clarity of Expectations	Communication of Goals	Ensuring that teachers fully understand academic objectives to deliver consistent lessons.
<i>"We involve teachers in setting our school's academic targets." (SP5)</i>	Goal-Setting Participation	Communication of Goals	Co-creating instructional goals with teachers to promote ownership and alignment with school direction.
<i>"Hosting academic fairs and community meetings boosts parental involvement and motivates students." (SP4)</i>	Parental Engagement Initiatives	Community and Parental Involvement	Organizing events that foster partnerships between schools, parents, and the wider community.
<i>"We encourage parents to participate in classroom activities and projects." (T7)</i>	Parent-School Collaboration	Community and Parental Involvement	Actively inviting parents into the teaching-learning process to strengthen home-school connections.
<i>"Our peer mentoring system has significantly enhanced instructional quality." (SP5)</i>	Peer Learning Opportunities	Professional Development	Facilitating mentorship and coaching among teachers to support skill development and instructional improvement.
<i>"One-on-one coaching during new policy implementation makes transitions smoother." (T6)</i>	Individualized Professional Support	Professional Development	Providing personalized guidance to help teachers adjust to policy changes effectively.
<i>"We encourage teachers to try new instructional strategies to engage students better." (SP2)</i>	Innovation Encouragement	Adaptability to Change	Supporting experimentation with new methods and technologies to improve teaching and learning.

"We assist teachers in adjusting to new curriculum requirements." (SP4)	Policy Implementation Support	Adaptability to Change	Offering resources and assistance to help teachers.
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Balancing Administrative and Instructional Roles. Principals consistently emphasized the need to balance administrative duties with instructional leadership. Principal A (SP3) shared, “Setting aside dedicated time for instructional planning with teachers has significantly improved our academic outcomes.” This finding supports Gatama et al. (2023), who argued that effective leaders strategically allocate time for curriculum coordination, creating a positive learning environment and managing resources to support teaching and learning. While principals recognize the need for such balance, the multi-faceted roles expected of them—ranging from administrative compliance to community engagement—often limit this focus (Pana, 2024). By contrast, ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Malaysia mitigate this burden through distributed leadership models (Lingam et al., 2021), freeing school heads to focus on pedagogical matters. The MATATAG Curriculum’s emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and well-being requires principals to reclaim their instructional leadership role. DepEd must institutionalize clear role definitions and possibly assign administrative officers to reduce principal workload, ensuring instructional leadership remains a core focus.

Engagement and Collaboration. Teacher engagement in decision-making emerged as a key driver of instructional leadership. Principal B (SP5) stated, “Engaging teachers in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to our school-wide goals.” This aligns with Musengamana et al. (2024), who found that inclusive leadership enhances teacher ownership and institutional performance. Yet, this ideal is not always realized in practice. In hierarchical school cultures like the Philippines, *pakikipagkapwa* (collegiality) may foster surface-level agreement without substantive change (Hallinger, 2018). Similarly, Lingam et al. (2021) noted that despite collaborative rhetoric, instructional inconsistencies persist across ASEAN schools. To address this, the MATATAG Curriculum could mandate the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to embed genuine collaboration focused on curriculum alignment, bridging the gap between collegiality and instructional rigor.

Data-driven instruction. The value of data-driven instruction was recognized by Principal C (SP3), who noted, “Regular LAC sessions align everyone toward improving student achievement.” This resonates with Rojas and Fuentes (2022), who emphasized the importance of cultivating a school-wide data culture to inform instructional practices. However, a contradiction arises in actual capacity: while the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) endorse data-driven leadership, many schools lack the training and tools to operationalize this ideal—contrary to Thailand’s structured data protocols (Lingam et al., 2021). The MATATAG Curriculum’s goals demand more systematic data-use training for principals and teachers. DepEd must embed such training into LAC sessions and in-service programs to enhance data literacy and ensure meaningful instructional improvements.

Effective Communication. Clear communication was identified as critical for instructional coherence. Principal D (SP4) remarked, “Clear communication makes it easier to align our lesson plans with school-wide goals.” This is consistent with Adejumo (2024), who found that transparent articulation of instructional objectives fosters alignment and collaboration among teachers. However, communication effectiveness may vary across schools, depending on leadership style and staff receptivity—raising concerns that DepEd’s expectations for uniform delivery (as under MATATAG) may not materialize without differentiated leadership training. The MATATAG Curriculum rollout should include targeted training for school leaders on instructional communication and consensus-building strategies to secure clarity and commitment across diverse school contexts.

Community and Parental Involvement. Parental engagement remains a challenge, despite efforts such as academic fairs. Principal D (SP4) observed, “Hosting academic fairs and community meetings boosts parental involvement and motivates students.” This supports Virador (2023), who emphasized the role of community initiatives in enhancing student outcomes. In comparison, ASEAN peers like Vietnam and Malaysia institutionalize parental engagement through structured programs (Lingam et al., 2021), whereas the Philippines relies on episodic, event-based involvement. This reveals a contradiction between cultural strengths (bayanihan) and the lack of formalized engagement mechanisms. To fulfill MATATAG’s holistic development goal, DepEd should promote institutionalized parent programs (e.g., parent education sessions, volunteer programs) aligned with Filipino cultural values for sustained involvement.

Professional Development. Ongoing professional growth emerged as a key factor in sustaining instructional quality. Principal E (SP5) shared, “Our peer mentoring system has significantly enhanced instructional quality.” This aligns with Nguyen et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of collaboration and shared problem-solving in achieving sustainable instructional improvement. Despite this recognition, professional development in many Philippine schools remains irregular and dependent on local initiative, unlike the nationalized, continuous models observed in countries like Singapore (Lingam et al., 2021). The MATATAG Curriculum should be supported by continuous, scaffolded professional development programs—not just pre-rollout training—ensuring teachers can adjust to reforms without burnout.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study on instructional leadership in public secondary schools in Isabela highlights practices that align with established models while being influenced by local cultural values like bayanihan and pakikipagkapwa. Key findings include the need for principals to balance administrative and instructional roles, foster collaboration, and utilize data for decision-making. However, challenges such as resource limitations and fragmented parental involvement are pronounced, reflecting broader trends in ASEAN countries but uniquely intensified in the Philippine context.

While the findings offer valuable insights, the study has several limitations. First, its scope is limited to selected public secondary schools within the province of Isabela, which may not fully represent the diversity of instructional leadership practices across different regions of the Philippines. Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative data from key informants, which, though rich in detail, may be subject to self-reporting biases. Third, the absence of longitudinal data limits the analysis of leadership practices over time and their sustained impact on student achievement.

To address these limitations, future studies are encouraged to expand the geographic coverage by including multiple regions or divisions for a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of instructional leadership across the country. Employing mixed-methods research designs can help triangulate findings and enhance validity by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be undertaken to examine how leadership practices evolve and influence learner outcomes over extended periods. Further investigation into the role of cultural values in shaping leadership styles and stakeholder engagement would also enrich the theoretical and practical implications of instructional leadership within the Philippine education system.

These insights and recommendations not only address localized educational challenges but also contribute to global discourses on instructional leadership by advocating for culturally responsive, evidence-based, and context-specific leadership frameworks in the development of education systems..



Statements and Declarations

1. **Funding details.** This research was supported through the Dissertation Manuscript Grant of the National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP).
2. **Disclosure statement.** There are no conflicting interests to disclose, according to the authors.
3. **Acknowledgment:** The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Department of Education – Region II for providing the necessary administrative coordination and relevant data to enable the completion of this study.
4. **Ethical Approval:** The Polytechnic University of the Philippines – Open University System (PUP-OUS) Ethics Review Committee examined and approved this study. Although no official ethics approval code was given, the approval's documentation can be found at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1T1NhuqSUboXBqbyhTlYa2q7K0otI1ipB/view?drive_link=usp.

5. **Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing.** The author(s) used Elicit AI to assist with the literature review and synthesis and Grammarly to improve grammar and readability while preparing this work. Following the use of these tools, the author or authors took full responsibility for the content of the publication and reviewed and edited it as necessary.

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