

Leading at the Margins: Lived Experiences of School Heads in Resource-Constrained Last Mile Schools in Sorsogon

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Abstract— This study explored the lived experiences of school heads leading in resource-constrained and geographically isolated Last Mile Schools (LMS) in Sorsogon. It examined how school heads navigate persistent shortages, multifaceted isolation, community partnership, and everyday innovation in sustaining education at the margins. Anchored on qualitative-phenomenological inquiry and guided by Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis, the study sought to humanize leadership by portraying how principals transform adversity into resilience and scarcity into adaptive practice. It addressed six areas: persistent shortages, isolation-related leadership challenges, community co-leadership, adaptive strategies and innovations, effects on identity and well-being, and recommendations for context-responsive interventions.

Ten school heads from diverse LMS contexts—mountain, coastal, inland, island, flood-prone, cliff-side, and conflict-affected—participated in in-depth interviews. Their narratives revealed six overarching themes. Persistent shortages highlighted chronic deficits in infrastructure, utilities, and resources that transformed leadership into daily crisis management. Isolation, both geographic and emotional, intensified deprivation and demanded physical endurance and psychological resilience. Community as co-leaders emerged as communities filled institutional gaps through bayanihan and collective responsibility. Adaptive strategies reflected everyday innovation, where leaders and teachers reimaged learning using local materials and improvised spaces. Professional identity and well-being were reshaped by layered roles and emotional strain, yet grounded in moral purpose. Recommendations pointed to recalibrated funding formulas, hazard-resilient infrastructure, offline digital solutions, institutionalized community partnerships, and psychosocial support.

The study concludes that leadership in LMS is resilience-driven, communal, and context-responsive. It calls for policies that recognize the human, relational, and moral dimensions of leading at the margins and support sustainable, equity-driven improvements for disadvantaged schools..

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I. INTRODUCTION

In many remote and underserved communities, the meaning of schooling is sustained not by buildings or policies alone but by the quiet perseverance of those who lead despite persistent adversity. Learning continues in classrooms patched with tarpaulins, in sitios accessible only through muddy trails or boat rides, and in schools that rebuild after every storm. These realities reveal that educational inequality is most deeply lived by those at the frontlines. In such settings, leadership is not merely an administrative function but a human endeavor shaped by hope, responsibility, and the daily resolve to keep children learning even when resources fall short. It is within this lived reality—where resilience becomes routine and commitment becomes a lifeline—that this study situates its inquiry into the structural, contextual, and human dimensions of leading

schools in the country’s most remote and resource-constrained areas.

Education is enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution as a fundamental right, mandating the State to protect and promote access to quality education for all (Art. XIV, Sec. 1). This constitutional guarantee frames education as both a legal and moral obligation. Yet, despite sustained reforms and investments, stark disparities persist across regions.

These inequalities are most evident in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA), where chronic shortages and systemic neglect undermine the promise of education as a pathway to empowerment. Schools in these contexts operate under conditions vastly different from those in urban and well-resourced areas,

reinforcing long-standing inequities in access and quality (UNESCO, 2021).

In response to these disparities, the Department of Education launched the Last Mile Schools (LMS) Program in 2019 to prioritize schools located at the farthest margins of the education system (DepEd Memorandum No. 059, s. 2019). The program recognizes that schools in remote barangays require targeted and context-sensitive interventions. However, the LMS initiative also exposes a persistent tension in Philippine education governance: while national frameworks articulate ambitious commitments, the realities on the ground remain deeply constrained (World Bank, 2022).

Last Mile Schools are commonly characterized by severe and chronic shortages. Classrooms are often inadequate or makeshift, access to electricity and potable water is limited, and instructional resources such as textbooks, laboratories, and digital tools are scarce (DepEd, 2020). Financial allocations are minimal and frequently insufficient to address urgent operational needs (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Compounding these challenges is geographic isolation—many schools require long and difficult travel by land or sea—and exposure to recurring environmental hazards such as typhoons, floods, and landslides (Bankoff, 2021). These conditions illustrate that deprivation in LMS is not merely material but also structural and environmental.

Within this context, the role of school heads becomes especially critical. Beyond instructional leadership, they function as crisis managers, community negotiators, and advocates. Government efforts to institutionalize support through successive General Appropriations Acts and inter-agency collaboration with DILG and DPWH signal recognition of LMS needs, particularly in infrastructure development and WASH facilities. Yet, these policy commitments have not consistently translated into sustainable improvements. For school heads in provinces like Sorsogon—situated along the typhoon belt—resource constraints are intensified by environmental vulnerability and geographic isolation, rendering leadership a complex and demanding undertaking (Orleans & Gomez, 2020).

Leadership in Last Mile Schools extends beyond conventional models that emphasize supervision, curriculum, and professional development (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). While these functions remain essential,

school heads in resource-constrained contexts must often prioritize survival-oriented strategies: improvising learning spaces, mobilizing community volunteers, adapting instruction during prolonged disruptions, and negotiating with external stakeholders for support. Such practices align with context-responsive leadership, which emphasizes adaptability, creativity, and responsiveness to environmental demands (Bredeson, 2019).

At the same time, the cumulative burden of persistent shortages, isolation, and recurring crises significantly affects school leaders as individuals. These pressures shape their professional identities, decision-making, and well-being. While adversity may foster resilience and innovation for some, others experience stress, fatigue, and burnout (Leithwood et al., 2020). These experiences foreground the human dimension of leadership at the margins—an aspect often overshadowed by policy-centered discussions.

The leadership realities in Last Mile Schools also reflect broader issues of social justice and equity. When school leaders are compelled to do more with less, the burden of systemic inequities shifts to individuals, transforming leadership into a moral and ethical undertaking (Theoharis, 2007). Their persistence amid scarcity reflects not only personal resilience but also the enduring aspiration of communities that view education as a pathway to a better future.

Despite the significance of these realities, much of the existing scholarship on educational leadership remains focused on mainstream and resource-abundant contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The voices of school heads leading in Last Mile Schools are largely absent, leaving a critical gap in understanding how leadership is practiced where constraints are most severe. This gap is particularly urgent in provinces like Sorsogon, where resource deprivation intersects with geographic isolation and climate vulnerability.

Motivated by his own experience as a school head in a last-mile secondary school in Sorsogon, the researcher pursued this study to explore whether his experiences resonated with those of other school leaders.

This inquiry sought to document how school heads navigate daily leadership amid shortages, geographic isolation, and environmental risks; how these conditions shape their engagement with stakeholders and professional well-being; and what adaptive strategies

they employ to sustain teaching and learning under adversity.

This study aligns with the constitutional mandate for equitable education and the goals of the Last Mile Schools Program. By centering the voices of school heads at the margins, it highlights their resilience, creativity, and commitment while underscoring the need for systemic and sustained support. Documenting their lived experiences contributes to more context-responsive leadership discourse and informs policies that enable school leaders not merely to survive, but to thrive in fulfilling the promise of education for all.

Ultimately, it sought to explore the lived experiences of school heads managing resource-constrained Last Mile Schools in Sorsogon. Specifically, it aimed at addressing the following questions:

1. How do school heads describe their day-to-day leadership experiences in navigating persistent shortages in:
 - a. finance,
 - b. facilities,
 - c. logistics,
 - d. utilities and digital access, and
 - e. community participation
2. What are the insights of the school heads on the leadership challenges arising from geographic and contextual isolation?
3. In what ways do these leadership challenges influence school operations and shape stakeholder engagement?
4. What adaptive strategies do school heads employ to sustain teaching-learning and ensure safety with limited infrastructure?
5. How do these experiences shape their professional identity, well-being, and decision-making?
6. What context-responsive interventions may be developed to address the unique leadership and resource challenges of Last Mile Schools?

II. METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Scholarship on educational leadership in resource-constrained and marginalized contexts consistently shows that leading schools at the margins requires more than routine managerial skills. International and local studies converge on the view that effective leadership in such settings is highly context-responsive, resilience-driven, and deeply relational. Leadership effectiveness is shaped by environmental realities, cultural

expectations, and systemic inequities rather than standardized administrative models (Bredeson, 1996; Hallinger, 2018).

Global studies emphasize the role of transformational and instructional leadership in sustaining morale and learning amid scarcity. Transformational leadership motivates teachers to transcend material limitations and strengthens collective commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), while instructional leadership relies on locally crafted innovations to compensate for shortages (Hallinger, 2011). Resilience is likewise identified as a core leadership attribute, conceptualized as “ordinary magic” arising from everyday adaptation and community support (Masten, 2014; Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2012).

Isolation further intensifies leadership challenges in disadvantaged schools. Geographic remoteness limits access to resources, professional networks, and institutional support, placing greater moral and emotional demands on school leaders (Mulford, 2008). In response, moral purpose and community engagement emerge as anchors of leadership, enabling principals to sustain education despite systemic neglect (Fullan, 2003; Epstein, 2011).

Philippine literature mirrors these patterns. Local studies describe school heads in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas as resource mobilizers, crisis managers, and community advocates who extend their roles beyond instructional supervision (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011; Estacio, 2016).

Research in disaster-prone regions highlights adaptive leadership practices, where principals rely on community collaboration and localized solutions to sustain learning during crises (Dizon, 2018; Alvior, 2019). Transformational leadership has likewise been shown to foster teacher collaboration, innovation, and perseverance under conditions of scarcity (Dela Cruz & San Jose, 2019; Soriano, 2020).

Culturally grounded leadership further characterizes Philippine LMS contexts. Values such as pakikipagkapwa, malasakit, and bayanihan foster trust, solidarity, and shared ownership of education, allowing communities to compensate for material deficiencies (Tolentino, 2017). These relational and cultural dimensions affirm that leadership in LMS is not only organizational but deeply human and communal.

Collectively, the literature supports four key propositions: leadership in marginalized schools is context-driven; resilience is central to sustaining education amid adversity; transformational leadership mobilizes collective agency; and school–community partnerships are critical for survival and continuity. These insights validate the theoretical lenses of this study—context-responsive leadership, resilience theory, role theory, and transformational leadership—while highlighting the moral and cultural foundations of leadership at the margins.

This study explored the lived experiences of school heads leading public elementary and secondary Last Mile Schools (LMS) in the province of Sorsogon, with particular focus on leadership challenges and adaptive strategies amid persistent shortages in facilities, finances, learning materials, and basic utilities such as electricity, water, and internet connectivity. It examined how school heads made sense of day-to-day leadership in geographically isolated and resource-constrained contexts, how these conditions affected school operations and stakeholder engagement, and how such experiences shaped their professional identity, well-being, and decision-making. The study aimed to generate insights that could inform context-responsive leadership interventions for Last Mile Schools.

The inquiry covered school heads with at least one year of leadership experience in LMS, coinciding with the implementation of the Department of Education's Last Mile Schools Program beginning in 2019. The school head served as the primary unit of analysis, with emphasis on lived experiences and adaptive practices rather than institutional outcomes alone.

The study was delimited to public elementary and secondary schools officially classified as LMS in DepEd Sorsogon Province and validated by the Division Engineer. Urban-based schools, private schools, and LMS under DepEd Sorsogon City Division were excluded to ensure focus on the most marginalized contexts and maintain research feasibility.

Using purposive sampling, ten school heads were selected from thirty-five identified LMS to represent diverse and highly disadvantaged settings, including mountainous, coastal, island, inland, flood-prone, cliff-side, conflict-affected, and rural environments. Nine participants led elementary schools, while one represented the secondary level—Sablayan High School

of Juban—where the researcher also served as school head, providing an insider perspective. Although the findings are not generalizable, they offer meaningful insights into educational leadership at the margins and contribute to understanding leadership practice in geographically isolated and resource-constrained school settings.

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of school heads leading resource-constrained Last Mile Schools (LMS) in Sorsogon. Phenomenology was chosen to capture leadership as a deeply contextual and human experience that could not be adequately explained through quantitative measures. The design centered on the meanings school heads attributed to their daily leadership, particularly in navigating shortages, isolation, and adversity, and in sustaining teaching and learning despite these constraints.

The study involved ten school heads purposively selected from thirty-five (35) DepEd-validated Last Mile Schools in Sorsogon Province. Participants were chosen to represent diverse and highly disadvantaged contexts, including mountainous, coastal, island, inland, flood-prone, conflict-affected, and rural settings. Of the ten participants, nine were elementary school heads, while one represented the secondary level—Sablayan High School of Juban—where the researcher also served as school head, providing an insider perspective on LMS leadership.

Data collection commenced after securing approval from the DepEd Division Office and obtaining informed consent from participants. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data-gathering method, allowing flexibility while ensuring alignment with the research questions. Interviews focused on leadership challenges related to persistent shortages, geographic isolation, disaster vulnerability, stakeholder engagement, adaptive strategies, and their effects on professional identity and well-being. Each interview lasted one to one and a half hours, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Selected focus group discussions were also conducted to enrich individual narratives and capture shared experiences.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, coded, and organized into categories that led to the development of overarching themes reflecting

common patterns of experience. Member checking was conducted to enhance credibility by validating emerging themes with selected participants. The analysis sought to surface meanings that revealed how leadership was practiced and experienced under severe constraints in LMS contexts.

III. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study on the lived experiences of school heads assigned in Last Mile Schools (LMS) in Sorsogon. The findings were drawn from in-depth interviews with ten school heads leading schools across diverse contexts—mountain, coastal, far-flung, inland, island, flood-prone, mixed-disadvantaged, cliff-side, conflict-affected, and rural settings. Their narratives offer direct accounts of the conditions under which they lead, the daily challenges they confront, and the strategies they use to sustain learning in geographically isolated and resource-constrained environments.

The results are organized thematically in line with the research questions. The themes highlight shared realities and distinct perspectives, reflecting leadership as a lived and contextual experience rather than an abstract administrative function. Overall, the findings show that leadership at the margins is shaped by persistent shortages and isolation, yet sustained through community co-leadership, everyday innovation, and a resilient sense of professional purpose. Participants also offered grounded recommendations for context-responsive interventions that strengthen LMS leadership and support systems.

Theme 1: Persistent Shortages

All ten school heads identified persistent shortages as the most defining condition of leadership in LMS. Shortages were not described as temporary disruptions but as daily and enduring realities that shaped school operations, leadership priorities, and the overall experience of managing education at the margins. These shortages were experienced across multiple dimensions: inadequate financial resources, fragile infrastructure, high logistical costs, lack of utilities and connectivity, and deep community poverty that limited learner readiness and parental support.

Financial constraints were consistently described as insufficient and misaligned with the realities of remote contexts. Participants explained that MOOE often failed to cover essential needs, forcing principals to make

difficult trade-offs between instructional priorities and urgent safety requirements. Several participants noted that long-term planning became difficult because funds were repeatedly diverted to emergency repairs and immediate operational demands.

Infrastructure and facilities were described as fragile, particularly in disaster-prone areas where classrooms were repeatedly damaged by typhoons, flooding, or environmental exposure. In many cases, waiting for formal repairs was not feasible, leading communities to patch classrooms using locally available materials to allow learning to continue. Shortages were also seen in the absence of basic utilities, such as electricity and water, which made teaching and school operations difficult and limited the school's ability to function as a safe learning environment.

Logistical burdens were another major dimension of deprivation. Participants emphasized that distance and terrain greatly increased the cost and difficulty of accessing supplies, attending district-level transactions, and complying with administrative requirements. In island and far-flung schools, weather conditions often dictated mobility, delaying emergencies, deliveries, and routine school tasks.

Utilities and digital access were widely reported as absent or unreliable. Participants described the difficulty of meeting online reporting requirements without stable power or internet connectivity. Some shared that disconnection created feelings of exclusion and invisibility, as systems assumed connectivity that did not exist in their contexts.

Finally, community poverty amplified shortages. Many learners lacked school supplies, food, and stable support at home, and parents were often unable to contribute financially. In such contexts, principals described having to respond not only to instructional needs but also to basic welfare concerns such as hunger, hygiene, and safety.

Taken together, persistent shortages created an environment of permanent scarcity, where leadership was often defined by survival-oriented decisions and constant crisis management rather than sustained developmental planning.

Theme 2: Leadership Challenges of Isolation

Beyond material scarcity, school heads identified isolation as a defining challenge that shaped both

leadership practice and personal well-being. Isolation was described as geographic, environmental, digital, and emotional—interacting to deepen inequity and intensify the burden of leadership.

Geographic isolation involved difficult travel routes, long treks, and risky transport across mountains, rivers, and seas. Participants described how the physical journey to and from school consumed time, energy, and resources, often affecting their capacity to supervise instruction and respond quickly to school needs. Administrative compliance also became burdensome, as submitting reports or attending meetings required exhausting travel and financial sacrifice.

Disaster-related isolation was frequently reported, especially among school heads in flood-prone or typhoon-affected areas. Disasters repeatedly disrupted classes, destroyed materials, and forced recovery cycles that drained already limited resources. For some, the school calendar was shaped less by academic scheduling and more by weather patterns and disaster recovery.

In conflict-affected contexts, isolation took on a security dimension, where school heads described prioritizing safety and managing uncertainty. Leadership expanded beyond instruction and administration into protection and crisis readiness, with principals balancing education continuity against risk.

Digital isolation also emerged strongly. Limited connectivity restricted communication with supervisors, delayed submissions, and reduced participation in trainings and decision-making processes. Participants described making critical decisions alone, often without guidance or timely information, reinforcing a sense of operating in silos.

These conditions produced emotional and professional costs. Participants described fatigue, loneliness, anxiety, and a sense of invisibility. For many, isolation reshaped professional identity—leadership became not only a technical role but also a personal endurance test requiring resilience, sacrifice, and sustained hope.

Theme 3: Community as Co-Leaders

Despite shortages and isolation, participants consistently emphasized that their schools survived because communities became indispensable co-leaders. Parents, barangay officials, local volunteers, and even learners played central roles in sustaining school operations, ensuring safety, and supporting continuity of

learning. Community support was not framed as optional help but as the primary lifeline in the absence of timely institutional resources.

Through “bayanihan”, communities repaired classrooms, carried construction materials, cleaned flood-damaged schools, and restored learning spaces after disasters. Participants highlighted that collective labor often bridged the gap between damage and formal repair processes. Communities also supported feeding programs through donated food, shared labor, and locally sourced resources.

While support was strong, participants acknowledged that trust and morale could become fragile under repeated hardship. However, many explained that trust was renewed when school heads demonstrated solidarity—working alongside parents during recovery and participating visibly in shared struggles. Community partnership in LMS was therefore relational and embodied, built through shared labor rather than formal agreements alone.

Participants also described how communities contributed to local innovations, such as hand-copying modules when printing was unavailable, sustaining school gardens for feeding programs, or providing makeshift learning spaces during disruptions. These practices reflected not only resource-sharing but also shared ownership of education, anchored in cultural values of collective responsibility and empathy.

Overall, the findings show that in LMS, leadership is practiced as a shared endeavor where community members function not merely as stakeholders but as co-owners and co-protectors of learning continuity.

Theme 4: Adaptive Strategies as Everyday Innovation

Participants demonstrated that in LMS, innovation is not primarily technological but survival-driven. Adaptive strategies were described as everyday practices that transformed scarcity into workable solutions. Innovation emerged through improvisation, contextual teaching, mobility, and community-based problem-solving.

School heads described pedagogical adaptations where teachers used local materials and the environment as learning tools—gardens, coastal resources, storytelling, and simple demonstrations replaced unavailable equipment and technology. In schools without electricity, low-tech strategies such as dramatization,

oral teaching, and chalkboard-based instruction were essential.

They also described flexible learning spaces. When school buildings became inaccessible due to floods, landslides, or conflict risks, learning moved to barangay halls, evacuation centers, or safe community spaces. In these contexts, classrooms were redefined not by buildings but by the ability to gather learners safely.

Resource mobilization was another innovation domain. Participants described securing donations, using locally available materials for repairs, establishing feeding support through community contributions, and adopting small but high-impact solutions such as solar lamps, raised shelves to protect supplies, eco-bricks, and offline learning resources.

Importantly, these adaptive practices shaped leadership identity. Participants expressed that everyday innovation enabled them to view themselves not merely as managers of scarcity, but as problem-solvers and builders of continuity. In LMS, adaptation was not an option—it was the core condition that allowed education to persist.

Theme 5: Professional Identity, Well-being, and Decision-Making

Participants' narratives revealed that leadership in LMS reshaped who they were as professionals and how they sustained themselves personally. School heads described their roles expanding beyond administration into functions such as builder, caregiver, counselor, protector, and community mobilizer. Identity was reconstructed through hardship, as leadership became grounded in solidarity, endurance, and moral responsibility.

At the same time, the strain on well-being was evident. Participants described physical exhaustion from travel and recovery work, emotional fatigue from repeated disasters, loneliness linked to isolation, and stress caused by compliance demands that did not reflect their realities. In conflict-affected contexts, fear and security concerns further weighed on leaders.

Decision-making in LMS was consistently described as survival-based and safety-centered. School heads weighed urgent needs against long-term development, and compliance against realistic capacity. Many described moral tension in choosing repairs, cleaning supplies, and basic welfare needs over instructional

materials—yet they viewed these choices as necessary to keep children safe and learning.

Overall, findings show that professional identity, well-being, and decision-making were inseparable. Leadership in LMS is deeply human work where choices are shaped by scarcity and risk, and where resilience is both a strength and a cost.

Theme 6: Recommendations for Context-Responsive Interventions

Participants' recommendations were concrete and grounded in daily realities. They emphasized that LMS interventions must be context-sensitive rather than standardized. Key recommendations clustered into five areas:

Recalibrate resource allocation to reflect the real costs of remoteness, logistics, and disaster vulnerability, including adjustments to MOOE and related support mechanisms.

Design hazard-resilient and terrain-sensitive infrastructure, reducing the cycle of repeated repairs and ensuring safe learning environments.

Pursue digital inclusion through alternative modalities, including solar power, offline learning resources, and acceptance of low-tech reporting systems where connectivity is absent.

Strengthen and formalize partnerships with LGUs, NGOs, and community organizations to support feeding, safety, transportation, infrastructure, and emergency response.

Support school heads' well-being through peer mentoring, psychosocial programs, wellness initiatives, and leadership support networks, especially for high-risk and conflict-affected assignments.

These recommendations reflect the participants' belief that equity requires policies and systems designed around lived realities—not assumptions of access, stability, or connectivity.

Synthesis of Findings

Across all themes, the findings portray leadership in Last Mile Schools as a continuous negotiation with scarcity and isolation. Persistent shortages shaped school operations and forced crisis-oriented leadership. Isolation intensified inequity and produced physical, digital, and emotional burdens. Yet schools endured

because communities became co-leaders through bayanihan and shared ownership of education. Innovation emerged as daily adaptation—low-tech, mobile, and locally grounded. These experiences reconstructed professional identity, strained well-being, and shaped decision-making around survival and safety. Finally, participants offered practical, context-responsive recommendations that point toward sustainable interventions built from the margins.

Taken together, the voices of the ten school heads reveal leadership in LMS as both sobering and inspiring: a reality marked by deprivation, yet sustained by resilience, creativity, and community solidarity that refuses to let distance extinguish the continuity of learning.

IV. DISCUSSION

Persistent Shortages

The lived experiences of school heads in Last Mile Schools (LMS) in Sorsogon showed that shortages were not temporary disruptions but enduring conditions that shaped leadership practice. Scarcity spanned finances, infrastructure, logistics, utilities, and community poverty, forcing principals to prioritize urgent survival needs—such as repairs, safety, and basic operations—over instructional development. This reflects national concerns that chronic resource gaps compromise learning conditions and widen inequities (Hernando-Malipot, 2025). In disaster-prone areas, fragile facilities and delayed repairs pushed communities to act as first responders, reinforcing how systemic delays transfer the burden of maintenance to parents and local stakeholders (Rappler, 2025). Geographic isolation further inflated operational costs; transportation and compliance demand consumed time and budget, echoing findings that remoteness increases costs and disrupts service delivery (Olabiyi et al., 2025). The lack of electricity and internet also isolated LMS from communication, reporting, and professional support systems, reinforcing inequity through digital exclusion (Santos, 2025). Community poverty magnified these shortages, limiting parental participation and learner readiness and showing that deprivation extends beyond school walls into the broader socio-economic context (Algabre, 2025). Overall, persistent shortages redefined leadership as continuous trade-off management between pedagogy and survival, consistent with warnings that without urgent reforms, inequity will persist (ACT Philippines, 2025).

Leadership Challenges of Isolation

Isolation emerged as a multidimensional burden—geographic, environmental, digital, and emotional—that intensified the difficulty of school leadership. Principals described physically demanding journeys that drained time and energy even before work began. Disasters deepened isolation through repeated cycles of disruption and recovery, while conflict-affected contexts added psychological strain, requiring school heads to prioritize safety and protection alongside instruction. These realities align with research describing burnout, loneliness, and limited institutional support among educators in remote settings (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). Digital isolation compounded the burden, as lack of connectivity restricted reporting, consultation, training participation, and timely guidance, forcing principals to make decisions alone and often with uncertainty (Santos, 2025). The emotional costs—feelings of invisibility, abandonment, and fatigue—were pronounced, underscoring the need for leadership approaches that build resilience and relational trust under constrained conditions (Rosel et al., 2024; Macapobre et al., 2024). In sum, isolation in LMS is not simply distance; it is a structural condition that magnifies inequity and turns leadership into an endurance-based, high-stakes practice.

Community as Co-Leaders

Findings highlighted that community support in LMS was not supplementary but essential to school survival. In the absence of timely institutional support, parents, barangay officials, and learners became co-leaders through bayanihan—repairing classrooms, cleaning after floods, contributing food, and helping sustain daily operations. This reflects evidence that community involvement in remote and Indigenous contexts is often driven by cultural values and necessity, making stakeholders indispensable partners (Algabre, 2025). Community participation sometimes became fragile under repeated hardship and misunderstandings, yet trust was often restored through shared labor and visible solidarity from school heads—an element consistent with servant leadership perspectives that strengthen relational bonds (Rosel et al., 2024). Communities also functioned as innovators, co-creating local solutions such as module hand-copying, food support, and school gardening, reinforcing how resilient leadership mobilizes local ingenuity to convert scarcity into workable practices (Mordeno & Rayon, 2025). These results support the view that stakeholder engagement

must be recognized and sustained through inclusive governance structures (Arguelles & Sarsale, 2025).

Adaptive Strategies as Everyday Innovation

Innovation in LMS was driven less by technology and more by necessity. School heads and teachers sustained learning through contextual pedagogy (using local materials, oral traditions, and improvised tools), flexible learning spaces (relocating classes to barangay halls or evacuation sites), and community-supported resource mobilization. These patterns affirm that resilience in remote schools is expressed through creative instruction and locally rooted solutions (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025; Arnilla et al., 2025). Modest interventions—such as solar lamps, raised storage, eco-bricks, and offline learning resources—often produced high impact, supporting calls for digital equity approaches that include low-tech and offline alternatives (Santos, 2025). Importantly, adaptive practices shaped principals' identities as innovators and problem-solvers, reinforcing leadership models that value flexibility, empathy, and context-sensitive judgment (Rosel et al., 2024; Sagap, 2024).

Professional Identity, Well-being, and Decision-Making

Leadership in LMS reshaped professional identity, as principals assumed expanded roles beyond administration—builder, caregiver, counselor, and protector—reflecting the need to contextualize leadership standards for remote realities (Apillanes, 2025).

However, well-being was consistently strained by physical exhaustion, disaster stress, isolation, and pressure to meet system demands without adequate support, paralleling findings on burnout and emotional exhaustion in under-resourced contexts (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025; Labindao, 2024).

Decision-making was largely survival- and safety-oriented, requiring principals to weigh trade-offs between instruction and urgent operational needs, often in isolation and without guidance (Sagap, 2024).

These results highlight the inseparability of identity, well-being, and decision-making and point to the need for leadership frameworks that explicitly address human, moral, and psychosocial dimensions of leading in extreme contexts (Rosel et al., 2024; Mordeno & Rayon, 2025).

Recommendations for Context-Responsive Interventions

School heads proposed practical, experience-based interventions across five domains: (1) recalibrating resource allocation (including MOOE) to reflect remoteness and disaster risks (Almonte, 2025); (2) developing hazard-resilient, terrain-sensitive infrastructure and improving implementation efficiency (Rappler, 2025); (3) pursuing digital inclusion through solar power, offline tools, and acceptance of low-tech compliance mechanisms (Santos, 2025); (4) formalizing partnerships with LGUs, NGOs, and community groups to strengthen safety, feeding, logistics, and emergency response (Arguelles & Sarsale, 2025); and (5) sustaining leader well-being through mentoring, peer support, wellness initiatives, and psychosocial services (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). Collectively, these recommendations emphasize that LMS interventions must be differentiated, place-sensitive, and aligned with lived realities rather than uniform assumptions.

Theoretical Implications

The findings challenge leadership theories that assume stable resources and consistent system support. In LMS, leadership operates as crisis-responsive practice centered on scarcity management, moral decision-making, and community negotiation. Isolation underscores the limits of centralized models and supports context-sensitive frameworks that include geographic, digital, and emotional disconnection. Community co-leadership strengthens participatory and distributed leadership perspectives, positioning stakeholders as integral actors rather than peripheral supporters. Innovation also requires redefinition—from technocentric models toward adaptive, locally embedded problem-solving. Finally, the expanded roles and emotional burdens of school heads highlight the importance of human-centered and trauma-informed leadership frameworks that integrate identity, well-being, and ethical decision-making.

Practical Implications

Practically, the study supports differentiated funding and planning models that account for transport costs, terrain, and hazard vulnerability, alongside infrastructure designs tailored to local conditions. It also reinforces the need to formalize community partnerships through inclusive planning and resource-sharing mechanisms.

Adaptive strategies—mobile learning spaces, contextual teaching, low-tech digital tools—should be strengthened through professional development and program support. Finally, institutional mechanisms for school head well-being (peer networks, mentoring, psychosocial services) are essential to sustaining leadership capacity in isolated and high-risk LMS contexts.

V. CONCLUSION

Findings:

School heads in LMS consistently navigate overlapping shortages in finances, infrastructure, logistics, utilities, and community poverty, which redefine leadership as a daily negotiation between survival and pedagogy.

Isolation in LMS manifests geographically, environmentally, digitally, and emotionally, severely limiting principals' access to support systems, collaboration, and recognition.

Communities in LMS act as co-leaders by providing labor, materials, food, and emotional support, sustaining education through bayanihan and culturally rooted solidarity.

Principals and teachers in LMS innovate daily by repurposing local materials, reimagining learning spaces, and mobilizing community resources to sustain education amid scarcity.

The extreme conditions in LMS reshape principals' professional identities into multifaceted roles, while their well-being and decision-making are continually strained by isolation and systemic neglect.

School heads designed grounded interventions, including recalibrated budgets, hazard-resilient infrastructure, offline digital solutions, formalized partnerships, and well-being support, which are needed for implementation in schools.

Conclusions:

Persistent deprivation in LMS transforms school leadership into a reactive and resilience-driven practice, where principals prioritize immediate needs over long-term educational development.

The multifaceted isolation experienced by school heads in LMS magnifies inequity and reshapes leadership into a solitary, high-stakes endeavor marked by physical and emotional strain.

In LMS, community involvement is not auxiliary but foundational, transforming schools into shared spaces of resilience and co-ownership.

Innovation in LMS is not a product of policy but a survival mechanism, where creativity and adaptability become the core competencies of leadership.

Leadership in LMS redefines professional identity as a multifaceted role shaped by hardship, where principals endure emotional and physical strain while making survival-based decisions in isolation.

School heads in LMS propose context-sensitive interventions—such as recalibrated budgets, resilient infrastructure, offline digital tools, and well-being support—that reflect their lived realities and aim to transform survival into sustainability.

Recommendations:

Recalibrate financial allocations and resource planning to reflect the compounded costs of remoteness, disaster vulnerability, and socio-economic disadvantage in LMS contexts.

Institutionalize adaptive leadership support systems that include digital connectivity, psychosocial services, and context-sensitive supervision to mitigate the burdens of isolation.

Formalize and resource community-school partnerships through local governance frameworks that recognize and institutionalize community contributions to education.

Support context-driven innovation by providing flexible funding, recognizing grassroots practices, and integrating adaptive strategies into professional development programs.

Institutionalize adaptive leadership support systems—including digital connectivity, psychosocial services, and context-sensitive supervision—to mitigate the emotional and professional burdens faced by school heads in Last Mile Schools.

Recalibrate financial planning, infrastructure design, and digital inclusion strategies to reflect the lived realities of LMS, while formalizing community partnerships and sustaining leader well-being through responsive governance frameworks.

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