

## TRAVELLING INTO THE PITCH-DARK ROAD: A CASE STUDY ON CHALLENGES IN EFFECTUATING LEADERSHIP AMID THE PANDEMIC

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### Abstract

*School leadership has to continually work whatever the circumstances the school heads face. It is the light that illuminates amid any the varying challenges. Thus, it shall be strengthened in achieving the common goals. This study investigated the challenges encountered by the school heads in private schools and their coping measures to such. Further, it also aimed to discover how school leadership was placed and executed in the context of the pandemic. The qualitative- case study method was used in the study and criterion sampling was used to determine the participants. Five school heads took part in the conduct of the structured interview. The thematic categorization method was employed in analyzing the data. The findings of this study revealed that unstable internet connection, collection of school fees, and work behavior of teachers were the emerging challenges faced by the school heads during the pandemic. Further, it was revealed that school heads in private schools were flexible in terms of running their school system during the pandemic. They used various strategic modes such as alternative work mode, collection arrangement policy, and reward and management system to address the challenges. It was also found out that participatory leadership was a common style among the school heads.*

**Keywords:** private school, challenges in school, coping measures, participatory leadership

### INTRODUCTION

Leading is not a thing that is added in the job description rather a job in itself that has to be embodied. Morgan (2020) said that a leader fuels the right motivation in leading and serving; in achieving positive results; and in promoting excellence at the work. Malik and Azmat (2019) defined leadership as “a process in which a person/s inspires (s) and motivates (s) the people to meet the shared goals or objectives which may be changed or added as per the needs and challenges.” The concept of leadership is bound to its redefinition based on the set of parameters on which the leaders are focused. Morgan (2020) said that leadership is diverse in the sense that it can cover a variety of perspectives.

School leadership has been continually evolving over time and in a different context (Day, Sammons & Gorgen, 2020). With the unpredicted demand of time, leadership approaches and styles in schools have also been developing to ensure that quality education is still served. Today, schools need to have a strong leadership foundation to facilitate educational policies and issues. Stein (2016) mentioned that the school principals and even district superintendents have a critical role in seeking to improve, or even optimize, existing systems and processes. Hence, for them to become effective leaders, they have to get directed with their institution's mission and vision, with an acute sense for situational awareness.

The rise of the Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the world and has impacted almost all aspects of human lives. The United Nations (2020) claimed that education is one of the sectors affected significantly by the pandemic. The lack of political will, resources, operating skills, leadership skills, and infrastructure (like a steady power supply) has affected the school operations during the pandemic crisis. Levenson & Mclaughlin (2020) mentioned that the new leadership challenge in the virtual world of work (as brought by the pandemic) is bound to effective performance measurement, management, and accountability. Leaders must have clearer views on how to effectuate leadership to achieve a high standard of performance despite the inevitable effect of the pandemic on their works. From this, the major challenge lies in the continuity of the education-teaching process (Atac, 2020). Thus, the school leadership has to be proactive, inclusive, and transparent to mitigate, if not to overcome, the emerging challenges. Hung, Huang & Tan (2020) claimed that there is a need to recalibrate leadership and seek opportunities in gearing up to a sustainable and enduring approach to effective leadership amid the current pandemic crisis.

With the significant change in the landscape of the educational system, a new way of thinking on school leadership also emerged to address the necessities of the school during this tumultuous time (Gurr, 2020). School leadership is a challenging and demanding role, especially when a crisis arises and difficult decisions have to be made (Earp, 2020). The pandemic happened unprecedentedly which the school leaders were not prepared for. Slade and Gallagher (2021) mentioned that there is no discreet handbook for a global pandemic that guides the school leaders in leading during the crisis. Many of them have stuck to their leadership stance while the majority have been trialing and experimenting as they go. The leadership path may seem risky and challenging but the key to being an effective leader is the skill to shift and adjust leadership approaches based on what is needed (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited, 2020). (Ryan) 2019) mentioned that leaders are exposed to risk all the time, and they need to be consistently responsible for managing that risk. Savvy leaders need to seize the opportunity to find an advantage amid the chaos with the development of fresh approaches and strategies in leading Levenson & Mclaughlin (2020).

During this pandemic crisis, the private schools are much affected that even resulted in their closures. In the United States, it was reported that 132 private schools announced their permanent, or temporary, shuttering because of the economic downturns (McCluskey, 2021). Various strategies were deployed in response to sudden school closures such as emergency remote education (Toquero, 2021). Furthermore, there were reports that private school teachers across the world have not been paid their salaries and/or had their contracts suspended (Carvalho & Hares, 2020). Consequently, it affected the performance of the teachers in carrying out the teaching-learning process. Furthermore, difficulties in fee collection were reported in India, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, and South Africa, among others. Across many contexts, the losses have been compounded by other financial burdens, such as rent, utilities, loan repayments, and the costs of meeting standard operating procedures (Alam & Tiwali, 2021). On top of these, McCluskey (2021) reported that enrollment decreased in some 57 percent of schools, including pre-K students, wherein it served as their revolving funds for operation. Thus, the challenging part of the school leaders in the private schools is on instruction, administration, management of resources.

In the Philippines, according to the report of Magsambol (2021), private schools saw a decline of 50% in enrollment from the previous school year. The Department of Education (DepEd) also

reported that at least 865 small private schools in the Philippines faced closures due to low enrollment and the inability to meet the requirements to conduct distance learning.

The school leader in private schools needs to work double-time to work on the prevailing problems and/or challenges that severely affected their operations. They have to focus on various areas of responsibility such to maintain learning continuity amid pandemic crises (Whand, n.d.). Furthermore, they need to refurbish their leadership styles to match the environment and conditions and to have consistency and sustainability of words and actions over time. In addition, school leaders should build resiliency and capacity for their school management to weather the disruptions caused by the pandemic (Bagwell, 2020).

This study is focused more on the approaches of the school heads/administrators to effectuate leadership amid the pandemic in private schools. There is a limited study that deals with the leadership operations amid pandemics in the small private secondary schools in a semi-urban area. This leads the researchers to conduct the study to further explore the leadership practices and approaches in private schools. Furthermore, there is a need to acquire an empirical understanding in the study of leadership during the uncertainties like the pandemic crisis.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to explore and determine how the school heads in the private secondary schools effectuate leadership amid the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study was focused on the school principals' management practices, their leadership styles, and the challenges they encounter during this tumultuous time. Specifically, the research study focused on three overarching research questions. First, what challenges have the school administrators/heads experienced during the pandemic? Second, what measures do the school administrators/heads take to address these challenges during the pandemic? Lastly, what leadership styles do school administrators/heads manifest in school operations during the pandemic?

### **METHODOLOGY**

Leadership as a concept is widely discussed in various researches and literature (Al-Malki & Juan, 2018). To map the terrain of this broad and continuously evolving and developing concept requires a bulk of concentration and patience (Collinson, Grint & Jackson, 2011). However, in this study, the importance of effectuating leadership during a time of crisis has been given an in-depth consideration in the research strategy. For this reason, this study employed a qualitative research design to obtain deeper insights and understanding of the research topic.

The case study method was used as the underpinning approach in the conduct of this study. Mesec (2009), as cited by Starman (2013), defined case study as "a comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis; i.e., the characterization of the case and the events, as well as a description of the discovery process of these features that is the process of research itself. Similarly, Harrison et al. (2017) detailed that the case study focuses on the complete inquiry of unit (a person or community) as a bounded system (the case) over time, within its context. In this study, the challenges and coping strategies of the private school heads, as they worked on effectuating leadership amid the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, were being investigated. McCombes

(2019) mentioned that the case study method is used in describing, comparing, evaluating, and understanding different aspects of a research problem. It addresses a wide range of questions that ask why what, and how of an issue and assist researchers to explore, explain, describe, evaluate, and theorize about complex issues in context. Outcomes can lead to an in-depth understanding of behaviors, processes, practices, and relationships in context (Harrison et al., 2017).

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

The participants of the study were the school administrators/heads of the private secondary schools in the Candon City Division, Ilocos Sur. The criterion sampling method was used to determine the participants of the study. The criteria in the selection of the participants were being a current school head in a private school and school head during the Covid-19 pandemic, and being willing to be interviewed. The criterion sampling method involves individuals, groups, or settings that meet a set of criteria Elmusharaf (2016). The sample of people or situations that are required for qualitative research methods shall be small but includes the widest range of people or situations rather than being representative (Karanja, 2017). The participants of the study involved four school administrators/heads who met the criteria set to be included in the study.

### **INTERVIEW DESIGN & ANALYSIS PROCEDURE**

This study used the semi-structured interview in gathering the data needed. DeJonckheere & Vaughn (2019) stated that qualitative research interviews unfold to gather subjective information from key informants who have personal knowledge and experience related to the research topic. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) emphasized the significance of flexibility in exploring and highlighting more detailed and deeper information on certain issues.

The researchers logically conceptualized and outlined the interview guide which was utilized to primarily highlight the means and ways of the private school heads in effectuating leadership amid the pandemic. Moreover, the interview questions were patterned to the three overarching problems of the study to provide the opportunity for the participants to share and elaborate their perceptions and insights on effectuating leadership at the height of the pandemic. The interview guide was validated by a panel of experts. Rucker (2017) mentioned that the interview guide was designed in a way that gives the participants enough space to tell their stories and provide the researcher a meaningful data.

Furthermore, this study used a technology-inclined mechanism in accomplishing the interview sessions. The researchers conducted the interviews as mediated by technology since health restrictions were still imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, it will be done through e-mail, messenger chats, or video calls—whichever the interviewees prefer. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) mentioned that interview techniques have been advancing with the development of technology which paves way for the use of emails and messengers (development of social media) to accomplish the same purpose.

Before the conduct of the study, a letter of consent was forwarded to the school heads of the private secondary schools in the City of Candon, Ilocos Sur to formally ask for their approval in taking part in the study. It contained and highlighted the purpose of this study, the interview process, and the assurance of its confidentiality. Upon approval, the researchers commenced communicating to the

participants regarding their interview preference and also their availability.

Throughout the interview process, the researcher ensured that the participant felt comfortable enough to answer the interview questions by having a friendly approach. Each participant was contacted by phone, e-mail, Facebook messenger, or any of their preference. Each interview lasted from thirty minutes to one hour and all of them were conducted by the researchers. All interview responses, messages, recordings, and transcriptions were confidentially stored and kept for the researchers' review only.

The thematic analysis was incorporated in identifying, analyzing, and describing the recurring patterns that were taken from the overarching statements of the participants. The thematic analysis aims to consider how the reported information addresses a specific research question or invites a new conceptual or theoretical understanding. In doing so, thematic analysis speaks to the data in a large sense and less often delves into the very detailed nuances of an individual's experiences (Lochmiller, 2021).

Colaizzi's (1978) method, a phenomenological data analysis method, was used to guide the data analysis for this study. The researcher repeatedly read the data in its literal sense, extract useful information, code repetitive information, and eventually summarize this information as themes. As cited by Huang (2019), the Colaizzi method includes 7 steps: (1) read all the contents of an interview; (2) extract significant statements; (3) formulate meanings; (4) organize the collection of meanings into clusters of themes; (5) integrate the clusters of themes into an exhaustion description; (6) establish the fundamental structure of the phenomenon identified by an unequivocal statement; and (7) return to interviewees for further information.

## **RESULTS**

Principals in the private schools who participated in the study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the overarching research questions: (1) what challenges have the school administrators/heads experienced during the pandemic? (2) what measures do the school administrators/heads take to address these challenges during the pandemic? (3) what leadership styles do school administrators/heads manifest in school operations during the pandemic? Three dimensions within the context of effectuating leadership amid a pandemic of private school heads were extensively explored and explained based on responses. The results were organized into three themes: the challenges faced by the school heads, measures taken to address the challenges; and participative leadership during the pandemic.

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY THE SCHOOL HEADS**

School heads, like no other leaders, are not spared from encountering complexities, risks, problems, or even failures within the school and organization they lead. Burkhauser et al. (2012) said in their study that principals are more challenged when functioning effectively in a new environment and assimilate quickly to a new culture. The past two years had brought havoc in the education sectors that even temporarily closed its gate for face-to-face learning while others permanently shut their school operations.

The private schools are not exempted from the adverse effect of the Covid-19 pandemic; in fact, they are even the most affected institution because they are only dependent on their resources.

McCluskey (2021) mentioned that private schools were placed in doom when the pandemic arose because of the many problems that the school received. The low-cost private schools were triggered to trim down, as expected, their usual operating procedures due to the economic effects that crippled their funding support. In the study of Aytac (2020), it was revealed that school infrastructure, access, and pedagogical issues in the process of teaching lessons were the emerging problems encountered by the school administrators.

To understand how the private school heads effectuate leadership during the pandemic, the researchers initially asked the challenges to particularly assess the current situations of the school. After analyzing all the responses of the participants, the researchers found that the private school heads have faced the following challenges in schools: unstable internet connection, collection of school fees, and work behavior of teachers.

### **UNSTABLE INTERNET CONNECTION**

Some of the participants consider the unstable internet connection as the major challenge that the school employees face in discharging the tasks during the pandemic. Moreover, due to unstable internet connection, the school operation is affected. Tria (2020) mentioned that the use of internet connection is pivotal in doing the school transactions such as submission of online reports, conducting meetings and conferences, attending webinars, interacting virtually with parents and students among others. One school head said, *"I could hardly send reports online and disrupted from holding meetings and conferences with teachers. Since classes are done virtually, most of the teachers complain about the poor connection of their internet providers. They can't even hold the class for the entire period because of this."*

This result is expected to appear and has similarities to the findings of other studies. For instance, in the study of Gurung (2021), the unavailability of strong internet access emerged as one of the challenges faced by the teachers. With this, it clearly shows that the school processes are disrupted and delayed specifically this pandemic in which everything requires virtual transactions, like in e-billing payment, in giving instructional materials online among others. Therefore, having a stable internet connection could help the school heads and their employees to fast track the support and delivery of products and services to the clients and stakeholders. It can be

### **COLLECTION OF SCHOOL FEES**

In private school operations, administrators are dependent mainly on fees such as tuition, textbooks, and other miscellaneous fees to be collected from parents. These fees are used to finance the personnel services, utilities such as electricity, water, internet, and rentals among others. However, if parents could not pay their dues on time, financial obligations are also affected.

One participant said, *"The parents or guardians of the learners pay on time while others don't. Or even worst, they wait until the end of the school year."* The encounter of another school the head is closely similar to that. She also faced challenges regarding the collection of students from their parents or guardians. She said, *"I know most of the parents of our students were laid off from their work. This is understandable. But though paying the school dues has an ultimatum, they keep on asking for more extensions. I can't do anything but grant it."*

The finding strengthened the issue raised by Alam and Tawari (2021) who mentioned that the challenge of private schools is to sustain the running of school operation through its revenue during the pandemic. As a primary means of the school income, the collection of fees is pivotal to sustainability and resilience in a time of crisis. Thus, it is a challenge for the school heads to remedy the funds for the school finances. Consequently, the worst case would happen and that is the closure of the school. Thus, there should be a decent dialogue between parents and schools, and concessions should be given on a case-to-case basis.

## WORK BEHAVIOR OF TEACHERS

To achieve the shared mission and vision of the school, teachers have to play a significant role in delivering the services offered to the learners. They are the strong partners in ensuring that quality education is maintained. Nevertheless, because of the recurring situation brought about by this pandemic, they seem to be disinterested and unmotivated in their manner of teaching in the new normal. For example, they are not used to preparing and delivering modules and teaching online. As a consequence, this affects their work behavior because of the present situation.

One participant said, *“Napapansin ko na parang hindi na sila masaya sa dami ng mga dapat gawin lalo sa pagtututo. Syempre hindi maiiwasan na medyo late na maibigay ‘yung sahod minsan.”* In a similar vein, the school head participant reported, *“I can sense that teachers are stressed and emotionally drained and concerned much for their safety. Because of this, their performance with important works to be done are significantly interrupted. And, I consider it as a challenge in making the teachers stay attuned with their commitment despite of their conditions.”*

This result corresponds to the study findings of Li, Liu & Ma (2021) that the pandemic has caused higher teaching stress and career development stress and has reduced passion. It is also parallel to the report of Collie (2021) that increased workload has stressed teachers which greatly affects their performance towards the teaching occupation. This has challenged the school heads in motivating the private school teachers to perform their duties and responsibilities. Thus, As supported by the teachers, the accountability and resilience to uphold academic success have put a lot of pressure on the school heads during the crisis.

## MEASURES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES

The Department of Education (DepEd) continues to advocate for learning continuity for learners and initiate intervention plans to address the educational challenges experienced by learners and teachers (Cruz, 2021). In response to the emerging issues affecting the school operations, the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) shall be operationalized. BE-LCP aims to streamline the K to 12 Curriculum into the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), and to allow the use of multiple learning delivery modalities such as distance learning and blended learning, either on top or in place of face-to-face learning. During these times, school leaders have provided clarity and direction, built resilience, and instilled hope as they remained focused on the best possible outcomes for their students and school communities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited, 2020). Hence, education must continue despite the threats and hazards of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## ADAPTING ALTERNATIVE WORK MODE

Unstable internet connection is inevitable and uncontrollable in a workplace. Notwithstanding, the need to adjust to the situation shall be made particularly to address this concern. Moreover, ensuring the quality of service as a priority must be placed at an optimum. Therefore, there must be a strategic way to cope with this problem encountered by the school heads and school personnel.

One participant said, *“Naisip ko bilang isang school head na kailangan mag-strategize ng alternative work mode. Like, kung may naka-schedule na webinar, pwedeng mag-work mode sa bahay kung malakas ang signal ng internet or vice versa.”* This could cater to the demand of the teachers to work at their comfort and to lessen the challenges in securing and submitting their documents and meeting their students with the buffering of the internet. Though private schools, teachers are paid on a no-work-no-pay basis which required them to get to school regularly, the private school heads should implement the flexible work arrangement with its maximum extent to create positive working conditions for them.

## IMPOSING COLLECTION ARRANGEMENT POLICY

The participants stated that their policy in collecting the dues from the stakeholders shall be restructured to come up with a mutual agreement. One school head reported, *“The number of enrollees in our school has threatened to decrease significantly. I cannot take the other students to transfer to the other schools because they are compelled to pay their tuition fee before they can enroll. So, I tried to make arrangements with the parents as to how they could pay the fees of their children.”*

Another principal shared the same, *“As much as possible, I have to keep our students because the amount of funds we revolve comes from their them. I tell the parents that “payment first” is not a requirement in our school. And, they can pay their dues quarterly, instead of monthly.”*

This shows that though the school is financially challenged, they have to arrive at a better plan to maintain the operational procedures of the school while keeping their students at the same time. In addition to this, the school personnel, parents, and stakeholders’ continuous and mutual understanding is necessary to help curve the impact of the pandemic to the private school as an independent learning institution. Thus, as a front liner in the school organization, the school heads shall be consistent with this measure to address the economic problem of the school.

### **DEALING WITH REWARD AND RECOGNITION SYSTEM**

The sense of recognition makes the teachers feel that they contribute greatly to the school. Further, a little motivation can boost their attitude in keeping up the good work and that their effort has been valued. Andrews (2011) reported that teachers receiving recognition and awards for their teaching have praised recognition programs as motivating for them to continue high-level instruction. Good performance results from consented efforts, ability, and true direction. Employees' performance rewards are therefore made up of the totality of the financial and other non-financial rewards that an employee receives because of their labor or services rendered (Sam-Kalabor & Ezeala, 2021).

One participant stated, *“I think this time it is important to reward the teachers for their simple effort. I give certificates to those who exemplified good performances in their tasks. Since the school is financially challenged, a salary increase is not possible. But, the school gives simple tokens or gifts to the personnel whenever there are occasions.”* Another participant also said, *“The school gives load allowances to the teachers to aide their online teaching and submission of reports.”*

This finding is coherent with the results of Sam-Kalabor & Ezeala (2021) that effective remuneration or incentives can effectively assist teachers to develop a good working habits. The school heads have to be sensible and considerate of the feelings and sentiments of the teachers. It is imperative to recognize and appreciate them extrinsically and intrinsically. Thus, as school heads, giving them what they deserve during a time of crisis is a must.

### **LEADERSHIP STYLE OF THE SCHOOL HEADS**

In ensuring that school operation is managed properly, school heads must adopt effective leadership styles in varying situations. Effective leadership is about executing the company’s vision (or redefining and improving it, in some cases) and setting the tone and the culture for that particular organization. Leadership means creating and planning, securing resources, and looking out for and improving errors. It is about motivating people to work together and cooperate with themselves and in some cases, other teams, to achieve a certain goal (Runrunit, 2021). Moreover, the wise leader knows to flex from one style to another as the situation demands. Therefore, the leadership styles of school heads are challenged.

The researchers asked the participants regarding the styles of leadership they employ during this Covid-19 pandemic. Some of them responded that participative leadership could be best during this



pressing situation. Participative leadership is a style of leadership in which all members of the organization work together to make decisions. Participative leadership is also known as democratic leadership, as everyone is encouraged to participate (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021). In addition, Participative leadership is defined as a leader's non-authoritative behavior that gives opportunities to subordinates to take part in the decision-making process and receive input from employees to make a quality decision. In effect, participative leadership provides everyone the opportunity to be engaged in the organization's crucial decision-making.

One participant said, *"With this current situation, I encourage my teachers to make their suggestions and empower them to do what they think can help respond to the challenges at their level"*. Another participant said, *"I know that the teachers have good ideas, too. They might have innovative solutions to be used in solving developing problems in school during this pandemic. That is why I allow them to speak out their minds."*

There is a lucid connection relating this study with the finding of Greiner (2021) that "there is not only consensus on the specific characteristics that comprise a participative style, but also general agreement that certain participative leadership characteristics produce more effective results. This connection between participation and effectiveness is significant because managers are more likely to act in a participative manner if they believe their actions lead to better results".

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