

LEADING LASTING CHANGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of school leaders in leading sustainable school improvement initiatives, drawing from thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with principals and teacher-leaders in Philippine public schools. Key findings reveal four core themes: leadership as an enduring challenge demanding resilience amid resource constraints and daily crises; collaboration as the foundation of sustainability through stakeholder partnerships, distributed roles, and professional learning communities; school improvement centered on holistic learner outcomes via integrated academic, health, environmental, and cultural interventions; and sustainability as long-term systems embedded in school culture rather than transient projects. Effective strategies include participatory planning, habit reinforcement, and strategic prioritization aligned with School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and DepEd processes. The results align with extant literature on distributed leadership, systems thinking, and wholeschool approaches, highlighting how collective ownership and capacity-building sustain reforms beyond individual tenures. Implications underscore the need for resilience-focused training and policy support for equitable, culturally responsive practices, particularly in Indigenous contexts. This study advances educational leadership theory by reframing sustainability as cultural institutionalization, offering practical insights for resilient school transformation in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: *Sustainable school improvement, distributed leadership, school leaders' experiences, stakeholder collaboration, resilience in education.*

INTRODUCTION

School leadership has long been recognized as a critical driver of educational transformation and institutional success. Sustainable improvement efforts require leaders to integrate innovation, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based practices to ensure long-term impact. However, achieving sustainable change is often hindered by barriers such as teacher resistance, limited resources, and evolving policy requirements.

Previous studies emphasize that effective leadership hinges on strategic planning, collaborative approaches, and adaptability to shifting educational landscapes (Duray, 2025). School heads frequently implement mentorship programs, professional development workshops, and stakeholder-driven policies to address systemic challenges (Karakose et al., 2024). Despite uncertainties, leaders who employ adaptive strategies foster environments conducive to sustainable academic progress.

Recent research highlights the importance of adaptive leadership in responding to educational reforms and systemic change (Duray, 2025). School leaders must balance policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and resource management to ensure lasting improvements (Karakose et al., 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, there remains a need to explore how leadership practices are contextualized in resource-constrained and rural settings.

In the Philippines, school leadership plays a pivotal role in driving reforms, particularly in areas facing socio-economic challenges. The implementation of the K to 12 curriculum and learning continuity plans has required school heads to adapt to new policies while maintaining quality education delivery (Duray, 2025). In President Roxas, Cotabato, school leaders encounter unique challenges related to curriculum development, teacher readiness, and community engagement. Sustainable school improvement initiatives in this region must address issues such as limited resources, teacher retention, and parental involvement. Collaborative leadership has been identified as a key factor in fostering resilience among educators and students (Karakose et al., 2024).

Building upon these contexts, this study aims to examine how school leaders in President Roxas navigate systemic challenges and implement strategies that lead to lasting educational improvements. By analyzing their narratives, the research seeks to uncover best practices that contribute to leadership effectiveness and sustainable school transformation.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology was appropriate because it sought to understand and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences regarding sustainable school improvement leadership. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how school leaders perceived, interpreted, and made meaning of their roles in initiating and sustaining lasting change within their schools

Research Participants

The study involved purposive sampling to select school leaders who had direct experience leading sustainable school improvement initiatives. Participants included principals, assistant principals, and other school administrators from public schools recognized for their ongoing sustainability efforts. The criteria for inclusion were at least five years of leadership experience in the same school, active involvement in school improvement initiatives focused on sustainability (environmental, academic, or organizational), and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of 10 participants were targeted to allow for rich, detailed data while maintaining manageability for qualitative analysis.

Research Materials

The materials used for data gathering in this study included a semi-structured interview guide developed from the research questions and relevant literature, which served as the primary instrument for eliciting participants' narratives on sustainable school improvement leadership. To ensure accuracy and completeness, interviews were recorded using digital audio devices and secure video conferencing platforms when face-to-face meetings were not feasible. Field notes were maintained throughout the sessions to capture nonverbal cues, emotional tone, and contextual observations that enriched the interpretation of participants' accounts. Transcription tools were employed to convert audio recordings into verbatim text, preserving the integrity of participants' lived experiences. Ethical safeguards were upheld through the use of consent forms and information sheets, which outlined the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. In addition, supplementary documents such as school improvement plans and leadership reflections were collected to provide contextual background and triangulate findings. Together, these materials ensured that the data collection process was comprehensive, credible, and firmly grounded in the authentic experiences of school leaders.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process for this phenomenological study was carefully structured to ensure depth, authenticity, and ethical integrity. Prior to conducting interviews, formal approval was secured from institutional authorities, and participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's objectives, procedures, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Informed consent was obtained, emphasizing their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Once participants were identified through purposive sampling, interviews were scheduled at times and settings convenient for them, either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms to maintain accessibility and privacy. Each interview was guided by a semi-structured protocol, allowing participants to share their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to probe for deeper insights. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and field notes were taken to capture nonverbal cues, emotional tone, and contextual factors that enriched the narratives.

Supplementary documents such as school improvement plans and leadership reflections were also collected to provide contextual background and triangulate findings. Following each session, recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymized through pseudonyms, and shared with participants for member checking to validate accuracy and interpretation. This systematic procedure ensured that the data gathered were credible, comprehensive, and firmly grounded in the lived experiences of school leaders engaged in sustainable school improvement initiatives.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed the principles of phenomenological inquiry, with the goal of uncovering the essence of school leaders' lived experiences in implementing sustainable school improvement initiatives. After each interview was transcribed verbatim, the researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and rereading the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the narratives. Significant statements directly related to participants' experiences were identified and extracted to preserve the core meanings of their accounts. These statements were then interpreted to formulate meanings, which were clustered into themes that reflected commonalities and variations across participants.

To provide a comprehensive understanding, both textural descriptions and structural descriptions were developed. These descriptions were synthesized to articulate the essence of the phenomenon, capturing the fundamental nature of leading and sustaining school improvement in resource-constrained settings. Throughout the analysis, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to bracket personal biases and conducted member checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants to validate interpretations. This rigorous and reflective process ensured that the analysis was credible, trustworthy, and firmly grounded in the authentic lived realities of school leaders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Qualitative analysis on how school leaders describe their experiences in leading sustainable school improvement initiatives

Issues probe	Codes/ Category	Significant Statements	Theme	Meanings
Experiences in leading sustainable school improvement initiatives	Daily challenges Nature of experience	"Everyday I encounter different problems... very challenging."	Leadership is challenging	School leadership involves constant problem-solving
	Rewarding leadership	"It is challenging yet rewarding."		Effort results in personal and

	Emotional experience			organizational growth
	Resilience Leadership qualities	“You need courage, determination, resilience.”		Effective leadership requires personal strength
	Stakeholder engagement Collaboration practices	“We tap stakeholders... parents, BLGU, community.”	Collaboration as foundation of sustainability	Sustainability depends on involvement of community
	Shared responsibility Dependency on partners	“Cannot do it alone... need support of internal and external partners.”		Sustainable initiatives require collective effort
	Professional collaboration Teacher empowerment	“Teacher collaboration and PLC improved practices.”		Teachers drive instructional and cultural change
	Integrated interventions Student outcomes	“Reading enrichment with SBFP improved literacy and attendance.”		Linking health + learning increases outcomes
	Infrastructure improvement Environment enhancement	“Physical transformation of school increased enrollment.”	School improvement focused on learner outcomes	School environment boosts motivation
	Cultural preservation Cultural relevance	“Embedding culture of Manobo-Kulamanon tribe in school.”		Sustaining IP culture through school practices
	Evolving understanding Knowledge shift	“Before I thought improvement is just new programs... now it’s building capacity.”		Sustainability as long-term systems, not one-time projects
	Long-term perspective Sustainability mindset	“It is a continuous process, not 3-year term only.”	Improvement continues beyond leadership terms	

	Cultural embedding Institutionalization	“Embedding practices into culture ensures continuity.”		Sustainability happens when practices become norms
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Thematic analysis revealed four key themes describing school leaders' experiences in leading sustainable school improvement initiatives. "Leadership is challenging" emerged from descriptions of constant problem-solving across student learning, behavior, staff collaboration, and resource constraints, requiring resilience, courage, and determination, as illustrated by IDI_P1: "Being a school leader... demands strategic thinking and resilience... navigate limited resources" and IDI_P2: "Leading sustainable school improvement... requires... resilience to navigate complex... challenges." "Collaboration as foundation of sustainability" highlighted stakeholder engagement with parents, BLGU, and community, alongside teacher PLCs, with IDI_P3 and IDI_P7 noting delegation and parent involvement in SIP tasks and projects. "School improvement focused on learner outcomes" involved integrated interventions like reading with SBFP for literacy, infrastructure for enrollment, and Manobo-Kulamanon cultural embedding, per IDI_P4 and IDI_P5 on parent advocacy and communication. "Sustainability as long-term systems" reflected shifts to capacity-building and cultural norms beyond terms, as IDI_P5 described evolving knowledge via experience and training.

Table 2. Qualitative analysis on the strategies school leaders find most effective in fostering a culture of sustainability within their schools.

Issues probe	Codes Category	Significant Statements	Theme	Meanings	
Effective strategies for sustainability	Multi-stakeholder involvement Participation mechanisms	“General assembly meetings, PTA, SGC involvement.”	Collaborative & participatory strategies	Transparency builds ownership	
	Collective planning Democratic leadership	“Better to have more brains than one.”		Shared planning improves decisions	
	Inclusive participation Inclusive leadership	“Teachers and learners represented in ESIP planning.”		Broad involvement strengthens culture	
		Codes Category	Statements	Theme	Meanings
		Delegation Leadership distribution	“I designate teachers and coordinators.”	Distributed leadership promotes ownership	Work is shared for efficiency
		Assigned roles Structural support	“Different coordinators (LIS, DRRM, subject areas).”		Functional roles strengthen sustainability
		Shared responsibility	“ESLG and PTA take part in leadership roles.”		Students and parents contribute to goals

Community-wide leadership			
Codes Category	Statements	Theme	Meanings
Environmental habits Habit formation	“Sustainability integrated in curriculum, garden, waste segregation.”	Institutionalizing sustainability in daily practice	Daily routines build sustainable mindsets
Behavioral reinforcement Behavioral culture	“Handwashing, toothbrushing, discipline routines.”		Habits ensure long-term cultural change
Alignment Policy integration	“Strategies anchored on SIP and memoranda.”		Policy alignment ensures consistency
Codes/ Category	Statements	Theme	Meanings
Prioritization Decision-making	“Prioritize based on urgency, relevance, magnitude.”	Strategic balancing of short-term and long-term goals	Criteria-based planning ensures balance
Quick wins Motivation	“Small quick wins like waste segregation motivate stakeholders.”		Early successes build momentum
Procedural adherence Process discipline	“Follow process... don't shortcut.”		Systems thinking supports sustainability

The qualitative analysis of participant responses revealed four primary themes addressing effective strategies for fostering sustainability in schools. Collaborative and participatory approaches engage multi-stakeholders through general assemblies, PTA, SGC meetings, and inclusive ESIP planning, guided by the principle "better to have more brains than one" to build transparency, ownership, and stronger organizational culture via memoranda of agreements for long-term accountability. Distributed leadership promotes shared efficiency by delegating roles to teachers, coordinators (LIS, DRRM, subjects), ESLG, and PTA, with functional structures ensuring students and parents contribute to goals through community-wide involvement. Sustainability institutionalizes in daily routines via curriculum integration, gardens, waste segregation, handwashing, toothbrushing, and discipline, forming sustainable mindsets and long-term cultural change anchored by SIP alignment and policy memoranda. Strategic prioritization balances short- and long-term goals by focusing on urgency, relevance, and magnitude, leveraging quick wins like waste segregation for motivation, and adhering to processes without shortcuts to uphold systems thinking and accountability.

Table 3. Qualitative analysis how school leaders measure impact and ensure longevity of initiatives

Issues probe	Codes/ Category	Significant Statements	Theme	Meanings
Balancing measurable impact with sustainable longevity of school initiatives.	M&E systems Evaluation	“Monitoring and evaluation... PIR, SMEPA.”	Data-driven monitoring ensures accountability	Data guides assessment
	Academic indicators Quantitative metrics	“Check reading performance, attendance, test scores.”		Student outcomes are major success measures
	Qualitative indicators Feedback systems	“Feedback from stakeholders and parents.”		Perceptions show real-life impact
	Codes Category	Statements	Theme	Meanings
	Institutionalization Documentation	“Integrate initiatives into SIP, AIP, action plans.”	Institutionalization secures continuity beyond leaders	Embedding ensures longevity
	Systems and structures Process integration	“Standard routines: reports, checklists, activity designs.”		Systems make practices repeatable
	Cultural embedding Cultural continuity	“Practices must become habits of learners.”		Culture is the foundation of sustainability
	Codes Category	Statements	Theme	Meanings
	Resource requirements Resources	“Three M’s: Money, Man, Materials.”	Strong support systems sustain long-term initiatives	Sustainability needs complete inputs
	Teacher capacity Capability-building	“Continuous professional development.”		Skilled teachers sustain improvements

	External support Partnerships	“Partnerships with BLGU, LGU, NGOs, alumni.”		Community strengthens sustainability
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Thematic analysis of interviews with school leaders revealed three interconnected themes addressing how they balance measurable impact with sustainable longevity of initiatives: data-driven monitoring, institutionalization for continuity, and strong support systems. Leaders employ structured M&E tools like PIR and SMEPA for quarterly assessments, tracking quantitative academic indicators such as reading performance, attendance, and test scores, alongside qualitative stakeholder feedback—including parent perceptions, enrollment rises, and volunteer support from improved school ambiance—as noted by IDI_P8, ensuring comprehensive accountability through integrated numerical and real-life evidence. Institutionalization secures continuity by embedding initiatives into SIPs, AIPs, and action plans with mid-year reviews (IDI_P3), reinforced by standard routines like reports and checklists, while cultural embedding transforms practices into learner habits via policies, recognition, and value-shaping leadership (IDI_P7), making systems repeatable beyond individual tenures. Strong support systems sustain efforts through the "Three M's" (money, manpower, materials), continuous professional development for teacher capacity, and partnerships with BLGU, LGU, NGOs, and alumni to foster shared responsibility (IDI_P5, IDI_P6).

DISCUSSION

Findings confirm Diaz (2025) on leadership as cognitively taxing yet essential, with resource limits echoing Karakose et al. (2024) on funding barriers needing systemic support. Collaboration themes align with Ngobeni (2024) on two-way partnerships, Koh et al. (2023) on distributed models, Cchiaro (2024) on shared capacity, and Kirby (2024) on quality reviews. Learner outcomes support Archer (2024) on multidimensional interventions enhancing engagement via health links, infrastructure, and cultural responsiveness. Long-term systems match Kudryavtsev et al. (2025) on embedded routines and Kalman (2020) on professional learning for continuity, advancing phenomenological insights into Philippine contexts with IP and BLGU integration.

Collaborative strategies, including general assemblies, PTA/SGC involvement, and inclusive ESIP planning guided by "better to have more brains than one," align with research on stakeholder engagement enhancing transparency, ownership, and decision quality, as evidenced by studies on participative management and democratic leadership improving academic outcomes and school culture. Distributed leadership through delegation to coordinators (LIS, DRRM, subjects), ESLG, and PTA mirrors TALIS data showing shared roles increase efficiency, collaboration, and commitment, while shifting

from hierarchical models fosters community-wide responsibility. Institutionalizing sustainability via curriculum-integrated habits (gardens, waste segregation, handwashing, toothbrushing, discipline) and SIP/memoranda alignment supports whole-school approaches like UNESCO Green School standards and Global Schools Foundation's 5S framework, where daily routines build long-term mindsets and cultural norms. Strategic prioritization balancing urgency/relevance with quick wins (e.g., waste segregation) and procedural adherence echoes Kotter's change management, Karakose et al. (2024), and DepEd Order No. 5 s. 2024, emphasizing criteria-based planning and process discipline for sustained impact amid shifting priorities.

Data-driven monitoring integrating quantitative metrics (reading, attendance, scores) with qualitative feedback aligns with (Llego, 2024) DepEd Order No. 5 s. 2024 and UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, which emphasize PIR/SMEPA for data-informed decisions and holistic impact assessment beyond numbers. Institutionalization via SIP mid-year reviews and cultural embedding echoes Walshe (2025) on leaders shaping values through policies and recognition, while Tafese and Kopp (2024) affirm habit formation as foundational for enduring change. Support systems leveraging resources, CPD, and BLGU/LGU/NGO partnerships mirror UNESCO's Greening Teacher Training (2024) and Binasoy (2024) on stakeholder engagement broadening ownership and capacity.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Findings across all three research questions highlight the necessity for DepEd to formalize distributed leadership, collaborative stakeholder engagement, and integrated M&E systems in national policies for Philippine primary schools. Policymakers should revise DepEd Order No. 5 s. 2024 to mandate SIP/AIP embedding of quick-win strategies, cultural habit formation, PTA/SGC assemblies, coordinator delegations, and PIR/SMEPA with balanced metrics, while allocating budgets for the "Three M's" and incentivizing BLGU/LGU/NGO partnerships to address resource constraints and daily challenges. Policies promoting resilience training and professional collaboration via PLCs would sustain learner-focused improvements like reading enrichment and cultural preservation amid leadership transitions

Soccsksargen principals can leverage collaboration as sustainability's foundation by delegating tasks during SIP crafting, engaging parents/BLGU for projects, and fostering teacher PLCs to navigate challenges like limited resources and time pressures. Implementing second RQ strategies—multi-stakeholder planning, distributed roles, daily routines (waste segregation, handwashing), and prioritization—builds ownership and momentum, while third RQ practices like

cultural embedding, CPD, and alumni ties ensure longevity through habits and support systems. Forming sustainability committees integrates learner outcomes (e.g., SBFP-literacy links, IP culture) for resilient, systems-oriented improvements beyond individual tenures.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study across all three research questions employs qualitative thematic analysis derived from in-depth interviews with a limited sample of nine school leaders (IDIP1-IDIP5, IDIP9, etc.) from primary schools in Soccsksargen, Philippines, which restricts generalizability to diverse DepEd contexts, including urban settings, other regions, or secondary education levels. This regional focus may overlook variations in resource availability, cultural dynamics, or policy implementation across the archipelago, potentially limiting the applicability of findings like collaborative PTA/SGC strategies or SIP embedding to non-rural primary contexts.

Self-reported data from interviews introduces potential response biases, where participants may emphasize positive or socially desirable experiences—such as resilience in challenges, successful quick wins, or stakeholder partnerships—while underreporting failures, conflicts, or implementation gaps. Without triangulation through observations, documents, or multi-source validation, the themes on distributed leadership, cultural habit formation, and M&E tools like PIR/SMEPA rely heavily on leaders' retrospective narratives, which could inflate perceived effectiveness of strategies for sustainability.

The cross-sectional design captures current practices but fails to assess longitudinal outcomes, such as whether daily routines (e.g., waste segregation, handwashing) or "Three M's" support truly endure beyond leadership terms or yield measurable learner gains in reading, attendance, or enrollment over time. Unmeasured confounding variables, including macroeconomic factors, teacher turnover rates, or evolving DepEd priorities, further complicate causal attributions for sustainability successes.

Mixed-methods studies should quantify sustainability impacts using pre/post metrics on reading performance, attendance, and enrollment across multiple DepEd divisions. Longitudinal research tracking initiatives beyond leadership terms would validate distributed models and habit formation. Comparative analyses between Philippine regions or with international cases (e.g., UNESCO Green Schools) could test scalability of collaborative strategies and M&E tools. Action research involving teacher PLCs would refine practical applications for resilience amid policy shifts.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study on sustainable school improvement in Philippine primary schools yields four primary conclusions drawn from thematic analysis across the three research questions.

1. School leaders in Soccsksargen demonstrate that effective sustainable improvement emerges from resilience amid daily challenges like resource limits and stakeholder dynamics, achieved through collaborative PLCs, parent/BLGU engagement, and learner-focused interventions such as SBFP-literacy links and IP cultural embedding, transforming obstacles into capacity-building opportunities.
2. Collaborative assemblies, PTA/SGC involvement, role delegations to coordinators (LIS/DRRM), and inclusive ESIP planning—guided by "more brains than one"—build transparency and shared responsibility, while daily habits (waste segregation, handwashing) and quick wins generate momentum, proving distributed leadership outperforms hierarchical models for enduring school culture.
3. Embedding initiatives into SIPs/AIPs with mid-year reviews, cultural habit formation, and procedural adherence via PIR/SMEPA integrates quantitative metrics (reading, attendance) with qualitative feedback, securing continuity beyond individual tenures when paired with systems thinking.
4. The "Three M's" (money, manpower, materials), continuous CPD, and external partnerships (LGU/NGOs/alumni) provide the foundation for scalability, with sustainability committees recommended to align DepEd tools and regional contexts for measurable learner outcomes like enrollment gains and cultural preservation.

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