Lived Experiences of School Principals in Crafting the School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of school principals in Davao City, Philippines, when crafting their school improvement plans (SIPs). Using purposive sampling, ten principals were identified and interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed challenges in data gathering, communication gaps, and resource management. Principals employed stakeholder engagement, collaboration, support, and development as coping mechanisms. Learning insights emphasized the importance of strategic planning, sustainability, continuous improvement, and adaptation. The study concluded that principals faced hurdles in collecting comprehensive data, communicating the importance of SIP, and securing sufficient financial resources. Recommendations include streamlining data collection, improving communication, advocating for increased funding, providing professional development, and promoting a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. The findings contribute to understanding the complex experiences of principals in school improvement planning and offer strategies for enhancing the SIP process.

Keywords: school improvement plan; principals; lived experiences; phenomenology; challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

School principals face several challenges in crafting school improvement plans. One significant obstacle is the need for more emphasis on providing principals with sufficient preparation for school improvement planning, making it difficult to create high-quality plans. Moreover, top-down approaches to policymaking, excessive politicization of school administration, a lack of openness, workload constraints, and bylaws that impede decision-making processes all provide challenges for principals trying to carry out their vision. Furthermore, school administrators frequently need proper training in tracking and reacting to efforts made in the context of improvement plans, which makes it challenging to carry out plans with high fidelity and enhance student results. Moreover, there is frequently a gap between the planning, execution, and actual student results of school reform efforts, which leads to their failure. Lastly, educators must commit to, engage in, or communicate about implementing school reform plans. These strategies may only be as successful if stakeholders are included, and progress is tracked.

Several empirical studies shed light on these issues. For example, Smith and O'Day (2021) stress the challenge of balancing conflicting goals, such as closing the achievement gap in academics and fostering social-emotional growth. Furthermore, research by Hallinger and Heck (2020) emphasizes how difficult it

may be to match the interests of many stakeholders, such as community members, parents, and teachers, with reform plans. This can cause disagreements and obstacles to implementation. Furthermore, Louis and Dretzke (2021) discovered that principals' capacity to implement thorough development plans is frequently hampered by a lack of resources, both human and financial. These empirical results highlight the complexity of school principals' challenges when creating successful development initiatives.

Research on school principals crafting school improvement plans has identified gaps in the existing literature (Aziz et al., 2023). Empirical studies suggest that there is much literature on principals' roles in school development initiatives, but less attention is paid to the precise methods and techniques they use to create these plans (Smith, 2018; Jones & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, several studies have emphasized the significance of collaborative decision-making in school improvement; however, comparatively little research has been done on how principals manage collaboration with different stakeholders to create successful improvement plans (Brown et al., 2019; Lee & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, although the impact of outside forces like policy mandates on school improvement planning is acknowledged, there are few empirical studies examining how principals balance these outside forces with their professional judgment and the circumstances of their schools (Garcia & Martinez, 2017; Wang & Wong, 2019). Thus, there is a need for further empirical research to explore the strategies, processes, and contextual factors influencing principals' crafting of school improvement plans.

As the clamor from public school principals around the nation concerning increased workloads becomes louder, we want to investigate this phenomenon considering the tremendous challenges caused by the predominance of completing this very crucial strategic plan. Furthermore, studies show that further study is needed to address the pressures most school leaders encounter at work. Hence, we desire to discover the details of their experiences regarding their challenges and coping mechanisms. Further, we are passionate about the study since we have only read limited research studies on this, considering the loud appeal of the school leaders regarding planning. We have yet to encounter a detailed study on this phenomenon in a more considerable locality. Lastly, this study aims to inspire other school principals who might be experiencing a similar plight through the learning and insights that may be revealed in the research. Hence, the conduct of this study.

The thrust of this study was to unearth the lived experiences of school principals of public elementary, secondary, and integrated schools in Davao City in crafting the 3-year school improvement plan.

Specifically, this study aimed to address the following objectives:
• To describe the challenges experienced by school principals of public elementary, secondary, and integrated schools in Davao City in crafting the 3-year school improvement plan;
• To explore the coping mechanisms based on the challenges experienced by school principals of public elementary, secondary, and integrated schools in Davao City in crafting the 3-year school improvement plan; and
• To gather learning insights based on the experiences of school principals of public elementary, secondary, and integrated schools in Davao City in crafting the 3-year school improvement plan.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Transformational Leadership theory. Transformational leaders inspire and encourage their people by forging a shared vision and giving them the tools they need to accomplish at more significant levels (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders in the context of school improvement plans are likely to include stakeholders in the planning process, including teachers, parents, and students, to create a sense of ownership and commitment to the goals outlined in the plan (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Moreover, empirical research has demonstrated that transformational leadership methods adopted by principals often have a favorable effect on student success (Leithwood et al., 2004). For example, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) discovered a substantial correlation between improved student performance outcomes and

transformational leadership actions, such as offering intellectual stimulation and tailored assistance.

Furthermore, Fullan's (2001) theory of educational reform, which emphasizes the value of cooperative procedures and developing stakeholder capacity for practical school improvement projects, enhances the notion of transformational leadership. According to Fullan, long-lasting change happens when people work together to create shared understandings, pursue lifelong learning, and adjust to shifting conditions.

In summary, the theory of transformational leadership, which highlights the importance of visionary leadership, empowerment, and cooperation in fostering organizational change, may be used to interpret the experiences of school principals in creating plans for school reform. Research indicates that transformational leadership approaches are beneficial in raising student achievement and that principals who possess these traits are more adept at navigating the intricacies of school reform initiatives.

2. METHODS

Research Design

The researchers used a qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is inductive, and the researcher generally explores meanings and insights in each situation (Levitt et al., 2017). It refers to a range of data collection and analysis techniques that use purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Gopaldas, 2016). It is described as an effective model that occurs naturally and enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological study describes the ordinary meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on defining what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The primary purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (Bannister Roby, 2023). The phenomenological qualitative approach is the most appropriate design for this study since the objective is to explore the lived experiences of school principals in crafting the school improvement plan.

Research Participants

The participants of the study will be ten (10) school principals currently assigned to public schools in the Division of Davao City for the school year 2023-2024. Moreover, the participants must have handled a school for at least three school years by the time the data collection was conducted to fit the study's inclusion criteria. Furthermore, the participants were identified using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method, and it occurs when elements selected for the sample are chosen by the researcher's judgment (Crossman, 2018).

Research Instrument

The instrument used in the study was an interview protocol with open-ended questions crafted by the researchers based on the context of the research objectives. The researchers presented the contents of the instrument to a group of experts for validation to address the validity issues of this design, specifically on the method.

Data Collection

The data was collected via an online survey form. After receiving approval from authorities to

conduct the study, the researchers obtained informed consent from the identified respondents before conducting the online interview. To maintain track of the flow of important material pertinent to the study, the researchers took notes during the interviews. The coding procedure started right away after each participant. After that, the researchers transcribed the recordings verbatim before data analysis began.

Data Analysis

This study used Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis, which aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns that build up the themes in a dataset. The researchers followed the six-phase framework for doing the thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2019): familiarize the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define the themes, and do the write-up.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations play a crucial role in research. To protect participants' rights and promote confidence and openness in the research process, the study required informed permission from respondents before any data was collected (Laurijssen et al., 2022). In addition, the investigators considered the security and welfare of study participants to avoid injury or exploitation, which aligns with the recommendations made by Pietilä, Nurmi, Halkoaho, and Kyngäs (2020). Furthermore, preserving confidence and upholding persons' rights depend on safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of participant data (Indriasari & Karman, 2023). This allowed for the integrity of handling the participants' data and protecting sensitive information like their identities. Additionally, treating all participants fairly is essential to ensuring fairness in research, particularly regarding vulnerable groups (Strauss et al., 2021). As a result, the researchers addressed justice issues by refraining from discrimination, encouraging inclusivity, and considering how their studies would affect various populations. Ultimately, upholding transparency at every stage of the research process improves the study's integrity and credibility (Pietilä et al., 2020). Accountability, repeatability, and trust between researchers, participants, and the public are fostered when procedures, results, and findings are transparently reported, as the researchers upheld.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and procedures employed to assure the quality of research is referred to as the study's trustworthiness or rigor. The researchers used qualitative validation by Guba and Lincoln (1994, as cited in Bij, 2021) to ensure trustworthiness in the study, which is composed of four components: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility. The researchers established a prolonged interaction with participants to maintain credibility. To ensure that everything in the participants' responses was understood and to assess the integrity and reliability of the narrative, the participants cross-checked, validated, and jointly evaluated the data and findings.

Confirmability. The researchers kept process logs to guarantee confirmability. Process logs were the researchers' records of all actions taken during the study and choices made regarding its many components, such as who to interview and what to observe. The researchers added the coding system to achieve the research's further aims.

Transferability. To ensure the transferability of the findings, the researchers concentrated on the informants and their narratives without claiming that this was everyone's story. They promoted the study's transferability by providing a thorough, in-depth description of the situation, setting, and participants under inquiry, as well as by being open and honest about the analysis and reliability of the findings. The researcher then painted a detailed picture that enlightened and resonated with readers.

Dependability. The researchers closely monitored the developing research design and maintained an audit trail to guarantee the dependability of this study. This implies that a thorough timeline of research procedures and activities, impacts on data collecting and analysis, emergent themes, categories, or models, and analytical annotations were considered and monitored.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lived Experiences of School Principals in Crafting the School Improvement Plan

The researchers' analysis of the participants' responses led to the emergence of three major themes, which show the experiences of school principals in crafting the school improvement plan: Data Gathering Hurdles, Communication Gaps, and Resource Management.

3.1.1. Data Gathering Hurdles

Effective crafting of the school improvement plan requires the availability of necessary data to aid in the practical assessment of the School's priority improvement needs. Collecting and analyzing data from diverse stakeholders, including students, teachers, and the wider school community, is critical to fostering a healthy school climate that supports student learning and teacher retention. In this perspective, school principals play a crucial role in collecting and using data to drive school improvement efforts.

Eight of the ten principals who were interviewed stressed their difficulties obtaining the information required for the initial stage of the school development planning process. They emphasized how challenging it is to gather information from many stakeholders to develop a thorough framework for the prioritizing scheme during the planning phase of the process. Frequently encountered obstacles were the focal person's unavailability when they arrived at their workplaces, time limits for collecting data, the community's distance and difficulties in following the homes throughout the child-mapping process, and missing paperwork.

The viewpoints of school principals align with the broader framework for education, emphasizing the vital role that appropriateness and completeness of the data collected play in ensuring the thoroughness of the data's interpretation and the ability to successfully identify the School's priority improvement areas (Aderet-German & Ben-Peretz, 2020). The School could prioritize what needed to be prioritized because of the school administrators' difficult but necessary experiences gathering data for the school development plan.

3.1.2. Communication Gaps

School principals also experienced challenges communicating effectively with diverse stakeholders for school improvement planning. They must create a welcoming environment, clearly explain goals, and ensure all voices are heard. Consequently, tailoring communication to different groups, such as local government units, teachers, parents, and learners, is crucial to engaging stakeholders effectively. Principals must emphasize high-level insights, actionable goals, and parent-friendly formats to engage stakeholders and foster collaboration.

Seven of the ten principals who were interviewed emphasized their challenges in explaining the School's requirements and alerting the stakeholders to their critical role in the planning process for school improvement. They emphasized how difficult it is to convince the School's stakeholders that their involvement is essential to the success of the projects meant to enhance the School's priority improvement areas because of the anxiety involved in keeping open, honest, and transparent communication with them. The lack of communication gadgets at home, parents' lack of digital literacy, and spotty cellphone service in the neighborhood are a few of the frequent communication gaps they encountered.

Principals' viewpoints are consistent with findings from comparable qualitative research that emphasized the need for communication to ensure lesson plans are current, relevant, and responsive (Rubinstein, 2014). Even though it was challenging, the school principals' experiences engaging with the school stakeholders for the school development plan were crucial in guaranteeing their involvement, which helped the School achieve its objectives.

3.1.3. Resource Management

Four distinct voices from among the ten school principals' answers highlighted a common issue: the importance of financial resources in the SIP's project planning under the resource management category. The principals of the schools highlighted how hard it is to get the local government to help, citing the low MOOE allotment for the different schools.

The experiences of school principals revealed the intricate issues related to resource management that arose during the creation of the School Improvement Plan. They expressed frustration with the lack of assistance from the local government and insufficient school MOOE for critical school upgrades, emphasizing the crucial relationship between projects and financial resources. The principals of the schools grumbled about the lack of funding, pointing out that planned advancements were hampered by the fact that the School bore most of the costs. Some participants offered a more nuanced viewpoint, acknowledging the issue of being unable to carry out initiatives without sufficient funding. Despite these problems, participants think SIP's strength is in providing a framework for assessing plan completion and fostering openness on effective execution. This collective story highlighted the strategic advantage SIP offered in determining the outcomes of these initiatives and the crucial role financial resources play in bringing about reforms in education.

Daca and Pacadaljen (2020) confirm the participants' first-hand accounts and highlight the critical role that efficient resource management plays in carrying out the School Improvement Plan (SIP). Through wise resource allocation, this study demonstrates participants' noteworthy progress toward their goals and holds schools responsible for their performance. The study highlights the value of cooperation between communities and schools to provide possibilities and guarantee the accomplishment of various projects.

3.2. Coping Mechanisms of School Principals in Crafting the School Improvement Plan

The researchers' analysis of the participants' responses led to the emergence of two significant themes showing the coping mechanisms of school principals in facilitating the crafting of the school improvement plan: stakeholder engagement and collaboration and support and development.

3.2.1. Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration

The principals' experiences provided insight into the crucial topic of stakeholder cooperation and participation in promoting the school development process. The principals' statement of stakeholder collaboration highlights the joint commitment of several groups participating in the school development process and suggests a positive collaborative environment. School principals (i.e., P2, P4, P5, & P7) also offered a standard, pragmatic perspective, highlighting the significance of effective time management on the side of school administrators to ensure stakeholder engagement and show flexibility even in cases where scheduling is not ideal. The importance of individual involvement in project design and execution, along with principals' proactive attitude in organizing orientations during class openings, was underscored by other participants (P1, P8, & P3). These narratives emphasized the vital role of strategic communication, proactive leadership, and stakeholder participation in fostering a collaborative climate inside educational institutions and skillfully navigating the obstacles associated with implementing school reform processes.

This study supports other studies that showed the complexity of stakeholder participation in SIPs and the connection between SIPs and academic achievement. Guzman (2022) discovered high stakeholder participation in all SIP levels; however, there were notable performance differences and no associations between involvement and overall performance. Nicdao and Ancho (2019) observed a range of school activities that indicate a high level of stakeholder participation and recommended tailored methods based on individual circumstances.

3.2.2. Support and Development

The experiences of the school principals illuminated the essential idea of growth and support to facilitate the planning process for school improvement. The repeated remarks made by the participants demonstrated how widely school administrators understand the vital significance of comprehensive stakeholder participation, growth, and support during the planning phase of school reform.

Principals like P5 emphasized the need to engage stakeholders to participate in the solution rather than the issue, given their initial reluctance to participate in the planning process. P7, on the other hand, stressed the value of orientation meetings with the school planning team to ensure they are equipped to participate in the process. P1 also emphasized the challenge of obtaining data consistent with information from the barangay office, emphasizing the significance of including all sectors and stakeholders in successfully crafting SIP.

This collective understanding highlighted various approaches to assisting and advancing educators, underscoring the intricate web of connections needed to foster development within a school community. These results highlight the necessity of inclusive cooperation, continuous professional growth, and specialized assistance in navigating the distinctive educational terrain (Epstein, 2019).

3.3. Learning Insights Based on the Experiences of School Principals in Crafting the School Improvement Plan

The researchers' analysis of the participants' responses led to the emergence of two major themes, showing the learning insights from the experiences of school principals in crafting the school improvement plan: strategic planning and sustainability and continuous improvement and adaptation.

3.3.1. Strategic Planning and Sustainability

Within "strategic planning and sustainability," the principals of five out of ten schools provided insightful commentary. They emphasized the significance of thorough planning and brainstorming before beginning the School Improvement Plan and being aware of issues unique to each School. Moreover, they said they would need external assistance to meet requests to modify or replace the SIP, suggesting there would be challenges with the procedure. P6 expressed satisfaction with the comprehensive nature of the SIP, indicating that it contains all required facts and information based on a three to five-year plan, resulting in a lack of specific suggestions, despite some participants expressing unfavorable opinions based on their recommendations. Through their shared experiences, school principals have demonstrated a range of views on sustainability and strategic planning, as well as varying degrees of satisfaction and challenges encountered throughout the implementation of SIPs.

The results supported Stevenson's (2019) claim. According to Stevenson (2019), an extensive reflection must be conducted on the plan's activities and instructional emphasis to provide clarity on objectives, roles, progress indicators, and timelines. Additionally, a clear route to success that includes a plan and defined phases must be presented for the execution to be effective. Daca et al. (2020) also found that

well-crafted SIP positively affects enrollment, participation rate, cohort survival rate, graduation rate, and National Achievement Test Mean Percentage Score (NAT MPS); however, their study also revealed that some SIP components—performance targets, goals and objectives, and implementation strategies—are only moderately implemented, underscoring the significance of well-thought-out strategic planning and efficient execution in school improvement initiatives.

3.3.2. Continuous Improvement and Adaptation

The results showed that approximately half of the participants, or 4 out of 10 school principals, had comparable answers to "continuous improvement and adaptation." The principals' comments showed a cooperation-oriented readiness to accept constructive changes. They strongly emphasize academic development, especially in reading, and foster the use of ICT and community members' participation in tutorial support. They also emphasize a collaborative approach to tackling educational difficulties. Demonstrating a willingness for accountability and a commitment to reform initiatives, they also suggested punishments for schools without a SIP and advocated thorough monitoring at various administrative levels. These suggestions demonstrate Davao City school administrators' dedication to continuous enhancement, flexibility, and proactive measures for academic progress.

According to Pelayo (2018), who endorses this approach, the SIP, with its three steps of evaluate, plan, and act, acts as a vehicle for a continuous improvement cycle, ensuring that the implementation status is methodically reviewed and modified yearly. These concepts show a thorough dedication to long-term advancement in Davao City's educational procedures, as does the SIP framework. This study supports the findings of Van Dyke's (2020) research, which emphasizes the value of cooperative methods and adaptable, ongoing improvement. The conclusions have a significant impact on the province's educational system. Moreover, the principals stressed the need for accountability and methodical changes at all administrative levels in their proposal for strict oversight and punishments for schools without SIP.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions and recommendations are obtained:

School principals needed help collecting comprehensive data from diverse stakeholders to identify priority improvement areas. Strategies, such as designating data coordinators and providing data collection training, are required to streamline data gathering. Principals also needed help communicating the importance of the school improvement plan to stakeholders. Improving communication through multiple channels, giving stakeholder training, and emphasizing the collaborative nature of the process can help engage the school community.

Insufficient financial resources, particularly MOOE allocations, hindered principals' ability to implement planned improvements. Advocating for increased and flexible funding for school improvement initiatives is critical. Moreover, providing principals with professional development in resource management, strategic planning, and change leadership can build their capacity to craft and execute school improvement plans effectively.

Principals recommended embracing a continuous improvement cycle, regularly monitoring and adjusting the school improvement plan. Establishing clear goals, roles, and progress indicators facilitates effective implementation. Promoting a culture of collaboration, shared responsibility, and commitment to the school improvement process among all stakeholders, including through sanctions for non-participation, can drive continuous progress.

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