(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

School heads' leadership role in early childhood education and its challenges

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Abstract

School heads play a central role in ensuring the quality of early childhood education (ECE) through core leadership functions in planning, staffing, organizing, controlling, and directing. This study assessed teachers' perceptions of school heads' leadership roles in ECE settings in Vinzons District, Camarines Norte; identified challenges encountered in performing these functions; examined the relationship between perceived leadership roles and challenges; and proposed an intervention to strengthen leadership capacity. A quantitative descriptive–correlational design was employed, with 86 public-school teachers selected through total enumeration. A researcher-made questionnaire measured leadership role performance and corresponding challenges. Data were analyzed using weighted mean and Pearson product–moment correlation in SPSS. School heads were rated at a high level across all leadership domains (overall means: 3.47–3.57). Reported challenges were also consistently high, with directing rated as the most challenging domain (overall mean = 3.52). Correlation analysis indicated statistically significant positive relationships between leadership roles and challenges (r = 0.495–0.690; p < 0.01), suggesting that greater engagement in leadership functions is associated with greater perceived constraints. Based on the findings, a handbook for school heads "Empowering Leadership in Early Childhood Education" was proposed, emphasizing strategic directing and school-based professional development to support sustained ECE implementation.

Keywords: Early childhood education; School head; Educational leadership; Planning; Staffing; Challenges

1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) provides foundational competencies that influence later learning, health, and well-being. In public-school settings, school heads are expected to translate early learning policy into school-level plans, ensure human-resource readiness, organize school operations, monitor compliance, and lead teachers toward child-centered instructional delivery. In the Philippines, mandatory Kindergarten was institutionalized to strengthen early learning access and continuity within the basic education system [1], with implementing policies requiring schools to meet staffing, instructional, and administrative standards [2].

Despite clear mandates, school heads frequently lead ECE alongside competing administrative demands and limited resources, particularly in district contexts. Understanding how teachers perceive school heads' leadership roles and the challenges linked to these roles is essential for designing targeted capacity-building support. This study therefore determined the extent of school heads' leadership roles in ECE in Vinzons District, identified the challenges encountered across planning, staffing, organizing, controlling, and directing, tested the relationship between perceived roles and challenges, and developed an intervention responsive to the findings.

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2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative descriptive–correlational research design and was conducted in public elementary schools in Vinzons District, Camarines Norte, Philippines. The participants were 86 public elementary teachers assigned in the district, and total enumeration was used to include all eligible teachers in the study sample. Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire composed of three parts: (1) teachers' perceptions of school heads' leadership roles in early childhood education across the domains of planning, staffing, organizing, controlling, and directing; (2) perceived challenges encountered by school heads in performing leadership functions within the same domains; and (3) proposed intervention inputs based on identified needs. Responses were rated using a 4-point Likert scale, with anchors for leadership roles as 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree, and anchors for challenges as 4 = Very Challenging, 3 = Challenging, 2 = Slightly Challenging, and 1 = Not Challenging

To establish the instrument's validity and reliability, a structured multi-stage procedure was implemented. The questionnaire underwent content validation by a panel of five expert reviewers (experienced school heads and master teachers) who assessed item relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study objectives, after which revisions were incorporated. A pilot test was subsequently conducted among 20 educators who were not included in the main respondents to further refine item clarity and usability. Internal consistency reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha, yielding high coefficients for the leadership-role domains: Planning ($\alpha = 0.914$), Staffing ($\alpha = 0.829$), Organizing ($\alpha = 0.845$), and Controlling ($\alpha = 0.848$), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

Prior to data gathering, administrative permission was secured from appropriate school authorities. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from respondents. Confidentiality was maintained by limiting access to completed instruments and by presenting findings only in aggregated form.

For data analysis, weighted mean was used to describe the extent of school heads' leadership roles and the level of challenges encountered, while Pearson product–moment correlation was used to determine the relationship between perceived leadership roles and perceived challenges. Statistical processing was conducted using SPSS version 21.

3. Results and discussion

Teachers rated school heads highly across all leadership domains (overall weighted means: 3.47–3.57, interpreted as Strongly Agree). However, challenges were also rated consistently high (overall weighted means: 3.43–3.52, interpreted as Very Challenging), indicating that strong leadership engagement coexists with substantial constraints. Detailed results are presented in Tables 1–11.

Table 1 School Heads' Roles In Early Childhood Education Along Planning

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Curriculum goals align with school role.	3.78	SA
Sets clear objectives for school improvement.	3.52	SA
Conducts strategic planning for program growth.	3.56	SA
Involves teachers in the planning process.	3.52	SA
Allocates resources based on priorities.	3.48	SA
Overall weighted mean	3.57	SA

Planning was rated highly (overall weighted mean = 3.57). The strongest indicator was curriculum–school goal alignment (3.78), while resource allocation, although still high, received the lowest weighted mean (3.48).

Table 2 School Heads' Roles In Early Childhood Education Along Staffing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Ensures qualified staff are hired.	3.66	SA
Adequate staffing to meet students' needs.	3.5	SA

Fosters professional development for teachers.	3.58	SA
Regular monitoring of staff performance.	3.51	SA
Provides support for staff success.	3.47	SA
Overall weighted mean	3.54	SA

Staffing roles were rated highly (overall weighted mean = 3.54), with hiring qualified staff as the highest-rated indicator (3.66).

Table 3 School Heads' Roles In Early Childhood Education Along Organizing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Efficiently organizes school operations.	3.48	SA
Responsibilities are clearly delegated.	3.4	SA
Ensures coordination between departments.	3.48	SA
Time management practices are effective.	3.5	SA
Well-structured school environment.	3.52	SA
Overall weighted mean	3.47	SA

Organizing roles were rated highly (overall weighted mean = 3.47). Delegation of responsibilities, while still rated strongly, had the lowest weighted mean (3.40).

Table 4 School Heads' Roles In Early Childhood Education Along Controlling

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Monitors policy implementation.	3.66	SA
Conducts regular performance evaluations.	3.48	SA
Ensures compliance with DepEd regulations.	3.7	SA
Assesses progress against goals.	3.48	SA
Provides feedback to improve performance.	3.5	SA
Overall weighted mean	3.56	SA

Controlling roles were rated highly (overall weighted mean = 3.56), with compliance assurance as the highest indicator (3.70).

Table 5 School Heads' Roles In Early Childhood Education Along Directing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Provides clear guidance to staff.	3.5	SA
Inspires teachers to achieve high performance.	3.59	SA
Communication with staff is open and effective.	3.5	SA
Encourages innovation in teaching practices.	3.52	SA
Motivates staff to align with school goals.	3.72	SA
Overall weighted mean	3.57	SA

Directing roles were rated highly (overall weighted mean = 3.57). Motivating staff toward school goals received the highest weighted mean (3.72).

Table 6 Challenges Encountered Along Planning

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Curriculum goals align with school role.	3.6	VC
Sets clear objectives for school improvement.	3.5	VC
Conducts strategic planning for program growth.	3.42	VC
Involves teachers in the planning process.	3.42	VC
Allocates resources based on priorities.	3.42	VC
Overall weighted mean	3.47	VC

Planning challenges were rated very challenging overall weighted mean (3.47), highlighting persistent Constraints Despite Strong Perceived Planning Performance.

Table 7 Challenges Encountered Along Staffing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Ensures qualified staff are hired.	3.56	VC
Adequate staffing to meet students' needs.	3.49	VC
Fosters professional development for teachers.	3.52	VC
Regular monitoring of staff performance.	3.48	VC
Provides support for staff success.	3.49	VC
Overall weighted mean	3.51	VC

Staffing challenges were rated as the most challenging domain overall (3.51), especially in securing qualified staff (3.56).

Table 8 Challenges Encountered Along Organizing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Efficiently organizes school operations.	3.41	VC
Responsibilities are clearly delegated.	3.42	VC
Ensures coordination between departments.	3.4	VC
Time management practices are effective.	3.42	VC
Well-structured school environment.	3.5	VC
Overall weighted mean	3.43	VC

Organizing challenges were rated very challenging overall (3.43), with maintaining a well-structured environment rated highest (3.50).

Table 9 Challenges encountered along controlling

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Monitors policy implementation.	3.52	VC

Conducts regular performance evaluations.	3.44	VC
Ensures compliance with DepEd regulations.	3.56	VC
Assesses progress against goals.	3.51	VC
Provides feedback to improve performance.	3.49	VC
Overall weighted mean	3.5	VC

Controlling challenges were rated very challenging overall (3.50), particularly ensuring compliance with DepEd regulations (3.56).

Table 10 Challenges Encountered Along Directing

Indicators	Weighted mean	Interpretation
Provides clear guidance to staff.	3.47	VC
Inspires teachers to achieve high performance.	3.52	VC
Communication with staff is open and effective.	3.48	VC
Encourages innovation in teaching practices.	3.48	VC
Motivates staff to align with school goals.	3.64	VC
Overall weighted mean	3.52	VC

Directing challenges were rated very challenging overall (3.52), with motivating staff aligned to goals rated highest (3.64).

Table 11 Pearson Correlation Between Leadership Roles And Challenges Encountered

School heads' role	Planning r (p)	Staffing r (p)	Organizing r (p)	Controlling r (p)	Directing r (p)
Planning	0.633 (0.000)	0.564 (0.000)	0.580 (0.000)	0.503 (0.000)	0.550 (0.000)
Staffing	0.637 (0.000)	0.601 (0.000)	0.615 (0.000)	0.512 (0.000)	0.606 (0.000)
Organizing	0.616 (0.000)	0.612 (0.000)	0.664 (0.000)	0.495 (0.000)	0.596 (0.000)
Controlling	0.581 (0.000)	0.567 (0.000)	0.549 (0.000)	0.545 (0.000)	0.538 (0.000)
Directing	0.690 (0.000)	0.636 (0.000)	0.667 (0.000)	0.561 (0.000)	0.680 (0.000)

All correlations were positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, indicating that higher perceived performance in leadership functions was associated with higher perceived challenges. The strongest association was observed between directing roles and planning-related challenges ($r = 0.690$).

3.1. Proposed intervention

Based on the results, a handbook for school heads "Empowering Leadership in Early Childhood Education" was developed by the researcher. The handbook focuses on strengthening strategic staffing and school-based professional development, including: (1) staffing analysis and deployment planning; (2) role clarification and delegation tools; (3) coaching and feedback routines for early grade teachers; and (4) compliance-oriented monitoring templates aligned with district and DepEd requirements. Implementation may be integrated into school-based Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and monitored through utilization logs and follow-up surveys.

4. Conclusion

School heads in Vinzons District were perceived by teachers to perform leadership roles in ECE at a high level across planning, staffing, organizing, controlling, and directing. Nevertheless, teachers likewise perceived these domains as very challenging, with staffing identified as the most pressing constraint. Significant positive correlations between

leadership roles and challenges suggest that higher role engagement is accompanied by greater operational and management demands. Targeted, domain-specific capacity-building particularly on strategic staffing and professional development is recommended to sustain ECE quality delivery.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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