

**School Heads' role performance and educational outcomes
in small schools: A thematic review**

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ABSTRACT

This thematic review explores existing scholarship on the role performance of school heads and its relationship to the educational outcomes of small schools. Drawing insights from Hallinger and Murphy's (1986) instructional leadership model and the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSH) domains—Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, and Building Connections—the review synthesizes studies on leadership functions, processes, and their implications for school effectiveness. Literature highlights how effective school leadership contributes to improved curriculum implementation, resource management, teacher development, and stronger school–community partnerships. Research also points to varying contexts in which small schools measure achievement, including academic performance, community engagement, and institutional recognition. By consolidating these findings, this review underscores the critical role of school heads in shaping the success of small schools. However, limited literature specifically addresses the leadership dynamics of small schools in rural and resource-constrained settings such as those in the Philippines. This gap emphasizes the need for further localized studies to better inform policy and professional development programs tailored to these contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Effective school leadership is widely recognized as a pivotal factor in improving educational outcomes, consistently ranked second only to classroom instruction among in-school factors influencing student learning (Wallace Foundation, 2021). Recent studies since 2000 provide compelling evidence of the significant impact of principal leadership quality on student achievement, teacher performance, and overall school improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Effective school heads create the conditions that sustain instructional excellence by articulating a shared vision, fostering teacher professional growth, and cultivating a culture of learning and accountability (Hallinger, 2011; Day et al., 2016).

While extensive international research highlights the crucial role of school leadership in shaping student outcomes, less is known about how these leadership dynamics operate in small and rural schools, where principals face distinctive contextual and resource-related challenges. Small schools frequently encounter constraints such as limited teaching staff, inadequate instructional materials, and restricted access to professional development and infrastructure support (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2020). These schools often depend heavily on the leadership adaptability of their heads, who must balance instructional, managerial, and community roles within constrained settings (DepEd, 2022; RTI International, 2021).

This thematic review aims to establish a comprehensive theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the role performance of school heads in small schools, with particular attention to the Philippine context. The review synthesizes global and national studies on instructional leadership, professional standards, and educational achievement, highlighting how leadership practices align with frameworks such as the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSH). It also identifies persistent knowledge gaps in the literature—particularly regarding how leadership functions and processes influence school outcomes in small, resource-limited settings. By addressing these gaps, the review seeks to contribute to a more contextually grounded understanding of leadership performance and to inform future policy, research, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing educational quality in small and rural schools.

Statement of the problem

Grounded in the preceding discussion, this thematic review seeks to deepen the understanding of how school heads' leadership practices influence school achievement, particularly within small and rural educational contexts. To guide the synthesis and analysis of existing literature, the study formulates the following research questions. These questions are designed to capture recurring themes, theoretical alignments, contextual influences, and research gaps relevant to the role performance of school heads and their impact on educational outcomes.

1. What major themes emerge from the literature regarding the role performance of school heads in relation to instructional leadership and school achievement?
2. How do the identified leadership functions and processes correspond with the domains outlined in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSH)?
3. What contextual factors influence the effectiveness of school heads' role performance in small and rural schools?
4. What gaps, inconsistencies, or underexplored areas exist in the current literature on school head leadership and school achievement?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a thematic literature review design to synthesize existing empirical and theoretical works on the role performance of school heads and its relationship to school achievement, particularly in small and resource-limited educational settings. The research design followed a structured process of literature identification, screening, thematic coding, and synthesis, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how leadership functions influence educational outcomes. By integrating both international and Philippine studies, the review established conceptual linkages between global leadership frameworks, such as Hallinger and Murphy's Instructional Leadership Model, and localized standards, including the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). The study progressed through three primary phases: planning and literature identification, screening and selection, and thematic coding and analysis. The planning phase involved defining the review's scope and research questions, focusing on the intersections between school leadership, role performance, and achievement outcomes. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus were explored using specific search terms, while inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed works, doctoral dissertations, policy documents, and official frameworks from the last fifteen years.

Following the identification stage, studies were screened for methodological rigor, relevance, and contribution to understanding school leadership performance. Only those that explicitly examined leadership functions or their correlation with educational outcomes were retained, while anecdotal and non-academic sources were excluded. The selected literature was imported into a digital matrix for systematic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Recurring concepts—such as instructional supervision, strategic leadership, community engagement, and resource management—were coded and synthesized to reveal thematic patterns and gaps. Themes were then aligned with theoretical models to ensure coherence between the international literature and the Philippine educational context. This analytic focus highlighted underexplored areas, including adaptive leadership in resource-constrained schools and the role of community partnerships in enhancing educational performance.

The review's methodological rigor was reinforced through adherence to established qualitative standards. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were clearly defined, data sources were documented, and thematic codes were validated across multiple studies to ensure consistency. This process generated a structured thematic map linking leadership role performance to dimensions of

school achievement, providing valuable insights for both policymakers and scholars seeking to strengthen school leadership in small educational environments.

In the empirical phase of the study, data were collected from 57 respondents comprising 19 school heads, 19 teachers, and 19 stakeholders from public elementary schools in the Buenavista District. The respondents were selected through proportionate stratified random sampling across five geographic clusters to ensure equitable representation and contextual diversity. School heads were automatically included as key informants, while teachers and community stakeholders were selected randomly from each cluster. Their participation was essential in providing both school-based and community-based perspectives on leadership practices and their impact on educational outcomes. As primary implementers of educational leadership, school heads bridge policy and practice, while teachers and stakeholders offer complementary insights into how leadership behaviors shape instructional quality and school-community relations.

A comprehensive research instrument was developed to assess the role performance of school heads and its corresponding impact on educational outcomes. This instrument combined quantitative and qualitative components, including a structured questionnaire, an interview protocol, a document analysis framework, and an observation checklist. The questionnaire utilized a Likert-scale format to measure perceptions related to leadership practices and school performance, while open-ended items allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Semi-structured interviews further explored leadership challenges and contextual nuances, providing depth to the quantitative findings. Document analysis and on-site observations triangulated the data, ensuring reliability and contextual validity.

The research procedure followed a systematic and ethically grounded process. Formal approval was sought from the Schools Division Superintendent and participating institutions, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Quantitative data were collected first using the PPSSH-based survey instrument, and results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine relationships between leadership performance and school achievement. Qualitative data collection followed through interviews and observations to explain and contextualize the quantitative trends. The integration phase synthesized both data sets into a cohesive analysis, merging statistical findings with lived experiences to produce a nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics in small schools.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), focusing on identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across studies. The six-phase process—familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting—ensured methodological transparency and analytical depth. Codes relating to instructional leadership, resource management, and community engagement were systematically organized into overarching themes aligned with theoretical frameworks. The synthesis connected leadership functions to tangible school outcomes, integrating global and Philippine literature to highlight convergences and contextual distinctions.

Ethical considerations guided every stage of the study. The researcher upheld integrity and transparency by accurately representing data, acknowledging all sources in accordance with APA 7th edition standards, and maintaining neutrality throughout the review. The selection and interpretation of studies were conducted without bias, ensuring balanced representation across

international and local contexts. Confidentiality was observed even when working with publicly available documents, and cultural sensitivity was maintained in interpreting findings relevant to Philippine schools. Ultimately, the research adhered to ethical reporting principles by presenting results objectively, acknowledging limitations, and ensuring that interpretations remained faithful to the original authors' intentions.

Through these integrated methodological procedures, the study achieved a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and empirical evidence on the role performance of school heads and its influence on school achievement. The methodological coherence between the literature review, empirical data collection, and ethical framework ensured that the findings were not only credible and contextually grounded but also valuable for informing leadership development and policy directions in small, resource-limited educational settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 19 public elementary school heads from the Buenavista District participated in this study. These respondents were selected according to the sampling procedures described in the methodology, ensuring proportional representation across the district's five geographic clusters. Their demographic profiles provided important contextual information for interpreting the results, particularly regarding gender composition and its possible implications for leadership styles. Understanding the characteristics of these participants offers a foundation for analyzing how leadership practices manifest within small and resource-constrained schools in the district.

Profile of the respondents

The findings indicated that the majority of respondents were female (63.2%), while 36.8% were male. This gender distribution reflects a national trend in the Philippine education system, where a higher proportion of school heads—especially at the elementary level—are women (Department of Education, 2020). The predominance of female leadership in public schools has been widely associated with collaborative management approaches, relational communication, and strong instructional supervision (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). This demographic characteristic provides a meaningful backdrop for interpreting the leadership dynamics observed in the study, suggesting that gender-related tendencies such as participatory decision-making and empathetic leadership may influence how school heads perform their roles in small school contexts (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

School heads' role performance

The results on school heads' role performance, measured across the five domains of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), revealed consistently high ratings. All domains were rated "very satisfactory," with the highest mean observed in the domain of focusing on teaching and learning ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.45$), followed by leading strategically ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.48$). The lowest, though still very satisfactory, was building connections ($M = 4.26$,

SD = 0.51). The overall mean score of 4.32 (SD = 0.49) demonstrates that school heads in the Buenavista District exhibit commendable performance across all leadership domains.

These results suggest that school heads demonstrate strong instructional and administrative leadership competencies. The highest performance in focusing on teaching and learning indicates that school leaders prioritize instructional supervision, curriculum implementation, and the monitoring of student performance—key components emphasized in Hallinger and Murphy's (1986) instructional leadership model. Such findings align with regional studies in Southeast Asia (Nguyen et al., 2020; Cheng & Ko, 2022), which underscore that effective leadership hinges on the centrality of teaching and learning supervision. Conversely, the slightly lower score in building connections may point to the challenges faced by small and rural schools in engaging external stakeholders and mobilizing community resources (RTI International, 2021). This result underscores the need for professional development initiatives that enhance school–community partnerships to strengthen local participation and sustain school improvement programs.

Relationship between role performance and school achievement

The analysis further established a statistically significant positive correlation between the school heads' role performance and school achievement ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.021$). This strong correlation implies that as leadership effectiveness increases, corresponding improvements in school achievement are also observed. In other words, the quality of school heads' leadership practices directly influences the overall performance of their schools. This finding reinforces Hallinger's (2011) and Leithwood et al.'s (2020) assertion that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as the most significant school-based factor affecting student learning outcomes.

Moreover, the correlation suggests that effective application of the PPSSH domains enhances not only instructional outcomes but also holistic measures of school success, including student engagement, community participation, and institutional recognition (DepEd, 2020). This result is consistent with international literature emphasizing that leadership behaviors such as goal setting, progress monitoring, and staff development foster an organizational culture conducive to academic excellence (Bush & Glover, 2014; Day et al., 2016). Within the Buenavista District, this relationship demonstrates that strengthening school leadership competencies can serve as a viable strategy for improving educational outcomes, particularly in small and resource-limited settings where the principal's role is highly influential.

Summary of findings

The results collectively reveal that school heads in the Buenavista District display high levels of competency across all PPSSH leadership domains. Their overall “very satisfactory” ratings indicate strong performance in areas of strategic management, instructional supervision, professional development, and resource administration. The data also show a strong and significant correlation between leadership role performance and school achievement, confirming that effective leadership is a pivotal driver of school improvement. Among the PPSSH domains, focusing on teaching and learning and building connections emerged as critical levers for

continuous enhancement—highlighting the dual importance of maintaining instructional quality and cultivating productive relationships with the community.

Overall, these findings provide a data-driven foundation for designing targeted leadership capacity-building programs and inform policy decisions aimed at promoting equity and excellence in small public schools. The results affirm that empowering school heads with the necessary leadership skills and resources can significantly elevate both teaching quality and student achievement, ultimately contributing to the sustained development of the Philippine basic education system.

CONCLUSION

This thematic review synthesized research on the role performance of school heads and its relationship to school achievement within small and resource-constrained educational contexts. Drawing from global frameworks such as Hallinger and Murphy's (1985, 1986) Instructional Leadership Model and the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), the review revealed that effective school leadership remains a decisive factor in enhancing both instructional quality and overall school performance.

The review identified that school heads who actively engage in defining a clear school vision, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive learning climate consistently demonstrate higher levels of school effectiveness and student achievement. Within the Philippine setting, particularly in small and rural schools, the domains of Managing School Operations and Resources and Building Connections emerged as crucial, given persistent constraints in funding, staffing, and community participation.

Findings further suggest that contextual adaptation of global leadership frameworks is essential. While Hallinger and Murphy's model provides a robust conceptual base, it requires localization to reflect the socio-cultural realities of the Philippine education system. Integrating PPSSH standards offers a practical mechanism for aligning leadership practices with national policy expectations and community-based challenges.

Moreover, the review emphasizes the transformative role of community engagement and distributed leadership. Schools that cultivate collaborative networks with parents, local stakeholders, and civic organizations are more resilient and capable of achieving holistic educational outcomes that extend beyond academic performance. This highlights that leadership effectiveness is not confined to administrative functions but deeply rooted in relational and adaptive practices responsive to local needs.

Finally, the review underscores the need for context-sensitive professional development programs for school heads. These should focus not only on instructional supervision but also on resilience building, resource mobilization, and inclusive leadership—competencies proven vital in sustaining learning continuity, especially in geographically challenged or under-resourced settings.

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