

**Inquiry-based leadership and school improvement capacity  
in Philippine public elementary schools**

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**ABSTRACT**

Schools are increasingly expected to sustain meaningful improvement through evidence-informed decision-making, collaboration, and reflective leadership. However, limited localized evidence exists on how inquiry-based leadership is developed and sustained in rural elementary schools, particularly in the Roxas Districts of Isabela. This study assessed the implementation of inquiry-based leadership and its role in building and sustaining school improvement capacity among public elementary schools in the Roxas Districts, Isabela, during School Year 2025–2026. Using a descriptive-comparative research design, the study involved 50 respondents, comprising 20 school heads and 30 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire, supplemented by interviews and documentary analysis. Findings showed that inquiry-based leadership practices and capacity-building strategies were highly implemented, while coping strategies and support mechanisms were rated very effective. Sustainability challenges were moderately serious, particularly workload, time constraints, and training needs. The t-test revealed no significant difference between the perceptions of school heads and teachers. The findings suggest that sustained inquiry requires adequate time, training, resources, and organizational support.

**Keywords:** Inquiry-based leadership, school improvement, school leadership, capacity building, elementary schools.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Schools are under increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable gains in student learning and to sustain meaningful improvements in educational outcomes. In this context, inquiry-based leadership has emerged as an approach that emphasizes continuous questioning, systematic analysis of information, collaborative reflection, and evidence-based decision-making. Rather than relying solely on established practices, inquiry-oriented leaders examine existing conditions, identify areas for improvement, consider possible interventions, and work collaboratively toward appropriate solutions. According to Anabo (2024), instructional

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leadership practices that emphasize systematic reflection and improvement can strengthen the capacity of school heads to respond to instructional and organizational challenges.

Despite its potential to promote sustained school improvement, inquiry-based leadership remains underutilized in many elementary schools, particularly in rural settings such as the Roxas Districts of Isabela. Although the approach emphasizes reflective dialogue, data-informed decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving, these practices have not been fully institutionalized at the grassroots level. As explained by Ballarta et al. (2022), schools may experience limitations in implementing school-based management and participatory practices because of inadequate professional development, limited mentoring opportunities, and insufficient structures for collaboration and reflection.

This concern persists despite national educational reforms, particularly the Department of Education's emphasis on School-Based Management (SBM). SBM seeks to empower schools by decentralizing decision-making and promoting participatory governance, thereby positioning school leaders, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders as active participants in school development. However, the effectiveness of such decentralization depends substantially on the capacity of school leaders to facilitate collaboration, interpret evidence, and lead systematic improvement efforts. Ballarta et al. (2022) noted that disparities in implementation may be associated with inadequate collaborative frameworks, training, and support for school leaders.

One important factor underlying the partial adoption of inquiry-oriented practices is leadership capacity. Without adequate training and sustained professional support, school heads may find it difficult to initiate and maintain professional inquiry processes that require skills in data interpretation, facilitation of professional dialogue, reflective practice, and strategic instructional leadership. In addition, collaborative structures that could support inquiry-based leadership—such as Learning Action Cells (LACs), peer-coaching systems, professional learning communities, and data teams—may be weakly implemented or unavailable in some rural school settings.

The challenge, however, is not purely structural. It also involves cultural and procedural dimensions. In schools where traditional, top-down management practices remain dominant, the transition toward participatory and inquiry-oriented leadership may encounter resistance or misunderstanding. Some school leaders may view inquiry primarily as an academic exercise rather than as a practical process for making informed decisions and improving school practices. Moreover, in resource-constrained schools, immediate administrative and operational concerns may take precedence over reflective planning and systematic inquiry cycles.

Thus, inquiry-based leadership should be understood not simply as an administrative strategy but as a continuous process through which school leaders and teachers examine practices, interpret evidence, reflect collectively, and implement appropriate improvements. This perspective places school leaders in a critical position because the sustainability of school improvement depends not only on the existence of policy frameworks such as SBM but also on leaders' readiness and capacity to translate these frameworks into collaborative, reflective, and evidence-informed practices.

The literature on educational leadership has increasingly emphasized the importance of inquiry-oriented practices in developing a culture of continuous improvement. Leadership of inquiry involves systematically questioning established practices, examining evidence, engaging stakeholders in collaborative reflection, and using the resulting insights to guide change. Through this process, school leaders can become better positioned to identify areas requiring improvement, explore contextually appropriate innovations, and motivate teachers and other stakeholders toward shared educational goals.

In rural school contexts, school administrators often perform multiple roles, including administrative management, instructional supervision, and community engagement, while working with limited resources. Without systematic inquiry processes, school initiatives may become reactive and inconsistent rather than strategic and sustained. Ang et al. (2025) found a significant relationship between School-Based Management implementation and educational outcomes in Philippine public schools, while also identifying continuing concerns related to leadership development and community participation. These findings suggest that decentralization alone may not be sufficient to produce sustained improvement when the leadership capacities and support structures necessary for effective implementation remain inadequate.

Professional support and collaboration are likewise important to the development of inquiry-oriented practices. Miasero (2024), in examining elementary teachers' perspectives on inquiry-based learning, emphasized the importance of professional support and collaborative learning environments in strengthening instructional practices. When teachers participate in professional learning communities and collaborative inquiry groups, they may become more motivated and engaged and may develop stronger critical-thinking practices. In contrast, the absence of adequate professional support can limit the effective implementation of inquiry-oriented approaches.

Similarly, community-of-practice models demonstrate the value of sustained collective learning in developing educational leadership capacity. The study *Building Educational Leaders' Capacity in a Community of Practice* (2023) reported that continuing inquiry-based interactions among educational leaders contributed to the development of agency, shared vision, and more systematic improvement efforts. In the words of the authors, community-based professional learning provides opportunities for leaders to learn from one another, reflect on their practices, and collaboratively address school-based concerns.

Taken together, these studies indicate that inquiry-based leadership is more likely to contribute to meaningful and sustainable school improvement when it is embedded in collaborative structures and supported by continuous professional learning. However, the literature also points to a gap in understanding how inquiry-oriented leadership is actually developed and sustained in rural elementary schools, particularly in contexts where resources, professional support, and opportunities for collaboration may be limited.

This gap is particularly relevant to the Roxas Districts of Isabela. Although existing studies provide evidence regarding instructional leadership, School-Based Management, inquiry-based learning, and professional communities, there remains limited localized evidence concerning how school leaders themselves develop, sustain, and apply inquiry-oriented leadership practices in rural elementary schools. Understanding these practices is important because contextual conditions may influence how leadership strategies are interpreted, implemented, and sustained.

By examining how school leaders in the Roxas Districts adopt, sustain, and respond to the challenges associated with inquiry-based leadership, the present study seeks to identify the factors that support or hinder leadership capacity for school improvement. The study draws from the literature's emphasis on collaboration, reflection, professional learning, and evidence-informed decision-making while situating these concepts within the realities of rural Philippine elementary schools.

Although existing studies provide encouraging evidence regarding inquiry-oriented leadership and collaborative professional learning, a localized understanding of its implementation and sustainability in rural Philippine elementary schools remains limited. In particular, important questions remain concerning how school heads develop the mindset,

routines, and organizational structures necessary for continuous inquiry and how contextual factors—such as rural location, resource limitations, workload, and community engagement—influence these processes.

This study therefore explores how elementary school leaders in the Roxas Districts of Isabela build and sustain capacity for school improvement through inquiry-based leadership. Drawing on the available empirical literature and the local educational context, the study seeks to generate actionable insights into the leadership practices, challenges, and enabling conditions associated with sustained school improvement.

This study is anchored on the concept of inquiry-based leadership as a means of strengthening sustainable school improvement in elementary schools in the Roxas Districts of Isabela. The framework positions school leaders as facilitators of professional learning, promoters of reflective practice, and proponents of evidence-informed decision-making. De Guzman and Ramos (2022) associated transformational school leadership with teacher engagement and emphasized the importance of leadership practices that encourage participation, professional growth, and commitment to shared goals.

At the center of this framework is transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership emphasizes the development of a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized support, and the motivation of organizational members toward common objectives. Within the context of this study, these characteristics are relevant to inquiry-based leadership because school heads need to encourage teachers to question existing practices, examine evidence, reflect on instructional experiences, and explore possible improvements.

School heads are therefore viewed not merely as administrators but also as lead learners who model continuous professional inquiry. Manansala (2023) emphasized the role of school leadership in establishing professional learning communities, where teachers can engage in collaborative learning and professional development. In the context of inquiry-based leadership, such practices may include mentoring, coaching, facilitating data-informed conversations, and supporting collaborative lesson-study activities.

As teachers engage in sustained and collaborative inquiry, professional learning communities can become important mechanisms for collective problem-solving, peer feedback, and reflective dialogue. Torres and Villanueva (2022) highlighted the contribution of school-based leadership development to teacher inquiry practices, suggesting that leadership support can create conditions in which teachers are encouraged to examine and improve their professional practices.

Inquiry-based leadership may consequently contribute to both instructional and organizational improvement. Through systematic reflection and evidence-informed decision-making, schools may develop more responsive teaching practices, stronger teacher engagement, and more coherent improvement initiatives. A culture of inquiry may also encourage greater participation among teachers and other stakeholders because school improvement becomes a shared rather than exclusively administrative responsibility.

However, the relationship between inquiry-based leadership and school improvement is not necessarily linear. The implementation and sustainability of inquiry practices may be influenced by contextual and institutional conditions. Sison and Montano (2023) noted the importance of contextual factors in understanding transformational leadership and reflective teaching in rural elementary schools. Factors such as time constraints, teacher resistance, limited resources, workload, and policy-related concerns may affect the extent to which inquiry practices are introduced, implemented, and institutionalized.

The professional and demographic characteristics of school leaders may also influence their leadership practices. Variables such as age, educational attainment, position, length of service, performance rating, and participation in professional development may provide relevant contextual information in understanding differences in leadership capacity. These

characteristics may interact with institutional conditions and affect how school leaders respond to challenges associated with sustaining inquiry-oriented practices.

Despite these challenges, school leaders may employ various strategies to maintain momentum toward school improvement. These may include mobilizing community resources, encouraging distributed leadership, strengthening professional collaboration, and maximizing available school-based training and development opportunities. Such strategies reflect the adaptive dimension of inquiry-based leadership, in which leaders continuously assess their circumstances and modify their approaches in response to emerging needs.

Overall, the theoretical framework suggests that inquiry-based leadership operates through a continuing cycle of questioning, evidence gathering, reflection, collaboration, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. The effectiveness of this process may depend on the leadership capacity of school heads, the professional engagement of teachers, available support structures, and the contextual conditions within which schools operate. The framework therefore provides a basis for examining the practices, perceived effects, challenges, and strategies associated with inquiry-based leadership in the elementary schools of the Roxas Districts of Isabela.

#### Statement of the problem

This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of inquiry based leadership in building and sustaining school improvement efforts in public elementary schools in the Roxas Districts of Isabela during the School Year 2025–2026.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the school leaders and key teacher leaders in terms of age, gender, civil status, highest educational attainment, current position, latest performance rating, length of service, level of in service training, and training and seminars attended related to inquiry based practices?
2. What inquiry based leadership practices are implemented by school leaders in their respective schools?
3. What are the perceived effects of inquiry based leadership on school improvement efforts?
4. What challenges are encountered by school leaders in sustaining inquiry based leadership?
5. What strategies or mechanisms are used by school leaders to overcome these challenges and sustain school improvement efforts?
6. Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of teachers and school heads regarding the building and sustaining of school improvement capacity through inquiry based leadership?

#### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive-comparative research design to assess the perceptions of school heads and teachers regarding the implementation of inquiry-based leadership practices and their influence on school improvement efforts in public elementary schools in the Roxas Districts, Isabela, during School Year 2025–2026. The descriptive approach was used to describe the respondents' profiles, inquiry-based leadership practices, perceived effects, challenges, and strategies for sustaining school improvement. The comparative component was used to determine whether significant differences existed between

the perceptions of school heads and teachers. According to Nassaji (2015), descriptive research provides a detailed account of a phenomenon without manipulating the conditions under study. Creswell (2012) explained that comparative approaches are useful for determining differences between groups, while Lodico et al. (2010) noted that descriptive-comparative research can describe existing conditions and examine meaningful differences among groups.

The study was conducted in the public elementary schools in the Roxas Districts, Isabela. The participants consisted of 50 respondents, comprising 20 school heads and 30 teachers. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the respondents based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. A structured questionnaire served as the primary data-gathering instrument and covered the respondents' profiles, inquiry-based leadership practices, capacity-building strategies, challenges in sustaining inquiry-oriented leadership, and coping strategies and support mechanisms. The questionnaire was developed from relevant literature, published studies, and previously validated research instruments and was subjected to a try-out among selected public elementary school teachers and school heads in a neighboring municipality. Suggestions from the participants, research adviser, and Dean of the Graduate School were incorporated into the final instrument.

The questionnaire was supplemented by unstructured interviews to clarify vague or incomplete responses and by documentary analysis of relevant school records, including school improvement plans, Learning Action Cell (LAC) session minutes, action research reports, instructional coaching logs, and performance-monitoring tools. These sources provided supplementary information and helped contextualize the survey findings. Before data collection, the researcher secured the necessary permissions from the Schools Division Office of Isabela and the participating schools. Respondents were oriented about the study and provided informed consent before the questionnaires were distributed and retrieved. The gathered data were subsequently checked, organized, coded, and prepared for analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents consisted of 20 school heads and 30 teachers. The school heads were generally experienced administrators, with the largest group (40.00%) aged 51–55 years, followed by 20.00% aged 56–60 years. Among the teachers, 33.33% were 56–60 years old and 23.33% were 51–55 years old. The predominance of older respondents suggests that the study drew largely from education professionals with substantial experience in school leadership and classroom practice. This level of experience may be an advantage in implementing inquiry-based leadership because both school heads and teachers have had considerable exposure to school improvement processes and instructional concerns.

The respondents were predominantly female, comprising 60.00% of school heads and 80.00% of teachers. Most respondents were also married, accounting for 75.00% of school heads and 86.67% of teachers. In terms of educational attainment, most school heads had pursued graduate studies, with 50.00% having MAEd units and 30.00% having EdD/PhD units. Among teachers, 53.33% were EdD/PhD graduates and 20.00% were MAEd graduates. The data indicate a highly educated group, particularly among the teacher respondents, which provides a strong professional background for engaging in reflective practice, collaborative inquiry, and school improvement activities.

The respondents also demonstrated strong professional standing. Among school heads, 30.00% were Principal 1, 25.00% were Principal 2, and another 25.00% were Head Teacher 3. All teacher respondents were Master Teachers, with 53.33% classified as Master Teacher 1 and 46.67% as Master Teacher 2. Moreover, 95.00% of school heads and 96.67% of teachers received an Outstanding rating in their latest performance evaluation. These results suggest that

the perceptions gathered in the study came largely from experienced and high-performing education professionals.

Training exposure, however, presents a more important distinction between the two groups. Although 60.00% of school heads had attended training or seminars related to inquiry-based practices, only 33.33% of teachers reported similar training, while 66.67% had not attended such training. School heads had also participated in training at national and international levels, whereas teachers' training exposure was concentrated more at the national and division levels. This difference suggests that school leaders may have greater formal exposure to inquiry-related concepts than teachers, pointing to the need for more systematic and inclusive professional development for teachers.

Despite this difference in training exposure, both groups perceived inquiry-based leadership practices as highly implemented. School heads obtained an average weighted mean of 4.66, while teachers obtained 4.46. The practices receiving particularly strong ratings included the formation of collaborative inquiry groups, the use of evidence from student outcomes to improve teaching, professional dialogue centered on student learning and data, and the integration of inquiry findings into school improvement plans. The close ratings of the two groups indicate that inquiry-oriented practices were not limited to formal leadership activities but were also experienced by teachers in their day-to-day professional work.

Capacity-building strategies were likewise rated highly implemented, with average weighted means of 4.46 among school heads and 4.27 among teachers. Regular Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, support for action research, mentoring or peer coaching, continuing professional development, and recognition of innovative inquiry projects were among the strategies reported as highly implemented. These findings suggest that the schools had established professional structures that could support inquiry-based leadership, although the lower teacher rating for mentoring or peer coaching (4.17) indicates that such support may not be experienced as consistently by teachers as it is perceived by school heads.

Notwithstanding the high level of implementation, respondents identified several challenges in sustaining inquiry-oriented leadership. School heads rated the challenges at an overall mean of 3.11, while teachers gave 2.93, both interpreted as moderately serious. For school heads, the most serious concern was excessive administrative workload (3.45). Teachers similarly identified limited time for collaborative inquiry and excessive administrative workload as their leading concerns, both with a mean of 3.07. Insufficient training was another recurring concern, rated 3.30 by school heads and 3.03 by teachers. These findings suggest that the main barriers are not necessarily resistance to inquiry itself but the practical conditions surrounding its implementation—particularly workload, time, and professional preparation.

The coping strategies and support mechanisms were nevertheless regarded as very effective. School heads reported a grand weighted mean of 4.40, while teachers reported 4.27. Recognition and rewards, regular feedback, mentoring and peer support, professional development, sharing of inquiry outputs, and documentation of successful practices were among the strategies viewed positively. The findings suggest that supportive leadership practices can help schools manage the practical difficulties associated with sustaining inquiry-based leadership. At the same time, the comparatively lower teacher ratings for digital collaboration (4.17) and workload reduction (4.07) indicate areas where further institutional support may be needed.

Finally, the independent-samples t-test showed no significant difference between the perceptions of school heads and teachers. The computed t-value was 1.419, compared with a t-critical value of 2.011, while the p-value was 0.162, which was greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis was retained. This means that school heads and teachers

held statistically comparable perceptions regarding the role of inquiry-based leadership in building and sustaining school improvement capacity. The result is important because it suggests a relatively shared understanding of inquiry-oriented leadership across the two groups rather than a substantial gap between managerial and classroom perspectives.

This finding is consistent with de Guzman and Ramos (2022), who associated transformational school leadership with stronger teacher engagement in public elementary schools. A shared perception may emerge when school heads and teachers operate within the same leadership environment and participate in common improvement priorities. Similarly, Muhayimana et al. (2023) found that community-of-practice approaches strengthened collaboration, professional conversations, and leaders' self-efficacy. These findings support the present result that inquiry-based improvement is more likely to be sustained when leadership and teaching personnel share a common understanding of improvement work and participate in collaborative professional processes.

Overall, the findings present a generally positive picture of inquiry-based leadership in the participating schools. The practices and capacity-building strategies were highly implemented, while coping mechanisms and support systems were viewed as very effective. However, the moderate seriousness of workload, time constraints, and insufficient training shows that high implementation ratings do not mean that the system is free from difficulties. The central issue, therefore, is not whether inquiry-based leadership is being practiced, but whether schools can provide sufficient time, training, and organizational support to make these practices sustainable. The absence of a significant difference between teachers and school heads further suggests that future improvement efforts can build on an existing shared understanding rather than having to reconcile substantially different views between the two groups.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the school heads were generally mid- to late-career leaders, predominantly female and married, with extensive professional experience, advanced educational preparation, and high performance ratings. They also reported substantial exposure to inquiry-related professional development. The teacher respondents were likewise predominantly senior educators, largely female and married, with advanced academic credentials and high performance ratings. However, their participation in inquiry-related training was lower than that of the school heads, indicating a need to provide teachers with more opportunities for professional development in inquiry-based practices.

The findings further show that leadership practices by inquiry were highly implemented as perceived by both school heads and teachers. Collaborative inquiry, reflective dialogue, shared planning, data-informed decision-making, and the use of evidence to improve teaching were already evident in the participating schools. These practices should be sustained by providing protected time for LAC sessions, collaborative planning, lesson study, and action research.

Similarly, capacity-building strategies were highly implemented by both groups. LAC sessions, action research support, mentoring and peer coaching, continuing professional development, and recognition of inquiry projects were among the practices supporting school improvement. These mechanisms should be strengthened through targeted training, clear mentoring arrangements, regular coaching, and wider participation of teachers, particularly those with limited exposure to inquiry-related training.

Despite the high level of implementation, challenges in sustaining inquiry-oriented leadership were moderately serious. Administrative workload was a serious concern among school heads, while teachers identified time constraints, workload, inadequate training, limited



resources, policy alignment, stakeholder support, and difficulties in assessing inquiry outcomes as concerns. Thus, schools need to review administrative assignments, streamline reporting requirements, delegate appropriate non-instructional tasks, and provide adequate resources and time for inquiry activities.

The coping strategies and support mechanisms were perceived as very effective by both school heads and teachers. Collaboration time, mentoring, professional development, recognition, documentation of good practices, and regular feedback were viewed as useful in sustaining inquiry initiatives. These supports should therefore be institutionalized, with successful practices documented and shared through LAC sessions, INSETs, school events, and other professional activities. Stakeholder participation should also be strengthened through regular communication and opportunities for parents, community partners, and other concerned groups to contribute to school improvement efforts.

The study also found no significant difference between the perceptions of school heads and teachers regarding the role of leadership of inquiry in building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. This suggests that both groups generally shared similar views about inquiry-based leadership. Such alignment provides a favorable foundation for strengthening inquiry-oriented practices and integrating them more consistently into school improvement processes.

Finally, inquiry-based leadership should be further embedded in the school's existing improvement mechanisms. Inquiry findings may be incorporated into School Improvement Plans, performance-monitoring activities, and other relevant school documents. Schools may also develop simple tools for monitoring inquiry outcomes, documenting good practices, and gathering feedback. Future researchers may extend the study to other districts and school contexts and examine factors such as school size, resource availability, leadership styles, and stakeholder engagement to provide a broader understanding of the conditions that sustain inquiry-oriented school improvement.

Overall, the study concludes that inquiry-based leadership is strongly practiced in the participating schools and is supported by effective capacity-building and coping mechanisms. However, its sustainability depends on addressing workload, time constraints, training needs, resource limitations, and stakeholder support. Strengthening these areas while maintaining the shared commitment of school heads and teachers can help institutionalize inquiry as a continuing approach to school improvement.

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