ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF LEADERSHIP STYLES IN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED SCHOOLS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Mahal B. Rosel[1], Rodel J. Agodera[2], Nolito J. Oksok[3], Rizza B. Bagalanon[4]

[1]0009-0001-4878-6052, [2]0009-0002-4785-6394, [4]0000-0003-4589-0863

[14]Jose Rizal Memorial State University, [2]Colegio de San Francisco,Javier of Rizal

[3]Department of Education

mahalrosel@jrmsu.edu.ph, agodera1217@gmail.com, nolitooksok001@gmail.com, rizzabagalanon@jrmsu.edu.ph

Abstract

Leadership in education plays a pivotal role in ensuring quality learning outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained environments. This study explores the application of various leadership styles—transformational, situational, transactional, servant, instructional, and operational—within rural schools in the Philippines. Grounded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), this research examines how these leadership styles impact school management, teacher retention, and classroom dynamics. Using qualitative field research methods, including non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, the study provides in-depth insights into the leadership behaviors most effective in addressing the unique challenges of rural schools. The findings suggest that adaptive leadership approaches—such as transformational and servant leadership—play a critical role in fostering collaboration, managing crises, and improving teacher retention in resource-limited settings. By integrating these adaptive strategies, school leaders can enhance educational outcomes in similar contexts worldwide.

Keywords and phrases: *Adaptive leadership; transformational leadership; servant leadership; rural schools; SDG 4; SDG 8; school management; crisis leadership; teacher retention; inclusive leadership*

Introduction

Educational leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in achieving global and national education goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (UNESCO, 2021). Effective school leadership can influence student achievement, teacher retention, and overall school performance, especially in rural and resource-constrained settings where educational inequalities are most pronounced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). International frameworks also call for inclusive and gender-responsive leadership in education – for example, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) emphasizes the importance of eliminating disparities and ensuring equal opportunities in educational leadership. Theoretical concepts such as queer theory and intersectionality highlight the need to consider how diverse identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) intersect to affect experiences in educational settings (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). These perspectives underscore that effective leadership should foster equitable and inclusive environments for all stakeholders.

Globally, leadership gaps in education have been exacerbated by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed the need for crisis leadership and adaptive decision-making to maintain educational continuity (Fullan, 2020). In many developing countries, including the Philippines, school leaders face additional challenges related to geographic isolation, socioeconomic disparities, and systemic inequalities (Patton, 2015). Within the ASEAN region, improving educational leadership is a regional priority, with recent analyses highlighting issues like the underrepresentation of women in school leadership in several Southeast Asian countries (UNICEF, 2024). Notably, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles in about half of the countries studied, even though schools led by women perform as well as or better than those led by men (UNICEF, 2024). Such findings emphasize the broader importance of inclusive leadership practices that address gender and other dimensions of diversity in schools. In the Philippines, the Department of Education has introduced policies to promote gender-responsive and safe schools, such as a 2017 policy aimed at ending gender-based discrimination in education (Thoreson, 2017). These efforts align with international norms on inclusive education and reflect a growing recognition that school leadership must adapt to diverse needs.

Transformational and servant leadership models, which emphasize collaboration, innovation, and the professional development of teachers, have emerged as key strategies for addressing the challenges of resource-constrained schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2020). However, there is a dearth of research on how these and other leadership styles are operationalized in rural Philippine schools, indicating a clear gap in the literature (Mohammad & Mejica, 2021). Most existing studies on school leadership in the Philippines focus on urban settings or single leadership frameworks, leaving rural contexts and multi-faceted leadership approaches under-explored. Addressing this gap, this study aims to explore how various leadership styles—transformational, situational, transactional, servant, instructional, and operational—are applied in rural schools in the Philippines. By understanding the impact of these leadership styles on school management, teacher retention, and classroom dynamics, the research contributes to the global discourse on adaptive leadership in education. The insights gained can inform

policy and practice in similar contexts, aligning with the broader goals of SDG 4, SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 by highlighting leadership strategies that promote quality, inclusive education and decent work conditions for educators.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative field research design, specifically a multiple-case study approach, to explore leadership behaviors in rural schools in the Philippines. Qualitative research is effective for understanding complex social phenomena within real-world contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed an in-depth investigation of how leadership styles such as transformational, situational, and servant leadership are applied in resource-constrained educational settings and how these styles interact with the local context. The research design was guided by the concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994), which provided a broad theoretical lens for examining how leaders adjust their style to meet the challenges of their environment.

Participants

A purposive sample of 10 school leaders was selected from public and private schools located in rural areas of the Philippines. The participants included principals, department heads, and district superintendents, all of whom had significant experience in managing schools under resource-limited conditions. These participants were chosen based on their leadership roles and their ability to provide rich insights into school management practices and leadership challenges (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria ensured that all selected leaders had at least five years of experience in a school leadership position in a rural setting. The selection process also sought diversity in background: participants represented both public and private institutions and included both male and female school leaders, to capture a range of perspectives. By using these criteria, the study aimed to include leaders who could speak to common challenges in rural education while also reflecting varied contexts (e.g., different provinces and school sizes).

Data Collection

Three primary data collection methods were used to ensure triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of leadership practices:

- Non-Participant Observations: School leaders were observed in their natural work setting during staff meetings, teacher evaluations, and classroom visits. These observations focused on leadership behaviors, decision-making processes, and interactions with teachers and staff (Bowen, 2009). A structured observation checklist was employed to systematically record behaviors related to each leadership style (e.g., instances of collaboration, delegation, or enforcement of rules). In total, approximately 30 hours of observation were conducted across five schools (multiple observation sessions per school), providing contextual evidence of how leaders manage day-to-day operations and unexpected challenges.

- Interviews: In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 10 participants. The interview protocol covered topics such as leadership challenges, crisis management experiences, teacher retention strategies, and approaches to curriculum development (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide was reviewed by two expert educators to ensure content validity and clarity of questions before use. This expert validation helped refine questions to align closely with the research objectives. Follow-up probing questions were used during interviews to delve deeper into specific examples of leadership behavior (e.g., "Can you describe a recent crisis and how you responded as a leader?").

- Document Review: Institutional documents, including school leadership policies, training manuals, meeting minutes, and crisis management plans, were collected and reviewed to triangulate findings from observations and interviews. Document analysis helped to contextualize the leadership practices by providing evidence of formal policies and procedures (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2019). For example, school improvement plans and teacher handbooks were examined for indications of leadership priorities (such as emphasis on collaboration or strict protocols). These documents offered a secondary perspective on how leadership styles were codified or encouraged within each school.

All data collection took place over a period of four months. Prior to data gathering, participants received an information sheet and provided informed consent. During the observations and interviews, the researcher took field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that audio recordings might miss. Data from multiple sources were later cross-referenced to ensure consistency and to deepen understanding (e.g., comparing an interviewee's claim of open communication with observation of an actual staff meeting).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step procedure. Thematic analysis is an effective method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The six steps applied in this study were as follows:

1. **Familiarization:** The research team immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents. Initial impressions and recurrent ideas were noted during this phase.

2. **Generating Initial Codes**: A coding framework was developed both deductively (based on leadership concepts from literature) and inductively (based on emerging data). Segments of data were labeled with codes representing key leadership behaviors and management practices, such as *collaboration*, *adaptability*, *teacher motivation*, *discipline enforcement*, etc. All transcripts were coded using qualitative analysis software to organize and manage the codes.

3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were examined for patterns and grouped into broader candidate themes. For instance, codes like "teamwork," "shared decision-making," and "teacher empowerment" were organized under a provisional theme of *collaborative leadership*. Similarly, codes related to crisis response and flexibility were grouped under *adaptive crisis management*.

4. **Reviewing Themes:** The candidate themes were reviewed and refined by checking against the data. The research team discussed each theme in light of the coded excerpts and the overall data set to ensure that themes were distinct, coherent, and reflective of significant aspects of the data. Some themes were merged or redefined at this stage. For example, initially separate themes of *Leadership Collaboration* and *Leadership Effectiveness* were combined into a single theme when it became clear they were strongly interlinked in practice.

5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and given a concise name that captures its essence. Subthemes were identified where applicable. Ultimately, four main themes were defined: (1) Leadership Effectiveness and Collaboration, (2) Crisis Management and Adaptability, (3) Teacher Retention and Motivation, and (4) Operational Efficiency and Discipline. Each theme encapsulates a set of related ideas about how leadership is enacted in the schools.

6. **Writing the Report:** The findings were compiled in a narrative form, with each theme discussed in detail in the Results section. Representative direct quotes from participants are used to illustrate each theme, giving voice to the school leaders' experiences. Observation and document evidence are also integrated into the narrative to provide concrete examples and to validate the interview data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, multiple strategies were employed. First, triangulation of data sources was used: insights gained from interviews were cross-checked against observations and documents. For example, if a leader claimed to practice collaborative decision-making, meeting minutes (documents) and meeting observations were examined for evidence of teacher involvement in decisions. Second, two researchers independently coded portions of the data and then compared their coding. This inter-coder agreement process led to discussions about any discrepancies and helped refine the code definitions, thereby enhancing the reliability of the coding process. Agreement was high (over 85% code overlap on a sample of transcripts), and differences were resolved through consensus. Third, a form of member checking was conducted: preliminary findings and interpretations were summarized and presented to three of the participant school leaders for feedback. These participants confirmed that the themes resonated with their experiences and provided minor clarifications on certain points, which were incorporated into the analysis. Together, these measures (triangulation, inter-coder review, and member validation) strengthen the credibility and dependability of the study's qualitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were rigorously observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, all names and identifying details of the participants and their schools have been omitted or replaced with pseudonyms in the transcripts and report. The data (audio recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and documents) were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team and will be destroyed after a set retention period in accordance with institutional guidelines.

The study was conducted with integrity and transparency. Ethical approval was obtained from the affiliated university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. During the research process, the researchers remained sensitive to the power dynamics between themselves (as external researchers) and the school leaders. Efforts were made to establish rapport and trust, especially during interviews, so participants would feel comfortable sharing honest insights. The researchers also took care to avoid disrupting school activities during observations by being as unobtrusive as possible. At the analysis and reporting stage, the researchers strived to represent the data accurately and without bias, faithfully conveying participants' viewpoints. Any potential methodological limitations that could affect results (such as the small sample size or the subjective nature of qualitative analysis) are acknowledged in the Conclusion section. Overall, the study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for person, beneficence, and justice, as well as the publication ethics guidelines set forth by *The Threshold*.

Results

Thematic analysis of the data revealed four main themes related to leadership practices in rural schools: (1) Leadership Effectiveness and Collaboration, (2) Crisis Management and Adaptability, (3) Teacher Retention and Motivation, and (4) Operational Efficiency and Discipline. Table 1 summarizes these themes, the key codes associated with each, and a brief description.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Codes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Codes	Description
Leadership Effectiveness and Collaboration	Collaboration, Teacher empowerment, Teamwork, Shared decision-making	This theme captures how transformational leadership fosters collaboration among teachers and staff, creating a shared vision and a collective sense of responsibility for student outcomes.
Crisis Management and	Flexibility, Crisis response, Policy	Situational leadership during crises (such as the COVID-19

Adaptability	adjustments, Teacher support, Communication	pandemic) was characterized by flexibility in decision-making and proactive crisis response. Leaders adapted policies to support teachers and maintain continuity.
Teacher Retention and Motivation	Teacher retention, Professional development, Supportive leadership, Recognition of effort	Servant leadership focused on improving teacher retention by supporting teacher well-being and professional growth, especially in rural schools where resources and opportunities are limited.
Operational Efficiency and Discipline	Structure, Accountability, Administrative control, Clear protocols, Monitoring	Transactional leadership ensured operational efficiency by maintaining structure, setting clear expectations, and holding teachers accountable. This style was particularly effective in larger schools with complex administrative demands.

Theme 1: Leadership Effectiveness and Collaboration

A dominant pattern among the participating school leaders was the use of transformational leadership, characterized by a strong focus on collaboration, empowerment, and a shared vision for the school. Leaders who employed transformational practices were found to inspire their teams by fostering a sense of collective responsibility for educational outcomes. One principal (Participant 1) noted the shift in school culture due to this approach: *"Collaboration has become a core part of how we work here; we are constantly encouraged to contribute ideas for improving teaching methods."* This comment illustrates how teachers were invited to be part of the decision-making process and innovation in the school's pedagogical strategies. Indeed, transformational leaders frequently organized regular team meetings and brainstorming sessions where teachers could share ideas and solve problems together. Participant 5 emphasized the importance of these collaborative efforts, saying, *"Our leader ensures that every teacher has a voice, which makes us feel valued and part of the decision-making process."* Teachers under such leadership felt a sense of ownership over school initiatives.

This collaborative leadership style proved particularly effective in encouraging teachers to engage in professional development and to take ownership of their instructional practices. For example, several teachers pursued additional training or introduced new classroom techniques after being motivated by their school head's inclusive approach. Field observations supported these accounts: during staff meetings observed in two schools, teachers actively contributed suggestions and even led portions of the discussion, indicating that the leadership successfully empowered staff to take initiative. This atmosphere of trust and teamwork led to a more open exchange of ideas. School documents

(such as meeting minutes and school improvement plans) further reflected this participative climate – they showed evidence of teacher input in planning and decision-making (e.g., multiple teacher names appearing as co-authors of a new teaching framework). Overall, Leadership Effectiveness and Collaboration as a theme highlights that when school leaders adopt transformational, team-oriented practices, it results in a more engaged and committed teaching workforce working collectively toward school goals.

Theme 2: Crisis Management and Adaptability

Situational leadership emerged as a critical approach during times of crisis, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders who practiced situational leadership demonstrated flexibility in their decision-making processes, rapidly adjusting policies and practices to suit the evolving needs of their schools. Participant 3 explained how their principal navigated the pandemic: *"During the pandemic, our leader adjusted schedules, modified lesson plans, and even restructured some of our procedures to ensure that both teachers and students were supported."* This account (echoed by others) shows how adaptive measures—such as staggered schedules, remote learning adaptations, and revised attendance policies—were implemented to cope with disruptions (Fullan, 2020).

The ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances was identified by participants as a key factor in maintaining school operations during crises. Many participants highlighted the importance of crisis management training and the need for leaders to be proactive in addressing potential disruptions to the learning environment. For instance, some leaders preemptively organized capacity-building sessions on online teaching for their staff when school closures appeared imminent. In one school, the principal formed a "crisis response team" among teachers to develop quick solutions for problems as they arose (such as distributing printed modules to students with no internet).

Documentary evidence reinforced these practices: one school's COVID-19 response plan, which the research team reviewed, showed multiple iterations with dates, indicating it was updated frequently as new guidelines or challenges emerged. This plan detailed steps like provision of teacher support hotlines and adjustments in grading policies, exemplifying proactive adaptation. Similarly, observation notes from emergency faculty meetings during the pandemic recorded that principals often changed normal protocols on short notice (e.g., temporarily suspending non-essential administrative tasks) to allow teachers to focus on remote instruction and student welfare. These flexible adjustments were communicated clearly and empathetically, mitigating stress for teachers.

Overall, the Crisis Management and Adaptability theme underscores that in periods of crisis, effective school leaders adopt a situational leadership style—being highly flexible and responsive to context. This leadership agility ensured continuity of learning. Participants credited such adaptability for their schools' ability to weather the pandemic with minimal learning loss. As one teacher described informally (noted in observation), *"Our principal became our problem-solver-in-chief during COVID-19; every time a new issue came up, she already had a plan A, B, and C."* Leaders who were quick to adjust and communicate these adjustments-maintained stability. Notably, this finding resonates with broader observations in educational leadership during COVID-19 in the Philippines, where principals had to navigate crises without clear guidelines by being innovative and adaptive in real time (Cahapay, 2022).

Theme 3: Teacher Retention and Motivation

Teacher retention was a significant issue in all the rural schools studied, where resources are limited, and professional development opportunities can be scarce. Servant leadership proved to be an effective model for addressing this challenge. School leaders who adopted a servant leadership approach prioritized the well-being and professional growth of their teachers, placing the needs of teachers at the forefront of their decision-making. As Participant 2 shared, *"In our rural school, retaining teachers has always been a challenge, but since our principal started focusing on our professional growth and well-being, we've seen fewer resignations."* This testimonial indicates that when leaders invest in their teachers – by supporting their further education, mentoring them, or even attending to their personal needs – teachers feel more valued and are more likely to stay.

Servant leadership in these schools was manifested through various supportive practices. Examples included principals arranging monthly wellness sessions for faculty, securing small scholarships or funding for teachers to attend workshops, and publicly recognizing teachers' accomplishments to boost morale. Several participants noted that their school head maintained an "open-door policy," encouraging teachers to voice concerns or seek advice without fear. By creating a supportive and caring work environment, these leaders enhanced teacher motivation and job satisfaction. As a result, teachers developed stronger loyalty to the school. One senior teacher mentioned (in an interview) that although she had opportunities to transfer to an urban school with better pay, she chose to stay because *"our principal here genuinely cares about us and our professional growth, which I don't think I'd easily find elsewhere."*

This approach not only improved teacher retention but also had positive ripple effects on classroom engagement and student outcomes. Motivated and supported teachers were more enthusiastic in their teaching, tried out new instructional strategies, and were generally more present for their students. Participant 7 (a district supervisor) observed that in schools where the principal practiced servant leadership, student performance on assessments had stabilized or improved, which she attributed to lower teacher turnover and higher teacher dedication.

The data also provide some tangible indicators of improvement in retention. In at least two of the participating schools, participants reported that annual teacher turnover had dropped in recent years. For example, one school that used to lose 2–3 teachers a year to transfers or resignations has retained all its faculty in the past two years. While exact figures were not available in all cases, these qualitative accounts align with the narrative that servant leadership helped reduce attrition. This was further corroborated by document analysis in one school: a comparison of faculty lists over a three-year period (attached to annual reports) showed a higher rate of teacher retention after the principal introduced new teacher support programs.

In summary, Teacher Retention and Motivation as a theme highlights the pivotal role of servant leadership in rural schools. By supporting teachers' needs and professional ambitions, servant leaders foster an environment where teachers feel motivated and committed to stay. This finding is consistent with broader research suggesting that servant leadership characteristics – such as empathy, support, and empowerment – have a positive effect on teacher job satisfaction and intent to remain in their jobs (Johnston, 2021).

Participants in this study clearly linked their leaders' supportive actions to their own decisions to continue teaching in challenging rural environments. Schools led by servant leaders became close-knit communities, helping to mitigate the allure of leaving for easier posts. As one teacher concluded, *"When your principal treats you like a valued partner rather than just an employee, you think twice about leaving."*

Theme 4: Operational Efficiency and Discipline

Many participants, especially those from larger or higher-level schools, reported that transactional leadership was commonly employed to maintain order and efficiency in their institutions. In schools with hundreds of students or multiple departments, having clear structures and procedures was seen as essential to ensure smooth operations. Leaders who adopted a transactional style emphasized the importance of well-defined rules, consistent enforcement of policies, and close monitoring of both teacher and student performance. Participant 5 remarked on this style in her school: *"There are clear protocols for everything in our school, from lesson planning formats to disciplinary actions. While this maintains structure, it sometimes feels rigid."* This comment encapsulates the trade-off inherent in transactional leadership: high levels of organization and accountability, potentially at the expense of flexibility and teacher autonomy.

Under this theme, participants described environments where expectations were explicit. Teachers knew exactly what was required of them on a daily and weekly basis (e.g., submission of lesson plans every Monday, strict start-of-class routines, etc.), and there were systematic checks in place. For instance, some principals conducted regular classroom inspections and reviewed teaching logs to ensure compliance with curriculum schedules. Performance appraisal systems in these schools were formalized, often tied to quantitative metrics like student test scores or attendance records. Such practices motivated teachers to meet standards, but a few participants also noted feeling pressure or constrained creativity. As Participant 5 indicated, creativity could be limited – a sentiment echoed by another teacher who said in an interview, *"Sometimes I want to try a different teaching approach, but I worry it might not align with the set protocols."*

From the data, it's evident that Operational Efficiency and Discipline yielded benefits such as consistent classroom management and clarity in school procedures. For example, during observations, the researcher noted that classes in these schools started on time and followed a predictable routine, suggesting that students and teachers alike were accustomed to a disciplined schedule. School documents supported this structured approach: the faculty handbook in one school spanned dozens of pages outlining procedures for virtually all scenarios (e.g., how to request materials, how to handle student absences, etc.). This level of detail indicated a high degree of administrative control. Additionally, meeting minutes in these contexts were often directive (principal giving instructions or feedback) rather than collaborative, reflecting the top-down nature of transactional leadership.

However, participants also discussed measures to balance this rigidity. One principal explained in an interview that while she maintained strict rules, she also provided incentives (like recognition or small rewards) for teachers who met or exceeded expectations – a classic transactional tactic of reward for performance. Teachers acknowledged that such rewards (even something as simple as public praise in a meeting or a commendation letter) were motivating and made the structured environment more

palatable.

In summary, Operational Efficiency and Discipline as a theme captures how a transactional leadership style helped maintain order and reliability in school operations. This style was particularly effective and perhaps necessary in larger schools with significant administrative demands or in situations where stability was the immediate priority. While some drawbacks were noted – chiefly a feeling of rigidity – many participants understood the value of having strong systems in place. Notably, none of the participants advocated abandoning this style entirely; rather, a few suggested it should be moderated with flexibility. For instance, one teacher suggested that periodic "innovation days" could allow some break from routine and encourage creativity without completely upending the structure. This insight foreshadows the idea, discussed later, that blending leadership styles (transactional for order and transformational for innovation) might be the optimal path in such schools.

In conclusion of the Results, the four themes collectively illustrate an adaptive leadership paradigm in practice: effective rural school leaders tend to blend different leadership styles to meet specific challenges. They act as transformational leaders to build a collaborative culture, become situational leaders in times of crisis, shift into a servant leadership mode to support and retain teachers, and employ transactional methods to ensure stability and routine. Each theme highlights one of these facets, and together they respond to the multifaceted demands placed on school leaders in resource-constrained environments.

Discussion

This study reveals that adaptive leadership styles—particularly transformational, situational, and servant leadership—are most effective in managing rural, resource-constrained schools. The findings align with the concept of *adaptive leadership* as defined by Heifetz (1994), which posits that successful leaders must adapt their style to the context and challenges at hand. In our cases, school leaders dynamically shifted between leadership approaches to address different needs, demonstrating adaptive leadership in action.

Firstly, transformational leadership fosters collaboration among teachers, creating a shared vision that encourages professional development and ownership of instructional practices. This leadership style has been shown to improve school performance and student outcomes by promoting a culture of innovation and teamwork (Leithwood & Sun, 2020). Our findings provide practical evidence of this: teachers in schools with transformational leaders were more engaged and proactive, echoing the literature that links such leadership with enhanced teacher motivation and student achievement. By inspiring a collective mission and valuing teachers' contributions, transformational leaders in rural Philippine schools helped overcome feelings of isolation and resource limitations. This outcome reinforces the theoretical claims that transformational leadership can elevate organizational effectiveness even in challenging settings. It also extends those claims into a new context, suggesting that what has been observed in more developed or urban school systems holds true in rural developing areas as well.

Secondly, situational leadership proved critical during times of crisis. The flexibility of this leadership style allowed school leaders to adjust policies and practices in response

to rapidly changing circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Fullan, 2020). This adaptability ensured that schools could continue to function effectively during periods of disruption. Participants' descriptions of how their principals handled the pandemic—by swiftly altering schedules, communication methods, and support systems—illustrate situational leadership in practice. These actions align with global observations of school leadership during COVID-19 and underscore the importance of agility and context-aware decision-making. Our discussion resonates with Cahapay (2022), who found that Filipino school principals navigating the COVID-19 crisis often embodied adaptive leadership, including promoting inclusivity and technological integration, to meet the unprecedented challenges. In both our study and Cahapay's work, leaders did not rely on one fixed style but instead adjusted their approach as the situation evolved, which is the essence of situational (and adaptive) leadership. This reinforces the idea that building capacity for crisis leadership (through training and experience) is an essential component of educational leadership development.

Thirdly, servant leadership emerged as a key strategy for improving teacher retention and motivation. By prioritizing the well-being and professional growth of teachers, servant leaders create a supportive work environment that fosters teacher loyalty, engagement, and ultimately, retention. This leadership style is particularly important in rural schools, where retaining qualified teachers is a major challenge due to limited resources and career opportunities. Our findings indicated noticeable improvements in teacher morale and decreases in turnover under servant leaders. This outcome is consistent with research linking servant leadership qualities (like support and empowerment) to greater teacher job satisfaction and lower intent to leave (Johnston, 2021). The study thereby validates the practical value of servant leadership theory in an educational context: when leaders act as servants to their teachers—removing obstacles, caring for their needs, and investing in their growth—teachers reciprocate with commitment and improved performance. It is worth noting that servant leadership in our context also contributed to better student experiences (through more stable staffing and enthusiastic teachers), highlighting a chain effect from leadership to teachers to students. This supports the view that leadership which nurtures educators can indirectly benefit learners and overall school outcomes.

The study's insights contribute to the broader understanding of adaptive leadership in education. Notably, the experiences from the Philippines can be informative for other developing country contexts with similar educational challenges. The leadership models identified here provide a framework for improving school management in resource-constrained environments worldwide. By aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and by incorporating considerations of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) for inclusive practices, this research joins the global conversation on how educational leadership can drive improvements in student outcomes and teacher retention in rural or disadvantaged settings (UNESCO, 2021).

It is important to acknowledge that while our study did not explicitly focus on gender or other intersectional factors in leadership, the findings implicitly endorse a leadership approach that is collaborative and inclusive. An adaptive leader, by nature, should also be attuned to issues of diversity and equity among staff and students. For instance, promoting a supportive environment for all teachers can be seen as aligning with gender-responsive leadership, ensuring that both male and female teachers (and those of diverse identities)

feel equally valued. Future leadership models may integrate concepts from queer theory and intersectionality to address how leadership practices can be made more inclusive of LGBTQ+ educators and sensitive to overlapping social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). In essence, our findings about creating supportive, flexible leadership systems complement the call for more inclusive leadership frameworks in education. Schools function best when leaders adapt not only to situational challenges but also to the diverse needs of their teachers and students.

Finally, the interplay of different leadership styles observed in this study suggests that no single style is sufficient on its own. Effective rural school leaders are those who can be transformational mentors, servant supporters, and firm transactional managers as circumstances require. This flexible blend is the hallmark of adaptive leadership. It validates theories that advocate for contingency-based leadership approaches – the idea that effective leaders diagnose the demands of their environment and respond accordingly rather than stick to one paradigm. Our discussion thus reinforces a practical message for educational leadership: developing the capacity to switch lenses and strategies can greatly enhance a leader's effectiveness in challenging school contexts.

Conclusions

This study highlights the crucial importance of adaptive leadership in managing schools in rural and resource-constrained environments. Through qualitative exploration, we found that transformational, situational, and servant leadership styles were the most effective in fostering collaboration, adaptability, and teacher retention, respectively, in the participating schools. By adopting these complementary leadership strategies, school leaders can enhance educational outcomes, improve teacher satisfaction, and ensure continuity of learning even during crises. The conclusions drawn from this research support and validate established leadership theories in the context of rural education. For instance, the success of transformational leadership observed in our cases confirms its theoretical benefits for team building and innovation in schools (Bass, 1990; Leithwood & Sun, 2020). Similarly, the efficacy of servant leadership in improving teacher retention provides empirical backing to the claims of servant leadership theory that focusing on employees' well-being leads to positive organizational outcomes (Greenleaf, 1977; Johnston, 2021). In essence, our findings demonstrate that these leadership theories are not just abstract concepts but practical tools that can yield measurable improvements in educational settings.

At the same time, the study underscores that effective school leadership is context dependent. Rural schools present a distinct set of challenges – from multi-grade teaching to community isolation – that require leaders to be especially flexible. The participating principals and department heads intuitively mixed leadership approaches: they inspired and empowered their staff, stepped up decisively during emergencies, nurtured their teachers' growth, and maintained necessary discipline. This adaptability embodies the very definition of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994), suggesting that training and professional development for school leaders should likewise encourage a repertoire of skills rather than a one-size-fits-all style.

The implications of these conclusions are both local and global. Locally, for the Philippines and similar developing contexts, strengthening leadership capacity in the ways

identified could directly address problems like high teacher turnover, suboptimal student performance, and vulnerability to disruptions. Globally, the study provides evidence that resonates with educational leadership in other parts of the world: whether in a rural village in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, empowering teachers, being ready for crises, and ensuring a well-run organization are universally relevant leadership goals.

Limitations: It is important to note the limitations of this study. First, the sample size was relatively small (10 school leaders) and geographically limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The experiences and effectiveness of leadership styles could vary in other regions or cultural contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported data (interviews) and observations within a certain period; as such, there may be observer bias or participants presenting their practices in a favorable light. We mitigated this through triangulation and member checking, but some bias cannot be entirely eliminated in qualitative research. Third, we did not disaggregate findings by characteristics such as the leader's gender, age, or specific community context – factors which could potentially influence leadership style and effectiveness. Additionally, the study was not longitudinal, so we could not track long-term outcomes of certain leadership interventions (e.g., whether improvements in teacher retention persisted over many years). These limitations suggest caution in overgeneralizing the results and indicate areas where further research is warranted.

Future Research: Building on this study, future research should explore the long-term impacts of adaptive leadership styles on school performance, student achievement, and teacher professional development, particularly as schools move into post-crisis recovery periods. Longitudinal studies could examine how sustained use of transformational or servant leadership affects metrics like student learning outcomes over several years. Moreover, future studies might incorporate a comparative element: for example, comparing rural vs. urban school leadership effectiveness, or the Philippines vs. other ASEAN countries, to better understand contextual differences. Importantly, future research should also consider diverse theoretical lenses such as *intersectionality* in examining educational leadership. Investigating how leadership practices account for or impact differences in gender, socioeconomic background, or other identity factors among teachers would provide a more nuanced understanding of inclusive leadership. Integrating frameworks from queer theory or critical social theories could help researchers and practitioners design leadership development programs that not only adapt to situational challenges but also promote equity and inclusion within the school community. By addressing these areas, subsequent research can build a more comprehensive picture of what effective and just school leadership looks like in the 21st century.

In conclusion, the present study provides empirical support for the idea that adaptive, multi-faceted leadership is key to overcoming the unique challenges faced by rural schools. School leaders who can transform their teams, serve their teachers, manage crises, and enforce essential structures create an environment where both teachers and students can thrive. These findings affirm existing leadership models while contributing new insights from the field, and they highlight actionable pathways for educational improvement. As educational systems worldwide strive to provide quality education for all, investing in and cultivating adaptive leadership at the school level emerges as a strategic priority that can have far-reaching benefits.

Acknowledgment

Disclosure: Use of AI Tools

In compliance with *The Threshold*'s guidelines for the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in academic research, the authors disclose the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT in the preparation of this manuscript. ChatGPT was utilized as an editorial assistant to help refine the language, improve clarity, and ensure coherence in the writing. The AI tool was employed strictly for copyediting and formatting suggestions; it did not contribute to the design of the study, data analysis, or the generation of scientific insights. All data interpretation, thematic analysis, and conclusions were conducted and determined solely by the human authors. The content crafted by the AI was carefully reviewed and verified by the authors to align with the study's findings and academic standards. The authors confirm that the use of AI did not bias the reporting of results or compromise the integrity of the research. This transparent acknowledgement is provided to maintain honesty about the manuscript development process, in line with *The Threshold*'s ethical standards for AI involvement in research writing. The authors remain fully responsible for the intellectual content of this paper and affirm that the work meets the journal's rigorous academic and ethical requirements.

References

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), 27–40. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. Sage Publications. Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge.

Cahapay, M. B. (2022). The phenomenon of leading without guidebook: Educational leadership practices of Philippine school principals in virulent COVID-19 times. International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management, 10(1), 2–26.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Fullan, M. (2020). Crisis leadership in education: Lessons from COVID-19. Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 5(3/4), 287–290. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0045

Heifetz, R. A. (1994). Leadership Without Easy Answers. Harvard University Press. Johnston, S. M. (2021). The Great Resignation in Teaching: Servant leadership impact on teacher retention, job satisfaction, and principal efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Doctoral dissertation, Southeastern University). ProQuest

Dissertations Publishing.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Leithwood, K., & Sun, J. (2020). Transformational school leadership for large-scale reform: Effects on students, teachers, and their classroom practices. School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 17(2), 201–227.

Mohammad, R. S., & Mejica, D. L. (2021). The role of rural school leaders in building school–community partnership. The Rizalian Researcher, 8(1), [Philippine e-journal].

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Thoreson, R. (2017, July 19). The Philippines affirmed equal rights in schools – now it should protect them. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/19/philippines-affirmed-equal-rights-schools-now-it-should-protect-them

UNESCO. (2021). Global education monitoring report 2021: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses? UNESCO Publishing. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379875

UNICEF. (2024). Evidence on women school leaders from Southeast Asia: Evidence from the SEA-PLM 2019 data. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.