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LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: BASIS FOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the leadership practices of school heads in implementing Special Education (SPED) programs in the Schools Division Office of Bataan, including the challenges they encounter and the relationships among selected variables. The researcher has utilized a quantitative descriptive-correlational design and gathered data from 101 respondents using a researcher-made questionnaire. Results showed that school heads demonstrate a very high level of leadership practices in innovation and learning, strategic relationships, technology integration, and career skills; thereby indicating strong management competencies of SPED programs. In addition, the respondents also exhibit positive attitudes toward leadership and continuous professional growth. However, serious challenges persist, particularly regarding unclear policies, insufficient funding, inadequacy of qualified SPED teachers, limited instructional materials, and a dearth of training opportunities. Despite these challenges, no significant differences in leadership practices were found across demographic variables. Furthermore, no significant relationship was identified between challenges and leadership practices, indicating resilience among school heads. The study recommends strengthening policies, increasing resources, and enhancing professional development to improve SPED implementation.

Keywords: *leadership practices, school heads, special education, SPED challenges, inclusive education*

INTRODUCTION

Education is a significant aspect for students and children who are to be the future of the world. Education does it all, from providing them with financial independence to developing their inner confidence. Howell (2022) noted that education provides us with the skills, techniques, information, and knowledge we need. Thus, it has a huge and complex impact on human lives.

Providing nondiscriminatory education to all citizens confirms that every child has the right to education that responds to their individual needs (UNESCO, 2020). Education is a right for everyone, including individuals with physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, or social disabilities. Learners with special needs deserve the same educational opportunities as their typically developing peers (Ainscow, 2020; Francisco et al., 2020). Hence, special education schools should be built with clear designs to help learners understand their needs and challenges.

Special education helps pupils with various learning challenges, impairments, or unique requirements by offering tailored support and tools. As noted by Angco et al. (2025), targeted supports and instructional strategies are essential for enabling students with special educational needs (SEN) to access the curriculum and participate meaningfully in school life. On the other hand, research by Gierczyk and Hornby (2021) revealed that teachers often lack adequate preparation and understanding of twice-exceptionality, which can limit their ability to identify and support these learners effectively. Students frequently report that their school experiences do not fully help them reach their potential because interventions tend to focus more on deficits than on strengths.

Ensuring the social and academic success of students with a variety of learning needs necessitates that special education become fully integrated within inclusive education systems. Leading this endeavor are school leaders, serving as chief instructional officers and making the most significant decisions related to creating inclusive schools. Beyond enforcing policies, they are responsible for allocating resources, guiding and supporting teachers, and building strong relationships with families and communities. Global research underscores that effective school leadership greatly influences the success and sustainability of special education programs (Feng et al., 2025). Furthermore, according to Thompson (n.d.), the head of the national special education school is an individual responsible for holding the trust and duty rather than the authority given. Consequently, the director or head of a focused educational body runs the institution under their control (Heli and Al, 2021). Still, even with core tasks defined, numerous principals face challenges that limit support for students in special education programs. Lack of resources, resistance to change within institutions, and the quick development of educational technologies can prevent them from being able to support students with disabilities. Research shows that levels of principal involvement may range from excelling in advocacy and oversight while disengaging, providing continuous staff development, and promoting partnerships between stakeholders. These differences may lead to variations in the quality of inclusive education in schools and communities.

In the Philippines, discussions about what students ought to learn - and why it's significant - remain uncommon, whether learners have impairments. Regarding this issue, DepEd introduced major guidelines promoting inclusion, such as the SPED initiative combined with SBM regulations, enabling principals to drive local reforms. Because of these actions, nationwide initiatives now aim to improve accessible education via targeted projects - using clear methods instead.

Even though there's active work to advance inclusive learning for pupils with special requirements, actual use still differs greatly among public primary schools (Muslimah & Darmayanti, 2024). In remote regions, this gap shows more clearly, such as low budgets, poor facilities, and missing skilled staff, which create serious challenges. School head's duties go beyond routine management; they must push initiatives, resolve issues, and at the same time drive improvements locally. On top of that, numerous leaders don't have proper preparation or tools to meet diverse student demands efficiently. Although much current work looks at policies, teachers' preparedness, or academic results, few explore what principals experience day to day. Studies rarely show how these leaders adjust routines to foster inclusion. Since they put policies into practice, their perspective holds weight. Their actual experiences reveal systemic flaws - while also pointing out fixes that statistics overlook. Addressing this gap supports more effective, community-based strategies for inclusive education. Moreover, the study conducted by Casaul et al. (2024) recommended a training program designed to improve principal leadership, which is essential to the effective implementation of special education.

Research Questions

The study aimed to determine the leadership practices of the school heads in response to educational programs in the Schools Division Office of Bataan.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the school head in terms of:
   1.1 age;
   1.2 sex;
   1.3 civil status;
   1.4 highest educational attainment;
   1.5 leadership and management training; and
   1.6 attitudes towards leading and managing?
2. What is the level of leadership practices of school heads on Special Education in terms of:
   2.1 innovation and learning;
   2.2 strategic relationships;
   2.3 advances in technology; and
   2.4 career skills?
3. How may the challenges encountered by school heads be described in terms of:
   3.1 policies and procedures;

3.2 implementation; and
3.3 professional development?

4. Is there any significant difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to their profile?
5. Is there any significant relationship between the challenges encountered and the leadership practices of the school heads?
6. Based on the findings, what development program can be proposed to strengthen the leadership practices of school heads in special education?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design to examine and describe the leadership practices and challenges of school heads in implementing special education in public schools within the Schools Division Office of Bataan, without establishing a cause-and-effect relationship. A purposive sampling technique was used among 101 public elementary and secondary school heads within the division; however, the specific names of the institutions were not disclosed.

The main instrument of this study was a researcher-made questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three parts. Part I dealt with the demographic profile of the school heads in terms of age, sex, civil status, highest educational attainment, leadership and management training, and attitudes towards leading and management. Part II focused on the level of leadership practices of school heads in Special Education (SPED), particularly in the areas of innovation and learning, strategic relationships, advances in technology, and career skills. Lastly, Part III focused on the challenges that school heads face in special education, including policies and procedures, implementation, and professional development.

Furthermore, to ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a rigorous validation process was followed: first, a thorough literature review was undertaken leading to the development of the instrument; second, the tool undergone expert validation by specialists to ensure strong content validity; third, it was subjected to pilot testing with a small group of participants to confirm their clarity, relevance, and effectiveness; and finally, refined through revision and finalization based on the pilot results and expert feedback. By employing this triangulation of data collection methods and stringent validation steps, the study aims to ensure comprehensive reliability and validity of the data, leading to a thorough understanding of the leadership styles and challenges of school heads in Special Education in the Division of Bataan.

Data analysis in this study utilized both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the collected data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, were used to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents, providing a clear overview of their distribution in terms of age, sex, civil status, educational attainment, and training experiences. While the weighted mean was used to indicate or measure the scope of leadership practices and challenges

experienced, enabling interpretation based on standard/level scales established by the researcher. Inferential statistical tests were used to assess relationships and differences between variables. These tests helped determine whether observed variations in leadership practices were statistically significant when grouped according to selected profile variables, as well as whether a significant relationship existed between leadership practices and the challenges encountered. All statistical computations were performed using SPSS, to ensure accuracy, efficiency, and reliability in data processing and analysis.

This study was limited to public elementary and secondary school heads solely from the Division of Bataan. This delimitation was established to ensure the research context remains focused and consistent, specifically on how SPED programs are implemented in public education. Thus, the results may not be directly generalizable to private educational institutions under different administrative structures, resource allocations, and policy frameworks.

RESULTS

Table 1. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of age

Age	Frequency	Percent
35-44 years old	56	55.45
45-54 years old	34	33.66
55 years and above	11	10.89
Total	101	100

Table 1 displays the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age. It is presented in the distribution of the respondents according to specific age brackets, including their corresponding frequencies and percentages. This table provides an overview of the age composition of the school heads who assessed the leadership practices in the implementation of Special Education (SPED) in the Schools Division of Bataan.

It can be gleaned from Table 1 that 56 of the respondents were aged 35–44 years, representing 55.45 percent. The next-largest group, at 33.66 percent, was school heads aged 45–54 years, indicating a predominance of more seasoned administrators. It is a little over 10.89 percent who were at least 55 years old, so fewer school heads are near retirement age. This distribution indicates a leadership workforce that is still relatively young and dynamic. It implies that schools are led by people who are flexible and innovative. Additionally, a smaller percentage of older leaders suggests succession planning continues in the sector. The dominance of middle-aged leaders could contribute to a balance between experience and energy.

The study conducted by Ciocon (2023), revealed that while several professional characteristics of school heads in relation to the implementation of the Special Education (SPED) program, such as educational attainment, plantilla position, length of service as a school head, and length of service in a school with a SPED program—which were found to positively influence SPED implementation—age of the school leaders was not reported as a significant factor influencing implementation outcomes in the published findings. The research concluded that instructional leadership, rather than demographic variables like age, drives higher levels of SPED program implementation, although specific professional attributes related to experience and role tenure did show positive relationships with effective implementation. In contrast, Berhanu (2025) found that the age of school leaders significantly influenced teachers' perceptions of principals' pedagogical leadership practices, indicating that older leaders were perceived differently in how they enact pedagogical leadership compared with younger counterparts, although this effect on leadership was small in magnitude. Specifically, age was a significant predictor of principals' pedagogical leadership practices in multivariate analysis, while it did not have a significant direct effect on teachers' job performance itself; this suggests that age may shape leadership behavior or its perception.

Overall, the age profile reflects a stable yet progressive leadership demographic.

Table 2. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of sex

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Female	83	82.18
Male	18	17.82
Total	101	100

Table 2 shows the profile of the respondents in terms of sex. As shown, female school heads dominate, accounting for 82.18 percent of the respondents. In contrast, only 17.82 percent are male, showing a significant gender imbalance. This suggests that leadership roles are mostly held by women. It may reflect broader trends in the teaching profession, where females are more represented. The high percentage of female leaders could also indicate strong opportunities for women in educational leadership. This imbalance may influence leadership styles, possibly leaning toward collaborative and inclusive approaches often associated with female leadership. However, it also highlights the need for gender diversity in leadership positions. The presence of male school heads contributes to perspectives. This distribution may also reflect hiring and promotion trends within the education sector. Overall, the findings emphasize the prominent role of women in school leadership.

Table 3. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of civil status

Civil Status	Frequency	Percent
Married	90	89.11

Separated	2	1.98
Single	7	6.93
Widowed	2	1.98
Total	101	100

Table 3 shows the profile of the school heads in terms of civil status. The data revealed that most school heads are married (89.11 percent), suggesting that they have family responsibilities in addition to their professional roles. Only a tiny fraction is single (6.93 percent), and even fewer are separated or widowed (1.98 percent each). This indicates that the majority of the respondents are individuals with established personal lives. This could be due to the societal standards of how people should maintain leadership positions. It may also reflect societal expectations or norms regarding leadership roles. The low percentage of single individuals suggests that leadership positions may be attained mainly later in life. The minimal representation of separated and widowed individuals indicates limited diversity in this aspect. The data imply that most school heads may have strong support systems at home. This could positively impact their work performance and resilience. Thus, the civil status profile reflects a mature and stable leadership group.

Table 4. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of the highest educational attainment

Highest Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percent
Doctorate Degree (Completed)	9	8.91
Doctorate Degree (Units)	8	7.92
Master's Degree (Completed)	13	12.87
Master's Degree (Units)	71	70.30
Total	101	100

Table 4 shows the profile of the respondents in terms of their highest educational attainment. It can be gleaned that seventy-one (71) of the school heads, with 70.30 percent, have master's degree units, indicating ongoing graduate education. Only 12.87 percent have completed their master's degree, while a smaller portion have doctoral qualifications. Specifically, 8.91 per cent have completed a doctorate, and 7.92 per cent have doctoral units. This suggests that while many are pursuing higher education, fewer have completed advanced degrees. The trend reflects a strong commitment to professional growth. However, it also highlights a gap in the completion of postgraduate programs. The relatively low number of doctoral degree holders may indicate barriers such as time, cost, or workload. Continuous education is essential for effective leadership, especially in specialized fields like SPED. The data show that most school heads are academically engaged but still developing. This may impact their expertise in research

and advanced leadership strategies. The findings emphasize the importance of supporting school heads in completing higher degrees.

In Paredes et.al. (2025), the essence of educational attainment is implied through the school leaders' reflections on how formal education, continuous professional growth, and depth of knowledge enable them to more effectively understand and support teachers handling learners with special needs; having higher educational qualifications equips leaders with the theoretical foundations and practical insights necessary to formulate empathetic, evidence informed strategies, foster comprehensive support systems, and guide inclusive educational practices that address both instructional and contextual challenges in diverse classrooms.

Table 5. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of leadership and management training

Leadership and Management Training (within the last 5 years)	Frequency	Percent
1-2 trainings	44	43.56
3-5 trainings	27	26.73
More than 5 trainings	30	29.70
Total	101	100

Table 5 displays the profile of the respondents in terms of leadership and management training. As shown, there are forty-four (44) respondents who attended 1–2 trainings in the past five years. Meanwhile, 26.73 per cent attended 3–5 trainings, and 29.70 percent attended more than 5 trainings. This indicates varying levels of professional development engagement. A significant portion has limited exposure to training, which may affect leadership effectiveness. However, nearly 30 per cent attending more than five trainings suggests a group highly committed to continuous learning. The variation may be due to access, funding, or availability of programs. Regular training is crucial for adapting to new educational demands. Supporting study by Lagasca (2024) revealed that leadership and management training encapsulates structured opportunities and formal learning experiences that equip school administrators with the practical skills, strategic insights, and competencies necessary to respond effectively to evolving trends in special education; such training enhances administrators' abilities to innovate, make informed decisions, collaborate with stakeholders, and lead improvement efforts, ultimately strengthening their leadership practices and professional growth so they can better support inclusive programs and diverse learner needs.

The data suggests a need to increase training opportunities for all school heads. More consistent training participation could improve leadership practices. It also highlights differences in professional development access.

Table 6. The demographic profile of the school head in terms of attitudes towards leading and managing

Attitudes Towards Leading and Managing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
I am confident in my ability to lead Special Education programs effectively.	3.18	0.55	Agree
I believe leadership plays a crucial role in improving inclusive education.	3.76	0.45	Strongly Agree
I am open to change and innovation in school management.	3.72	0.45	Strongly Agree
I actively seek feedback to improve my leadership performance.	3.66	0.47	Strongly Agree
I feel motivated to continuously develop my leadership skills.	3.96	2.96	Strongly Agree
General Mean and SD	3.66	0.98	Strongly Agree

Table 6 shows the profile of the school heads in terms of attitudes towards leading and managing. The data revealed that school heads generally show a very positive attitude toward leadership, with a general mean of 3.66. Also, the respondents claimed that they feel motivated to continuously develop their leadership skills, as indicated by the highest mean of 3.96. This strongly believes that leadership is crucial in improving special education. However, the confidence in leading SPED programs is slightly lower as viewed by the respondents as Agree. but still positive. This suggests that while they feel capable, there may still be room for improvement. The strong agreement across indicators highlights a proactive leadership orientation. Positive attitudes are essential for effective school management.

Table 7. The level of leadership practices of school heads in Special Education in terms of innovation and learning

Innovation and Learning	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Promotes innovative teaching strategies in Special Education.	3.50	0.58	Very High Extent
Supports continuous learning among SPED teachers.	3.53	0.58	Very High Extent

Encourages experimentation with new instructional approaches.	3.50	0.58	Very High Extent
Allocates resources for research and innovation in SPED.	3.51	0.59	Very High Extent
Facilitates professional learning communities in SPED.	3.53	0.59	Very High Extent
General Mean and SD	3.52	0.58	Very High Extent

Table 7 displays the level of leadership practices of school heads in SPED in terms of innovation and learning.

As shown, there is a great extent of leadership practices in innovation and learning, with a mean of 3.52. School heads actively promote innovative teaching strategies in SPED. They support continuous learning among teachers, which is essential for professional growth. Moreover, encouraging experimentation suggests openness to new methods. Resource allocation for research indicates support for development initiatives and facilitates professional learning communities, strengthening collaboration. The consistency of high ratings reflects strong leadership in this area. It shows that school heads value innovation as a key component of education. This can lead to improved teaching practices and student outcomes.

Stavrou and Kafa (2023) describe how various leadership styles (vision, innovation, stakeholder engagement) influence teachers' and schools' ability to innovate instructional practices and improve learning outcomes in inclusive SPED contexts. Additionally, Villaver et.al. (2024) pointed out that leadership is both an agent of innovation and a driver of an inclusive learning system.

Table 8. The level of leadership practices of school heads in Special Education in terms of strategic relationships

STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Builds strong partnerships with parents of learners with special needs.	3.73	0.47	Very High Extent
Collaborates with external agencies supporting Special Education.	3.61	0.55	Very High Extent
Promotes teamwork among SPED and general education teachers' instructional approaches.	3.95	2.97	Very High Extent

Involves stakeholders in decision-making processes.	3.65	0.52	Very High Extent
Maintains effective communication with the school community.	3.71	0.50	Very High Extent
General Mean and SD	3.73	1.00	Very High Extent

Table 8 shows the level of leadership practices of school heads in SPED in terms of strategic relationships.

As shown, the item “promotes teamwork among SPED and general education teachers’ instructional approaches” obtained the highest weighted mean of 3.95, which means “very high extent”. This was followed by the item “builds strong partnerships with parents of learners with special needs” with a weighted mean of 3.73, which implies “very high extent”. The lowest weighted mean of 3.61, which means “very high extent", was obtained by the item “collaborates with external agencies supporting Special Education”.

Strong relationships contribute to better program implementation. The high ratings reflect consistent engagement with stakeholders. This indicates that school heads recognize the importance of collaboration.

Table 9. The level of leadership practices of school heads in Special Education in terms of advances in technology

ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Promotes the use of assistive technologies in SPED.	3.85	2.99	Very High Extent
Provides training on digital tools for SPED teachers.	3.50	0.63	Very High Extent
Integrates technology in school management processes.	3.56	0.59	Very High Extent
Ensures access to appropriate technological resources.	3.56	0.61	Very High Extent
Supports digital innovation in Special Education programs.	3.52	0.63	Very High Extent
General Mean and SD	3.60	1.09	Very High Extent

Table 9 displays the level of leadership practices of school heads in SPED in terms of advances in technology.

It can be gleaned that a 'very high extent' of technology integration with a general weighted mean of 3.60. As cited by Campado et al. (2023), the development and integration of various forms of assistive technology into the teaching and learning process for learners with special educational needs and disabilities is important to reinforce learning, enhance student engagement and motivation, and support instructional practices, even as their use remains limited by availability, teacher preparedness, and resource constraints in Philippine SPED contexts. Furthermore, technology plays a crucial role in Special Education (SPED). The high ratings suggest strong leadership in this area.

Table 10. The level of leadership practices of school heads in Special Education in terms of career skills

CAREER SKILLS	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Demonstrates effective decision-making skills.	3.66	0.53	Very High Extent
Practices conflict resolution effectively.	3.60	0.55	Very High Extent
Manages time and resources efficiently.	3.66	0.57	Very High Extent
Mentors and coaches SPED teachers.	3.58	0.64	Very High Extent
Exhibits ethical and professional leadership behaviour.	3.63	0.58	Very High Extent
General Mean and SD	3.63	0.57	Very High Extent

Table 10 shows the level of leadership practices of school heads in SPED in terms of career skills.

Data revealed that the respondents exhibit very high career skills with a general mean of 3.63. This means that respondents demonstrate strong decision-making abilities, conflict resolution skills, and efficient management of time and resources. These findings support the study conducted by Villaver et al. (2024), emphasizing that leaders should cultivate collaboration, communication, and strategic visioning — all career skills that help special education professionals navigate complex roles and advance in their field.

Table 11. The challenges encountered by school heads can be described in terms of policies and procedures

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Insufficiently explicit and current special education-specific policies.	3.58	0.60	Serious Challenge
Frequent changes in policies affecting SPED program stability.	3.59	0.59	Serious Challenge
Inconsistent interpretation of inclusive education guidelines.	3.91	4.08	Serious Challenge
Delays in approval of SPED-related requests and procedures.	3.52	0.67	Serious Challenge
Limited policy support for inclusive education initiatives.	3.58	0.67	Serious Challenge
General Mean and SD	3.64	1.32	Serious Challenge

Table 11 displays the challenges encountered by the school head in terms of policies and procedures.

It can be gleaned that school heads face serious challenges in policies and procedures, with a general mean of 3.64. The highest mean of 3.91 posed a serious challenge in the implementation of Special Education (SPED) due to an inconsistent interpretation of guidelines. Policies are often insufficiently explicit and outdated. Frequent changes create instability in SPED programs. Delays in approval processes hinder implementation. Limited policy support affects inclusive initiatives. These issues create barriers to effective leadership. The high mean indicates that these challenges are widespread. Variability suggests differing experiences among respondents. Addressing policy issues is critical for improvement. Overall, policy-related challenges significantly impact SPED leadership.

Table 12. The challenges encountered by school heads be described in terms of implementation

IMPLEMENTATION	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Insufficient budget allocation for SPED programs.	3.67	0.62	Serious Challenge
Shortage of qualified Special Education teachers.	3.74	0.54	Serious Challenge

Limited availability of instructional and assistive materials.	4.11	4.05	Serious Challenge
Resistance from staff toward inclusive practices.	3.60	0.55	Serious Challenge
Difficulty monitoring and evaluating SPED program effectiveness.	3.56	0.67	Serious Challenge
General Mean and SD	3.74	1.29	Serious Challenge

Table 12 shows the challenges encountered by school heads in terms of implementation.

As shown, data revealed that implementation issues are also rated as serious challenges (mean = 3.74). Insufficient budget allocation is a major concern. There is a shortage of qualified SPED teachers. Instructional and assistive materials are limited. Resistance from staff affects inclusive practices. Monitoring and evaluation of programs are difficult. These challenges hinder effective program delivery. The high ratings indicate that these issues are common. Resource constraints are a major barrier. Addressing these problems is essential for program success. These findings were supported by Espeño et al. (2024), revealing reasons why implementation served as a challenge in the Special Education (SPED) curriculum in the Philippines. It centers on a combination of systemic and contextual barriers: despite existing legislative support, schools face inadequate funding and resources, insufficient specialized teacher training, rigid and inflexible curriculum structures, policy–practice gaps that lead to inconsistent enactment across regions, and pervasive social stigma and infrastructural limitations, all of which hinder educators' ability to deliver quality, inclusive instruction and fully meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. Overall, implementation challenges were significant and need urgent attention.

Table 13. The challenges encountered by school heads can be described in terms of professional development

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Limited access to specialized SPED training programs.	3.58	0.62	Serious Challenge
Insufficient funding for professional development activities.	3.61	0.60	Serious Challenge
Absence of ongoing leadership development for school heads.	3.46	0.64	Serious Challenge

Limited mentoring or coaching support in SPED management.	3.62	0.60	Serious Challenge
Few opportunities to attend conferences or workshops on special education.	3.61	0.63	Serious Challenge
General Mean and SD	3.58	0.62	Serious Challenge

Table 13 shows the challenges encountered by school heads in terms of professional development.

As shown, school heads also face serious challenges in professional development. Access to specialized SPED training is limited. Funding for development activities is insufficient. Ongoing leadership development is lacking. Mentoring and coaching support are also limited. These issues affect the growth of school leaders. Continuous development is crucial for effective leadership. The high ratings indicate widespread concern. Limited opportunities may hinder innovation and improvement. Strengthening professional development programs is necessary

The study conducted by Walker et. al (2025), revealed that professional development served as a challenge because special education leadership requires a highly specialized set of competencies—such as navigating complex legal requirements, coordinating diverse support services, and fostering inclusive school cultures—that often extend beyond general administrative training, meaning many leaders feel underprepared without targeted, specialized development opportunities; this gap between existing skills and the demanding realities of inclusive program management highlights how insufficient access to focused professional growth can impede leaders' confidence and effectiveness in implementing high quality special education practices

Table 14. The difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to age

Age		Innovation and Learning	STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	CAREER SKILLS	Decision	Remarks
35-44 years	H	3.041	0.818	0.442	3.223	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.081	0.366	0.506	0.073		
	H	0.421	2.640	0.442	1.106		

45-54 years	p-value	0.516	0.104	0.506	0.293	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
55 years and above	H	4.036	3.750	5.183	1.340	Significant to Innovation and Learning, and ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	Ho is rejected
	p-value	0.045	0.053	0.023	0.247		

Grouping Variable: Age

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 14 shows the difference between the level of leadership practices of school heads when categorized by age in four areas, including innovation and learning, strategic relationships, advances in technology, and career skills. The results indicate different degrees of statistical significance between the different age groups.

In the case of school heads aged 35-44 years, the derived H-values of innovation and learning (H = 3.041, p = 0.081), strategic relationships (H = 0.818, p = 0.366), advances in technology (H = 0.442, p = 0.506), and career skills (H = 3.2 Similarly, for those aged 45–54 years, the results show no significant differences in innovation and learning (H = 0.421, p = 0.516), strategic relationships (H = 2.640, p = 0.104), advances in technology (H = 0.442, p = 0.506), and career skills (H = 1.106, p = 0.293). These results imply that the leadership practices between school heads across these age groups are fairly similar, and that age in the mid-career period has no significant impact on leadership practices of school heads in the special education context. Conversely, school heads aged 55 years and more have vast differences in certain areas. The outcomes demonstrate that innovation and learning (H = 4.036, p = 0.045) and technological improvements (H = 5.183, p = 0.023) have statistically significant values (at the 0.05 level) and, as a result, the null hypothesis is rejected in these indicators. However, strategic relationships (H = 3.750, p = 0.053) and career skills (H = 1.340, p = 0.247) remain not significant. This means that the school heads in the older age bracket exhibit some sharp differences in their commitment to innovation and technology-based practices in relation to other age groups. The high variations between the school heads of 55 years and above can be explained by the fact that there is a generation gap, experience and professional responsiveness to the changing needs of education especially in the use of technology and innovativeness in special education institutions. Their vast experience can increase the strategic and relational leadership capabilities; however, the disparities in their exposure to technological changes and ongoing opportunities of professional development might affect their practices of innovation and technology integration.

On the whole, the results suggest that age is not a determinant factor in a majority of leadership practices, but it is a prominent variable in particular areas, including innovation and technological progress with regard to older school heads. This shows the necessity of special professional development initiatives specializing in digital leadership and

innovative practices, especially for senior school leaders, to be responsive to the dynamic demands of special education. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of the continuous professional development programs that suit particular age groups, especially regarding the integration of technologies and innovative pedagogies, as a means of maintaining equity and effectiveness in the leadership of all age groups (Tahir et al., 2021).

Table 15. The difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to sex

Sex		Innovation and Learning	STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	CAREER SKILLS	Decision	Remarks
Female	U	542.500	470.500	542.000	526.000	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.829	0.274	0.820	0.679		
Male	U	4.500	4.500	3.500	4.000	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.424	0.417	0.300	0.353		

Grouping Variable: Sex
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The results show the disparity between the degree of leadership practices of school heads when grouped on the basis of sex in four areas namely, innovation and learning, strategic relationships, advances in technology, and career skills. The findings remain constant in that no statistically significant differences are shown between the male and female school heads in all the domains of measurement of leadership.

For female school heads, the computed U-values for innovation and learning (U = 542.500, p = 0.829), strategic relationships (U = 470.500, p = 0.274), advances in technology (U = 542.000, p = 0.820), and career skills (U = 526.000, p = 0.679) all yielded p-values greater than the 0.05 level of significance. On the same note, the results indicate that there are non-significant differences in innovation and learning (U = 4.500, p = 0.424), strategic relationships (U = 4.500, p = 0.417), advances in technology (U = 3.500, p = 0.300), career skills (U = 4.000, p As such, the null hypothesis is not rejected meaning that sex does not have a significant effect on the leadership practices of school heads. These results indicate that male and female school heads are equally effective in enacting leadership practices in special education. Lack of notable differences means that gender does not dictate leadership skill areas like innovation, creating strategic relationships, technological integration, and career-related skills, but rather professional training, experience, and leadership ability. Also, this finding reinforces the idea that the sphere of education, and special education in particular is becoming more and more inclusive and equitable, with both male and female leaders having equal abilities to do their job well. It also indicates that the expectations of the organization, professional standards, and

leadership development opportunities are probably implemented in a similar manner irrespective of sex hence reducing the gender-based differences in leadership practices.

Generally, the results indicate that sex is not a major determinant in leadership practices of school heads. This highlights the need to emphasize competency-based development and ongoing professional development over gender differences in enhancing leadership outcomes in special education. This is in accordance with findings that certain particular leadership abilities may exhibit gender discrepancies, but the general leadership success and expertise in technology do not differ considerably between men and women educational leaders (Almutairi and Rizk, 2023; Letuma et al., 2023).

Table 16. The difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to civil status

Civil Status		Innovation and Learning	STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	CAREER SKILLS	Decision	Remarks
Married	H	1.263	0.227	3.429	3.322	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.738	0.973	0.330	0.345		
Separated	H	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.317	1.000	0.317	1.000		

Grouping Variable: Civil Status
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05

Table 16 shows the variation in the degree of the leadership practices of school heads grouped in terms of civil status, in terms of the areas of innovation and learning, strategic relationships, technological advances and career skills. According to the results, no statistically significant differences are found in the leadership practices in the case of respondents which are divided by their civil status.

For married school heads, the computed H-values for innovation and learning (H = 1.263, p = 0.738), strategic relationships (H = 0.227, p = 0.973), advances in technology (H = 3.429, p = 0.330), and career skills (H = 3.322, p = 0.345) all yielded p-values greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Similarly, for separated school heads, the results also show no significant differences in innovation and learning (H = 1.000, p = 0.317), strategic relationships (H = 0.000, p = 1.000), advances in technology (H = 1.000, p = 0.317), and career skills (H = 0.000, p = 1.000). The null hypothesis is not rejected in any of the cases and it has been proved that civil status does not have a significant effect on leadership practices of school heads. This evidence indicates that the personal marital state of

school heads does not influence their leadership effectiveness in special education. School leaders, whether they are married or separated, exhibit comparable competences in terms of nurturing innovation, strategic relationships, technological advancements, and skill development in career-related aspects. This means that professional duties and leadership functions are executed without taking into consideration individual life situations. Furthermore, the lack of substantial variations can suggest that school heads can preserve the objectivity of their professions and devotion to their jobs despite the differences in their civil status. It also captures the fact that institutional frameworks, leadership expectations and professional development opportunities offer an unwavering platform in which leadership performance is consistent amongst leaders despite their individual backgrounds.

In general, the findings highlight the fact that the civil status does not play the key role in the leadership practice of school heads in special education. This reiterates the need to emphasize leadership competencies, training and experience as opposed to demographic factors in improving leadership effectiveness and organizational performance. This result is consistent with the results of prior studies that show no significant difference in management, leadership, and professionalism by civil status (Albaqawi et al., 2023), which also confirms the insignificance of marital status to leadership efficacy.

Table 17. The difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to their highest educational attainment

Highest Educational Attainment		Innovation and Learning	STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	CAREER SKILLS	Decision	Remarks
Doctorate Degree (Complete)	H	0.170	1.636	3.500	0.286	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.680	0.201	0.061	0.593		
Doctorate Degree (Units)	H	1.115	1.400	1.757	1.896	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.573	0.497	0.415	0.388		
Master's Degree (Completr)	H	3.909	4.989	6.952	0.550	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.272	0.173	0.073	0.908		

Master's Degree (Units)	H	0.274	1.128	1.244	0.359	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.965	0.770	0.742	0.949		

Grouping Variable: Highest Educational Attainment

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05

The data shows the difference in the level of leadership practices by school heads when categorized by the highest level of education in four areas: innovation and learning, strategic relationships, advances in technology, and career skills. The results indicate that school heads do not have statistically significant differences in their leadership practices in relation to their level of educational attainment.

In the case of school heads who have a doctorate degree, the calculated p-values of innovation and learning (H = 0.170, p = 0.680), strategic relationships (H = 1.636, p = 0.201), advances in technology (H = 3.500, p = 0.061), and career skills (H = 0.286 Similarly, those with doctorate units also showed no significant differences across innovation and learning (H = 1.115, p = 0.573), strategic relationships (H = 1.400, p = 0.497), advances in technology (H = 1.757, p = 0.415), and career skills (H = 1.896, p = 0.388). Similarly, school leaders who had a master degree earned showed no significant difference in innovation and learning (H = 3.909, p = 0.272), strategic relationships (H = 4.989, p = 0.173), technology advances (H = 6.952, p = 0.073) and career skills (H = 0.550, p = Similarly, the master degree unit bearers had non-significant outcomes in all domains, such as innovation and learning (H = 0.274, p = 0.965), strategic relationships (H = 1.128, p = 0.770), advances in technology (H = 1.244, p = 0.742), and career skills (H = 0. All of the indicators do not reject the null hypothesis as all of their p-values are greater than the 0.05 level of significance. These findings are pointing to is that the level of formal educational attainment is not a major determinant of the leadership practices of school heads in the area of special education. Whether school heads possess a doctorate degree or are pursuing their doctoral degree or are attaining their master qualification, the leadership practice of promoting innovation, developing strategic relationships, using technology, and developing career skills is similar. This could mean that even though increased educational levels lead to the theoretical knowledge and academic training, it does not automatically reflect in terms of substantial differences in practical leadership behaviours. Special education Leadership in special education settings could be more effectively determined by the experience in the profession, ongoing training, situational needs, and personal leadership skills. Moreover, the findings also emphasize the fact that special education leadership is a practical field in which practical skills, flexibility, and responsiveness to the needs of learners are more important than academic qualifications. It further indicates that professional development programs, mentoring, and leadership exposure can be even more crucial in the development of leadership practices than the degree of academic degree achieved.

All in all, the results indicate that the highest educational attainment is not a strong factor in determining leadership practices of school heads. This reflects the significance of life-long learning, hands-on growth, and contextual leadership training in the effectiveness of leadership in special education. To some degree, this view is substantiated by research that even though the educational attainment might not be universal in affecting all leadership practices, it can be a distinguishing factor in certain domains, including reflective inquiry and instructional leadership (Castaño & Litao, 2021; Rivera, 2023).

Table 18. The difference in the level of leadership practices of the school heads when they are grouped according to Leadership and Management Training

Leadership and Management Training (within the last 5 years)		Innovation and Learning	STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	CAREER SKILLS	Decision	Remarks
1-2 trainings	H	0.831	0.527	1.022	0.001	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.362	0.468	0.312	0.971		
3-5 trainings	H	0.077	0.056	1.949	0.090	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.782	0.813	0.163	0.764		
More than 5 trainings	H	0.333	0.627	0.112	0.029	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.564	0.429	0.737	0.865		

Grouping Variable: Leadership and Management Training

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05

Table 18 shows the difference in the level of leadership practices of school heads grouped by the number of leadership and management trainings taken in the past five years. The leadership practices are explored in four areas, namely, innovation and learning, strategic relationships, technological progress, and career skills. The findings indicate that leadership practices do not differ statistically in terms of the number of trainings attended.

For school heads who attended 1–2 trainings, the computed H-values for innovation and learning (H = 0.831, p = 0.362), strategic relationships (H = 0.527, p = 0.468), advances

in technology (H = 1.022, p = 0.312), and career skills (H = 0.001, p = 0.971) all yielded p-values greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Similarly, those who participated in 3–5 trainings also showed non-significant results across innovation and learning (H = 0.077, p = 0.782), strategic relationships (H = 0.056, p = 0.813), advances in technology (H = 1.949, p = 0.163), and career skills (H = 0.090, p = 0.764).

Similarly, school heads that underwent more than five trainings did not show any significant differences in terms of innovation and learning (H = 0.333, p = 0.564), strategic relationships (H = 0.627, p = 0.429), advances in technology (H = 0.112, p = 0.737), and career skills (H = 0 All p-values in all training categories are above the 0.05 level of significance, then the null hypothesis is not rejected in all indicators. These results indicate that the amount of leadership and management trainings received in the past five years does not have a significant impact on the leadership practices of school heads in special education.

Irrespective of the number of trainings school heads have participated in, their scores on their engagement in innovation, strategic cooperation, technological development, and career-related skills are similar. This may imply that merely increasing the quantity of trainings does not necessarily enhance leadership practices. Rather, the quality, relevance and applicability of training programs can be more important in affecting leadership effectiveness. Perhaps, the school heads trainings attended are not differentiated, or are not adequately related to the special education leadership needs, which limits their effects on the actual leadership practices. In addition, the findings underscore the significance of developing needs-based, context-specific and outcome-driven professional development initiatives. There is a need to focus on experiential learning, coaching, mentoring, and long-term professional involvement and not a single or frequency-based training attendance.

In general, the results show that leadership and management training, as a measure of frequency alone, does not play a major role in determining leadership practices among school heads. This highlights the importance of educational systems to pay attention to the efficacy and influence of professional development programs to guarantee significant enhancements in leadership practices in special education contexts. This view is consistent with studies that suggest that just attending the training sessions does not always result in better performance, and the usefulness of professional development is commonly dependent on its topicality, time, and possibilities of practical implementation (Manolong et al., 2024).

Table 19. The relationship between the challenges encountered and the leadership practices of the school heads

INDICATORS		POLICIES AND PROCEDURE	IMPLEMENTATION	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Decision	Remarks
Innovation and Learning	rho	0.162	0.140	0.082	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.106	0.162	0.415		
STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS	rho	0.076	-0.007	-0.025	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.452	0.947	0.800		
ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY	rho	0.179	0.130	0.086	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.073	0.197	0.393		
CAREER SKILLS	rho	0.064	0.053	-0.037	Not Significant	Fail to reject Ho
	p-value	0.527	0.597	0.714		

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05

The results show the relationship between the experienced challenges by school heads and their leadership practices in three dimensions of challenges, including policies and procedures, implementation, and professional development, and four domains of leadership practices, including innovation and learning, strategic relationships, advances in technology and career skills. The findings indicate that the challenges faced and the school head leadership practices do not have statistically significant relationships.

In particular, with respect to innovation and learning, the correlation coefficients show a weak positive association with policies and procedures (ρ = 0.162, p = 0.106) and implementation (ρ = 0.140, p = 0.162), and a very weak positive relationship with professional development (0.082, p = 0.415). Nevertheless, all the p-values exceed the 0.05 level of significance, which means that these associations are not statistically significant. Likewise, there are very weak correlations between strategic relationships and policies and procedures (ρ = 0.076, p = 0.452), implementation (ρ = -0.007, p = 0.947), and professional development (ρ = -0.025, p = 0.800), which are not significant. In terms of advances in technology, the results also demonstrate weak positive correlations with policies and procedures (ρ = 0.179, p = 0.073), implementation (ρ = 0.130, p = 0.197), and professional development (ρ = 0.086, p = 0.393). Even though the correlation with policies and procedures is approaching significance, it is still above the 0.05 level and is

thus not significant. Similarly, policies and procedures (ρ = 0.064, p = 0.527), implementation (0.053, p = 0.597) and weak negative relationship with professional development (= -0.037, p = 0.714) have very weak relationships with career skills, which are not statistically significant. In general, the results have shown that the issues that school heads face regarding policies and procedures, implementation and professional development do not play a major role in determining their leadership practices. The fact that the correlation coefficients are consistently weak indicates that although challenges exist, they do not significantly impede or promote the performance of school heads in their leadership functions in special education environments. Such findings can mean that school heads have a certain degree of resilience, flexibility, and professional competence that can help them to continue leadership practices even in the light of the challenges they have to deal with. It also indicates that intrinsic factors like leadership commitment, experience, and professional values are most likely to drive leadership practices in special education as opposed to external limitations. Moreover, the lack of important relationships underscores the fact that the support systems, institutional frameworks, and coping mechanisms in place are effective in counteracting the effects of challenges on leadership performance. This highlights the need to enhance organizational support, resource allocation and leadership development efforts to maintain quality leadership practices despite the challenges of the context.

Conclusively, the results underline that the issues facing school heads do not play a major role as predictors of their leadership. This finding indicates that external challenges can affect leadership efficacy through other factors, including internal leadership attributes or institutionalized coping strategies, especially in the narrow sector of special education administration (Gonzaga et al., 2024). This implies that, although educational leadership (especially special education) has inherent challenges, it does not always mean that the school heads are not able to execute their functions.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence gathered, it can be concluded that school heads exhibit a high level of leadership effectiveness in Special Education (SPED). Leadership practices across all domains are performed to a very high extent, reflecting strong competence in managing special education programs.

The findings indicate that demographic characteristics are not determining factors in the leadership practices of school heads. Regardless of differences in age, sex, civil status, highest educational attainment, or number of trainings attended, school heads tend to demonstrate comparable levels of leadership effectiveness. This suggests that leadership in the context of Special Education (SPED) is not inherently shaped by personal or background attributes, but instead by how individuals apply their knowledge and skills in real-world situations.

School heads possess positive attitudes toward leadership and continuous professional growth. Their strong motivation and openness to innovation contribute to effective leadership, although confidence in SPED-specific leadership may still be enhanced.

School heads encounter serious challenges in SPED implementation. Issues related to policies, resources, staffing, and professional development remain significant barriers to optimal program implementation.

Finally, challenges do not significantly affect leadership practices. Despite the presence of constraints, school heads maintain effective leadership, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in managing SPED programs.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were proposed.

1. Review and strengthen SPED policies and guidelines. The Department of Education and concerned authorities should ensure that policies are clear, updated, and consistently implemented.

2. Provide increased funding and adequate resources for SPED programs. Sufficient budget allocation, instructional materials, and assistive technologies should be prioritized to improve implementation.

3. Design and implement needs-based professional development programs. Training initiatives should emphasize quality, relevance, and practical application, including mentoring and coaching for school heads.

4. Enhance capacity-building in innovation and technology integration. Targeted training programs, especially for senior school heads, should be provided to strengthen digital leadership and innovation skills.

5. Promote continuous leadership development and support systems. Schools should institutionalize professional learning communities, peer collaboration, and leadership coaching to sustain leadership effectiveness.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of educational research to protect, respect, and promote the rights and dignity of human participants. Permission was obtained from the Schools Division Office of Bataan and school administrators before data collection. The participation of the school heads was absolutely voluntary, and informed consent to participate in the study was obtained after the necessary information about the purpose, procedures related to studying, right to withdraw at any moment without penalty was provided.

Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully maintained throughout the entire research process. The respondents were not identified, and the data collected was only for academic purposes. All responses are confidential and were collected in a secure environment to prevent any unauthorized breaches. The researcher must represent data

accurately without fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation to maintain the integrity and credibility of a study.

In addition, the study did not employ any harm, coercion, or bias. Participants were treated with respect, fairness, and transparency. The collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of data were carried out to maintain the ethical standards in place as practitioners when publishing research notes on Special Education.

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