



COLLABORATIVE AND CONTEXT- SENSITIVE CHANGE: CHALLENGES FACED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL HEADS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of public school heads in implementing Department of Education (DepEd) programs during Academic year 2025-2026. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables a deep understanding of the subjective realities and challenges faced by school administrators as they implement mandated educational initiatives within their institutions. In structuring the analysis, the study applied Fullan's Theory of Educational Change, which highlights the multifaceted nature of implementing change in educational environments. The Fullan framework emphasized complex interrelationships among individuals, organizations, and systems that underpinned success or challenge change processes. Using this theoretical framework, the study then explored how school heads negotiated the policy implementation process, cultivated productive resistance and collaborated to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Six public school heads served as the respondents of this study. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their personal experiences, insights, and struggles in translating DepEd directives into actual school practice. The study generated ten themes: Policy-Guided but Locally Interpreted; Grounding Program Goals in Feasibility and Inclusion; Limited Support and Self-Reliance; Conditional and Uneven Teacher Engagement; Structural Limitations; Technical Support and Uneven Partnerships; Structured Roles and Relational Leadership; Context-Responsive Program Adaptation; and Embedded in Daily School Life. The primary output of this research was an Action Plan designed to address the challenges identified by public school heads in implementing Department of Education programs.

Keywords: *School heads, DepEd programs, program implementation, challenges, phenomenology, lived experiences*

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership worldwide was facing mounting challenges as governments sought to reform and improve their education systems in response to globalization, technological advancement, and evolving social needs. Across nations, school leaders found themselves at the frontline of educational change, tasked with translating ambitious national policies into tangible classroom outcomes. As it was in the OECD report "Empowering School Leadership," Schleicher (2021) emphasized that effective school leadership had become even more critical in the post-pandemic era, as schools navigated unprecedented disruptions while implementing ongoing reforms.

The implementation of Department of Education (DepEd) programs such as sports, Adopt a School, and journalism was firmly grounded in Philippine laws and policies. The Adopt A School Act of 1998 (Republic Act No. 8525) provided the legal framework for the Adopt a School Program, encouraging private sector participation in upgrading and modernizing public schools through resource sharing and incentives. In terms of sports development, the Palarong Pambansa Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10588) institutionalized the Palarong Pambansa as the premier national sports competition and mandated DepEd to strengthen grassroots sports programs in schools. For campus journalism, the Campus Journalism Act of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7079) ensured the promotion of freedom of expression among students and supported the development of responsible campus journalism in both public and private schools. More broadly, the Education Act of 1982 (Batas Pambansa Blg. 232) served as the general foundation of the Philippine education system, granting DepEd authority to implement co curricular programs that enhanced student development.

However, school heads in small and medium public schools often had unique challenges in implementing these programs. Limited financial resources, inadequate facilities, and insufficient training opportunities hindered their ability to fully realize program objectives. For instance, sports programs required equipment, venues, and coaching support, which were often lacking in smaller schools. The Adopt-a-School Program demanded strong networking and partnership-building skills, yet many school heads struggled with limited community engagement and administrative support. Similarly, journalism programs required training, materials, and mentorship, but these were often unavailable or underfunded in resource constrained schools.

Recent studies highlighted that school heads frequently encountered policy misalignment, resource limitations, and leadership burdens when implementing DepEd programs (Po, 2025; Sumapal, 2025; Matilla, 2023). These challenges not only affected program delivery but also impacted student participation and outcomes. Understanding these difficulties were crucial to designing interventions that strengthened leadership capacity, improved resource allocation, and ensured equitable access to DepEd programs across all schools.

The study was necessary to go a step deeper into the lived experiences of school heads and the challenging realities they faced in small and medium-sized public schools. Although the Department of Education (DepEd) programs were intended to augment student learning and holistic development, in many cases, all this could be realized only through school leaders' ability to implement these under extreme constraints. The hope was that in recording the lived experiences of these school heads, evidence would be created that could lead to more nuanced, responsive policy and leadership development, as well as resourcing strategies. The ultimate goal of the research was to connect policymakers' intentions with actual practice, so that mandatory programs were implemented with greater effectiveness and equity across different types of schools.

Research Questions

The following were the semi-structured interview questions intended for the School Heads:

1. Can you describe how the purpose and expected outcomes of these DepEd programs were explained to you when they were introduced in your school? (Sports, Journalism, Adopt a school program).
2. How did you relate the goals of these DepEd programs to the realities and needs of your school during the early stages of implementation?
3. What training and support have you and your teachers received to build capacity for implementing these programs?
4. Based on your experience, how did teachers respond to the implementation of these programs, and what situations influenced their level of involvement?
5. What challenges related to resources, facilities, and partnerships hinder the implementation of these programs?
6. Based on your experience, how did teachers respond to the implementation of these programs?
7. How do you foster collaboration among teachers in planning and implementing these programs?
8. How do you adapt these programs to address the complexity and unique challenges of your small/medium school setting?
9. Can you describe moments when these programs became part of the regular practices of your school rather than temporary initiatives?
10. How has your leadership role evolved in response to implementing multiple DepEd programs simultaneously?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach. This study was conducted within the Schools Division of Calamba City, Laguna, focusing specifically on public elementary schools categorized as small or medium sized. Phenomenology was appropriate because it focused on understanding

the lived experiences of selected school heads at Division of Calamba City regarding the challenges they faced in implementing DepEd programs. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was used for data gathering as a qualitative method capturing the essence of lived experience of school heads. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate because the study sought to explore and understand the lived experiences of school heads in small and medium public schools as they implemented Department of Education (DepEd) programs such as sports, the Adopt a School Program, and journalism. Phenomenology was employed as it was concerned with describing what participants shared as they experienced a particular phenomenon, thereby revealing its essential structure (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study asserted that each school head's experience was shaped by their unique context, school size, available resources, community support, and personal leadership style. The qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological approach, following the framework outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2023). The aim was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of school heads in small and medium public schools as they implemented Department of Education (DepEd) program.

RESULTS

Table 1 Annotated Exemplars on the Descriptions of the Purpose and Expected Outcomes of DepEd programs.

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	"So yung mga Purpose and outcomes ng deped ini-introduce sa school through division memorandum, memoranda, and also yung mga programs, mga seminars and orientations. And while the goals were clearly stated the implementation were open general requiring us the school head to interpret and contextualize them based on the school's capacity and availability din ng resources, and learners profile"	School Head A appeared calm and with a smile in her face while explaining her answer.
School Head E	"Actually, ma'am ang natatandaan ko yung sa Adopt a school nagkaroon tayo ng parang reiteration na ika nga ay kung ano yung, yung assignment ng per adopt a school" "naalala ko yung sa stakeholder, para maging kabilang siya sa adopt a school program ng paaralan, yun lang naalala ko tapos sa sports at saka sa journalism"	School Head E spoke lively every time he talks about Adopt a school program, he spoke proudly in his achievements in engaging stakeholders in his programs in school.

Table 2 Annotated Exemplars on Relating the Goals of DepEd Programs to the Realities and Needs of the School on the Early Implementation Stage

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	"So during the early stage nagkakaroon kami ng School Improvement Plan ang bawat school sa public school. So, we align our program with our school's actual needs. Kagaya po sa main we are catering 2 curriculum, general education and special needs education. Since our school is not highly competitive, napaka supportive naman ng aming barangay at SPTA sa mga programs. Pero may mga parent's kami na hindi active sa ganyang programs. Ako as a school head kasama mga guro, we focus on the participation of learner development and inclusion, since we are catering to curriculums."	School Head A, while talking, was sad in her eyes the way she said '2 curriculum', not highly competitive, you can feel the heaviness in her voice. She has only been in her new station for 5 months.
School Head B	" ang realities ko dito is hindi madali pumasok sa mga ganito. Kung ang inaambisyon mo ay Manalo lang, Kailangan tuklasin mo yung parang mag-umpisa ka sa grassroots program. Mag-umpisa ka kumbaga magtanim ka muna sa bandang dulo. Aanihin mo naman. So 'yung sa bata muna. parang ganun din eh. Ang hindi din madali talaga Kailangan marami kang pagdadaan bago. ka makapag-invest ng malaki. Syempre ihanda mo din ang mga guro sa mga programa na ipatupad mo. Kaya ba ng resources ng paaralan ang programa na yan? Saan ako kukuha ng panggastos sa sports, journalism at syempre yung adopt a school yun ang tutulong sa mga problema"	School Head B may hugot every time he answers the question, lalim ng mga salita na binitawan niya.

Table 3 Annotated Exemplars on the Training and Forms of Support Received by the School Heads and Its Influence on their Ability to Implement the Programs

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head C	"The training usually came in the form of Division or District level, orientations and meetings. The training and support by DepEd gave us a general direction, pero di pa rin minsan sapat. As a school head, I had to adapt, rely on teamwork, and sometimes learn through trial and error".	School Head C is very articulate, occasionally smile during the interview.
School Head A	"I received initial trainings and orientations from the Division office, however, most support was limited to start -up phases, so, continuous TA was also limited. Ang implementation naman depende heavily on school-based initiatives"	School Head A She occasionally smiles while discussing her training, yet there is still uncertainty in her voice.

Table 4 Annotated Exemplars on the School Heads' Experiences on Teacher's Response to the Implementation of DepEd Programs and the Situations that Influenced Their Involvement

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	"Some teachers were proactive in sports. Lalo na yung 2, teacher na lalaki. Proactive Sila, they were eager na magturo ng sports na pwede sa mga bata.kaya lamang mas marami ang babae kaya ang aming sports program ay hindi ganun kaganda. Yung iba kasi reactive sa sports, maybe kasi ayaw nila. But kalahati naman ng mga guro ay proactive. Sa journalism naman proactive din sila. So ang tingin ko lamang sa implementation hindi nakakuha ng consistent first di nila nakuha".	School Head A maintains eye contact and a soft tone while describing responses of teachers in the implementation of programs.

School Head F	“So first if the teacher are good, they will be motivated they will be reinforced to actively participate in a given activity for example sa sports, if they have the knowledge and skills, if you provided training programs to your teachers, I am skilled I can do that, I can do that, I can provide skills to my athletes, to my players, So yun with regards to journalism yun po ang focus natin”.	School Head F remains composed and professional.
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Table 5 Annotated Exemplars on the Challenges Related to Resources, Facilities, and Partnership Hinder the Implementation of DepEd Programs

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	“Kagaya po ng sinabi ko na mas lamang ang naibibigay na resources sa Special Education kaysa sa Gen Ed. Mas marami nagbibigay sa Special needs education kaysa sa Gen Ed. Kaya nagkakaroon ng selosan, kasi nga 2 curriculum ang aking paaralan. So nahahati ang resources and facilities ng school”.	School Head A was serious when she spoke about resources, a bit of disappointment in her voice, 'selosan'.
School Head D	“Siguro yung lacking and limited resources po yun yung nag limited lang yung resources lalo sa sports. Halos sa sports siguro yung mga sports materials. halimbawa kailangan ko ng badminton, ganyan mga rocket dumating ako wala pa sila, so yun and then yung support ng stakeholder kung paano kami, nahingi ng tulong sa kanila so limited lang kasi ang aking stakeholder”.	School Head D was reflective; his voice is calm yet firm.

Table 6 Annotated Exemplars on the School Heads' Experiences on the Forms of Support from DepEd or External Partners that Helped or were Lacking in Sustaining the programs

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	"DepEd provided policy guidance, while external stakeholders extended support to selected school programs. However, the support within the school remains uneven, which affects program sustainability and continuity. Napapansin na mas may consistent na suporta sa ilang programa tulad ng sa inclusive education program, samantalang ang ibang programa gaya ng sports at journalism ay may limitadong resources at stakeholder engagement".	School Head A Spoke occasionally with smile and with eye contact.
School Head C	"In my experience as a school head, ang suporta mula sa DepEd at mga external na kasosyo ay may mahalagang papel sa pagpapanatili ng mga programang ito, ngunit mayroon ding malinaw na mga kakulangan na gumawa ng hamon sa pagpapatupad para sa isang medium na paaralan tulad ng amin. Ang suporta ng DepEd ay karamihan ay teknikal. Mga DepEd orders and memo ang mga basehan".	School Head C remains composed and professional, occasionally smiling, still with a bit of shyness.

Table 7 Annotated Exemplars on the School Heads Fostering Collaboration among Teachers in Planning and Implementing DepEd Programs

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head C	"Collaboration usually starts with simple and open discussions during faculty meetings. Since we do not have a dedicated sports coordinator, we assign roles based on teachers' strengths and interests. I encourage teamwork by making schedules flexible and reminding teachers that even	School Head C spoke sincerely and maintained a professional tone

	small contributions, like helping during practice or supervising learners, already make a big difference. Sharing the workload helps reduce pressure and encourages teachers to support one another”.	
School Head D	“siguro yung paggagawa ng action plan for each program. Halimbawa sa sports may mga program na meron din, nagagawa rin sa journalist naman. may mga coordinator naman bawat program. And then tapos sabi nga dito identify the coordinator then yung timeline”.	School Head D spoke confidently and with hand gestures

Table 8 Annotated Exemplars on the School Heads on Adapting DepEd Programs to Address the Complexity and Unique Challenges of Small/Medium School Setting

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head B	“Sa sports kasi ang aming paaralan, marami silang naikwento sa akin na ganito sila nakikilala. Then dumaan ang mga taon na parang nawala ng bigla. So dahil gusto kong magsimula ulit, maibalik yung galing nila. Ako na mismo ang kusang nagli-lead. Ako ang nagiging trainer nila. tinuturuan ko na lang 'yung teacher na ganito ang gawin niyo”	School Head B was serious and calm, and spoke with a soft voice
School Head C	“I adapt it by simplifying activities and focusing on inclusivity rather than competitiveness. Instead of offering many sports, we concentrate on a few that can be managed with our limited space and equipment. Practices are scheduled in short, flexible sessions, and we use improvised or shared resources when needed. The goal is to promote physical activity and teamwork, even if we cannot fully meet competitive standards”.	School Head C was confident and gentle

Table 9 Annotated Exemplars on School Heads' Experiences on Moments When Deped Programs Became Part of the School Regular Practices Rather Than Temporary Initiative

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head A	"Programs became sustainable when integrated into the School Improvement Plan and Annual Implementation Plan, rather than being treated as one-time activities. Ang SIP ginagawa yan with barangay, teachers, learners at stakeholder. Dyan lahat nakalagay ang mga gawain ng paaralan ng buong taon kaya nagiging regular na sa amin"	School Head A was Practical and Solution-Oriented
School Head D	"Through practice pa rin mga training continuous halimbawa continuous yung training after ng halimbawa ano ba una natin school activities? pagkatapos ng pasukan may mga practice na kami. Kasi sa athletics kami nag-excel".	School Head D shows humility and pride

Table 10 Annotated Exemplars on School Heads 'Leadership Role that Evolve in Response to Implementing Multiple DepEd Programs Simultaneously

Participant	Responses	Researcher's Observation
School Head C	"In the beginning, my leadership was more directive. I focused on compliance, deadlines, and making sure that all required activities were implemented, even if it was challenging for a medium school like ours. As time went on, dun ko na realized that this approach was not always effective. With limited teachers, resources, and time, I had to shift my leadership style to become more supportive, flexible, and collaborative. Instead of trying to oversee everything myself, I learned to trust my teachers more, listen closely to their <i>concerns</i> , and <i>adjust expectations based on what was realistically possible</i> ".	School Head C when discussing the evolution of leadership, he carefully described the transition from directive to collaborative approaches, showing deep self-reflection.

School Head D	“Ay, nabago ako, yung ibang mga alam ko sa pagiging guro na ngayon ako ay leader na ng school. Siguro yung ano ah prioritizes the needs, lagi yun ang nasa isip ko. Kaya ipa-priority mo muna yun para yung mga priority na kailangan para sa improvement ng school. kung kaunti ang stakeholder mo maghanap ka para makatulong sa mga limited na kailangang materials na hindi naman kaya ng lahat ibigay ng MOOE. Natuto akong makiusap sa mga stakeholders. Kasi from classroom teacher to leader, na enhanced ang aking pagiging leader. Matuto ka talagang makisama sa lahat ng klase ng tao”.	School Head D	showed gratitude and pride when talking about the support for his learners.
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DISCUSSION

The emergent themes from the semi-structured interviews were detailed in the following tables.

Interview Question 1. Can you describe how the purpose and expected outcomes of these DepEd programs were explained to you when they were introduced in your school (Sports, Journalism, Adopt-a-school Program)?

Theme A Policy-guided but Locally Interpreted

Policy-driven yet locally interpreted, the themes were from respondents. Participants described program introductions through formal DepEd channels but emphasized the need for local adaptation. Through Fullan’s lens, this reflects coherence-making: leaders must bridge the gap between central policy and local realities, creating meaning that fits their unique contexts. Reyes (2021) examined how school principals navigated contextual challenges in the Philippine education system, revealing that reforms often required local interpretation to address unique school contexts, aligning with the theme of policy-guided but locally interpreted program introductions.

Interview Question 2. How did you relate the goals of these DepEd programs to the realities and needs of your school during the early stages of implementation?

Theme B Grounding Program Goals in Feasibility and Inclusion

With Grounding Program Goals in Feasibility and Inclusion, school heads related the goals of DepEd programs to their school realities by anchoring them on what was feasible and inclusive within their specific contexts. During early implementation, they assessed their schools’ capacities, adjusted expectations based on limited resources, prioritized

learner participation and holistic development, and relied on stakeholder support to address immediate needs. Rather than pursuing ideal or competitive outcomes, school heads emphasized practical, inclusive, and sustainable approaches that reflected their schools' actual conditions. This illustrates Fullan's principle of capacity building and moral purpose. Leaders adopt ambitious goals to ensure equity and learner inclusion, prioritizing participation and holistic development over competition. For instance, the Manila Bulletin (2025) reported persistent resource shortages in Philippine public schools, including classroom and teacher deficits, which mirrored school heads' efforts to ground program goals in feasibility by aligning them with actual needs through School Improvement Plans. Likewise, BusinessWorld (2025) noted that guidelines for programs in arts, journalism, and sports were unclear, reinforcing the need for inclusive prioritization over competition in resource-limited settings.

Interview Question 3. How did you relate the goals of these DepEd programs to the realities and needs of your school during the early stages of implementation?

Theme C Limited Support and Self-Reliance

The theme, Limited Support and Self-Reliance, school heads implemented DepEd programs within a context of limited and largely orientation-based training, which required them to become highly self-reliant. With minimal continuous technical assistance, they compensated through self-directed learning, peer consultation, and school-based initiatives. These experiences shaped implementation as adaptive and context-driven, but also uneven and dependent on individual leadership capacity. Fullan's emphasis on continuous learning and capacity building is evident. School heads rely on peer collaboration, self-directed growth, and trial-and-errors when institutional support is insufficient, embodying resilience in leadership.

Interview Question 4. Based on your experience, how did teachers respond to the implementation of these programs, and what situations influenced their level of involvement?

Theme D Conditional and Uneven Teacher Engagement

The theme, Conditional and Uneven Teacher Engagement, teachers responded to the implementation of DepEd programs with varying and conditional levels of engagement. Some demonstrated proactive involvement, particularly when programs aligned with their interests and competencies, while others participated minimally or reactively when constrained by workload, limited resources, or lack of confidence. Teacher engagement was therefore not uniform but depended on personal readiness and contextual support within the school environment. This reflects Fullan's principle of relationship building. Leaders must foster trust, motivation, and shared ownership to sustain teacher involvement, recognizing that engagement is shaped by both capacity and leadership influence. These results aligned with Henderson (2021) which interviewed school principals who reported difficulties in maintaining teacher enthusiasm amid resource pressures, aligning with uneven engagement influenced by motivation and workload.

Additionally, Foster and Kim (2022) demonstrated principals acted as emotional buffers for teachers facing policy demands, reflecting conditional involvement tied to skills and facilities.

Interview Question 5. What challenges related to resources, facilities, and partnership hinder the implementation of these programs?

Theme E Structural Limitations

The theme, Structural Limitations, emerged from the response of school head in question concerning challenges in resources, facilities, and partnerships hindering DepEd program implementation. School heads faced persistent shortages in resources, inadequate facilities, fragile partnerships, and time-intensive coordination demands. These interconnected challenges restricted the scope, consistency, and sustainability of program implementation, requiring school heads to continuously negotiate between program expectations and operational realities. This demonstrates Fullan's capacity building under constraint. Leaders innovate and mobilize partnerships to overcome systemic shortages, negotiating limited resources while striving to sustain program delivery. The Manila Bulletin (2025) documented nationwide shortages of classrooms, teachers, and resources, which directly supported the evidence of structural limitations in implementing specialized programs. Consequently, a House Bill that proposed revisions to Republic Act 8525 (2025) noted shortages in budgets and materials, which exacerbated disparities between curricula and facilities. Likewise, BusinessWorld (2025) reported inconsistent resources for journalism and sports, which highlighted fragile partnerships and inadequate infrastructure in small to medium schools.

Interview Question 6. Based on your experience, what forms of support from DepEd or external partners helped or were lacking - in sustaining these programs?

Theme F Technical Support and Uneven Partnerships

The theme, Technical Support and Uneven Partnerships, the lived experiences of school heads revealed that the sustainability of DepEd programs rests on consistent technical assistance from DepEd combined with uneven external partnerships, requiring school leaders to act as compensatory agents when support falls short. While training and policy guidance provided foundational capacity, the absence of equitable resources and reliable partnerships shifted the burden of sustaining programs to school. Through Fullan's lens, this embodies coherence-making and relationship building. Sustainability depends on aligning internal policy with external partnerships, yet gaps in prioritization reveal the fragility of program continuity. The House Bill (House of Representatives, 2025) indicated continuing budget problems that limited the Adopt-a-School Program's effectiveness, which aligned with uneven partnerships and technical support gaps. The study of Docallas (2025) revealed varied awareness and resource limitations in campus journalism, which suggested inconsistent external aid across programs. Similarly, the National Schools Press Conference Reports (2023–2025) noted inadequate funding and limited technical knowledge, which supported the theme of policy guidance as

foundational but insufficient for sustaining partnerships.

Interview Question 7. Based on your experience, what forms of support from DepEd or external partners helped or were lacking - in sustaining these programs?

Theme G Structured Roles and Relational Leadership

With Structured Roles and Relational Leadership, this theme directly answered the question by showing that collaboration was cultivated through a combination of formal structures (roles, plans, meetings) and intentional relationship-building, which enabled teachers to participate meaningfully despite varying capacities and contexts. This reflects Fullan's relationship building and capacity building. Collaboration strengthens collective efficacy, while structured roles and trust ensure that teachers feel empowered to sustain initiatives. On a similar note, Kiral (2024) found that principals fostered collective responsibility through communication and support strategies, which mirrored structured role assignments and relational trust-building. Additionally, Aboudahr (2023) discovered that mentoring and interactive roles enhanced school improvement, which supported open communication and strength-based engagements. Finally, Castañeda (2025) identified high ratings in participatory management, such as teamwork and decision-making, which aligned with action plans and coordinators for collaboration.

Interview Question 8. How do you adapt these programs to address the complexity and unique challenges of your small/medium school setting?

Theme H Context Responsive Program Adaptation

With Context-Responsive Program Adaptation, this theme captured how school heads adapt Department of Education programs by responding directly to the specific realities of their small and medium school contexts. Rather than implementing programs in a uniform or idealized manner, school heads adjusted expectations, processes, and leadership practices to fit limitations in facilities, manpower, time, and funding. Their adaptations reflected an understanding that effective implementation is shaped by what is possible within the school environment, not solely by policy prescriptions. Participants modified programs for feasibility and relevance. Viewed through Fullan's Change Theory, this theme reflects how educational change unfolds through capacity building, sustainability, and humanity paradigm. School heads act as change agents who recalibrate reform expectations to protect both teacher well-being and student development. By grounding program implementation in school realities, they enable change to persist over time, highlighting that sustainable reform emerges not from rigid adherence to policy, but from adaptive leadership responsive to context. Arciaga and Astillero (2023) noted that school heads juggled curriculum adaptations amid pandemics, which supported context-responsive modifications such as simplified activities. Maxwell (2021) emphasized flexible, iterative qualitative processes that were sensitive to context, reflecting adaptations to unique school challenges. Docallas (2025) highlighted geographic influences on program success, which aligned with improvisations and community engagements in small and medium settings.

Interview Question 9. Can you describe moments when these programs became part of the regular practices of your school rather than a temporary initiative?

Theme I Embedded in Daily School Life

The theme, Embedded in Daily School Life, emerged from the responses of the school head. This theme directly answers the question by showing that DepEd programs ceased to be temporary when they were absorbed into planning systems, daily routines, relationships, and shared responsibilities, allowing them to function as part of the school's normal operations rather than event-based activities. Pestano and Ibarra (2021) evaluated how sports programs became embedded through enhanced training, which supported their integration into plans for continuity. Also, Recibe (2024) found that the consistent application of child protection policies normalized practices, which paralleled shared ownership and community normalization. Finally, Aureada (2021) identified that instructional leadership fostered positive climates, which aligned with programs transitioning into daily routines through continuous practices.

Interview Question 10. How has your leadership role evolved in response to implementing multiple DepEd programs simultaneously?

Thematic Chart J Collaborative and Context Sensitive Change

The theme, Collaborative and Context Sensitive Change, directly answered the question by showing that school heads' leadership evolved as they navigated multiple DepEd programs, that is, shifting from compliance-driven, individual control toward collaborative, empowering, and context-aware leadership responsive to school realities. The experiences of school heads showed that implementing multiple DepEd programs simultaneously prompted a profound evolution in leadership practice. Leadership shifted away from rigid supervision and compliance toward collaboration, empowerment, and strategic responsiveness. As school heads encountered limitations in resources, manpower, and time, they learned to trust their teachers, strengthen relationships, prioritize needs, and align leadership practices with school realities. They all came from classroom teachers before becoming leaders. This embodies Fullan's moral purpose and relationship building. Leaders evolve into adaptive, collaborative figures who empower teachers and stakeholders, sustaining change through strategic prioritization and trust. Castañeros (2023) explored how newly promoted heads evolved through self-reliance and support, which reflected shifts toward collaborative styles. Moreso, Macalangga and Lumapenet (2024) revealed leadership challenges that required cultural responsiveness, which supported context-sensitive changes. Furthermore, Bellibas (2025) synthesized crisis leadership as cyclical, involving adaptation and reflection, which aligned with the evolution from directive to empowering approaches amid multi-program demands.

Conclusions

From the phenomenological inquiries on the testimonies of school heads on the challenges faced by small and medium public-school heads in implementing Department of Education programs, ten (10) superordinate themes emerged. These were: Policy-

Guided but Locally Interpreted; Grounding Program Goals in Feasibility and Inclusion; Limited Support and Self-Reliance; Conditional and Uneven Teacher Engagement; Structural Limitations; Technical Support and Uneven Partnerships; Structured Roles and Relational Leadership; Context-Responsive Program Adaptation; and Embedded in Daily School Life.

Recommendations

The study also provided these recommendations:

The Department of Education may create and adhere to flexible policy frameworks, including contextual adaptation guidelines for all programs like sports, journalism, and the Adopt-a-School initiative, ensuring initial disseminations include localized examples and ongoing evaluation mechanisms to address gaps in support and resources. The Schools Division Office of Calamba City may enhance continuous technical assistance through regular mentorship programs and resource allocation audits tailored to small and medium schools. The School Heads may prioritize integrating programs into School Improvement Plans with a focus on inclusivity and feasibility, while cultivating relational leadership by assigning roles based on teacher strengths. Teachers may actively participate in skill-building training and collaborative planning sessions to enhance engagement, sharing feedback on workload and program relevance to inform adaptations, thereby contributing to a culture of shared ownership and continuous practice in school activities. Finally, the Action plan may be used to conduct longitudinal studies on the long-term impact of adapted DepEd programs in varied school sizes, incorporating quantitative metrics alongside qualitative insights to explore leadership evolution and partnership dynamics, potentially expanding to other regions for comparative analysis.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study followed all ethical rules for research with people. Permission was obtained from school administrators, and every participant gave informed consent. They were told that joining was voluntary and that they could stop at any time without any negative effects. The research followed the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association, the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173), and the rules of the Graduate School of Laguna College of Business and Arts (LCBA), including the LCBA Research Manual, which stresses respect, confidentiality, and honesty. No names or personal details were collected. All answers were kept private, stored securely, and only the researcher and adviser had access. After the study, the data was properly disposed of according to LCBA rules.

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