Original Article

Between Chalk and Crossfire: Narratives of School Heads in Armed-Conflict Schools

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Abstract. Educational leadership in armed-conflict settings is marked by persistent insecurity, disrupted schooling, and heightened risks to learners and educators. While prior studies have documented institutional responses to conflict, limited research has explored the lived experiences of school heads who lead under continuous threat. This study aimed to examine and interpret the experiences of public-school heads assigned to conflict areas in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. Guided by van Manen's LifeWorld Existential Theory, a hermeneutic phenomenology was employed. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected school heads who had served in conflict-affected schools for at least two consecutive years. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Fifteen emergent themes highlighted leadership amid danger, crisis-driven decision-making, emotional and physical strain, reliance on community collaboration, resilience rooted in purpose, and aspirations for peace and transformation. Findings indicate that school heads perform roles beyond administration, serving as protectors, crisis managers, and emotional anchors for their communities. Despite prolonged exposure to fear, trauma, and resource constraints, participants maintained educational continuity through adaptive leadership, moral commitment, and strong community partnerships. The study underscores that leadership in armed-conflict zones is shaped by lived experiences of risk, responsibility, and meaning-making. Explicit implications for policy and practice include designing trauma-informed leadership frameworks, establishing psychosocial support programs for school heads, integrating conflict-sensitive strategies into school management, and formulating context-sensitive educational policies that enhance safety, resilience, and the effectiveness of leadership in conflict-affected schools. These measures can guide policymakers, educational administrators, and training programs to support better school leaders operating under continuous threat.

Keywords: Armed conflict; Educational leadership; Hermeneutic phenomenology; School heads; Trauma-informed leadership.

Education has long been regarded as a universal right and a cornerstone of peacebuilding; however, it remains among the most vulnerable sectors in times of war and insecurity. Globally, attacks on schools, learners, and teachers have intensified in recent years. The Education Under Attack 2022 report documented more than 9,000 incidents targeting education in conflict-affected countries between 2020 and 2021, resulting in

school closures, learner displacement, and heightened safety risks for educators (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack [GCPEA], 2023). These findings underscore that education is not spared from violence and that school leaders in such contexts shoulder responsibilities that extend beyond routine administrative duties.

Moreover, scholars argue that armed conflict not only disrupts educational systems but also reshapes the roles and identities of school leaders. Dryden-Peterson (2020) noted that leaders in conflict-affected schools often serve simultaneously as administrators, protectors of children's rights, and coordinators of community response. While this literature illuminates the expanded scope of leadership, it primarily emphasizes institutional functions and strategic responses, offering limited attention to how leaders personally experience and make sense of these layered responsibilities under constant threat.

In addition, the Philippine education system—particularly in Mindanao—has long grappled with the effects of armed conflict. The GCPEA (2023) reported that schools in the Bangsamoro region and adjacent provinces have repeatedly experienced armed clashes, resulting in damaged facilities, displaced learners, and disrupted teaching. Studies such as Lopez (2024) and Bauyot et al. (2024) describe resilience-oriented strategies among Filipino school heads, including adaptive planning, emotional labor, and community collaboration. However, these studies primarily highlight leadership practices and outcomes rather than the lived meanings, ethical tensions, and emotional burdens embedded in everyday leadership.

At the same time, leadership in conflict-affected schools demands more than managerial competence. Lopez (2024) emphasized that school heads frequently engage in intense emotional labor as they balance safety concerns with professional obligations. Bauyot et al. (2024) further argued that resilience among school leaders emerges through the capacity to transform adversity into meaning. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they stop short of capturing the lived journeys through which school heads experience, endure, and interpret their leadership roles.

Narrowing the lens to Sultan Kudarat, the municipality of Palimbang presents a concrete example of how armed conflict permeates educational spaces. Intermittent armed skirmishes in the area have disrupted daily life and heightened insecurity among learners and educators. Delavin (2024) found that school leaders in conflict-affected areas frequently confront moral dilemmas and emotional exhaustion while striving to protect their school communities. Nevertheless, existing studies in Palimbang continue to emphasize administrative responses, leaving the lived meaning-making of school heads within this distinct context underexplored.

Consequently, the limited research directly examining the lived experiences of school heads in Palimbang reveals a critical gap in the literature. While prior studies focus on institutional resilience and leadership frameworks, they rarely foreground leaders' voices or explore how courage, hope, and sacrifice are constructed in conflict-ridden environments. As Pangandoyon et al. (2024) asserted, resilience is not merely about coping but about creating meaning in the face of adversity.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by employing a phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of school heads in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat. By foregrounding their narratives, the study aims to deepen understanding of leadership as it is lived in armed-conflict schools and to contribute to scholarship, policy, and practice by informing trauma-informed and context-sensitive support mechanisms for school leaders navigating the realities of chalk and crossfire.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of school heads working in armed-conflict settings. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that focuses on how individuals experience and make sense of their realities (Neubauer et al., 2019), making it well-suited to examining the complex, emotional, and context-bound nature of school leadership under conditions of fear, insecurity, and risk. The design was selected to capture school heads' narratives regarding how they navigated challenges, sustained educational continuity, and ensured the safety of learners and teachers. Through in-depth interviews and open-ended inquiry, the study generated rich, contextualized data that enabled an interpretive understanding of the professional, social, and ethical dimensions of leadership in conflict-affected schools, thereby addressing the research question and contributing meaningful insights to educational leadership

practice and policy (Tenny et al., 2022).

Results and Discussion

There are fifteen (15) emerging themes that were articulated through arduous procedural data analysis and interpretation. They were synthesized from several formulated meanings, initial themes, and clustered themes.

Leadership Amid Constant Threat in Conflict-Affected Schools

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict areas is inseparable from constant exposure to danger. Consequently, teaching and school management are no longer confined to instructional or administrative functions; instead, they are shaped by fear, unpredictability, and the urgent need to protect lives. In this context, violence is not an abstract concept for school heads but a lived reality that disrupts daily routines and necessitates immediate, high-stakes decision-making. Thus, leadership is enacted in conditions of extreme vulnerability, where every action carries the potential to risk both leaders and learners.

"One morning while going to school, I heard gunfire. Teachers and learners hid under tables." **(P1)**
"We calmly evacuated students while gunshots echoed." **(P2)**
"Receiving death threats made me want to leave, but community support made me stay." **(P3)**
"Armed men killed our IPMR." **(P4)**
"Gunfire disrupted our graduation ceremony." **(P5)**

Moreover, the school heads' responses indicate that leadership in armed-conflict schools involves repeated encounters with life-threatening situations, including gunfire, sudden evacuations, and direct threats. As a result, normal school activities are frequently disrupted, creating a persistent environment of fear and uncertainty. In such circumstances, ensuring the safety of learners and teachers becomes the primary responsibility, often overriding instructional priorities. Consequently, school heads are required to exercise rapid judgment and decisive action under intense emotional and psychological strain, revealing leadership that is continuously shaped by trauma and risk.

Taken together, these narratives emphasize that leadership in conflict-affected schools extends beyond formal authority and administrative competence. Instead, school heads assume moral and protective roles, positioning themselves as stabilizing figures amid chaos and insecurity. Despite ongoing threats to personal safety, their experiences reflect leadership grounded in emotional awareness, ethical responsibility, and sustained commitment to service. This understanding is supported by related research that highlights how educational leadership in conflict-affected systems is constrained by rigid structures and high-risk environments, which intensify the burden on school leaders and shape how leadership is practiced (Karousiou, 2025). Ultimately, leadership in this context becomes an expression of resilience and care, where safeguarding lives is central to the meaning and practice of leading a school in an armed-conflict setting.

Crisis-Driven Leadership Responsibility Schools

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict areas is continuously shaped by crises that demand rapid, high-stakes decision-making. Consequently, leadership in these contexts is often reactive rather than planned, requiring school heads to respond immediately to threats while simultaneously ensuring the continuity of education. In this sense, crisis-driven moments redefine leadership as an active, situational process in which safeguarding learners and staff takes precedence over all other concerns.

"I delivered learning modules in an armed sitio." **(P1)**
"I supervised the evacuation of students as the conflict approached." **(P2)**
"Children here already know how to use guns." **(P3)**
"Armed men killed the IPMR leader." **(P4)**
"We sent learners home immediately because of gunfire." **(P5)**

Moreover, the participants vividly recalled crisis-driven events that demanded urgent leadership responses. These included delivering learning materials in dangerous locations, supervising evacuations, and responding to active armed threats near the school. As a result, leadership responsibilities in conflict-affected areas are often reactive, requiring quick judgment to protect learners while maintaining educational processes. Taken together, these

experiences indicate that leadership roles and priorities are repeatedly redefined by crisis, emphasizing constant readiness and responsibility under pressure. In addition, grounded in Crisis Management Theory and Situational Leadership Theory, these narratives illustrate how school heads continuously adjust their leadership styles in response to the severity and immediacy of threats. Consequently, effective leadership in conflict zones requires flexibility, decisiveness, and courage. School heads are compelled to act as emergency responders, safety officers, and emotional anchors, demonstrating that leadership in these environments is neither static nor uniform but adaptive, situational, and deeply contextual (Othman Saiful Azlan et al., 2024).

Community as a Pillar of Leadership Survival

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in conflict-affected areas is sustained through strong community relationships. Accordingly, teachers, parents, barangay officials, soldiers, and indigenous leaders were identified as essential partners who provide emotional, logistical, and security support. In this way, these connections form a protective network that enables school heads to continue functioning despite persistent threats.

"Teachers, parents, and soldiers are the ones who really support me." **(P1)**
"Teachers, students, and parents stand out because we face the danger together." **(P2)**
"The barangay captain supported us greatly." **(P3)**
"I am always concerned for teachers who are not familiar with the area." **(P4)**
"Datu Malinoy Siput helped establish the school." **(P5)**

Moreover, the participants emphasized that school heads rely heavily on community members to survive and fulfill their leadership roles. These individuals were particularly significant because they provided protection, guidance, and emotional reassurance during dangerous situations. As a result, leadership in conflict zones is not exercised in isolation but is sustained through interpersonal and community relationships. Without this collective support, maintaining leadership would be difficult. Taken together, the findings indicate that leadership survival in armed-conflict areas is deeply rooted in collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility within the local community. In addition, guided by Community Collaboration Theory and Indigenous Leadership Theory, these narratives demonstrate that effective leadership in conflict zones is collective rather than solely individual. The school heads' reliance on community alliances highlights the importance of shared responsibility and mutual trust. Consequently, these relationships enhance resilience and reinforce the notion that leadership survival in high-risk environments depends on strong social and cultural support systems (Martin, 2021).

Living a Lifeworld of Constant Vigilance

This emerging theme reveals that the everyday lifeworld of school heads in armed-conflict areas is characterized by continuous alertness, fear, and uncertainty. Consequently, serving in such contexts requires leaders to remain perpetually watchful, as danger may arise at any moment. In this environment, leadership is enacted in a context of fragile, temporary peace, and school heads must simultaneously anticipate threats while fulfilling their educational responsibilities. As a result, vigilance becomes embedded in daily routines, shaping how leaders think, act, and interact within the school community.

"Every day has fear and hope; I need to stay alert." **(P1)**
"Every day, I balance learning and protection." **(P2)**
"Life cannot really improve because danger is always there." **(P3)**
"Soldiers are stationed in the classroom for safety." **(P4)**
"We constantly monitor the peace and order situation." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants described their everyday life as a continuous state of alertness and uncertainty. They shared that fear and vigilance are inherent to their routines, as danger can emerge at any time. Balancing educational responsibilities with safety concerns was a constant challenge. Consequently, the presence of armed forces and the need to monitor peace and order shaped how school activities were conducted. Taken together, these responses show that leadership is enacted in a context where normalcy is temporary, and preparedness, rather than stability, defines the school head's lifeworld. In addition, anchored in Situational Awareness Theory and Crisis Management Theory, these narratives illustrate that leadership in conflict zones requires constant environmental scanning and rapid risk assessment. School heads must make swift decisions that directly affect the safety of learners and staff. Despite the sustained emotional and psychological strain, their narratives reveal unwavering commitment to educational continuity and leadership perseverance in conditions of uncertainty

(Lazaris, 2025). Thus, leadership in these settings is both adaptive and relational, balancing immediate threats with the ongoing mission of schooling.

Purpose-Driven Leadership Amid Uncertainty

This emerging theme reveals that, despite the dangers and emotional strain of working in armed-conflict areas, school heads' leadership is sustained by a strong sense of purpose. Consequently, their commitment to education and learners provides meaning that anchors them amid fear and instability. For these school heads, leadership is not merely a professional obligation but a moral calling grounded in service to learners and the community. As a result, this sense of purpose enables them to endure conditions that might otherwise discourage or overwhelm individuals in less hostile environments.

"Education is a weapon. If not me, then who?" **(P1)**
"Leadership requires courage, compassion, and hope." **(P2)**
"I stay for the children; teachers also sacrifice." **(P3)**
"Life is uncertain, so I pray and stay ready." **(P4)**
"I always worry for my colleagues and learners." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants' reflections show that leadership is deeply rooted in purpose, even amid constant danger. While fear and uncertainty were ever-present, they were balanced by hope, faith, and responsibility. Leadership was described not merely as a job but as a moral obligation. Taken together, these responses indicate that purpose provides emotional and psychological sustenance, allowing school heads to persevere under threatening conditions. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory and Servant Leadership Theory, these narratives illustrate how purpose transforms fear into commitment. School heads' motivation is sustained by values, faith, and a sense of responsibility rather than by external rewards. Consequently, this sense of purpose enables them to lead with hope, inspire others, and remain steadfast despite ongoing threats. Education becomes both a mission and a form of resistance against violence and instability (Lawyer, 2024).

Personal and Professional Transformation Through Conflict

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict areas profoundly reshapes both personal identity and professional practice. Consequently, continuous exposure to danger, uncertainty, and responsibility compelled school heads to develop resilience, emotional strength, and adaptability. As a result, many participants described becoming stronger and more mature as leaders, while also acknowledging the psychological limits imposed by fear and stress. Taken together, these experiences illustrate leadership growth forged through adversity rather than formal training.

"I became stronger; my leadership expanded to security and trauma care." **(P1)**
"I developed resilience, empathy, and crisis skills." **(P2)**
"I gained maturity through conflict." **(P3)**
"Fear limits my professional growth." **(P4)**
"Despite fear, I must always show presence." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants described significant personal and professional changes resulting from their leadership roles in conflict areas. They reported enhanced resilience, emotional strength, and maturity. At the same time, persistent fear and stress constrained opportunities for professional growth. Leadership responsibilities expanded to include security management and trauma awareness. Consequently, leadership development in conflict zones involves both growth and constraints, reflecting a dynamic, complex process shaped by lived experiences rather than formal instruction. Anchored in Adaptive Leadership Theory and Resilience Theory, these narratives highlight leadership as evolving and context-dependent. While adversity fostered personal and professional growth, it also imposed constraints that limited the full realization of leadership potential. Nonetheless, the participants demonstrated the capacity to adapt, lead effectively, and remain visible figures of stability within their communities (Chughtai et al., 2023). In this way, conflict functions simultaneously as a catalyst for empowerment and a source of limitation, producing leaders who are resilient, situationally aware, and morally grounded.

Ripple Effects of Leadership on Significant Others

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in conflict-affected schools extends beyond the individual to affect

families, colleagues, learners, and communities. Consequently, the constant danger associated with their work generates emotional strain among loved ones, particularly family members who worry about the school heads' safety. At the same time, shared adversity strengthens bonds with colleagues and fosters collective commitment within the school community. As a result, leadership impacts not only professional responsibilities but also personal and social relationships.

"My family worries, but teachers bond and learners are inspired." **(P1)**
"My role inspires my colleagues and the community." **(P2)**
"My family's fear conflicts with my duty." **(P3)**
"The danger affects both family and colleagues." **(P4)**
"My family worries, especially for students who travel far." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that the emotional burden of leadership extends into their personal lives. Family members experienced constant worry and fear due to the risks involved in their work. Conversely, colleagues and learners developed stronger connections through shared experiences of danger. Taken together, these narratives illustrate that leadership in conflict zones creates ripple effects, influencing relationships and emotional well-being well beyond institutional boundaries. Anchored in Role Conflict Theory and Social Support Theory, these findings highlight the tension between personal and professional responsibilities in high-risk environments. Despite these challenges, school heads relied on collective understanding, shared responsibility, and community support to sustain their leadership roles. Consequently, leadership in armed-conflict settings is both relational and socially embedded, demonstrating how individual actions reverberate across the broader community (Park et al., 2024).

Emotional Complexity of Conflict-Affected Leadership

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict areas is characterized by a complex interplay of emotions, including fear, courage, anger, compassion, and fulfillment. Consequently, emotional responses are not static but shift depending on the situation. Fear often coexists with bravery, while frustration gradually transforms into fulfillment when learners remain safe and engaged in education. This dynamic demonstrates that emotional experience is integral to leadership practice in high-risk environments.

"I feel fear and nervousness, but also courage and hope." **(P1)**
"There is fear, compassion, and tension because of risk." **(P2)**
"I felt anger and disappointment, but later fulfillment." **(P3)**
"I am brave, but I am also afraid for my students." **(P4)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that navigating these emotional complexities is a continuous part of their leadership role. Fear, anxiety, and stress coexist with hope, courage, and commitment, requiring constant self-regulation. Taken together, these experiences reveal that leadership in conflict zones demands emotional resilience and flexibility, allowing school heads to respond effectively to unpredictable and dangerous situations while supporting their learners and staff. Anchored in Emotional Resilience Theory, these narratives suggest that emotional complexity enhances the depth of leadership rather than undermining it. The school heads' ability to recognize, regulate, and channel emotions allows them to remain functional and supportive leaders despite persistent stress. Consequently, their emotional awareness fosters empathy toward learners and teachers, reinforcing a leadership model grounded in care, responsibility, and moral commitment (Park et al., 2024).

Physical Manifestations of Prolonged Stress

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict areas significantly affects the physical health of school heads. Consequently, prolonged exposure to stress and danger manifests in bodily symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia, weight loss, and tension, reflecting the cumulative impact of chronic stress. These physical responses highlight that the demands of leadership in conflict zones extend beyond emotional and psychological strain, exacting a tangible toll on the body.

"I experience neck tension, fast heartbeat, and sleeplessness." **(P1)**
"I feel constant tension, fatigue, and headaches." **(P2)**
"I lost weight and started smoking to cope." **(P3)**
"Trauma caused my insomnia." **(P4)**

"I became pale and lost weight." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that these physical symptoms were persistent and closely linked to the continuous pressure and danger inherent in their roles. Taken together, these narratives indicate that stress in conflict-affected leadership is not solely emotional but also physiological, affecting overall well-being and daily functioning. Aligned with Stress and Coping Theory, these findings suggest that sustained exposure to threat disrupts physical health and may impact leadership performance. Consequently, addressing both physical and mental health is critical, highlighting the need for institutional support mechanisms to sustain school heads' capacity to lead effectively in conflict-affected settings (Maqsood et al., 2024).

Fulfillment Through Perseverance

This emerging theme reveals that, despite extreme challenges, school heads derive fulfillment and meaning from their leadership in armed-conflict areas. Consequently, moments of joy and accomplishment often arise from small yet significant achievements, such as seeing learners attend school despite danger or observing positive transformations in the community. For these leaders, fulfillment does not arise from comfort or safety but from perseverance—continuing to teach, lead, and protect amid adversity. As a result, joy becomes deeply intertwined with survival, hope, and continuity.

"I feel joy when students attend school despite danger." **(P1)**
"Seeing students grow brings me joy." **(P2)**
"Community transformation gives me happiness." **(P3)**
"The work is challenging but fulfilling." **(P4)**
"Community support gives me fulfillment." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that these moments of fulfillment help counter fear, emotional exhaustion, and stress. Taken together, the narratives show that perseverance and small successes sustain motivation, reinforce leadership commitment, and enable school heads to continue serving their communities despite ongoing threats. From a phenomenological perspective, these experiences illustrate how meaning is constructed through endurance and are anchored in Positive Psychology Theory. Fulfillment functions as a psychological resource that counters despair and burnout. Consequently, by finding joy in learners' persistence and community solidarity, school heads strengthen emotional resilience and reaffirm the transformative purpose of education, even in violent and unstable contexts (Valdez, 2025).

Structural and Contextual Leadership Challenges

This emerging theme reveals that leadership in armed-conflict schools is constrained by systemic and contextual challenges that extend beyond personal capacity. Consequently, persistent security threats, limited resources, disrupted instruction, and uncertainty regarding students' futures shape the daily realities of school heads. As a result, leadership effectiveness is influenced not only by individual competence but also by structural conditions. In such environments, long-term planning becomes difficult, and survival-oriented decision-making dominates.

"Security, trauma, and limited resources challenge my role." **(P1)**
"It is difficult to maintain instruction amid instability." **(P2)**
"Conflict hinders school improvement." **(P3)**
"Students' futures are uncertain." **(P4)**
"Leadership is difficult but empowering as a woman." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that these structural and contextual constraints intensify the demands of leadership. Conflict disrupts school improvement initiatives, complicates instruction, and generates emotional strain, particularly for students facing uncertain futures. Taken together, these experiences indicate that leadership in conflict-affected areas requires navigating systemic obstacles while simultaneously addressing immediate safety, educational, and emotional needs. Grounded in Role Strain Theory and Organizational Constraint Theory, these findings illustrate how overlapping demands increase pressure on school heads. Consequently, leaders must manage competing priorities—ensuring safety, sustaining instruction, and providing emotional support—often in resource-limited environments. Despite these structural constraints, participants demonstrated persistence, agency, and adaptability, suggesting that effective leadership in conflict zones involves negotiating systemic limitations while sustaining hope, direction, and commitment to the school community (Diano & Calbi, 2024).

Selective Sharing of Lived Experiences
This emerging theme reveals that participants selectively share aspects of their leadership experiences, highlighting the limits of verbalizing prolonged exposure to conflict. Consequently, while essential and impactful moments were narrated, many everyday struggles and emotional burdens remained unspoken. As a result, selective sharing functions both as emotional protection and as a reflection of the complexity inherent in leadership under continuous threat.

"I shared the essential experiences, but much happens daily." **(P1)**
"I shared emotional, professional, and personal impacts." **(P2)**
"Everyone already knows what happened." **(P3)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that silence and omission are not signs of disengagement but rather strategies for managing emotional exhaustion. Taken together, these narratives suggest that some experiences are too complex or emotionally heavy to convey fully. This selective articulation underscores that lived experiences in conflict zones extend beyond what words can capture, and that narrative choices prioritize meaning over completeness. Anchored in Phenomenological Reflection Theory, these findings highlight that participants focus on experiences that best represent their leadership reality. Consequently, selective sharing allows for deeper insights into identity, resilience, and responsibility, while also revealing the emotional saturation and the limits of language in conveying prolonged exposure to danger (McLeod, 2024).

Leadership Lessons Forged in Conflict
This emerging theme reveals that prolonged exposure to adversity shapes profound leadership lessons for school heads. Consequently, participants emphasized resilience, service, perseverance, and courage as core principles guiding their roles. Conflict functioned as an influential teacher, reshaping their understanding of leadership—not as authority, but as responsibility, moral commitment, and sacrifice.

"Leadership is service, and education brings peace." **(P1)**
"I learned resilience, empathy, and optimism." **(P2)**
"Hold on; results will come." **(P3)**
"Community relationships are essential." **(P4)**
"We must not be ruled by fear." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants highlighted that these lessons influenced both professional practice and personal values. Taken together, their experiences indicate that adversity fosters moral endurance, strengthens commitment to learners, and reinforces community-centered leadership. The school heads' insights demonstrate that hardship transforms leadership from a positional role into a practice grounded in empathy, perseverance, and hope. Guided by Servant Leadership Theory and Grit Theory, these findings illustrate that leadership in conflict zones is sustained through moral resilience and enduring commitment. Consequently, the lessons learned extend beyond professional development, shaping personal values while reinforcing leadership grounded in service, courage, and the pursuit of positive community impact (Tomarong et al., 2023).

Vision of Future Leadership
This emerging theme reveals that, despite ongoing threats, participants articulate hopeful visions of themselves as future leaders and advocates. Consequently, their aspirations reflect a shift from survival-focused leadership toward long-term transformation, emphasizing the creation of safer schools, peaceful communities, and empowered learners.

"I want to be a voice for children." **(P1)**
"I see myself becoming stronger and more compassionate." **(P2)**
"I want to be a peace advocate." **(P3)**
"I want students to become capable in a peaceful community." **(P4)**
"I want to help bring positive change." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that personal growth, compassion, and resilience are central to their future outlook. Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that leadership in conflict-affected schools is not limited to immediate survival but extends to long-term purpose and positive societal impact. The responses highlight

leadership grounded in hope, optimism, and commitment to transformative change. Anchored in Visionary Leadership Theory, these findings suggest that future-oriented leadership is shaped by resilience and foresight. Consequently, the school heads' aspirations underscore leadership as a tool for peacebuilding, with a commitment to shaping environments in which education can thrive, free from violence and fear (Yorman, 2023).

Aspirations for Peace and Community Transformation
This emerging theme reveals that participants' leadership aspirations extend beyond school management to encompass peace, safety, and holistic community development. Consequently, they envision schools as secure spaces where learners and teachers can thrive academically and emotionally. These aspirations reflect a desire to break cycles of violence and create sustainable change through education.

"I dream of safe facilities and a peaceful community." **(P1)**
"I hope for a thriving and peaceful school." **(P2)**
"I want students to succeed." **(P3)**
"I hope for empowered teachers and a peaceful community." **(P4)**
"I want safety and positive change." **(P5)**

Moreover, participants emphasized that education is a powerful pathway for healing and transformation. Taken together, these narratives suggest that leadership in conflict-affected areas is deeply connected to long-term societal impact. The responses highlight that school heads perceive their roles not only as educators but also as agents of peace and community empowerment. Grounded in Community Empowerment Theory and Peacebuilding Theory, these findings illustrate that leadership functions as a catalyst for community transformation. Consequently, the school heads' aspirations reflect a profound belief in education's capacity to foster resilience, peace, and sustainable development, reinforcing leadership as both a moral and strategic force for societal progress (Plaku & Leka, 2025).

Conclusion
Leadership in conflict-affected schools is profoundly shaped by constant exposure to danger, trauma, and uncertainty. Despite these challenges, school heads demonstrate remarkable resilience, adapting their leadership strategies to maintain educational continuity while prioritizing the safety and well-being of learners and staff. Although the emotional and physical toll is significant, these leaders consistently prioritize their duty to students, balancing operational demands with emotional support for their communities.

Furthermore, leadership in these contexts extends beyond traditional instructional and administrative roles. School heads serve as protectors, crisis managers, and emotional anchors, demonstrating courage, commitment, and a deep sense of purpose. This highlights the importance of trauma-informed leadership, which recognizes and addresses both the psychological and physical challenges inherent in conflict-affected settings. In addition, community collaboration emerged as a critical factor in sustaining effective leadership. For instance, the support of teachers, parents, local authorities, and even military personnel allows school heads to share responsibility, reinforce resilience, and maintain stability. As a result, collaborative networks are essential for leadership survival and for ensuring that education continues despite ongoing threats.

Looking forward, future research could explore the long-term effects of prolonged exposure to conflict on leadership effectiveness, examine the perspectives of teachers and learners in these environments, or investigate structured programs for trauma-informed leadership development tailored to conflict-affected schools. Moreover, studies could assess strategies to strengthen community networks and institutional support to sustain leadership in high-risk educational settings. Leadership in armed-conflict schools is adaptive, community-centered, and purpose-driven. Thus, effective leadership in such environments requires resilience, emotional intelligence, and the ability to foster collaborative networks, demonstrating that commitment to learners and communities remains central even under extreme adversity.

Contributions of Authors
Author 1: proposal writing, conceptualization, literature review, development of research instruments, data gathering, data analysis, manuscript writing
Author 2: validation of tools, manuscript formatting, editing, and checking language, as well as the results for coherence and grammar clarity

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