

Original Article

Stakeholder Collaboration and Resource Optimization Strategies of Public School Leaders: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract. Public elementary schools operate under limited financial resources, challenging school leaders to sustain quality instructional programs. Despite centralized resource management policies, little is known about how principals optimize scarce resources within their local contexts. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the resource optimization strategies employed by public elementary school principals, focusing on stakeholder engagement, adaptive leadership, and policy implementation. A focus group discussion was conducted with six purposively selected principals from the Division of Davao del Sur. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: (1) adaptive resource mobilization through partnerships with local government units, alumni, and community stakeholders; (2) collaborative and transparent leadership in resource allocation; (3) structural and policy constraints affecting resource utilization; (4) contextual adaptation and resilience in responding to financial limitations; and (5) reform orientation and advocacy for improved resource management. The findings indicate that principals actively supplement limited government resources through collaborative leadership and community partnerships while adapting existing policies to local needs. However, rigid administrative structures and limited institutional support continue to constrain these efforts. The study concludes that effective resource management in public schools requires greater policy flexibility, stronger stakeholder collaboration, and context-responsive governance to support sustainable educational improvement.

Keywords: Educational leadership; Policy implementation; Public elementary schools; Resource optimization; Stakeholder collaboration.

The financing of public education remains a critical challenge, particularly in developing economies where government allocations may be insufficient to support the full cost of delivering quality instructional programs. In public elementary schools, principals are expected to maintain facilities, support teacher development, comply with administrative requirements, and improve student learning despite limited Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) budgets. Nacion Gipaya (2023) reported that school administrators frequently work within financial limitations while attempting to sustain essential school operations. Similarly, Basalaeva and Shpilman (2023) observed that available funds are often directed toward utilities, infrastructure repairs, and compliance requirements, leaving limited resources for instructional innovation and localized interventions. Together, these studies indicate that financial constraints affect both school

operations and the capacity of school leaders to respond to instructional needs.

Although previous studies agree that resource limitations influence school administration, they emphasize different aspects of the issue. Nacion Gipaya (2023) focused on the budgetary conditions affecting school operations, while Basalaeva and Shpilman (2023) highlighted how essential expenditures may restrict investments in instructional improvement. Aguilar (2023), in contrast, emphasized the leadership dimension of resource management by suggesting that resource optimization has become an essential competency for school principals. These findings collectively show that managing limited resources is not solely a financial or administrative concern. It is also a leadership responsibility that requires principals to prioritize needs, identify alternative resources, and make context-sensitive decisions.

The growing complexity of this responsibility has encouraged a shift from conventional administrative management toward strategic and collaborative forms of educational leadership. Kaakandikar and Soni (2025) argued that contemporary educational environments require transformational and strategic leadership rather than an exclusive dependence on bureaucratic procedures. In a related study, Joseph et al. (2024) emphasized that transformational school leadership extends beyond internal school management by involving communities, businesses, local government units, and other stakeholders in educational improvement. While Kaakandikar and Soni (2025) focused on the broader transition in leadership approaches, Joseph et al. (2024) identified stakeholder engagement as a practical expression of this transition. Their findings suggest that principals optimize resources not only through the management of government allocations but also through collaboration with external partners.

This reliance on external relationships may be understood through Resource Dependency Theory. The theory proposes that organizations depend on resources found in their external environment and must manage relationships with resource providers to reduce uncertainty and sustain their operations (Gilzene, 2021). In the context of public elementary schools, government funding constitutes an important resource, but it may not sufficiently address all operational and instructional needs. Principals may therefore establish relationships with local government units, alumni associations, parents, private organizations, and community members to obtain financial, material, technical, or human resources. Resource Dependency Theory is relevant to the present study because it helps explain why stakeholder collaboration becomes a central leadership strategy when internally available resources are limited. It also provides a framework for examining how external dependence may shape principals' decisions, partnerships, and resource optimization practices.

However, principals' ability to mobilize and optimize resources is influenced by the policies that govern school funding and resource utilization. Friesen et al. (2025) noted that centralized approaches may not adequately account for variations in geographic location, socioeconomic conditions, staffing, and institutional capacity. This observation presents an important contrast with studies that emphasize principals' strategic leadership and stakeholder engagement. Although leadership-oriented studies demonstrate how principals can respond creatively to resource limitations, policy-oriented literature indicates that their actions remain restricted by standardized regulations and compliance requirements. Principals may therefore experience tension between following centralized directives and responding to the immediate needs of their schools.

Existing studies have addressed financial constraints, strategic leadership, stakeholder participation, and centralized policy limitations. However, these concerns have often been examined separately. Limited attention has been given to how public elementary school principals simultaneously manage scarce resources, establish stakeholder partnerships, and navigate policies that may not fully correspond with local school conditions. Moreover, there remains a need for context-specific evidence concerning how principals themselves experience and interpret the interaction among resource limitations, external dependency, leadership practices, and policy compliance. This gap is particularly relevant in resource-constrained public elementary schools, where administrators must make daily decisions that affect both school operations and instructional programs.

Addressing this gap requires an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of school principals who continually balance policy compliance with local resource realities. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study explores how public elementary school principals manage limited resources, collaborate with stakeholders, and respond to educational policies in supporting instructional programs.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- (a) How do public elementary school principals manage limited resources to support instructional programs?
- (b) What stakeholder collaboration strategies do principals use to optimize school resources?
- (c) How do existing educational policies influence these resource optimization practices?

The findings of the study may benefit school principals by identifying resource management and stakeholder engagement practices that may be applicable to similar school contexts. Teachers and other school personnel may benefit from a clearer understanding of how participatory decision-making can support the prioritization and use of limited resources. Education policymakers and officials from the Department of Education may use the findings in reviewing resource-allocation policies, compliance requirements, and capacity-building programs for school leaders. Local government units, alumni associations, parents, and community organizations may gain insight into how their participation can contribute to school improvement. Finally, future researchers may use the findings as a basis for further investigations into educational leadership, resource dependency, stakeholder collaboration, and policy implementation in public schools.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was employed because the study sought to understand the lived experiences of public elementary school principals in optimizing limited resources and implementing instructional programs within resource-constrained environments.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Through purposive sampling, the study involved six public elementary school principals from the Division of Davao del Sur. Purposive sampling was used because the study required participants with direct knowledge and experience in school leadership, administration, and resource management. Prospective participants were identified based on the inclusion criteria and recruited through an invitation letter. A total of 10 principals were invited to participate, of whom six accepted the invitation and provided informed consent.

To qualify for participation, individuals had to: (1) be currently designated as public elementary school principals in the Division of Davao del Sur; (2) have direct administrative and leadership responsibilities in managing an elementary school; (3) possess sufficient school management and leadership experience to provide relevant insights; and (4) be willing and available to participate during the data collection period.

Research Instrument

A researcher-made Focus Group Discussion (FGD) protocol was utilized as the primary research instrument of the study. The FGD protocol was composed of open-ended guide questions and follow-up probes designed to elicit detailed narratives from public elementary school principals regarding their lived experiences in resource optimization, stakeholder collaboration, and policy implementation. The questions were developed based on the three central research questions of the study and were aligned with the theoretical foundations of the paper, particularly Resource Dependency Theory, Distributed Leadership Theory, Curriculum Implementation Theory, Growth Mindset, and Leadership for Social Justice.

During the FGD, the participants were asked to describe the resource-related challenges they commonly encountered in implementing instructional programs in their schools. They were also asked how they prioritized school needs when resources were limited and what strategies they used to maximize or optimize available school resources. These questions were intended to address the first research objective by exploring how school principals navigate financial and material constraints in sustaining instructional programs. They were also aligned with Resource Dependency Theory, which emphasizes how organizations strategically manage internal and external resources to survive and function effectively despite scarcity.

The participants were further asked to identify the stakeholders they usually engaged when addressing resource limitations and to explain how these stakeholders contributed to the school. They were also asked how they encouraged collaboration, transparency, and shared decision-making in the use of school resources. These questions were intended to address the second research objective, which focused on stakeholder collaboration

strategies. They were also aligned with Distributed Leadership Theory because they examined how school principals involved teachers, parents, local government units, alumni, and other community members in decision-making, planning, and resource mobilization.

In addition, the FGD included questions on the resource optimization practices that had been effective in the participants' schools and the reasons these practices worked in their respective contexts. The principals were also asked what policies or directives affected their ability to manage and optimize school resources, as well as why some practices continued, changed, or failed despite existing educational policies and directives. These questions addressed the third research objective by examining the relationship between policy implementation and actual school-level practices. They were aligned with Curriculum Implementation Theory, as they explored how centralized directives were interpreted, adapted, or constrained by local school realities.

Finally, the participants were asked to provide recommendations to policymakers on how resource management and support for public elementary schools could be improved. This question was aligned with Leadership for Social Justice because it allowed the principals to express reform-oriented insights based on their lived experiences. Overall, the FGD questions were selected because they directly corresponded to the study's objectives and theoretical framework. Their open-ended structure allowed participants to provide rich descriptions, clarify meanings, and share concrete examples of leadership practices in resource-constrained public elementary school settings.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through one face-to-face Focus Group Discussion session conducted with six public elementary school principals from the Division of Davao del Sur. The participants formed a single FGD group, which allowed the researcher to facilitate an interactive discussion among school leaders who shared direct experiences in managing resource constraints, stakeholder collaboration, and policy implementation in public elementary schools. The FGD was held at the Principal's Office of Sacub Elementary School and lasted for 58 minutes. The session was audio-recorded with the explicit permission of the participants and was later transcribed verbatim, including responses expressed in English and translated local dialects.

Before the FGD began, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, secured informed consent, and assured the participants of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. The researcher used a semi-structured FGD guide consisting of open-ended questions and follow-up probes. The discussion focused on the principals' experiences in navigating limited resources, prioritizing school needs, mobilizing stakeholders, implementing resource optimization strategies, and responding to policies and directives affecting school-level resource management.

Several contextual factors influenced the conduct of the data-gathering process. Since the participants were all active public elementary school principals, the FGD was scheduled at a time and place that was accessible and convenient for them. The use of a familiar school-based venue helped create a professional and comfortable environment where participants could freely share their experiences. The group composition also allowed participants to compare practices, affirm common challenges, and elaborate on shared realities in managing limited school resources. Moreover, the use of English and local dialects during the discussion enabled participants to express their ideas more naturally and accurately.

Throughout the session, the researcher encouraged equal participation among the six principals and used follow-up probes to clarify responses, obtain concrete examples, and deepen the discussion. These procedures ensured that the data gathered were sufficiently rich, context-based, and aligned with the objectives of the study. The detailed documentation of the number of FGD sessions, duration, group size, venue, language use, and contextual conditions strengthened the credibility and transparency of the data-gathering process.

Data Analysis Procedure

The transcribed data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. This approach allowed themes to be developed from the lived experiences and narratives of public elementary school principals rather than from predetermined categories. The analysis was conducted manually.

The researchers moderated the focus group discussion and used a semi-structured discussion guide and follow-

up questions to obtain detailed responses. Assistant moderators were present during the discussion. The assistant moderator recorded field notes, monitored the audio recorder, observed nonverbal responses, and assisted with the organization of the discussion. Data saturation was considered achieved when participants' responses became repetitive, and no substantially new information or categories emerged from the discussion.

The researcher first became familiar with the data by repeatedly reading the verbatim FGD transcript. Significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful expressions concerning resource constraints, stakeholder collaboration, leadership practices, policy implementation, and reform recommendations were noted. Initial codes were then generated from words, phrases, and transcript segments that represented relevant meanings in the participants' responses. These included stakeholder mobilization, local government support, participatory decision-making, resourcefulness, fiscal transparency, policy-context misalignment, surface compliance, contextual adaptation, and advocacy for change.

Related codes were grouped into broader categories based on their similarities and relevance to the research questions. For example, stakeholder mobilization, local government support, alumni engagement, and parent involvement were categorized under community partnership. Participatory decision-making and fiscal transparency were grouped under collaborative leadership. The categories were subsequently examined and organized into five themes: adaptive resource mobilization, collaborative and transparent leadership, structural and policy constraints, contextual adaptation and resilience, and reform orientation and advocacy.

The themes were reviewed against the coded transcript segments to determine whether they accurately represented the participants' accounts. Overlapping themes were clarified, while categories with insufficient supporting data were revised or merged with related categories. The final themes were then named and defined according to their central meanings and their relevance to the research objectives and theoretical framework. Representative participant quotations were selected to demonstrate how the findings were grounded in the data. Several procedures were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review and validate the summary of their responses. A qualitative research expert also reviewed the coding process and resulting themes to assess their consistency and appropriateness. An audit trail was maintained to document the processes of transcription, coding, categorization, theme development, and refinement. Patterns were also compared across participants to identify areas of agreement, variation, and contradiction. These procedures strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Table 1 presents the coding of selected transcript segments and illustrates the progression from participant statements to initial codes, categories, and final themes.

Table 1. Systematic Coding of Significant Transcript Segments

Transcript Segment	Initial Code	Category	Final Theme	Participant
"We MAXIMIZE partnerships with the barangay and with parents' associations."	Stakeholder Mobilization	Community Partnership	Adaptive Resource Mobilization	P1
"The barangay captain was very supportive. They donated a new unit."	LGU Support	Community Partnership		P2
"The decision was made collectively."	Participatory Decision-Making	Collaborative Leadership	Adaptive Resource Mobilization	P2
"We train our teachers to create improvised materials."	Resourcefulness / Improvisation	Adaptive Resource Use	Contextual Adaptation and Resilience	P3
"Resource scarcity is not an excuse to reduce quality."	Growth Mindset	Teacher Empowerment	Contextual Adaptation and Resilience	P4
"Recycled materials to create manipulatives."	Low-Cost Instructional Materials	Adaptive Resource Use	Collaborative and Transparent Leadership	P4
"Seeing the bigger picture... investing resources where they have the most impact."	Strategic Planning	Leadership Competency		P5
"When parents SEE where the money goes... they are more willing to contribute."	Fiscal Transparency	Community Partnership		P1
"Alumni... raised funds for our library."	Alumni Engagement	Community Partnership	Structural and Policy Constraints	P3
"Not all partnerships work out... always have a backup plan."	Partnership Risk Management	Strategic Planning		P4
"Policies are designed from the top... do not fit ground reality."	Policy-Context Misalignment	Structural Challenge		P6
"Contextual FIT is key."	Contextual Adaptation	Policy Implementation	Contextual Adaptation and Resilience	P2
"Comply superficially or find workarounds."	Surface Compliance	Policy Implementation		P2
"Told WHAT to do but not HOW."	Lack of Capacity-Building Support	Structural Challenge		P5
"We hope these conversations reach the policymakers."	Advocacy for Change	Reform Orientation	Reform Orientation and Advocacy	P1

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the highest standard of qualitative research integrity, strict ethical protocols were observed throughout the study, aligning with modern human-subject research guidelines (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). Prior to the session, informed consent forms were distributed and signed by all participants, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose. Participants were explicitly informed of their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without prejudice, a critical requirement for safeguarding participant autonomy (Rajasegaram & Gani, 2025). To protect identities and encourage candid discourse regarding state policies, confidentiality was assured, with all actual names replaced by alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2) in all transcripts and publications. Explicit permission for audio recording was sought and granted before the FGD commenced. Furthermore, all digital and physical data are stored securely and utilized solely for academic research purposes, adhering to data privacy mandates (Roberts & Allen, 2015). Finally, a thorough debriefing was conducted at the end of the session to address any participant questions and validate their shared experiences.

Results and Discussion

Inductive thematic analysis of the focus group discussion with six public elementary school principals in the Division of Davao del Sur generated five themes: adaptive resource mobilization, collaborative and transparent leadership, structural and policy constraints, contextual adaptation and resilience, and reform orientation and advocacy. The findings are presented through representative participant quotations, followed by concise interpretation, comparison with relevant literature, and implications for educational leadership and resource management.

Theme 1: Adaptive Resource Mobilization

The participants consistently described seeking resources beyond regular government allocations. Their strategies included coordinating with local government units, engaging parents and community associations, approaching alumni, and producing low-cost instructional materials. These actions were used to address immediate operational and instructional needs that the schools' available funds could not fully cover.

"We maximize partnerships with the barangay and with parents' associations." (P1)

"The barangay captain was very supportive. They donated a new unit." (P2)

"Alumni raised funds for our library." (P3)

The findings suggest that community partnerships have become an important strategy for supplementing limited school resources. Participants did not describe a single source of assistance. Instead, they combined support from local officials, parents, alumni, and other community members according to the needs and opportunities available in their respective schools. Improvising instructional materials also enabled them to respond to shortages without waiting for additional allocations.

These findings are consistent with Resource Dependency Theory, which explains how organizations manage relationships with external actors to obtain resources that are not sufficiently available internally (Stern et al., 1978). They also support Hands (2023), who emphasized the role of school-community networks in strengthening local capacity, and Sathiyaseelan et al. (2024), who associated low-cost innovation with the continuation of educational services in resource-constrained settings. However, the capacity to mobilize external support may vary across communities. As noted by Maruyama and Igei (2024), schools in economically disadvantaged areas may have fewer local resources from which to draw.

The findings therefore indicate that stakeholder partnerships can supplement school resources, but they should not replace adequate and equitable government funding. Schools may benefit from clear procedures for building partnerships, documenting contributions, and ensuring that resource mobilization remains transparent and aligned with instructional priorities.

Theme 2: Collaborative and Transparent Leadership

Participants identified participatory decision-making and financial transparency as important practices in allocating limited resources. Teachers, parents, and community representatives were involved in identifying priorities, while principals explained how available funds and stakeholder contributions were used. These practices helped establish shared responsibility for school needs.

"When parents see where the money goes, they are more willing to contribute." (P1)

"The decision was made collectively." (P2)

The quotations show that transparency was linked to stakeholder trust and willingness to participate. Collective decision-making also provided a basis for prioritizing urgent concerns, such as classroom repairs and instructional materials. Rather than making resource decisions independently, the principals described consultation as a way of increasing acceptance of difficult choices.

These findings support distributed leadership, which recognizes that school leadership and decision-making may be shared among individuals and groups rather than concentrated solely in the principal (Spillane & Mertz, 2015). They are also consistent with Kavgaci and Ozturk (2023), who linked transparent and participatory practices with stakeholder trust, and Mandaguio (2025), who found that collective decision-making may strengthen support for school initiatives. Nevertheless, broad participation may require additional time and coordination. Kwon and Kim (2025) cautioned that poorly structured participation can increase workloads and delay decisions.

The findings suggest that participatory budgeting and accessible financial reporting may strengthen community confidence when roles, timelines, and decision-making procedures are clearly defined. Collaboration should therefore be organized in ways that encourage stakeholder voice without creating unnecessary administrative burdens for teachers and school personnel.

Theme 3: Structural and Policy Constraints

Participants described difficulties in implementing policies that did not fully reflect the conditions of their schools. Geographic location, community resources, staffing, and available funding affected their capacity to comply with standardized requirements. They also indicated that some directives were introduced without sufficient guidance or capacity-building support.

"Policies are designed from the top. They do not fit ground reality." (P6)

"Told what to do but not how." (P5)

"Comply superficially or find workarounds." (P2)

These accounts indicate a gap between formal policy expectations and the resources available for local implementation. The reference to superficial compliance suggests that some requirements were completed at the documentary level even when meaningful implementation was difficult. In this context, workarounds served as practical responses to competing demands, although they did not resolve the underlying mismatch between policy and school capacity.

The findings are consistent with implementation perspectives emphasizing that policy outcomes depend on local capacity, contextual fit, guidance, and sustained support (Okyerere, 2025). Pashmforoosh (2022) similarly observed that insufficient implementation support may lead to procedural rather than substantive compliance, while Hubbard (2024) associated context-insensitive directives with reduced school-level innovation. At the same time, standardized policies can provide common expectations and minimum safeguards across schools (Hansen, 2019). The issue raised by participants is therefore not the absence of standards, but the limited flexibility and support available when applying them in different contexts.

The findings suggest that new directives should be accompanied by practical guidance, training, and mechanisms through which school leaders can report implementation barriers. Limited contextual flexibility may also be considered when local conditions prevent schools from meeting requirements in the same manner or within the same timeframe.

Theme 4: Contextual Adaptation and Resilience

Participants described adapting programs and resource decisions to the specific conditions of their schools. Their responses included producing alternative instructional materials, preparing contingency plans, training teachers to use available resources, and modifying initiatives when partnerships or planned support did not materialize.

"Resource scarcity is not an excuse to reduce quality." (P4)

"Contextual fit is key." (P2)

"Not all partnerships work out. Always have a backup plan." (P4)

These statements show that participants viewed adaptation as an ongoing leadership responsibility. They sought to maintain instructional activities by matching strategies to local conditions and preparing alternatives when resources were uncertain. The data also indicate that resilience was expressed through school-level practices, including shared problem-solving and contingency planning, rather than through individual persistence alone.

These findings are consistent with studies that frame organizational resilience as the capacity to sustain core functions while responding to disruption and resource limitations (Ozdemir et al., 2023). They also support Haokip (2024) and Cole and Stavros (2025), who associated a growth-oriented approach with learning, adjustment, and problem-solving under difficult conditions. However, Ortega-Dela Cruz (2026) cautioned that emphasizing resilience without addressing structural underfunding may transfer responsibility for systemic limitations to individual educators.

The findings suggest that contextual decision-making, contingency planning, and resourceful instructional practices may be included in leadership development programs. Such preparation can strengthen school-level responses to uncertainty, but it should complement rather than substitute for adequate funding, staffing, and institutional support.

Theme 5: Reform Orientation and Advocacy

Beyond addressing immediate school needs, participants expressed interest in contributing to policy improvement. They wanted the experiences of school leaders to inform decisions at higher administrative levels and emphasized strategic planning, teacher empowerment, and the allocation of resources to activities with the greatest expected benefit.

"We hope these conversations reach the policymakers." (P1)

"Seeing the bigger picture, investing resources where they have the most impact." (P5)

The findings indicate that principals did not view themselves solely as policy implementers. Their accounts reflected a desire to communicate implementation challenges and propose adjustments based on school-level evidence. This orientation was connected to their direct experience of balancing compliance requirements, instructional priorities, and limited resources.

These findings are consistent with leadership for social justice, which positions educational leaders as participants in identifying and addressing inequitable institutional conditions (Shields, 2026). Turkoglu Ozdemir and Sincar (2025) likewise associated school leadership with advocacy for equitable resource distribution, while Mihaescu and Andone (2023) emphasized the value of feedback from implementers in developing context-responsive policy. However, upward advocacy may be difficult in hierarchical systems, particularly when safe and formal channels for critical feedback are limited (Prestoza & Naldoza, 2025).

The findings suggest a need for regular and protected mechanisms through which principals can communicate policy effects, resource gaps, and locally developed solutions. Division-level consultations, structured implementation reviews, and written feedback processes may help connect school experiences with policy development while reducing the risks associated with informal or individual advocacy.

Conclusion

Public elementary school principals manage limited financial resources through adaptive resource mobilization, collaborative and transparent leadership, stakeholder engagement, and context-responsive decision-making. These practices help sustain instructional programs, although centralized policies, limited flexibility, and insufficient capacity-building support influence their implementation. This study contributes qualitative evidence on how public elementary school principals simultaneously mobilize external resources, collaborate with stakeholders, and navigate policy constraints in responding to school-level needs. The findings suggest that resource optimization is shaped by the interaction between adaptive school leadership and the institutional

conditions governing resource allocation and policy implementation. Future studies may examine similar practices in secondary schools, other geographic locations, or larger participant groups using comparative or mixed-method approaches.

Contributions of Authors

The principal author contributes to the study's writing and implementation. The co-authors edit and supervise the data.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors assert no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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