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Research Article

Leading and Managing Geographically Isolated Schools in a VUCA Environment: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Principals in Romblon, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

School principals in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas operate under volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions that intensify the demands of educational leadership and management. This study explored how principals in geographically isolated schools in Romblon, Philippines experienced and integrated authentic leadership and educational management within a VUCA environment. Method: Using transcendental phenomenology, the study engaged nine elementary and secondary school principals selected through purposive sampling. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and supplementary document review. Analysis followed epoché, phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. Results: Findings showed that authentic leadership was enacted through vision anchored on learner needs, collaborative influence, Filipino cultural values, presence, trust, and service. Educational management was performed through structured monitoring, role clarification, strategic resource prioritization, policy alignment, delegation, and operational discipline. VUCA conditions were experienced through weather disruptions, transportation barriers, unclear policies, resource scarcity, staffing limitations, and changing learning modalities. Elementary school contexts required more direct, hands-on, and overlapping leadership roles, whereas secondary contexts involved broader curriculum, governance, and coordination demands. Conclusion: The transcending essence of the phenomenon was values-driven resilience through integrated authentic leadership and educational management. To lead and

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manage a geographically isolated school authentically meant serving with heart, deciding with integrity, organizing with discipline, adapting with resilience, and sustaining education through collective school-community strength.

Keywords: *Authentic leadership, Educational management, Filipino values, Geographically isolated schools, School principals, Transcendental phenomenology, VUCA*

Introduction

Educational leadership in the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). These conditions require school principals to respond to changing policies, shifting educational demands, and unpredictable organizational challenges while sustaining school effectiveness. Leadership and management are conceptually distinct but practically intertwined: leadership provides vision, influence, values, and direction, while management organizes structures, resources, processes, and policy implementation (Abdelkader et al., 2023; Pont, 2020).

The demands placed on principals become more pronounced in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA). In island provinces such as Romblon, geographic isolation may intensify difficulties related to infrastructure, transportation, communication, professional support, and resource access. Principals in these schools are expected to maintain instructional continuity and administrative accountability while addressing school-community needs under constrained conditions (Moral et al., 2020; Myende et al., 2020).

Authentic leadership provides a relevant lens for examining principals' work in such contexts. It emphasizes self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). In educational settings, authentic leadership has been associated with trust, professional commitment, collaborative culture, and school effectiveness (Hsu, 2024; Saarinen et al., 2022). However, many studies have examined leadership through competencies or outcomes rather than the lived meanings that principals attach to leadership and management in isolated contexts.

This study addressed that gap by exploring the lived experiences of elementary and secondary school principals assigned to geographically isolated schools in the Province of Romblon. Specifically, it examined how they enacted authentic educational leadership, performed educational management, navigated VUCA conditions, differentiated leadership across elementary and secondary contexts, integrated leadership with management, and constructed shared meanings from these experiences.

Materials and Methods

Research Methodology

Research Design The study used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design. This approach was appropriate because the inquiry sought to describe the essence of principals' lived experiences rather than measure leadership effectiveness statistically. Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to engage in *epoché*, identify significant statements, develop meaning units, and synthesize textural and structural descriptions into the essence of the phenomenon (Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Moustakas, 1994; Stolz, 2022).

Participants and Locale The participants were nine school principals assigned to geographically isolated public elementary and secondary schools in the Province of Romblon, Philippines. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience leading and managing schools under geographically isolated conditions. Including both elementary and secondary principals allowed the study to capture contextual variation in school size, organizational structure, personnel composition, curriculum demands, and administrative responsibilities.

Data Gathering Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the prin-

cipals. Interviews focused on authentic leadership, educational management, VUCA-related challenges, contextual differences between elementary and secondary schools, and leadership-management integration. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Relevant school documents such as plans and reports were also reviewed as supplementary contextual materials.

Data Analysis and Rigor The analysis followed transcendental phenomenological procedures. The researcher first bracketed personal assumptions through *epoché*. Interview transcripts were then read repeatedly to identify significant statements through horizontalization. These statements were clustered into meaning units, which informed textural descriptions of what principals experienced and structural descriptions of how these experiences were shaped by GIDA and VUCA conditions. Trustworthiness was strengthened through careful transcript review, participant coding, documentation of analytic decisions,

and attention to recurring meanings across participants (Moustakas, 1994; Nowell et al., 2021).

Ethical Considerations Institutional permission and informed consent were secured before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants could refuse to answer questions or withdraw at any time. Participant codes P1 to P9 were used to preserve anonymity. Because geographically isolated communities may make participants easier to identify, details that could reveal the identity of schools or principals were minimized.

Result and Discussion

The findings were organized according to the research questions and synthesized through emergent themes. They show that leadership in geographically isolated schools is not only a formal administrative responsibility but also a relational, moral, adaptive, and community-rooted practice.

Table 1. Emergent themes on authentic educational leadership

Emergent Theme	Core Meaning	Supporting Participants
Vision anchored on learner needs and school improvement	Principals guided school direction through SIP development, performance review, contextualized programs, remediation, innovation, and learner-centered interventions.	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9
Influence through collaboration and shared ownership	Principals influenced teachers and staff through consultation, open communication, shared planning, empowerment, and recognition of teachers' efforts.	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9
Leadership grounded in Filipino values	Malasakit, bayanihan, and pakikipagkapwa-tao shaped decision-making, stakeholder relationships, and school-community trust.	P1-P9
Authentic leadership as presence, trust, and service	Principals experienced leadership as being sincere, fair, caring, visible, approachable, and service-oriented.	P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9

Authentic educational leadership was experienced as relational, values-driven, and responsive to the realities of geographically isolated schools. Principals did not describe leadership merely as positional authority. Instead, they described it as the ability to provide school

direction, influence teachers through collaboration, and sustain trust through Filipino cultural values. One participant explained, "I spearheaded a data-driven diagnostic through SWOT analysis and community profiling. This allowed me to set a strategic direction

grounded in actual needs" [P4]. Another participant emphasized shared work: "I am their co-worker, not a boss" [P9]. These narratives affirm that authenticity was enacted through vision, humility, transparency, and shared responsibility. They also extend authentic

leadership theory by showing how authenticity is culturally expressed through malasakit, bayanihan, and pakikipagkapwa-tao in Philippine GIDA schools (Avolio & Gardner, 2025; Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Nowell et al., 2021; Pont, 2020).

Table 2. Emergent themes on educational management practices

Emergent Theme	Core Meaning	Supporting Participants
Structured daily monitoring and role clarification	Principals used checklists, classroom monitoring, consultations, task delegation, role clarification, and daily operational routines.	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9
Strategic resource prioritization	Limited funds and materials were allocated according to urgency, equity, learner impact, SIP priorities, and DepEd requirements.	P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9
Policy alignment and compliance	Principals aligned activities with the SIP, AIP, APP, DepEd programs, reporting requirements, and policy issuances.	P2, P6, P7, P8, P9
Management through delegation and prioritization	Principals addressed multitasking, limited manpower, compliance pressure, stakeholder concerns, and simultaneous responsibilities through delegation and prioritization.	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9

Educational management served as a stabilizing mechanism. Principals performed management by clarifying roles, organizing schedules, monitoring instruction, allocating limited resources, and ensuring compliance with DepEd mandates. One participant stated, "I manage daily operations through clear delegation of tasks, structured coordination with teachers and staff, and consistent monitoring of school

activities" (P7). Resource allocation was also treated as an ethical decision because limited funds and materials had to be directed toward programs with the greatest learner impact. This supports the view that educational management involves planning, organizing, coordinating, supervising, allocating resources, and maintaining operational continuity (Abdelkader et al., 2023; Pont, 2020).

Table 3. Principals' navigation of VUCA conditions

VUCA Dimension	Manifestation in the Data	Principals' Responses
Volatility	Sudden weather changes, typhoons, flooding, pandemic disruptions, unstable learning delivery modes, and urgent repairs	Rapid response, flexible planning, consultation, and coordination with LGU and stakeholders
Uncertainty	Unclear policies, delayed materials, unpredictable transportation, unstable internet access, and uncertain transitions in learning delivery	Consultation with supervisors, policy review, reliance on DepEd issuances, data gathering, and collaborative decision-making
Complexity	Simultaneous instructional, administrative, compliance, resource, and stakeholder concerns	Prioritization, delegation, structured communication, and shared responsibility

VUCA Dimension	Manifestation in the Data	Principals' Responses
Ambiguity	Changing guidelines, multiple interpretations of policies, and conflicting expectations	Evidence-based decisions, professional judgment, learner-centered action, and transparency

VUCA conditions were not occasional disruptions but part of principals' daily leadership reality. Volatility was experienced through weather disturbances, flooding, difficult terrain, pandemic transitions, and unstable learning modalities. P4 explained, "In a GIDA setting, VUCA is a daily reality." Principals transformed uncertainty into action through policy literacy, stakeholder consultation,

professional judgment, and collaborative decision-making. These findings confirm that leadership in VUCA environments requires adaptability, resilience, collaboration, and strategic thinking (Hongchai & Weber, 2023; Mutil et al., 2024). In Romblon, however, VUCA was intensified by geographic isolation, limited communication access, and delayed support systems.

Table 4. Differences between elementary and secondary school contexts

Area of Comparison	Elementary or Small School Contexts	Secondary or Larger School Contexts
Organizational structure	Flatter structure, fewer personnel, direct supervision, and role overlap	Layered structure, larger teacher and support staff groups, and formal school organizations
Leadership approach	Highly personal, direct, hands-on, and relational	Program-based, consultative, and organization-based
Management demands	Multitasking, coordinatorship overload, limited manpower, and reliance on community or mother-school support	Broader curriculum management, governance management, budget management, and formal coordination
Resource context	Limited materials, personnel, connectivity, and basic facilities	Wider access to personnel and downloaded budget in some cases, but still affected by isolation and enrollment concerns
Main implication	Leadership and management are highly embodied in the school head's daily presence	Leadership and management are distributed through curriculum, governance, and organizational systems

Differences between elementary and secondary contexts were mainly structural and operational. In elementary or small school contexts, principals often performed overlapping roles because of limited personnel and flatter structures. One participant described the difficulty of shifting from teacher to school head while handling multigrade responsibilities

[P2]. Secondary school contexts were broader and more formalized, involving curriculum management, governance management, larger staff groups, and more organizational systems. Thus, principals shared a common moral commitment to learners and communities, but their leadership-management practice differed in scope, structure, and complexity.

Table 5. Integration of educational leadership and educational management

Emergent Theme	Core Meaning	Supporting Participants
Vision translated into systems	Principals aligned school vision with SIP, school plans,	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9

Emergent Theme	Core Meaning	Supporting Participants
	SLAC, technical assistance, schedules, reports, and implementation structures.	
Leadership inspired; management operationalized	Leadership provided direction, motivation, values, and purpose; management provided structure, resources, and implementation.	P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9
Balance through prioritization and delegation	Principals balanced people-centered leadership with administrative duties through time blocking, task delegation, shared leadership, and prioritization.	P2, P4, P6, P7, P9
Interdependence of leadership and management	Participants rejected a strict separation of the two roles and described both as necessary for school success.	P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9

Principals integrated leadership and management by translating vision into structured action. Leadership provided inspiration, values, and relational influence, while management provided schedules, resources, processes, and accountability. P6 summarized this integration by stating, "Leadership provides the inspiration; structured management provides

the infrastructure." P7 added, "Vision without structure leads to confusion; structure without vision leads to stagnation." In geographically isolated schools, leadership-management integration was not merely a professional expectation; it was a survival strategy for sustaining learning amid scarcity and disruption.

Table 6. Shared meanings and transcending essences

Transcending Essence	Meaning Constructed from Participants' Experiences	Supporting Participants
Authentic leadership as leading with heart and integrity	Leadership meant sincerity, fairness, care, credibility, ethical judgment, service, and meaningful impact.	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9
Management as sustaining learning despite limits	Effective management meant ensuring that plans and programs were implemented despite limited resources.	P4, P5, P6, P7, P9
Resilience and adaptability as survival leadership	Geographic isolation required flexibility, resourcefulness, patience, courage, and the ability to continue despite disruption.	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9
Community as the lifeline of school leadership	Partnerships with teachers, parents, BLGU, LGU, mother school, indigenous leaders, and stakeholders sustained school programs.	P2, P4, P5, P7, P9
Integration as the essence of school headship	Principals lived leadership and management simultaneously as vision, structure, care, accountability, and continuity.	P1-P9

The synthesis of textural and structural descriptions revealed the transcending essence of the phenomenon: values-driven resilience through integrated authentic leadership and educational management. Principals did not experience leadership and management as separate identities. They lived both roles simultaneously by providing vision, caring for people, organizing systems, mobilizing community support, managing scarce resources, responding to uncertainty, and sustaining learning despite isolation and disruption. In their experience, geographic isolation did not mean social isolation; schools survived through relationships, collective effort, and community-rooted moral practice.

Conclusions

The study concludes that authentic leadership among principals in geographically isolated schools is relational, values-driven, service-oriented, and culturally embedded. It is enacted through vision anchored on learner needs, collaborative influence, ethical judgment, transparency, and Filipino values such as *malasakit*, *bayanihan*, and *pakikipagkapwatao*.

Educational management is equally essential because it gives structure to leadership vision. Principals sustain school operations through role clarification, scheduling, resource prioritization, policy alignment, delegation, documentation, and monitoring. In GIDA contexts, management is not merely administrative compliance; it is the practical means by which learning continues despite scarcity.

Elementary and secondary school contexts shape leadership and management differently. Elementary principals often work within flatter structures and overlapping roles, while secondary principals manage broader governance, curriculum, and organizational systems. Across both contexts, however, leadership and management are interdependent.

The central essence of the phenomenon is that to lead and manage a geographically isolated school authentically is to serve with heart, decide with integrity, organize with discipline, adapt with resilience, and sustain education through the collective strength of the school and community. Leadership development

programs for GIDA principals should therefore emphasize not only competencies but also ethical judgment, adaptive management, community partnership, and culturally grounded authentic leadership.

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Declarations

Ethical approval: The study secured institutional permission and informed consent from the participants prior to data collection.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. This statement may be revised if needed before submission.

Data availability: Interview transcripts are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality in geographically isolated communities.

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