



Voice from the Coastal: A Narrative Inquiry on the Opportunities in the Implementation of Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) among Newly Designated Schoolheads in Kalamansig

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Authors:

¹Joseph D. Espartero

FB Concha Memorial Elementary School

²Josevic Hurtada, PhD

East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences and opportunities of newly designated school heads implementing the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat. Utilizing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the research purposefully sampled 5-8 new school leaders with less than five years of experience. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions, and subsequently analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The findings revealed that these leaders experienced a challenging transition marked by initial uncertainty before developing a profound commitment to their school communities. They faced severe operational difficulties inherent in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) and last-mile schools, including deteriorated infrastructure, lack of electricity, and high learner absenteeism driven by geographic barriers and economic responsibilities like farming and mining. Consequently, effective leadership in this coastal and remote context required deep cultural sensitivity, adaptive flexibility, and trust-based community partnerships rather than rigid adherence to standardized policies. Furthermore, systemic challenges such as frequent curriculum changes and inequitable resource distribution significantly hindered operations. The study concludes that achieving quality education in last-mile schools necessitates highly contextualized leadership and shared community ownership. It recommends that policymakers prioritize equitable resource allocation for GIDA schools, establish transparent data reporting systems, ensure curriculum stability, and provide targeted, localized professional development to better support newly designated school heads.



Keywords: *Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), newly designated school heads, narrative inquiry, educational leadership, Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

With rapid curricular modifications and the rise of technological interventions in the educational system of the Department of Education (DepEd), the number of millennials, fresh-breed, and tech-savvy school heads increased and accepted the challenge to serve as agents of change. They made a significant impact on the educational setting through their information-sharing practices, building supportive social connections, participating in mentoring programs, and fostering progress amid constant change.

In Guyana, South America, newly appointed school principals faced significant challenges in learning and adjusting to the school culture, which was crucial for effective leadership. These challenges included difficulties with decision-making and workload management, often exacerbated by limited support and socialization processes. However, gaining experience through these challenges helped principals build confidence and competence in managing school culture and implementing necessary changes to improve teaching and learning. Support from staff during the initial stages was vital to help new principals navigate these challenges effectively and maximize their leadership potential, ultimately benefiting the school community and educational outcomes (Medford & Brown, 2022).

In the Philippine educational system, the role of the school head was one of

increasing complexity, requiring a blend of instructional, managerial, and ethical leadership. In a commitment to enhance the quality of basic education, the DepEd institutionalized the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) through DepEd Order No. 024, s. 2020. The PPSSH was a robust framework that clearly defined the expectations for school heads across five career stages, encompassing five core domains: Leading Strategically, Managing School Operations and Resources, Focusing on Teaching and Learning, Developing Self and Others, and Building Connections. It served as the foundation for human resource systems, performance assessment, and professional development programs, aiming to develop competent and transformative school leaders.

In the Municipality of Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat, it was evident that most of the school heads were young and new to the designation, yet they showcased competitiveness in complying with the mandates of the department. The transition to a school head position was a significant career milestone, often presenting new leaders with both formidable challenges and substantial opportunities. For newly designated school heads, the implementation of a national standard like the PPSSH was experienced within a unique local context. This required a localized understanding of how the framework was interpreted, adopted, and integrated into their daily leadership practice.

This study, titled "Voice from the Coastal: A Narrative Inquiry on the Opportunities in the Implementation of PPSSH among Newly Designated School Heads in Kalamansig," was an endeavor to capture the lived experiences of these new leaders. By adopting a narrative inquiry approach, the research aimed to move beyond a simple assessment of compliance and to examine the opportunities for professional growth, school improvement, and community engagement that the PPSSH



framework facilitated, as perceived by school heads themselves.

Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), this research aimed to demonstrate how better education supported individual growth, societal development, and global competitiveness by providing essential knowledge, skills, and values. It built the human capital necessary for economic progress, fostered safe and inclusive environments, and promoted social cohesion, peace, justice, and strong institutions. This foundation prepared learners for meaningful employment, responsible citizenship, and participation in democratic processes, thereby contributing to sustainable development and societal stability.

Theoretical Frameworks

Narrative inquiry, as established by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), posits that human experience is inherently storied and best understood through personal narratives, emphasizing the profound intertwining of education and life experiences. This framework acknowledges that the leadership experiences of school heads are continuously shaped across three dimensions: time (temporality), social interactions (sociality), and specific environments (place). Consequently, it enables researchers to examine in depth how newly designated school heads interpret their experiences of adapting to and implementing the PPSSH within their unique coastal community contexts. Furthermore, the theory supports the collaborative construction of knowledge between researchers and participants, amplifying the voices and lived realities of school leaders while highlighting the ongoing processes of growth, change, and cultural navigation inherent in their roles.

The study posits that the opportunities perceived and experienced by newly-designated School Heads in Kalamansig during the initial implementation of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) are shaped by their narrative experiences within their specific coastal context.

Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study gathers personal stories to understand how standards are interpreted and enacted within this unique socio-cultural context, emphasizing the dynamic between theory (PPSSH standards) and practice (school heads' experiences).

This framework supports exploring how contextual factors mediate the enactment of leadership standards and how these contribute to educational outcomes and leadership development (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Department of Education, 2017).

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore and understand the opportunities experienced by newly designated school heads in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat in the implementation of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH).

Specifically, this narrative inquiry aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How did Newly-Designated School Heads in Kalamansig narrate their lived experiences as they transitioned into and assumed their leadership roles?
2. How did these school heads interpret, apply, and integrate the principles and standards articulated in the PPSSH Domains such as



- 2.1 Leading Strategically,
- 2.2. Managing School Operations,
- 2.3. Focusing Teaching and Learning,
- 2.4. Developing Self and
- 2.5. Others and Building Connections; within the specific day-to-day realities of the Kalamansig context?

3. In what ways did the unique Contextual Influences of Kalamansig shape both the leadership practices of the Newly-Designated School Heads and their understanding of the PPSSH?

4. What Opportunities in Implementation emerged from the narratives that highlighted the dynamic interaction between professional standards, personal experience, and the local context, which could inform future policy and support programs?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design. This approach was suitable for understanding the lived experiences and personal stories of newly-designated school heads as they navigated the implementation of PPSSH. Narrative inquiry allowed a rich, in-depth examination of the opportunities encountered, providing meaningful insights grounded in participants' voices (Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M., 2000).

The study aimed to delve into lived experiences to reveal meanings and practices that numerical data alone could not fully capture or explain. By concentrating on personal and contextual narratives, the

research sought a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances that shaped how individuals experienced and interpreted phenomena.

This approach recognized that some aspects of human experience—such as emotions, perceptions, and meanings—were best explored through qualitative inquiry rather than through quantitative measurement.

Thus, the study prioritized rich, descriptive data that illuminated subjective realities, going beyond what statistical data could convey (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Participants of the Study

The participants were new school heads in Kalamansig who had recently started implementing the PPSSH. Purposive sampling was used to select 5 to 8 participants with less than 5 years of experience who could provide rich, detailed narratives about their experiences. Participants were recruited based on their willingness to share their stories and their involvement with PPSSH implementation within the last two years.

Sampling Technique

This study employed a Purposive Sampling Technique to purposefully select 4-8 school heads from selected elementary and secondary schools in the Municipality of Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat during the school year 2025–2026 (Palinkas, L. A., et al., 2015).

This technique involved deliberately selecting participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study's focus, such as newly-designated school heads actively involved in PPSSH implementation in Kalamansig.



Purposive sampling in narrative inquiry prioritized rich and meaningful narratives over large sample sizes. Typically, a small number of participants—ranging from 4 to 10—was considered sufficient, as the emphasis was on the detailed exploration of lived experiences rather than generalizability. The key was to select participants who could provide insight and comprehensive stories based on their direct experiences with the phenomenon under study. This method supported prolonged engagement with participants, gathering nuanced narratives that conveyed opportunities and challenges in PPSSH implementation.

Additionally, participant selection was guided by clear criteria aligned with the research objectives, such as designation status, length of experience with PPSSH, and willingness to share their stories. Transparency about these criteria enhanced the study's rigor. The size was determined by the point of saturation, where additional narratives no longer yielded new insights.

In summary, purposive sampling was the most suitable technique for this narrative inquiry, selecting participants based on specific criteria to ensure rich, meaningful data related to opportunities in PPSSH implementation among new school heads in Kalamansig.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview was used in this study as an exploratory method during both individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) to investigate how newly designated school heads and instructional leaders complied with and implemented the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). This approach used a flexible interview guide with predetermined themes and questions, allowing the interviewer to explore topics in

depth while adapting the order and phrasing as needed. It facilitated open-ended responses, encouraging participants to share detailed insights and experiences. The semi-structured format also enabled follow-up questions to clarify and expand on participants' answers, providing a richer understanding of their practices and compliance with PPSSH. This method balances structure with adaptability, making it suitable for examining the complex experiences of the school leaders' implementation process.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting comfortable for the participant to facilitate an open sharing of their stories. Additionally, reflective journals and relevant documents, such as self-assessment reports or implementation plans, were reviewed to triangulate the data.

The researcher complied with the established protocols to maintain reliability. The focus of this investigation was to explore how newly designated school heads and instructional leaders in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat, perceived and took advantage of opportunities in implementing the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH).

Firstly, authorization was sought from the Superintendent of DepEd-Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the CGS by requesting them to sign documents permitting the research activities.

Secondly, a formal request was sent to the District Supervisor of DepEd Kalamansig to obtain accurate data necessary for the study. A survey questionnaire was carefully designed, evaluated, and administered for this purpose.



Thirdly, the researcher applied purposive sampling to include key informants who could provide reliable and relevant information. Provided that health protocols were observed, data collection through face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) proceeded.

Finally, the collected data from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic analysis to identify core themes and insights.

Data Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis was employed to interpret the collected data. The analysis involved transcribing interviews verbatim and coding the transcripts to identify significant themes and patterns relating to opportunities in PPSSH implementation. The researcher also engaged in reflective memoing to capture emerging insights. Verification techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing were used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in this study were analyzed to extract and synthesize key participant responses into broad, overarching themes. This process involved systematically examining the data to identify recurring patterns and significant ideas that captured the essence of the participants' perspectives.

Thematic analysis was employed to organize and interpret the qualitative data, ensuring that the most important insights were clearly highlighted and meaningfully connected to the research questions. This structured approach allowed for both detailed exploration and clear presentation of the main themes emerging from the rich

narratives gathered through interviews and FGDs.

Scope and Limitations

This study was a narrative inquiry focused on the opportunities in the implementation of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH). The participants were limited to newly designated school heads (defined as those serving in the position for one to five years) within the Kalamansig Municipality, Division of Sultan Kudarat. The subject matter was confined to the school heads' lived experiences and personal/professional narratives as they related to adopting the PPSSH in their respective school contexts. The core data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews, focusing on the interpretation and utilization of the PPSSH as a tool for positive change and development.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the lived experiences of school heads in Kalamansig, in implementing the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), the study revealed the following key findings through a narrative inquiry approach. This approach is highly relevant, as standard educational research emphasizes that national policy implementation—such as the PPSSH established through DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020—is best evaluated and understood through the firsthand, lived realities of field implementers (Llego, 2020). The transition into school leadership in Kalamansig was a profound psychological journey where initial doubts and "reality shock" served as catalysts for developing internal resilience and a mission-driven mindset (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Beyond pedagogical expertise, these leaders had to become logistical experts to navigate the severe geographical barriers and resource



scarcities unique to "last-mile" schools, often prioritizing physical access and student attendance over standard administrative routines (Alinsunurin, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

To bridge the gap between unfamiliar national standards, specifically the PPSSH (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020), and these harsh field realities, school heads relied heavily on informal mentorship and peer collaboration to stabilize their professional identities (Hallinger, 2011). Ultimately, the study reveals that successful leadership in remote indigenous communities is rooted in a human-centric approach, where sincerity, cultural sensitivity, and relational trust prove to be more essential than technical knowledge alone (Khalifa et al., 2016; Epstein, 2018).

In Kalamansig, school leadership functioned as a strategic response to "resource fragility" and socio-economic competition, where school heads moved beyond traditional administration to become social motivators and resource mobilizers. Faced with "reality-based" absenteeism driven by gold mining and harvest seasons, leaders employed home visits and material incentives to shift the community's value system toward long-term educational gains (David et al., 2018). These leaders demonstrated high agency through "strategic boldness," utilizing unconventional decision-making and a narrative of "community ownership" to secure staff and expand services despite limited formal support (Epstein, 2018). Furthermore, the gap between rigid national standards and local realities was bridged through cultural diplomacy and the contextualization of the PPSSH, ensuring that school operations remained functional through coordination with indigenous leaders and local volunteers (Khalifa et al., 2016; DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020).

Moreover, school leadership was redefined as a form of community

organizing where success was built on "genuine service" and relational trust rather than formal authority, transforming schools into vital social hubs (Epstein, 2018). The findings underscored that the rigid application of national standards, such as the PPSSH, was ineffective without cultural adaptation; leaders instead utilized emotional intelligence to align school operations with local cycles like harvest seasons, ensuring stakeholders "felt valued" (Khalifa et al., 2016; DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020). Due to geographical extremes described as "a nickel away from heaven," school heads transitioned from traditional administrators to active advocates, aggressively lobbying local government units to overcome infrastructure barriers that standard systems could not resolve (Alinsunurin, 2020). Despite these hardships, a clear shift toward modern administrative practices emerged, characterized by teacher empowerment through delegation and the use of data-driven coordination to make high-stakes, evidence-based decisions (Fullan, 2016).

Further, professional development for school heads in Kalamansig was characterized by a shift toward instructional leadership, where staying updated on teaching strategies and curriculum changes became the top priority to ensure student academic success (Hallinger, 2011). Administrative competence, particularly in financial management and specialized programs like IPED and BEACON, was viewed as a critical safeguard for the transparent and efficient use of limited resources in "last-mile" schools (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020; Alinsunurin, 2020). This growth was framed as a lifelong learning journey, with leaders emphasizing the necessity of pursuing higher studies to remain relevant in an evolving educational landscape (Fullan, 2016). Furthermore, successful leadership in these marginalized areas required a transition from solitary decision-making to a collaborative model,



utilizing external diplomacy with local stakeholders and building strong networks with district supervisors to secure essential community support (Epstein, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Finally, the findings from the study emphasized that systemic educational reform in Kalamansig must be anchored in institutional integrity and data transparency, particularly through the establishment of independent evaluation bodies to eliminate the practice of "data alteration" driven by administrative pressure (Fullan, 2016). Participants identified a critical state of "reform fatigue," advocating for policy stability and a curriculum focused on foundational skills to allow both leaders and teachers to achieve instructional mastery without the burden of constant, rapid changes (Hallinger, 2011). Furthermore, the study suggested that leadership selection for "last-mile" schools should prioritize personal resilience and accountability over academic qualifications alone, supported by a robust mentorship framework from supervisors to navigate high-stakes decision-making (Spillane & Lee, 2014; DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020).

Ultimately, there was a profound call for the Department of Education to shift from equal to equitable resource allocation, prioritizing infrastructure and basic utilities for Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA) to bridge the gap between national "21st-century" expectations and local realities (Alinsunurin, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Conclusion

The journey of school heads in Kalamansig was defined by immense resilience, cultural adaptability, and a profound commitment to community service. Operating in remote and resource-scarce environments, these leaders must transcend traditional administrative roles to become

community organizers, strategic problem-solvers, and advocates for equity. The critical role of resilience in educational leadership, particularly in challenging, high-stress environments, is documented; leaders and educators must demonstrate profound adaptability to foster community resilience and navigate resource limitations (Fu & Zhang, 2024). This interplay between a school leader's resilience and the broader community's well-being is symbiotic, sustaining educational delivery in adverse conditions.

The findings concluded that effective school leadership in such contexts was not the application of standardized policies, but a highly contextualized practice that relies on shared community ownership and cultural respect.

Research underscores that applying rigid, standardized frameworks—often driven by compliance and public accountability—can exacerbate inequities in marginalized or remote educational settings rather than resolving them (Keddie et al., 2022). Thus, adapting leadership to specific community contexts and valuing local cultural dynamics is essential to establishing meaningful and equitable educational engagement.

Furthermore, the success and well-being of these schools and their leaders were severely hindered by systemic issues, namely, frequent curriculum changes, inaccurate data reporting, and inequitable resource distribution. Educational systems are frequently plagued by systemic pressures, such as relentless and disruptive curriculum shifts, which significantly undermine educator well-being, job satisfaction, and institutional stability (Ortan et al., 2021). Moreover, aggressive accountability frameworks and rigid supervisory mandates are often disconnected from the realities of under-resourced schools, pressuring leaders rather



than holistic, developmental problem-solving (Arnold & McMillian, 2024).

Therefore, achieving quality education in these isolated areas requires not only the dedication of local school heads but also urgent, transparent, and targeted support from higher educational authorities. Transforming such schools requires a deliberate shift away from competitive or purely efficiency-driven policies toward systemic interventions that genuinely prioritize the equitable distribution of resources and targeted support for public education networks (Keddie et al., 2022).

Recommendations

Based on the narratives of school heads in the implementation of the Philippine Professional Standards of School Heads (PPSSH), here are some suggestions for the following stakeholders:

1. For Policy Makers and DepEd Officials
 - a. Ensure equitable and immediate allocation of resources, infrastructure support, and basic utilities (like electricity) to geographically isolated schools where teachers and learners face extreme conditions.
 - b. Create independent evaluation bodies and streamlined data-banking systems to ensure educational data accurately reflects field realities without fear of reprisal, driving true evidence-based policymaking.
 - c. Minimize frequent curriculum changes to allow mastery of foundational skills and conduct independent evaluations of new curricula (such as MATATAG) to assess their real-world impact.
 - d. Implement targeted training, mentoring, and continuous support systems for newly designated school heads, focusing on resilience, data utilization, and contextualized decision-making.

2. For School Administrators (School Heads)

- a. Continue to build strong, culturally sensitive partnerships with Indigenous leaders, local government units, and parents to foster shared ownership of the school and collaboratively address learner absenteeism.
- b. Actively seek training in financial management, curriculum leadership, and instructional supervision to support teachers and manage school operations effectively.
- c. Utilize local data to guide strategic decisions, delegate responsibilities to empower teachers, and remain flexible in implementing standards to suit the unique context of the community.

3. For Teachers

- a. Actively participate in training and capacity-building programs alongside school heads to improve teaching strategies and adapt to evolving curriculum changes.
- b. Work closely with school leadership and the community to develop flexible, context-specific interventions that encourage learner engagement and accommodate students facing severe economic or geographical pressures.

4. For Future Researchers

- a. Conduct independent, longitudinal studies evaluating the implementation and real-world effectiveness of new educational curricula within the context of remote and indigenous communities.
- b. Explore the systemic barriers to accurate data reporting in the educational sector and propose frameworks for transparent, evidence-based evaluation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Before implementation, all plans and suggestions were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc. to ensure compliance with the procedures. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all participants, assuring confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.



Participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. The study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the privacy rights.

Participants were interviewed, and focus groups were conducted using validated instruments in settings they perceived to be secure, pleasant, and convenient, with risks minimized or eliminated.

Participants had the option of reviewing the collected data. Individuals volunteered their time for interviews lasting thirty (30) minutes to one (1) hour.

The researcher acknowledged their contribution through tokens of appreciation. In accordance with the Data Privacy Act of the Philippines, all participant information was handled with strict confidentiality. The researcher ensured that no personal identifiers or study results containing identifying details would be disclosed to any third parties to ensure data privacy throughout the study process.

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Declaration AI Tools Utilization

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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