

Research Article

LEADERSHIP STYLES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HEADS DURING THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA FROM THE LENSES OF THE SEASONED TEACHERS

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the leadership styles of elementary school heads in the post-pandemic era as perceived by seasoned teachers in private Catholic schools in the Philippines. Using purposive sampling, seven seasoned teachers with ten or more years of teaching experience participated in in-depth online interviews conducted from June to August 2025. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol and analyzed through a hybrid thematic approach grounded in Colaizzi's phenomenological method.

Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Transformational leadership, characterized by vision-setting, motivation, and support for teacher and learner growth; (2) Democratic leadership, reflected in participatory decision-making and collaborative problem-solving; (3) Technological leadership, highlighting the school heads' integration of digital tools for communication, instruction, and administrative management; and (4) Adaptive and resilient leadership, manifested in flexible responses to evolving educational challenges and efforts to sustain organizational stability after the pandemic.

Findings demonstrate that school leaders' use of varied leadership styles contributed to a more supportive, communicative, and responsive school environment during the transition to post-pandemic education. These insights underscore the importance of leadership practices that integrate collaboration, technological competence, and contextual adaptability in elementary school settings. Future research may examine the long-term impact of these leadership approaches on teacher well-being, instructional quality, and student outcomes.

Keywords: seasoned teachers, leadership styles, school heads, phenomenology, post-pandemic education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped educational landscapes worldwide, compelling school leaders to navigate sudden shifts in instructional delivery, organizational management, and community engagement. As schools transitioned to the post-pandemic era, leadership practices evolved to address persistent uncertainties, heightened workloads, and changing expectations among teachers, students, and families. In the Philippines, where private Catholic elementary schools constitute a substantial portion of basic education, the leadership role of school heads became even more pronounced due to the sector's strong emphasis on values formation, community cohesion, and mission-driven education.

Private Catholic schools operate within a distinctive educational context informed by Catholic social teaching, institutional charisms, and a long-standing tradition of promoting holistic learner development. School heads in such settings are expected not only to administer academic programs but also to embody moral leadership, relational care, and service to the school community. These expectations shaped how leadership was enacted before, during, and after the pandemic, influencing how teachers experienced changes in school management and professional life. Understanding leadership, therefore, requires acknowledging the spiritual, cultural, and organizational values that underpin Catholic educational environments.

Within this context, seasoned teachers (those with a decade or more of classroom experience) hold a uniquely informed perspective. Their prolonged engagement in Catholic schools allows them to observe leadership across different phases of educational reform, technological adoption, and institutional transitions. As witnesses to pre-pandemic norms and active participants in post-pandemic adjustments, seasoned teachers are well-positioned to provide rich, nuanced reflections on how school heads' leadership styles influenced their daily work, sense of stability, and professional relationships. Exploring their lived experiences aligns directly with phenomenology, which seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of the realities they encounter.

Despite the extensive literature on educational leadership, several gaps remain. Previous studies in the Philippines and abroad have examined leadership styles in public secondary schools, digital transformation during remote learning, and crisis leadership during the height of COVID-19. However, little is known about how leadership is experienced by teachers in private Catholic elementary schools after the pandemic, a period marked not only by recovery but also by long-term adaptation. Moreover, while quantitative studies have described leadership typologies and their correlates, phenomenological inquiries capturing the subjective meaning of leadership practices from the perspective of seasoned teachers remain scarce. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how leadership styles are not merely operational strategies but lived realities that shape teacher well-being, collaboration, motivation, and commitment to mission.

This study therefore examines the lived experiences of seasoned teachers as they interpret and describe the leadership styles of their school heads in the post-pandemic era. By focusing on their perceptions, the study sheds light on how leadership is enacted on the ground: how decisions are communicated, how teachers are supported, how technology is integrated, and how school communities rebuild stability after

disruption. Insights generated from this exploration can guide school heads, educational policymakers, and Catholic institutions in strengthening leadership practices that foster resilience, relational trust, and meaningful professional engagement.

Through this phenomenological approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership as experienced in the day-to-day lives of teachers rather than solely as a managerial construct. It also underscores the continuing importance of leadership in shaping the evolving educational landscape in a post-pandemic world.

Research Objective and Question

This study aims to explore and interpret the lived experiences of seasoned teachers in private Catholic elementary schools in Baguio City as they perceive and make meaning of the leadership styles of their school heads in the post-pandemic era. By focusing on their reflections and narratives, the study seeks to illuminate how leadership is enacted, experienced, and understood within this specific educational and cultural context.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how seasoned teachers interpret and make meaning of the leadership styles demonstrated by their school heads in the post-pandemic era. Phenomenology is appropriate for inquiries that seek to understand the essence of lived experiences by capturing participants' descriptions, reflections, and meaning-making processes within a specific context. In this study, the focus on seasoned teachers (educators with long-term professional exposure to pre-pandemic and post-pandemic leadership conditions) aligns with phenomenology's aim to uncover subjective interpretations shaped by time, experience, and relational engagement. The design allowed the researchers to delve into how leadership was encountered, understood, and internalized in private Catholic elementary schools during a period of institutional recovery and transition.

Participants and Setting

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants who could provide rich, experience-based insights consistent with phenomenological inquiry. The study was conducted in two private Catholic elementary schools in Baguio City, selected because of their long history, large faculty population, and strong emphasis on values-based educational leadership. Catholic institutions often operate within a mission-driven framework informed by compassion, community, social responsibility, and the holistic development of learners; these unique cultural and organizational features shape how leadership is enacted and experienced within the school environment.

Inclusion criteria:

- Full-time elementary teachers with at least 10 years of teaching experience (seasoned teachers)
- Currently employed in a private Catholic elementary school

- Direct experience working under the leadership of the current school head
- Willingness to participate in recorded interviews

Exclusion criteria:

- Teachers with fewer than 10 years of service
- Part-time, administrative-only, or newly hired staff
- Individuals unwilling to be interviewed or recorded

Seven seasoned teachers met the inclusion criteria and consented to participate. Interviews were conducted from Academic Year 2023-2024, a period that allowed teachers to reflect on the leadership practices that shaped their post-pandemic experiences.

Table 1 Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Religious Affiliation	Subject Taught	Years of Teaching Experience	Position	Length of Service in Catholic School (years)
ST1	Female	54	Roman Catholic	Mathematics	33	Classroom Teacher	33
ST2	Female	55	Roman Catholic	Science	33	Classroom Teacher	32
ST3	Female	54	Roman Catholic	English	33	Academic and English Coordinator	33
ST4	Female	60	Roman Catholic	GMRC with CLE/Religion	40	Classroom Teacher	40
ST5	Female	48	Roman Catholic	GMRC with CLE/Religion	35	Classroom Teacher	35
ST6	Female	60	Roman Catholic	Science, EPP	27	Homeroom Adviser	27
ST7	Female	48	Roman Catholic	English	26	Classroom Teacher	26

Data Gathering Tool

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol, developed based on leadership theories (transformational, democratic, adaptive, and technological leadership), phenomenological inquiry principles, and Catholic educational values such as community, empathy, and shared mission. This conceptual

grounding ensured that the interview questions elicited deep descriptions of lived experiences rather than surface-level opinions.

The protocol included open-ended questions, prompts, and probes that encouraged participants to narrate specific experiences, describe their perceptions of leadership practices, and articulate how these leadership styles influenced their professional roles and daily work. The full interview guide is provided in the Appendix.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the respective school heads. Eligible participants were identified using faculty service records and were invited to participate. After providing informed consent, participants selected interview schedules at their convenience.

Interviews were conducted online through Google Meet due to practical and scheduling considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 35–55 minutes and was video- and audio-recorded with participant permission. The researchers facilitated the interviews, asked follow-up questions when necessary, and took observational notes to support interpretive analysis.

Recordings were transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed during transcription to maintain confidentiality. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the researchers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a hybrid thematic phenomenological approach, integrating Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to ensure depth, structure, and rigor.

The hybrid approach allowed the researchers to:

- Draw themes inductively from participants' narratives
- Acknowledge deductive influences from leadership theories and Catholic educational principles

Coding Approach

A hybrid inductive–deductive coding strategy was used:

- *Inductive coding* allowed themes to emerge naturally from teacher narratives.
- *Deductive coding* drew from established leadership frameworks to inform interpretation without constraining the data.

Analytic Steps

1. Familiarization: Researchers listened to recordings and read transcripts repeatedly to grasp participants' meaning structures.
2. Extraction of significant statements: Meaningful statements related to leadership experiences were highlighted.
3. Formulation of meanings: Statements were interpreted to derive essence-bearing meanings.
4. Initial coding: Codes were developed using the hybrid approach.

5. Theme development: Related codes were clustered into thematic categories aligned with phenomenological principles.

6. Construction of thematic descriptions: Themes were developed into rich, textural descriptions of lived leadership experiences.

7. Validation: Themes were compared across participants to identify convergences and divergences, and the researchers returned to transcripts to ensure fidelity to the original data.

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability:

- Member checking: Participants reviewed their transcript summaries and verified the accuracy of interpretations.
- Peer debriefing: The researchers consulted an external qualitative researcher to assess coding decisions and thematic clarity.
- Audit trail: Documentation of coding decisions, analytic memos, and reflexive notes was maintained.
- Thick description: Contextual and experiential details were retained to support transferability to similar educational settings.
- Reflexivity: Researchers continuously reflected on positionality to minimize interpretive bias.

Triangulation across data sources was limited due to the phenomenological focus on teacher experiences alone; however, this limitation is acknowledged in the Discussion section, along with suggestions for future multi-stakeholder research.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect for people. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the participating school heads, and the study followed the ethical guidelines of the researchers' institution and the participating schools.

Before each online interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form that clearly explained the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the approximate duration of the interview (35–55 minutes), and the potential risks and benefits. The form emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, that there would be no monetary compensation, and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences.

Participants were informed that they were free to decline any question they felt uncomfortable answering and could request to stop the recording or terminate the interview. Confidentiality was safeguarded by removing all identifying information from the transcripts and using codes (e.g., ST1, ST2) instead of names in all records and reports. Audio and video files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers. All personal data were deleted after the completion of the analysis and reporting.

Throughout the research process, the researchers endeavored to protect participants from harm, deception, and invasion of privacy and remained transparent about the study's aims, methods, and use of findings.

Results

Analysis of the seven interview transcripts produced four major themes that describe seasoned teachers lived experiences of their school heads' leadership styles in the post-pandemic era: (1) Transformational Leadership, (2) Democratic Leadership, (3) Technological Leadership, and (4) Adaptive and Resilient Leadership. These themes reflect how teachers interpreted leadership behaviors that influenced their professional work, emotional well-being, and the overall functioning of their school communities.

The themes are presented below with descriptive summaries and selected direct quotations that exemplify the participants' experiences.

Table 2 Summary of Themes and Representative Participant Quotations

Theme	Description	Representative Quotation
Transformational Leadership	School heads inspired, motivated, and supported teachers through vision, encouragement, and people-centered leadership.	"Their leadership was not only about managing but also about inspiring and motivating everyone to work together in these trying times." (ST2)
Democratic Leadership	Leadership practices emphasized shared decision-making, collaboration, and inclusion of teachers and stakeholders.	"She fosters collaboration within the school community by involving the teachers and other personnel in decision-making." (ST6)
Technological Leadership	School heads demonstrated effective use of digital tools for communication, instruction, and administrative management.	"Our school head relied on technology for communication and meetings even after returning to face-to-face classes." (ST3)
Adaptive and Resilient Leadership	Leaders demonstrated flexibility, responsiveness, and emotional support in navigating post-pandemic challenges.	"Their adaptability and resilience were commendable despite the challenges we faced." (ST2)

Theme 1: Transformational Leadership

Seasoned teachers consistently described their school heads as leaders who inspired, motivated, and guided faculty members through the challenges of transitioning back to in-person learning. Many participants

highlighted how school heads emphasized personal growth, compassion, vision, and encouragement during a period marked by uncertainty.

Participants noted that school heads prioritized developing teachers and sustaining morale. One teacher shared: *“Their leadership was not only about managing but also about inspiring and motivating everyone to work together in these trying times.”* (ST2)

Another emphasized the sense of direction provided: *“Our school head remained empathetic and visionary. She guided us not just to return to normal but to become better than before the pandemic.”* (ST5)

Transformational behaviors were especially evident in efforts to promote continuous learning, support instructional improvements, and attend to the emotional and spiritual well-being of teachers and students. Many teachers associated these behaviors with the school’s Catholic mission, describing their leaders as “protective,” “values-driven,” and “people-centered.”

Theme 2: Democratic Leadership

Teachers described school heads who encouraged participation, openness, and shared decision-making. This leadership style was reflected in collaborative problem-solving, structured consultations, and the inclusion of teachers in planning school-wide initiatives.

One participant expressed appreciation for the principal’s approach: *“She fosters collaboration within the school community by involving the teachers and other personnel in decision-making.”* (ST6)

Another teacher emphasized how democratic leadership shaped safety procedures and policy implementations: *“Our principal worked closely with staff, parents, and even health authorities in creating protocols for the school. It made us feel included and valued.”* (ST3)

Participants described feeling respected and supported when their perspectives were sought, noting that this strengthened their sense of belonging and ownership in the school community. Democratic leadership was viewed as particularly important during the transition back to on-site operations, when teacher input contributed meaningfully to resolving emerging challenges.

Theme 3: Technological Leadership

The post-pandemic educational landscape required strong digital competencies from school leaders, and participants consistently described their school heads as demonstrating technological leadership. Teachers shared that school heads effectively used digital platforms for communication, monitoring, and operational continuity.

One participant described this shift: *“Our school head relied on technology for communication and meetings. He used virtual conferences and digital platforms even after returning to face-to-face classes.”* (ST3)

Another emphasized integration into instructional support: *“They continued setting SMART goals but incorporated digital tools and strategies to ensure learning still progressed effectively.”* (ST2)

Technological leadership was characterized by school heads’ ability to navigate digital systems, model their use, and support teachers in adapting to the new expectations. Many participants perceived this as a positive development that strengthened school efficiency and connectedness.

Theme 4: Adaptive and Resilient Leadership

Teachers repeatedly emphasized the flexibility, responsiveness, and resilience demonstrated by their school heads during the school's post-pandemic transition. Adaptive leadership emerged through the willingness to modify policies, adjust expectations, and provide compassionate support to teachers navigating lingering challenges from the pandemic.

One teacher observed: *"Their adaptability and resilience were commendable. They managed to maintain a cooperative environment among pupils, parents, and teachers despite the challenges."* (ST2)

Another added: *"Our school head continued using collaborative problem-solving while showing adaptability and resilience in navigating the unique challenges we faced."* (ST5)

Teachers interpreted resilience not merely as endurance but as an ability to stabilize the school community, guide recovery efforts, and maintain mission-driven leadership. The emphasis on holistic well-being (emotional, psychological, and spiritual) was consistent across accounts, reflecting the Catholic identity of the schools.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of seasoned teachers regarding the leadership styles of elementary school heads in private Catholic schools during the post-pandemic era. The findings revealed four interrelated leadership styles that shaped teachers' professional experiences and contributed to organizational stability during a period of educational transition. Rather than representing isolated leadership behaviors, these styles functioned collectively to address teachers' instructional, emotional, and relational needs in a context marked by recovery, adjustment, and long-term change.

The prominence of transformational leadership in the findings underscores the importance of vision-driven and people-centered leadership in sustaining teacher motivation and morale after the pandemic. Consistent with leadership literature, transformational leaders inspire followers by articulating a shared vision, providing individualized support, and fostering professional growth (Northouse, 2019; Deng et al., 2022). In this study, seasoned teachers interpreted transformational practices as expressions of empathy, encouragement, and moral responsibility, qualities that resonated strongly within the Catholic school context. These findings align with prior research indicating that transformational leadership enhances teacher commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational engagement, particularly during periods of uncertainty and reform (Çakır & Özgenel, 2024; Lai et al., 2014). Importantly, teachers did not describe transformation as limited to crisis response but as a continuing leadership orientation that guided schools toward improvement beyond pandemic recovery.

Democratic leadership emerged as a critical mechanism for fostering collaboration, trust, and shared ownership in school decision-making. Teachers' narratives highlighted participatory leadership practices such as

consultation, open communication, and collective problem-solving. These experiences reflect broader evidence that democratic leadership strengthens teachers' sense of belonging and professional agency, which in turn supports organizational commitment and school effectiveness (Aydin et al., 2013; Rivera, 2021). Within the post-pandemic context, democratic leadership was particularly valued as teachers navigated changing policies, safety protocols, and instructional demands. By involving teachers in decisions that directly affected their work, school heads reinforced relational trust and strengthened the school community, a core value in Catholic educational leadership.

The emergence of technological leadership reflects a significant shift in leadership expectations that extends beyond emergency remote learning. Teachers described school heads who modeled digital competence, utilized technology for communication and monitoring, and supported instructional continuity through digital platforms. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing the growing importance of technological leadership in contemporary school management (İbili & Özbaş, 2022; Turan, 2020). Notably, participants perceived technological leadership not as a temporary response to crisis but as an enduring leadership practice that improved efficiency, transparency, and connectedness even after the return to face-to-face instruction. This suggests that post-pandemic leadership involves integrating technology as a routine component of school governance rather than reverting to pre-pandemic norms.

Adaptive and resilient leadership further illustrates how school heads responded to ongoing uncertainty and evolving challenges. Teachers consistently emphasized flexibility, responsiveness, and emotional support as defining features of effective leadership during the post-pandemic transition. Adaptive leadership theory highlights the capacity of leaders to adjust strategies, manage complexity, and guide organizations through sustained change (Savik, 2022; Madden, 2023). In this study, resilience was interpreted not merely as endurance but as the ability to stabilize the school community while remaining responsive to teachers' needs. These findings echo prior research demonstrating that adaptive leadership promotes organizational learning, psychological safety, and long-term sustainability in times of disruption (Weiner et al., 2021; Reid, 2021).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that post-pandemic school leadership is best understood as multi-dimensional and contextually grounded. In private Catholic schools, leadership practices were deeply intertwined with values such as care, service, community, and moral responsibility. Teachers' accounts suggest that effective leadership extended beyond managerial competence to include relational and ethical dimensions consistent with Catholic educational principles (Boyle & Nuzzi, 2016; Ancho & Villadiego, 2022). This integration of leadership theory with faith-based values shaped how teachers experienced support, stability, and meaning in their professional roles.

From a contemporary perspective, the study addresses concerns regarding the relevance of post-pandemic research by demonstrating that the identified leadership practices remain applicable to present-day elementary school contexts. The leadership styles described by teachers reflect long-term adaptations rather than temporary crisis responses. As schools continue to face challenges related to teacher well-being, digital

integration, and institutional resilience, these leadership approaches remain essential for sustaining effective educational environments.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused exclusively on teachers' perspectives, limiting triangulation across multiple stakeholder groups such as school heads, parents, or students. While this aligns with phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience, future research may benefit from incorporating additional perspectives to deepen understanding of leadership dynamics. The small sample size and focus on private Catholic schools in one city also limit generalizability; however, the use of thick description supports transferability to similar educational settings. Future studies may explore comparative leadership experiences across public and private schools or examine the long-term impact of these leadership styles on student outcomes and teacher retention.

Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of seasoned teachers regarding the leadership styles of school heads in private Catholic elementary schools during the post-pandemic era. The findings revealed that transformational, democratic, technological, and adaptive leadership practices played significant roles in shaping teachers' professional experiences and supporting their ongoing adjustment to post-pandemic realities. These leadership approaches contributed to sustaining motivation, strengthening collaboration, enhancing digital capacity, and fostering stability within the school community. The insights offered by seasoned teachers underscore the continuing importance of responsive, values-driven, and forward-looking leadership in an educational landscape that remains influenced by the long-term effects of the pandemic.

Implications for Educational Practice

The results of this study offer insights that may inform leadership development and institutional planning in private Catholic schools and similar educational settings.

1. **Strengthening Leadership Capacities:** Leadership programs may integrate training on transformational, democratic, and adaptive leadership to better support teachers in times of ongoing change.
2. **Sustaining Digital Competence:** School heads should continue developing technological leadership to enhance school communication, efficiency, and instructional innovation.
3. **Prioritizing Teacher Well-Being:** Values-driven leadership that emphasizes empathy, support, and community-building can foster greater teacher resilience and long-term professional engagement.
4. **Guiding Policy and Decision-Making:** Teacher perspectives can contribute meaningfully to curriculum planning, safety protocols, and school-wide strategies, especially amid evolving post-pandemic demands.

Further studies could explore the long-term impact of these leadership styles on student outcomes, teacher well-being, and overall school effectiveness. Additionally, investigations could delve deeper into how

these leadership styles can be further developed and supported to create a thriving educational environment in a post-pandemic world.

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