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From Practice to Purpose: Instructional Leadership as Lived by Master Teachers in a Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) Grounded Action Research

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Master Teachers as instructional leaders in conducting action research in the Plaridel North and South Districts, Division of Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025–2026. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the research captured in-depth narratives from ten purposively selected Master Teachers aligned with the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). Data were collected through a validated semi-structured interview guide and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Master Teachers play a crucial role in fostering a research culture, mentoring teachers, and improving instructional practices, despite experiencing challenges such as role overload, time constraints, limited resources, and gaps in research competence. To address these, they employed coping mechanisms including strategic time management, collaboration, continuous professional development, and the use of technology. The study highlights the need for strengthened institutional support, capacity-building initiatives, and enhanced research systems to sustain effective instructional leadership and action research in schools.

Keywords: instructional leadership, action research, Master Teachers, PPST, phenomenological study

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Introduction

Instructional leadership has increasingly been understood as a practice that extends beyond formal school heads to include teachers who influence teaching and learning from within the classroom. Internationally, recent studies describe instructional leadership as a form of professional influence grounded in expertise, collaboration, and reflective practice, where experienced teachers support instructional improvement through mentoring, coaching, and inquiry-based problem-solving (Hallinger, 2020). In this context, action research has emerged as a key mechanism through which instructional leadership is enacted, as it allows teachers to systematically examine classroom challenges, implement interventions, and use evidence to improve practice (Burns, 2022). Scholars emphasize that when instructional leadership is combined with action research, leadership becomes contextualized, reflective, and closely aligned with actual classroom realities rather than abstract leadership roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). These global perspectives resonate with Philippine education reforms anchored on Republic Act No. 9155 (Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001), which promotes shared governance and accountability across all levels of the school system, and Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013), which underscores quality instruction, teacher development, and learner-centered reforms—thereby recognizing teachers as key agents in improving instructional outcomes.

In the Philippine educational context, instructional leadership among Master Teachers is institutionally framed through professional standards and accountability systems, particularly the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017. The PPST explicitly positions Master Teachers, especially at Career Stages 3 (Highly Proficient) and 4 (Distinguished), as instructional leaders who model exemplary teaching practices, mentor colleagues, lead professional learning communities, and contribute to school improvement initiatives. Their leadership roles are operationalized through DepEd Order No. 2, s. 2015, which integrates PPST indicators into the Results-Based Performance Management System (RPMS), making research engagement, professional collaboration, and instructional innovation measurable components of teacher performance. Furthermore, action research is institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2017, which establishes research as a mechanism for evidence-based policy and practice, and is financially supported through DepEd Order No. 39, s. 2016 under the Basic Education Research Fund (BERF). These issuances collectively reinforce that action research is not merely optional but embedded within the professional mandate of Master Teachers as instructional leaders.

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2020) assert that teacher leadership is deeply relational and sustained through trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility rather than hierarchical authority. Similarly, York-Barr and Duke (2021) emphasize that teachers' leadership practices are often informal and embedded in routine instructional work, shaped by school culture and contextual realities. Within the PPST framework, these relational and collaborative dimensions align with Domain 7 (Personal Growth and Professional Development) and Domain 6 (Community Linkages and Professional Engagement), which emphasize reflective practice, professional collaboration, and leadership in learning communities. Studies focusing on action research further suggest that while teachers recognize its value, their engagement is influenced by workload demands, research competence, institutional encouragement, and perceived classroom relevance (Burns, 2022). These perspectives underscore the importance of examining how Master Teachers genuinely experience and interpret instructional leadership through action research within their actual school environments rather than assuming uniform compliance with policy expectations.

National and international reports indicate that teachers face increasing instructional and non-instructional workloads, limiting the time available for reflective practices such as action research (OECD, 2021). In the Philippine context, while policies define teaching loads and ancillary assignments, the realities of documentation requirements, program implementation, learner assessment, and mentoring responsibilities often extend beyond official hours. Although DepEd policies promote a research culture and professional accountability, participation levels and research quality vary across divisions, reflecting differences in technical support, leadership encouragement, and contextual resources. In districts such as Plaridel North and South in the Division of Misamis Occidental, Master Teachers are expected to lead instructional improvement, mentor peers, produce research outputs aligned with PPST indicators, and contribute to School Improvement Plans—all while maintaining full teaching responsibilities. These conditions highlight a critical need for localized, qualitative inquiry into how instructional leadership through PPST-grounded action research is actually lived, negotiated, and sustained in practice.

In response to this gap, the study “Lived Instructional Leadership Experiences of Master Teachers in Action Research: A PPST-Based Qualitative Inquiry” aims to explore how Master Teachers in Plaridel North District experience and enact instructional leadership through action research. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how Master Teachers interpret PPST-aligned leadership expectations, how they engage in action research as a leadership practice, and how contextual factors influence their instructional leadership roles. By focusing on lived experiences, the study intends to capture the meanings, challenges, strategies, and professional judgments that shape Master Teachers’ leadership practices in real school settings, thereby contributing context-specific insights to the existing body of literature.

For this study, the expected result is a nuanced and grounded understanding of how Master Teachers exercise instructional leadership through action research within the constraints and opportunities of their district context. The findings are expected to reveal patterns in leadership practices, such as mentoring approaches, use of research evidence, and alignment with PPST domains, as well as common challenges related to time, support, and resources. Ultimately, the study is expected to generate practical insights that may inform district-level professional development, research support mechanisms, and policy implementation, strengthening instructional leadership and promoting more sustainable action research practices among Master Teachers in Plaridel North District, Division of Misamis Occidental.

Methods

This study explores the lived experiences of Master Teachers in exercising instructional leadership while conducting action research grounded in the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study involves ten purposively selected Master Teachers from public elementary and secondary schools in the Plaridel North and South Districts, Division of Misamis Occidental, during the School Year 2025–2026. Data are gathered through a researcher-developed and expert-validated semi-structured interview guide, with individual interviews focusing on the participants’ instructional leadership experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in conducting action research. The gathered data are transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis through familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. The study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how Master Teachers manage their dual roles as instructional leaders and action researchers, address professional and institutional challenges, and employ adaptive strategies to sustain their leadership and research responsibilities within the PPST framework.

Results and Discussions

Theme 1: Instructional Leadership and Collaborative Research Culture

The findings reveal that Master Teachers experience instructional leadership in action research primarily as a process of mentoring, guiding, collaborating, and building a research-oriented culture within the school. Their role extends beyond checking research outputs or ensuring compliance with school requirements. Instead, they actively assist teachers in identifying classroom-based problems, developing research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and connecting findings to instructional improvement. This is evident in the experience of MT01, who explained, *“As a Master Teacher, I don’t just check their outputs. I really guide them step by step, especially in identifying their research problem. Most teachers don’t realize that their everyday classroom struggles can already be a research topic.”* Such an experience indicates that Master Teachers function not simply as supervisors but as mentors who help teachers recognize that many concerns encountered in daily classroom practice can become meaningful subjects of systematic inquiry. Their leadership therefore makes action research more accessible to teachers by transforming seemingly technical research processes into manageable and practical activities. This mentoring function is further strengthened by technical guidance in areas where teachers commonly experience difficulty, particularly problem identification, data collection, analysis, and research writing. In this way, the Master Teacher serves as a bridge between teachers’ classroom experiences and the systematic process required in action research. The soft copy further demonstrates that Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions provide an important venue for this type of leadership because teachers are given opportunities to share research ideas, critique one another’s work, discuss classroom problems, and collectively develop possible solutions. One participant described LAC sessions as a space where teachers could freely exchange ideas rather than simply receive information from the Master Teacher. This suggests that research leadership becomes more effective when learning is collaborative rather than purely directive.

The collaborative nature of this leadership also contributes to the gradual development of a school research culture. Master Teachers encourage teachers to see research not merely as an additional requirement but as a professional tool that can contribute to school improvement and teacher development. The participants specifically emphasized aligning research activities with school priorities and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). For example, MT05 explained that teachers are reminded to connect their research with school priorities, such as improving reading performance, while MT09 observed that teachers become more motivated when they recognize that their research contributes to their professional growth under the PPST. These experiences demonstrate that Master Teachers perform a strategic leadership role by connecting individual teacher research with broader institutional goals. Their leadership therefore moves research away from isolated individual activity toward a collective school practice centered on solving actual educational problems. The participants also observed changes in teacher participation over time, with more teachers beginning to initiate their own research and present their findings during INSET activities. This gradual transformation indicates that sustained mentoring, peer interaction, and institutional alignment can help normalize research as part of teachers' professional practice. The soft copy relates these experiences to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the development of self-efficacy through guided experiences, observation, and interaction, as well as to the concept of Communities of Practice, where professional learning develops through participation, dialogue, and shared knowledge construction. Thus, the experiences of the Master Teachers suggest that instructional leadership in action research is most meaningful when it creates an enabling environment in which teachers are guided, supported, and encouraged to participate collectively in research for continuous school improvement.

Theme 2: Role Strain, Workload, and Institutional Challenges

The findings further reveal that the experiences of Master Teachers in conducting and leading action research are shaped by role strain, competing responsibilities, time limitations, and inadequate institutional support. Master Teachers simultaneously function as classroom teachers, mentors, instructional leaders, researchers, and, in some instances, implementers of administrative requirements. These multiple responsibilities make it difficult for them to give sustained attention to action research. MT01 captured this experience by stating, *"It's really challenging because I am handling classes, at the same time mentoring teachers in research, and doing administrative work. Sometimes, I don't know which one to prioritize."* Similarly, MT03 shared that there are times when work must be brought home simply to meet deadlines for research outputs. These experiences illustrate that the difficulty is not necessarily a lack of commitment to research but the reality that research responsibilities compete with equally important teaching, leadership, and administrative duties. The constant need to decide which responsibility requires immediate attention may produce cognitive and emotional strain, while bringing work home shows how professional responsibilities can extend beyond regular working hours. Administrative requirements also consume substantial portions of available time. MT05 specifically identified documentation, reports, and meetings as activities that limit opportunities to concentrate on research. Consequently, Master Teachers may experience a gap between what is expected of them as research leaders and the actual time and working conditions available for accomplishing those expectations.

The pressure becomes more pronounced because Master Teachers are also expected to demonstrate quality research performance and "lead by example." Participants explained that deadlines sometimes create tension between research quality and compliance, because research processes that require careful reflection, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation may have to be completed within limited periods. One participant even acknowledged that research may sometimes be rushed to comply with deadlines despite knowing that meaningful inquiry should not be hurried. This situation suggests that excessive workload can reduce opportunities for deep engagement in research and may unintentionally shift attention from meaningful inquiry toward completion of required outputs. Moreover, workload concerns are intensified by resource and institutional limitations. Participants reported inadequate access to training, materials, research journals, technical assistance, and other forms of institutional support. MT08 stated, *"We lack resources like training, materials, and even access to research journals. It makes it harder to guide teachers effectively."* Likewise, MT06 described a situation in which research outputs are expected even when the necessary support system is not always available. The soft copy interprets these experiences through Role Theory, explaining that individuals experience strain when they must fulfill several competing and sometimes conflicting expectations. In the case of Master Teachers, their simultaneous responsibilities as educators, mentors, leaders, and

researchers create conditions for role overload and role conflict. The manuscript likewise connects these experiences with workload intensification, in which increasing professional responsibilities are not always accompanied by proportional resources and institutional support.

Despite these difficulties, the experiences also show that Master Teachers develop adaptive ways of maintaining their responsibilities. Participants reported scheduling specific periods for research mentoring, establishing routines, prioritizing tasks, and maintaining commitment because they recognize the potential benefits of research for teachers and learners. Such strategies demonstrate resilience and professional agency; however, they also show that much of the responsibility for managing structural challenges is placed on the individual Master Teacher. The soft copy notes that these coping mechanisms frequently depend on personal organization rather than strong institutional support. This finding is significant because sustainable research leadership cannot depend solely on the ability of individual Master Teachers to work around constraints. Schools and higher offices must also provide enabling conditions, including adequate time, technical assistance, access to research resources, appropriate professional development, and administrative support. Therefore, the theme suggests that strengthening action research requires not only motivated and competent Master Teachers but also an institutional environment that recognizes the complexity of their roles and provides sufficient structures for them to perform research leadership effectively.

Theme 3: Reflective Practice, Research Competence, and Professional Growth

The third theme reveals that conducting action research serves as a meaningful process of reflection, continuous learning, and professional transformation among Master Teachers. Although action research creates additional responsibilities and challenges, participants describe it as an opportunity to examine their teaching practices more systematically and use evidence to improve instruction. MT01 stated, *“Through action research, I became more conscious of my teaching strategies. I started evaluating what works and what needs improvement.”* Similarly, MT03 explained, *“It made me reflect more on my classroom practices. I don’t just teach anymore—I analyze my teaching.”* These statements demonstrate an important movement from routine teaching toward deliberate and evidence-informed professional practice. Instead of relying exclusively on previous experience or intuition, Master Teachers become more conscious of why particular strategies work, which practices need improvement, and what adjustments are required to respond to classroom concerns. The soft copy connects this experience with Schön’s concept of reflective practice, which views professional learning as a continuing process of examining and learning from one’s own actions. In the context of action research, reflection becomes more systematic because classroom concerns are identified, investigated, analyzed, and used as a basis for making instructional decisions.

Action research also enables Master Teachers to make more evidence-based instructional decisions and become more responsive to learners’ actual needs. MT02 explained that research results help determine which strategies are more effective for students, while MT05 emphasized that research findings guide modifications in lessons because decisions are supported by evidence rather than simple trial and error. Participants also reported that systematic inquiry helped them recognize differences in learners’ needs and identify specific learning difficulties that might otherwise remain unnoticed. MT04, for instance, shared that research enabled the identification and appropriate response to particular learner difficulties, while MT06 described becoming more sensitive and responsive to the real problems experienced by learners. These accounts show that action research strengthens the connection between inquiry and classroom practice. Research does not end with the production of a paper; rather, its value is realized when findings are translated into improved strategies, interventions, and learning experiences. The soft copy accordingly describes this process as data-driven decision-making, in which instructional improvements are based on empirical findings rather than intuition alone, and connects it with the principle that effective teaching should be informed by evidence about what contributes to student learning.

At the same time, professional growth through action research involves recognizing and addressing one’s own limitations. The soft copy indicates that Master Teachers still encounter difficulties in research design, data analysis, methodology, and technical writing despite their leadership positions. Such experiences demonstrate that being an instructional leader does not imply complete mastery of every research competency. Instead, leadership itself involves continuous learning. The manuscript therefore identifies the need for ongoing training, mentorship, professional development, and opportunities to strengthen research skills. This recognition contributes to the development of a stronger professional identity because Master Teachers gradually see

themselves not only as classroom teachers but also as teacher-researchers and instructional leaders capable of generating and applying evidence to improve practice. Action research therefore becomes both a means of improving instruction and a mechanism for developing professional competence, confidence, and identity. The soft copy further connects continuous skills development with lifelong professional learning, emphasizing that educators need to continually update their knowledge and competencies as professional demands evolve. Overall, the experiences suggest that action research is transformative when Master Teachers are able to move through a continuing cycle of identifying problems, reflecting on practice, generating evidence, applying findings, and learning from the results. In this sense, research becomes an integral part of professional growth rather than merely a requirement to be completed.

Conclusions

The study concludes that Master Teachers, as instructional leaders, occupy a critical and transformative role in bridging classroom practice and evidence-based improvement through action research within the framework of the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). Their lived experiences underscore that instructional leadership is not merely a function of authority but a dynamic, reflective, and collaborative practice shaped by real-world constraints such as workload demands, limited resources, and varying levels of research competence. Despite these challenges, Master Teachers demonstrate agency, resilience, and professional commitment by adopting strategic coping mechanisms, engaging in continuous learning, and fostering collaborative research cultures within their schools. The findings affirm that action research serves as a powerful vehicle for instructional improvement and professional growth when adequately supported. Thus, the study highlights the urgent need for sustained institutional support, targeted capacity-building programs, and strengthened research infrastructures to empower Master Teachers further, ensuring that instructional leadership and action research are not only implemented but meaningfully sustained and embedded in the educational system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, Master Teachers are encouraged to continuously strengthen their competencies in action research, data analysis, academic writing, instructional leadership, and time management while sustaining reflective practice, collaboration, and mentoring among teachers. School heads are encouraged to provide adequate time, manageable workloads, research resources, technological support, and structured mentoring opportunities that enable Master Teachers to effectively perform their leadership and research responsibilities. Classroom teachers should actively participate in action research and Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and develop their research competencies to promote evidence-based teaching and continuous improvement. DepEd officials and education supervisors are encouraged to provide comprehensive capacity-building programs, technical assistance, accessible research resources, and streamlined research processes, particularly in areas where Master Teachers experience competency and resource gaps. Likewise, the Department of Education may further strengthen policies, funding, ICT support, and institutional mechanisms that promote a sustainable school-based research culture aligned with the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). Finally, future researchers are encouraged to examine the experiences of Master Teachers in other educational contexts and employ mixed-methods, longitudinal, or intervention-based studies to determine how specific programs, institutional support systems, and policies can further strengthen instructional leadership, research competence, and the sustained implementation of action research in schools.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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