



JOURNAL

OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH,
INNOVATION, AND
MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

An Academic Journal Publication

Website: | <https://jerimspublication.com>

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBERS

PRINT ISSN | 3116-5559

ONLINE ISSN | 3116-5567

Volume 1, Issue 04, pp 24-29, June 2026

Research Article

Teacher-Leaders in Remote Schools: A Narrative Study on Leadership Practices and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Submission: May, 2026

Revised: May, 2026

Accepted: May, 2026

Published: June, 2026

Originality: 96%

Similarity Index: 7%

Grammarly Score: 97%

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Recommended Citation:

Pague, E.J., (2026). Teacher-Leaders in Remote Schools: A Narrative Study on Leadership Practices and Coping Strategies. *Journal of Educational Research, Innovation, and Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1(4),24-29.

<https://doi.org/10.67001/jeri.2026.03.G6T9XN>

Remote schools present unique challenges that require teacher-leaders to demonstrate adaptive, values-driven leadership and effective coping strategies. This study explored the leadership practices, coping strategies, and implications of the lived experiences of teacher-leaders in remote schools. A qualitative narrative research design was employed to capture the personal stories of twelve teacher-leaders who have been supervising their respective schools for two to three years. Participants were purposively selected based on their roles as teacher-in-charge. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, generated codes and themes. The study revealed three major themes: (1) leadership practices demonstrated by teacher-leaders, (2) coping strategies employed to sustain professional effectiveness, and (3) implications drawn from lived experiences. Findings indicate that teacher-leaders navigate challenges such as resource scarcity, administrative and instructional demands, and community isolation through adaptive problem-solving, mentoring, program coordination, peer support, reflective practices, and stakeholder engagement. The study underscores the importance of structured leadership training, wellness programs, institutional guidance, and community partnerships to sustain teacher-leaders' well-being and effectiveness. These insights provide valuable guidance for policymakers and educational leaders in designing strategies to strengthen leadership capacity, enhance teacher support, and ultimately improve learner outcomes in geographically isolated schools.

Keywords: *teacher-leaders, leadership practices, coping strategies, remote schools, narrative study*

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Introduction

Around the world, teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas face unique challenges that test their resilience and professional commitment. According to education UNESCO, 2021 revealed that teachers in remote schools often struggle with poor infrastructure, minimal instructional materials, lack of connectivity, and high rates of teacher turnover, yet they remain central to ensuring equitable access to education. Narrative inquiry has become a useful lens in studying these realities, allowing researchers to capture teachers' lived experiences as stories of struggles and triumphs that are often overlooked by policy and official reports (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020). In the Philippine context, the Department of Education recognizes the importance of addressing the needs of "last mile schools," which are defined as those located in geographically isolated, disadvantaged, and conflict-affected areas, with limited or no access to basic services. These schools represent the frontier of the Philippine educational system's commitment to inclusivity, and the narratives of their teachers embody the struggle to bring quality education where it is most difficult.

Lingo and Garcia (2024) categorized teachers' experiences in remote schools under themes such as "laborious workload," "far and uneasy road," "distance from family," and "sense of isolation," showing that geographical realities greatly affect teachers' personal and professional lives. Despite these struggles, teachers' survival strategies, such as prayer, maintaining a positive outlook, and relying on the camaraderie of colleagues. Similarly, Reyes (2021) noted that teachers in disadvantaged schools often continue to find ways to sustain effective teaching and learning (Andaya et al., 2025). Manguiat (2025) defines leadership practices as the actions and behaviors teacher-leaders use to guide their peers, motivate learners, and maintain instructional quality despite many constraints. These include mentoring, teamwork, professional growth, and working with local communities to solve learning problems (Salazar & Plaza, 2025). Such practices show not only their skills but also their deep commitment and adaptability.

The work of teacher-leaders in remote schools goes beyond teaching and leading. It also involves facing and overcoming hardship (Molleno, 2025). To survive and succeed, they use coping strategies which are practical ways to manage stress, make do with limited resources, and deal with the challenges of isolation and poverty (Doria & Ortega, 2024). These strategies include solving problems creatively, making use of what is available, working with community partners, and keeping a sense of purpose and resilience (Fabrigas & Paglinawan, 2025). Understanding how teacher-leaders cope gives insight into the human side of leadership—how they continue to lead and teach even in difficult conditions.

Several studies in the Philippines have explored teacher leadership, often focusing on mentoring, collaboration, and improving classroom instruction. Zabala (2024) highlighted how teacher-leaders play a key role in guiding peers, promoting teamwork, and building a culture of shared responsibility in schools. Similarly, Andaya and Quinito (2025) explained that teacher leadership strengthens professional growth by encouraging teachers to learn from one another through mentoring and reflective dialogue. Manguiat (2025) also pointed out that in many schools, teacher-leaders help sustain performance by bridging gaps between teachers, learners, and administrators. Research has also examined how school principals in remote schools demonstrate leadership amid difficult conditions. Dela Peña (2020) and Mordeno and Rayon Jr. (2025) described how principals in remote areas use adaptive leadership to manage schools with limited resources. Tejada and Cheing (2024) found that these principals rely on community partnerships and collaboration to deal with logistical barriers. Magistrado et al. (2024) further observed that many school principals lead by example, showing creativity and persistence despite poor infrastructure and scarce funding. These studies show that leadership in remote schools demands flexibility, commitment, and strong community ties.

Beyond these, recent research on leadership in remote schools has leaned heavily on qualitative case studies on phenomenological designs. For example, a case study in the Davao Region employed interviews and focus groups with school heads, teachers, and stakeholders to explore resilient and adaptive leadership in the context of resource constraints and geographic isolation (Mordeno & Rayon Jr., 2025). Similarly, a phenomenological study in the Talaingod District employed purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews to examine the lived experiences and coping strategies of school leaders managing instructional and administrative duties under difficult conditions (Tejada & Cheing, 2024). Another case study in Misamis Occidental triangulated interviews with teachers, parents, and supervisors to provide a comprehensive picture of leadership practices amidst socio-cultural and infrastructural challenges (Marci & Naparan, 2025). However, little is known about the lived experiences of

teacher-leaders in remote schools. Most research focuses on principals, overlooking the stories of those who teach and lead simultaneously, while facing isolation, limited resources, and daily challenges. Their coping mechanisms and leadership journeys are not yet well-documented.

This gap in research highlights the need to explore the leadership practices and coping strategies of teacher-leaders in remote schools through narrative inquiry. By focusing on their voices, this study aims to understand how they adapt, persist, and sustain education under difficult conditions. Their stories can help shape better policies, improve teacher support, and promote fair access to quality education in the Schools Division of Oroquieta City.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative narrative research design to explore the lived experiences of teacher-leaders in remote schools within the Schools Division of Oroquieta City. A total of twelve (12) teacher-leaders were purposively selected based on their leadership roles, years of experience, and assignment in geographically isolated schools. Data were gathered through a researcher-developed, expert-validated semi-structured interview guide that demonstrated excellent content validity ($S-CVI/Ave = 0.94$) and was pilot-tested prior to implementation. The research followed a systematic data-gathering procedure that included securing institutional approvals, obtaining informed consent, conducting in-depth interviews, and ensuring participant confidentiality. The collected narratives were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework with the aid of NVivo software, while member checking, audit trails, thick description, and reflexive journaling were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical principles guided the entire research process, including adherence to the Declaration of Helsinki, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

Results and Discussions

Leadership Practices Demonstrated by Teacher-Leaders in Remote Schools

The thematic analysis revealed that teacher-leaders in remote schools demonstrate diverse and multifaceted leadership practices essential for sustaining school operations and promoting quality education despite geographic isolation and limited resources. Seven major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: Instructional Leadership and Academic Supervision, Collaborative and Shared Leadership, Supportive and Mentoring-Oriented Leadership, Administrative and Operational Leadership, Adaptive and Resourceful Leadership, Community-Oriented and Stakeholder Engagement Leadership, and Values-Based and Service-Oriented Leadership. These findings indicate that teacher-leaders perform expanded roles that encompass instructional supervision, collaborative decision-making, mentoring, school management, resourcefulness, community engagement, and servant leadership. Such practices enable them to address instructional challenges, foster teamwork, strengthen partnerships with stakeholders, and prioritize learners' welfare amid resource-constrained environments. The findings support previous studies emphasizing that leadership in geographically isolated schools requires instructional competence, adaptability, collaboration, and a strong commitment to service (Bush, 2021; Day, 2020; Chang et al., 2024; Paglinawan et al., 2025; Famero, 2024). Moreover, the results align with the principles of adaptive and servant leadership, highlighting that effective teacher-leadership in remote schools is characterized by resilience, innovation, shared responsibility, and moral purpose, which collectively contribute to sustaining school improvement and enhancing educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities.

Coping Strategies Employed by Teacher-Leaders in Remote Schools

The thematic analysis revealed that teacher-leaders in remote schools employ diverse and complementary coping strategies to effectively manage the demands of leadership, geographic isolation, limited resources, and workplace stress. Six major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: Time Management and Task Prioritization, Personal Resilience and Inner Motivation, Peer Support and Collaborative Coping, Adaptive and Resourceful Coping Strategies, Work-Life Balance and Family Support, and Community-Based Support and Engagement. These findings demonstrate that teacher-leaders rely on deliberate planning, emotional resilience, collegial collaboration, adaptability, family support, and community partnerships to sustain their leadership roles and maintain their well-being despite challenging working conditions. By organizing tasks, strengthening their sense of purpose through faith and reflection, seeking support from colleagues and family, creatively addressing resource limitations, and engaging community stakeholders, teacher-leaders are able to reduce stress, prevent burnout, and ensure the continuous delivery of quality education. These findings are consistent with

previous studies emphasizing that resilience, adaptive coping, collaborative support, and effective time management are critical factors in sustaining leadership effectiveness in remote and resource-constrained educational settings (Day, 2020; Evans & Pruzan, 2021; Mulenga & Marbán, 2021; Chang et al., 2024; Famerio, 2024). Furthermore, the results underscore that successful leadership in geographically isolated schools depends not only on professional competence but also on strong personal, social, and community support systems that foster resilience and organizational sustainability.

Implications Drawn from the Lived Experiences of Teacher-Leaders in Remote Schools

The thematic analysis revealed that the lived experiences of teacher-leaders in remote schools have significant implications for educational leadership, institutional support, policy development, and school sustainability. Six major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: Reframing School Leadership as Service-Oriented, Strengthening Institutional and Professional Support Systems, Enhancing School–Community Partnerships, Developing Adaptive and Resilient Leadership Capacities, Ensuring Continuity and Quality of Education in Remote Contexts, and Promoting Teacher-Leader Well-Being and Retention. These findings suggest that effective leadership in geographically isolated schools extends beyond administrative functions, requiring a strong commitment to service, moral responsibility, adaptability, collaboration, and continuous professional growth. The participants emphasized that sustainable school leadership depends on responsive institutional support, context-sensitive policies, strong partnerships with families and communities, and initiatives that promote the well-being and retention of teacher-leaders. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating adaptive leadership skills and providing adequate recognition and support systems to enable teacher-leaders to sustain quality instruction and foster positive school environments despite persistent challenges. These implications are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that service-oriented leadership, professional development, community engagement, adaptive leadership, and leader well-being are essential for maintaining effective and resilient leadership in remote and resource-constrained educational settings (Day, 2020; Bush, 2021; Mulenga & Marbán, 2021; Chang et al., 2024; Mansfield et al., 2020).

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that teacher-leaders in remote schools demonstrate strong adaptive leadership and problem-solving skills, which enable them to maintain school operations and ensure instructional quality despite limited resources. Their active engagement with parents, learners, and community stakeholders highlights the critical role of collaboration in strengthening school resilience, promoting learner outcomes, and sustaining educational programs. To manage the challenges of their roles, teacher-leaders rely on effective coping mechanisms such as reflection, faith-based practices, peer support, and structured work-life management, which are essential for preserving their well-being and leadership effectiveness. Moreover, intrinsic motivation and a strong sense of service drive their commitment to learners, fostering persistence, accountability, and continuous professional growth. Finally, systemic support and policy interventions including leadership training, institutional guidance, wellness programs, and formal recognition are necessary to complement personal resilience and ensure sustainable, effective leadership in remote school settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that school division offices and education policymakers formulate context-responsive policies that provide structured administrative support, equitable resource allocation, and professional assistance to teacher-leaders in remote schools. School administrators and training institutions should strengthen leadership development by offering continuous professional learning opportunities focused on adaptive leadership, instructional supervision, mentoring, collaboration, and problem-solving while establishing peer-learning networks and reflective practice programs. Teacher-leaders are likewise encouraged to sustain effective coping strategies through self-reflection, work–life balance, peer collaboration, and active engagement with learners, parents, and community stakeholders to promote shared leadership and improve school outcomes. Furthermore, education authorities should implement comprehensive wellness programs, mentorship initiatives, recognition systems, and workload management strategies to enhance teacher-leaders' well-being, reduce burnout, and encourage long-term retention in remote schools. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to undertake longitudinal and intervention-based studies that examine the long-term effects of adaptive leadership, professional development, institutional support, and policy implementation on teacher-leaders' resilience, leadership effectiveness, and learner outcomes in geographically isolated and disadvantaged school contexts.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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