SCHOOL CLIMATE PERSPECTIVE IN THE NOW-NORMAL FROM THE LENSES OF SCHOOL HEADS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the educational landscape, compelling an urgent shift toward the "Now Normal". This dissertation investigates the strategies employed by school heads to navigate these unprecedented challenges, with a particular focus on sustaining and enhancing a positive school climate in the face of significant operational and pedagogical disruptions. Utilizing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research was conducted in select public schools in Bataan, Philippines, through a combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal school heads remarkable adaptability, resilience, and innovative leadership as they redefined traditional concepts of school climate, facilitated strategic decision-making, and fostered environments conducive to both personal and professional growth. Moreover, the study underscores the crucial role of technology integration, mental health activities, and community engagement in creating a supportive and dynamic educational atmosphere. These elements were vital in sustaining a climate of care and collaboration, even amidst the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic. The study's recommendations for policy and practice emphasize the need for greater investment in technological infrastructure, the prioritization of mental health programs for both staff and students, and the cultivation of a culture that engages a continuous innovation and learning. Additionally, the research presents a new theoretical framework for understanding school climate and educational leadership during times of crisis, providing valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators in navigating future educational transformations and challenges.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, school climate, qualitative narrative inquiry, Bataan, Philippines, COVID-19 pandemic, technology integration, mental health initiatives, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of K-12 education is to aid learners in achieving their full potential. (An et al., 2021; Quijano, 2023). Achieving this vision requires a learning environment that is both supportive and conducive to academic growth (Cardichon et al., 2017; Hammond and Harvey, 2018). Over the past five decades, educational efforts have made significant advancements globally (Daniel, 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Gómez-hurtado et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges, causing abrupt educational transformations that affect access, learning outcomes, and mental health. (Rotas et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2020; García, 2021; Agayon et al., 2022; Werner and Woessmann, 2023; Karakose et al., 2023). This crisis has necessitated the evolution of traditional educational pedagogies, such as classroom instruction, which were transformed overnight into school pivots to remote learning, hybrid models, and technology-driven instruction. This shift fundamentally altered the dynamics of school climate, which commonly focused on physical safety and academic performance, now expanding to prioritizing emotional well-being, digital engagement, and community support (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Thorne, 2020; Spyropoulou and Koutroukis, 2021; Simbre et al., 2023). Consequently, the concept of school climate is being reevaluated, focusing on supportive environments and student engagement. (Zhu & Liu, 2020; Čech et al., 2020; Scallion, 2010).

Across ASEAN countries, the pandemic's impact on education has been profound but varied, with each country facing unique challenges. The Philippines has implemented remote learning initiatives and modular approaches to bridge gaps in technology access. (Estrellado, 2021; Pecson &

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Pogoy, 2021). While Indonesia adopted blended learning models that combine face-to-face and online instruction (Karakose et al., 2023). Malaysia and Singapore accelerated digital literacy and technology integration into their curricula to equip their students for the future. (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Thorne, 2020). Meanwhile, Vietnam and Thailand reported on the pandemic's impact on student mental health, highlighting the need for supportive school climates. (Rotas et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2020). These differing strategies reflect the diverse educational context in the ASEAN region, emphasizing the need for adaptable school systems that prioritize not only academic success but also the well-being of students and staff. (Zhu & Liu, 2020; Čech et al., 2020).

Despite extensive education research on these adaptations, there has been a limited focus on the role of school leaders in shaping school climate, particularly during crises. Most studies have concentrated on administrative infrastructural changes, often overlooking the strategies that school heads employ to foster resilience, emotional support, and community engagement within their schools. (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Maxwell et al., 2017; (Parris et al., 2018). School heads, as key figures in decision-making and school culture, offer valuable insights into how educational institutions can navigate disruptions while maintaining supportive climates. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of school heads in Bataan, Philippines on managing post-pandemic school climates, with a focus on emotional well-being, educational support, community involvement, and safety protocols. By examining their experiences, this study will contribute to developing more effective school management strategies, ensuring educational institutions are resilient and supportive in future challenges. (Murtedjo & Suharningsih, 2018; Dichoso, 2023; Villar et al., 2021).

FRAMEWORK

This study examines the evolving nature of school climate from the perspective of school leaders in the Philippines, integrating Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory and Transformational Leadership concepts. School climate, including relationships, teaching methods, administrative frameworks, and social norms, significantly impacts student outcomes. (Jinot, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's theory posits that complex interactions within the school microsystem and broader ecological systems. Influence human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Transformational leadership, crucial for shaping a positive school climate, emphasizes adaptive practices that promote resilience and academic success. (Bass, 2023; Khalil and Hussain Ch, 2021)This study focuses on how leaders address emotional well-being, educational assistance, community involvement, and safety measures during the now-normal. By integrating these theories with empirical data, the research can address the subjective experiences of school leaders and the impact of transformational leadership on school climate post-pandemic. The results will aid in forming strategies for creating a supportive and resilient school climate, essential for meeting future educational challenges.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This manuscript provides a detailed understanding of how school heads perceive and manage school climate amid the paradigm shift caused by the global health crisis. It analyzes the multifaceted effects of recent educational changes on school climate as observed by the school leaders, identifying the most significantly impacted aspects. The study also evaluates initiatives and strategies introduced by educational authorities to foster a positive and supportive atmosphere in schools, exploring formal policies and effective informal practices.

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The research uncovers challenges and opportunities that school administrators face in maintaining and enhancing the school climate. It explores obstacles such as resource limitations, staff and student well-being, and edtech integration in teaching. Additionally, it investigates innovative approaches and adaptive strategies adopted by school heads, highlighting best practices and areas for improvement.

The study developed a comprehensive theoretical framework capturing the complexities of school climate in the now normal, based on data from interviews with school heads. The result can enhance the current body of knowledge, offering practical insights for developing targeted interventions and policies. These interventions and policies will support school heads in promoting a positive school climate, enhancing student well-being and academic achievement in the evolving educational landscape.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research used the narrative Inquiry approach to gain a deep understanding of how school heads perceive and manage school climate in the context of the now normal following the COVID-19 pandemic. Narrative Inquiry is particularly suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and how these experiences shape and are shaped by the evolving educational environment. By analyzing the personal narratives of school heads, the study aims to capture the complexities of their experiences, revealing insights into how their perceptions and management strategies have adapted during and after the pandemic.

All interviews and communications are recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Theoretical saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from additional data. To validate the findings, member checking was employed, where participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations of their narratives. This feedback was instrumental in refining the study's findings and ensuring that the conclusions accurately reflected participant's experiences. Member chacking also provided an opportunity to gather input on potential interventions and policies designed to support school leaders.

Research Site

This study will focus on public secondary schools in Bataan, Philippines. Bataan is selected due to its diverse community and densely populated nature, which can provide unique insights into the evolving school climate under the now-normal (Makri & Neely, 2021). The study targeted school heads as primary participants, recognizing their critical role in shaping the school environment and addressing the challenges and opportunities in the current education context. This selection aims to capture a broad range of experiences and strategies implemented across different schools, enriching the understanding of school climate dynamics in this region.

Participants

This study gathered narratives from 11 out of 56 provincial secondary school heads in Bataan, Philippines, selected through purposive sampling to include public secondary school heads with at least three years of experience who have managed schools during the new normal. Participants ranged from Principal I to Principal IV, with experience spanning three years to ten years, and held bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Their school-based management (SBM) levels varied from level I to level III, and many were recognized as outstanding principals or had received leadership awards. These

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diverse backgrounds provided comprehensive insight into how leadership impacts school climate, demonstrating the influence of varied leadership qualities in the current academic context.

Instrumentation
Construction and Development

The construction and development of the questionnaire are crucial to ensuring the quality of data collected in a research (Aliero, H. y Miswar, 2023). The questionnaire is designed to capture the research objectives accurately and be comprehensible to the target population. For this study, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed to gather data on school climate perspectives in the now-normal from the standpoints of school heads. Semi-structured interviewing balances standardization and openness of responses, allowing for rich, detailed data. (Belina, 2023). The questionnaire is grounded in an extensive review of the related literature on school climate, COVID-19's impact on education, and the role of school leaders during a health crisis. It included both close-ended and open-ended questions to facilitate comprehensive qualitative data collection. (Hadler, 2023). Pre-testing was conducted with a small sample of school heads, and their feedback was used to refine and improve the questionnaire, ensuring clarity, relevance, and objectivity. (Aithal and Aithal, 2020).

Validation and Reliability

Ensuring the consistency and accuracy of the questionnaire is vital for obtaining reliable data. (Coleman, 2021)Reliability, which indicates consistency, was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with a value of 0.765 or higher, and the test-retest method was deemed acceptable. (Quintão et al., 2020). Validity, ensuring the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure, was supported by a comprehensive literature review for content validity and pre-testing for face validity. (Daud et al., 2021)

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously implemented throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their rights. The study prioritized ethical principles to protect participants' rights and well-being. (Rodríguez, 2023). Confidentiality was strictly maintained anonymizing all data and securely storing records. Participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Moral guidelines, such as personal respect, kindness, and justice, were strictly followed, ensuring that every participant was regarded with consideration and dignity during the study.

Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple methods to provide a holistic view of school climate changes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school heads from various schools in Bataan, Philippines, to gather details of personal accounts. To supplement these interviews, observations were carried out in the school settings to document real-time interactions and environmental changes. Additionally, document analysis of relevant school records, policy documents, and previous reports was performed to contextualize the interview and observation data within the broader institutional and historical framework. The discussion was recorded, logged, and examined using constant comparative patterns from the study procedures. (Makri & Neely, 2021), Allowing a deeper exploration of their viewpoints.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of School Heads on Educational Shifts and School Climate

This research aimed to understand how school leaders perceive the impact of recent educational shifts on the school climate. The findings indicate that school leaders adapted their leadership styles to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic, demonstrating resilience and flexibility. For instance, many school leaders reported a shift towards more collaborative and student-centered leadership approaches, which involved actively engaging with stakeholders and prioritizing the mental and emotional well-being of students and staff. Stiller & Meijerink (2015) discuss the need to identify the various manifestations of leadership within networks, which can be analogous to recognizing the multiple leadership roles within educational frameworks.

These perceptions directly influenced the development of various initiatives. For example, feedback from school leaders highlighted the need for robust mental health support systems. Consequently, educational authorities implemented targeted mental programs, including counseling services and well-being workshops, to address the psychological impact of the pandemic on both students and staff. This alignment between leaders' experiences and policy responses demonstrates how practical insights can guide effective educational reforms.

Initiatives of Educational Authorities

Educational authorities have introduced several initiatives to foster a positive and supportive atmosphere in schools during unconventional times, addressing the second study objective. Key initiatives include hybrid learning adoption, cultural inclusivity programs, mental health support, teacher professional development, technology integration, and forming digital learning alliances. These initiatives are created to adjust to evolving conditions, support diverse student needs, and ensure the well-being and success of all school community members. Kachnic & Cohen (2022) also support this notion, emphasizing that school climate interventions must be studied holistically to understand their effects on student achievement and well-being.

Table 1
Summary Table of Initiatives

Initiatives	Description	Examples/Case
Hybrid Learning Adoption	Combines online and face-to-face instruction for flexible learning options.	Most of the schools in the second District of Bataan Implemented a blended model where students attend in-person classes twice a week and engage in online learning for the remaining days. This approach helped accommodate varying student needs during the pandemic.
Cultural Inclusivity Programs	Promotes diversity and inclusivity in academic settings.	Bia-an Integrated School in the town of Marivels Launched an initiative celebrating cultural diversity with monthly events and workshops, fostering a more inclusive environment for students from different backgrounds.

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Mental Health Programs	Provides counseling services and well-being workshops.	All School Principals included in the study introduced a comprehensive mental health program, including weekly counseling sessions and stress management workshops, addressing the increased psychological needs of students and staff.
Teacher Professional Development	Offers training to adapt to new methods and technologies.	All principals interviewed Conducted a series of professional development workshops on remote teaching tools and digital pedagogies, helping teachers effectively transition to online instruction.
Technological Integration	Enhances the use of digital tools in schools.	Division of Bataan launched Integrated interactive digital whiteboards and learning management systems to enhance student engagement and facilitate more dynamic learning experiences.
Digital Learning Alliance	Partners with tech providers to improve access to digital resources.	Some principals partnered with a local government unit to provide students with tablets and internet access, improving the availability of digital learning resources and supporting remote education.

Challenges and Opportunities in Maintaining a Conducive Learning Environment

The third objective of this study focused on the challenges and opportunities educational leaders face in maintaining a conducive learning environment amid recent educational reforms. School leaders have implemented various strategies to successfully navigate these conditions. These strategies include technology integration, methodological shifts, emotional and psychological support, remote learning opportunities, inclusive education practices, professional development, and community collaboration. Research indicates that schools with supportive climates experience lower dropout rates and enhanced student performance (Özdemir et al., 2022). Thus, fostering such climates is paramount, and recognizing the multifaceted nature of this environment is critical for educational leaders.

Table 2
Summary Table of Strategies

Strategy	Description
Technology Integration	Utilize digital tools to enhance teaching and learning.
Methodological Shifts	Adopt new pedagogical approaches suited to remote and hybrid learning environments.
Emotional and Psychological Support	Provide counseling and mental health resources to support the well-being of students, staff, and stakeholders.
Remote Learning Opportunities	Increase the availability of high-quality education via online platforms.
Inclusive Education Practices	Ensure all learners have access to excellent education, irrespective of background or abilities.
Professional Development	Offer intensive training programs to help teachers develop necessary skills.

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Community Collaboration	Engage with parents, local organizations, and stakeholders to create a supportive network.

Validation of Theory and Methods

Narrative inquiry is defined as a qualitative research method that explores and interprets personal stories to enhance understanding of experiences. According to Xu & Connelly (2010), this approach enables researchers to delve into the narratives of individuals, allowing for a deeper investigation into the subjective nature of their experiences. The reliability and validity of data analysis were ensured through inter-coder reliability and member checking. The findings support Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory, highlighting the dynamic interactions within the school microsystem that influence student outcomes and emphasizing the crucial role of administrative frameworks, relationships, and social norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The study also underscores the importance of transformational leadership in shaping a favorable school atmosphere, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's concept of proximal processes. Consistent with global and ASEAN studies, supportive and adaptive leadership is vital for resilience and academic success, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Karakose et al., 2023; Aristovnik et al., 2020). Integrating empirical data with Bronfenbrenner's theoretical insights, the research comprehensively understands school climate dynamics, showing how transformational leadership influences emotional well-being, educational assistance, community involvement, and safety measures.

Critique of Methods and Theories

The study's data collection methods, while insightful, present some limitations. The reliance on supported data from interviews may introduce response bias, and observations may not capture all contextual factors influencing school climate. To enhance the robustness of future research, a mixed-method approach could be employed, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. Additionally, expanding the scope of observations to include a broader range of school activities and context could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of educational reforms.

CONCLUSION

The elementary teachers were highly competent in stating the lessons' objectives to the study sheds light on how school heads navigated the complexities of school climate in the now normal, providing valuable insights that can inform both practical strategies and policy recommendations. School administrators' resilience and adaptability in addressing challenges – ranging from health protocols to online learning and socio-emotional well-being – highlighted the critical need for flexible, student-centered approaches. These findings underscore the importance of integrating leadership development programs that focus on adaptive strategies, as well as embedding socio-emotional support systems into educational policy frameworks. For policymakers, this research suggests that prioritizing professional development, technology infrastructure, and mental health resources is essential in creating resilient school environments capable of withstanding future disruptions.

However, this research primarily focuses on public schools within the Province of Bataan, limiting the generalizability of the findings across diverse educational contexts. Additionally, while the narrative inquiry approach provided deep insights, the reliance on self-reported data from school leaders may have introduced biases. Future research could address these gaps by incorporating broader

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participant samples, including different regions and types of schools, and integrating perspectives from teachers, students, and parents. Mixed-method approaches could also enhance understanding by triangulating data from surveys, interviews, and quantitative matrices.

Despite these limitations, the insights gained from this study have broader implications beyond the immediate context. The adaptive leadership strategies highlighted here apply to various educational settings globally, particularly in responding to crises and periods of transition. Policymakers and school leaders can apply these findings to shape education reform efforts, focusing on building a flexible, equitable, and supportive school climate. In contexts where digital infrastructure is limited, for instance, tailored interventions that bridge the digital divide can help ensure inclusive education. Likewise, professional development policies can be expanded to include resilience training for educational leaders, equipping them to lead effectively through future challenges.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

To effectively translate research on school climate in the "Now Normal" into practice, each form of media should be tailored to specific stakeholders and developed collaboratively to meet their needs. Policy briefs and guidelines for school administrators can focus on implementing adaptive leadership and technology integration, while creative expressions like songs, dances, and illustration books can engage students and parents by conveying resilience and flexibility through relatable scenarios. Storytelling, drama, podcasts, and video clips featuring real-life case studies of school leaders navigating challenges can benefit teachers, staff, and the broader community, making complex concepts accessible through social media and educational platforms. Visual media such as posters and brochures can reinforce these ideas in schools, offering practical tips for maintaining a positive school climate. Evaluating these methods through surveys and feedback mechanisms ensures continuous improvement, while recent initiatives, such as school-based drama performances for mental health awareness, show the practical value of using performing arts to engage stakeholders and promote well-being.

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