

Exploring the Spiritual Leadership of School Heads

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Abstract: This study explored the experiences of school heads in applying spiritual intelligence in their leadership practices. It employed a qualitative phenomenological design. In-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with 10 school heads from Basiawan Central Elementary School, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed thematically. The study identified five major challenges faced by school heads: (1) balancing compassion with discipline, (2) managing personal beliefs in a diverse educational environment, (3) handling stress and emotional exhaustion, (4) addressing resistance to change and skepticism, and (5) maintaining integrity under external pressures. To overcome these challenges, heads employed various coping strategies, including (1) adopting a balanced approach by blending discipline with empathy, (2) embracing inclusivity and respecting diverse beliefs, (3) engaging in mindfulness practices, self-care routines, and reflective exercises, (4) fostering open communication, and (5) grounding decisions in ethical principles and institutional values. From their experiences, school heads gained three key insights: (1) leading with spiritual intelligence requires balance, (2) inclusivity does not mean imposing beliefs but finding common ground, and (3) self-reflection and mindfulness are essential. Future research may examine the quantitative impact of spiritual intelligence on leadership effectiveness and explore its application in other educational settings.

Keywords: *Spiritual Intelligence, Educational Leadership, Ethical Decision-Making, Mindfulness, School Management, Inclusivity*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study highlighted that school leaders with high spiritual intelligence tend to show greater emotional resilience, ethical decision-making, and inclusivity. As schools encounter growing challenges, it's important to understand how these leaders use spiritual intelligence to create a positive and effective school environment.

School heads across various contexts face challenges in applying spiritual intelligence (SI) due to cultural, institutional, and training-related constraints. In secular Western countries, SI is often underutilized due to fears of appearing biased, while in international and multicultural settings, it risks being misinterpreted as religious proselytization. Despite its proven benefits in promoting ethical decision-making, stress management, and inclusive leadership, SI remains largely excluded from professional development programs. In the Philippines, where spirituality is deeply rooted, school heads have unique opportunities to integrate SI but struggle due to unclear guidelines, inconsistent implementation, and limited resources—especially in underfunded or diverse areas like Mindanao, where socio-political and cultural complexities heighten the need for spiritually intelligent leadership.

Exploring spiritual intelligence in school leadership can enhance inclusivity and ethics, but its application faces challenges across global and local contexts due to cultural, training, and resource-related issues. Addressing these challenges is key to creating effective strategies that help school heads apply spiritual intelligence to improve education and leadership.

This study explored how school heads perceive and apply spiritual intelligence in their leadership, focusing on its role in decision-making, staff and student interactions, and building inclusive school cultures. It aims to understand the challenges and opportunities of integrating spiritual principles, highlighting their potential impact on leadership effectiveness and educational environments in diverse settings.

This study aimed to explore the application of spiritual intelligence among school heads. By focusing on the experiences of school heads, the research seeks to understand the challenges they face in integrating spiritual intelligence into their roles, the coping mechanisms they employ to manage these challenges, and the insights they gain from their experiences. The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the experiences of school heads on spiritual leadership?
- What are the coping strategies of school heads on spiritual leadership?
- What are the insights of school heads on spiritual leadership?

Literature on spiritual intelligence (SI) in educational leadership highlighted its role in promoting ethical, empathetic, and effective leadership. SI supports transformational and servant leadership, enhances conflict resolution and team collaboration, and improves leaders' well-being and stress management. Research suggested that targeted SI training can strengthen leadership effectiveness, especially in culturally diverse and non-Western educational settings.

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Burns and expanded by Bass, was found to be highly relevant in understanding the application of spiritual intelligence (SI) in educational leadership. This framework emphasized inspiring and motivating followers through traits closely linked to SI, such as empathy, ethical decision-making, and a shared sense of purpose. Integrating SI into transformational leadership helped foster inclusive school cultures, improve team cohesion, and enhance conflict resolution. Similarly, Servant Leadership Theory, introduced by Greenleaf, offered a strong foundation for exploring SI in leadership by emphasizing service, empathy, and community building.

II. METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach, chosen for its focus on exploring the lived experiences of individuals. This method was particularly suited to understanding how school heads perceived and applied spiritual intelligence in their leadership roles. It allowed the researcher to deeply examine participants' personal meanings, beliefs, and values related to spiritual intelligence. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study captured the complexities and nuances of how SI was understood and implemented in real-world educational settings, offering rich insights into its role in leadership.

This study is grounded in four key philosophical assumptions that shape its qualitative, phenomenological approach. Ontologically, it acknowledges multiple realities shaped by individual experiences, recognizing that school heads interpret spiritual intelligence differently based on their personal and cultural contexts. Epistemologically, it adopts a constructivist stance, viewing knowledge as co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants. Axiologically, it values transparency and reflexivity, acknowledging the influence of both researcher and participant values on the research process. Rhetorically, it follows qualitative traditions that emphasize context-specific, inductive inquiry to deeply explore the lived experiences of school heads applying spiritual intelligence in leadership.

The researcher's qualitative assumption was based on the belief that reality is subjective and constructed through individual experiences and interactions. Aligned with a constructivist paradigm, the study viewed knowledge as co-constructed rather than objectively discovered. In exploring how school heads applied spiritual intelligence, this assumption recognized that each leader's understanding and use of SI was shaped by personal beliefs, values, and experiences within their educational settings.

The study involved five purposively selected school heads from Sta. Maria, Davao Occidental, including those serving as coordinators. Participants were chosen for their relevant experience and knowledge of spiritual intelligence in leadership. Inclusion criteria required them to be currently employed as school heads in the area, have at least three years of experience, and be willing to participate in in-depth interviews to share their experiences and insights.

The researcher collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focused group discussions, using a structured set of questions tailored for the study. These methods allowed for detailed, face-to-face conversations to explore participants' experiences with spiritual intelligence in educational leadership. Interviews were conducted individually, lasting 15 to 30 minutes, in comfortable settings chosen by participants. With consent, sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Ethical standards such as confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained throughout the process.

The researcher analyzed the data through a systematic process: first, transcribing interviews verbatim to capture all details; second, thoroughly reading the transcripts to become familiar with the content; third, coding meaningful text segments related to the research questions; fourth, organizing these codes into broader themes reflecting participants' shared experiences; and finally, reviewing and refining the themes by cross-checking with the original data to ensure accuracy and validity.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first section of the study found that school leaders faced several challenges in applying spiritual intelligence in their leadership practices. They struggled to balance compassion with discipline, managing the enforcement of rules while remaining empathetic and fair. Navigating personal beliefs in diverse educational settings posed difficulties in maintaining inclusivity without imposing ideologies. Leaders also experienced stress and emotional exhaustion due to the demands of constant emotional regulation. Additionally, they encountered resistance to change and skepticism from stakeholders who were hesitant to embrace spiritually intelligent leadership. Lastly, school heads worked to maintain their integrity despite external pressures and institutional constraints. These challenges required them to continually adapt their leadership approaches while upholding their spiritual intelligence values.

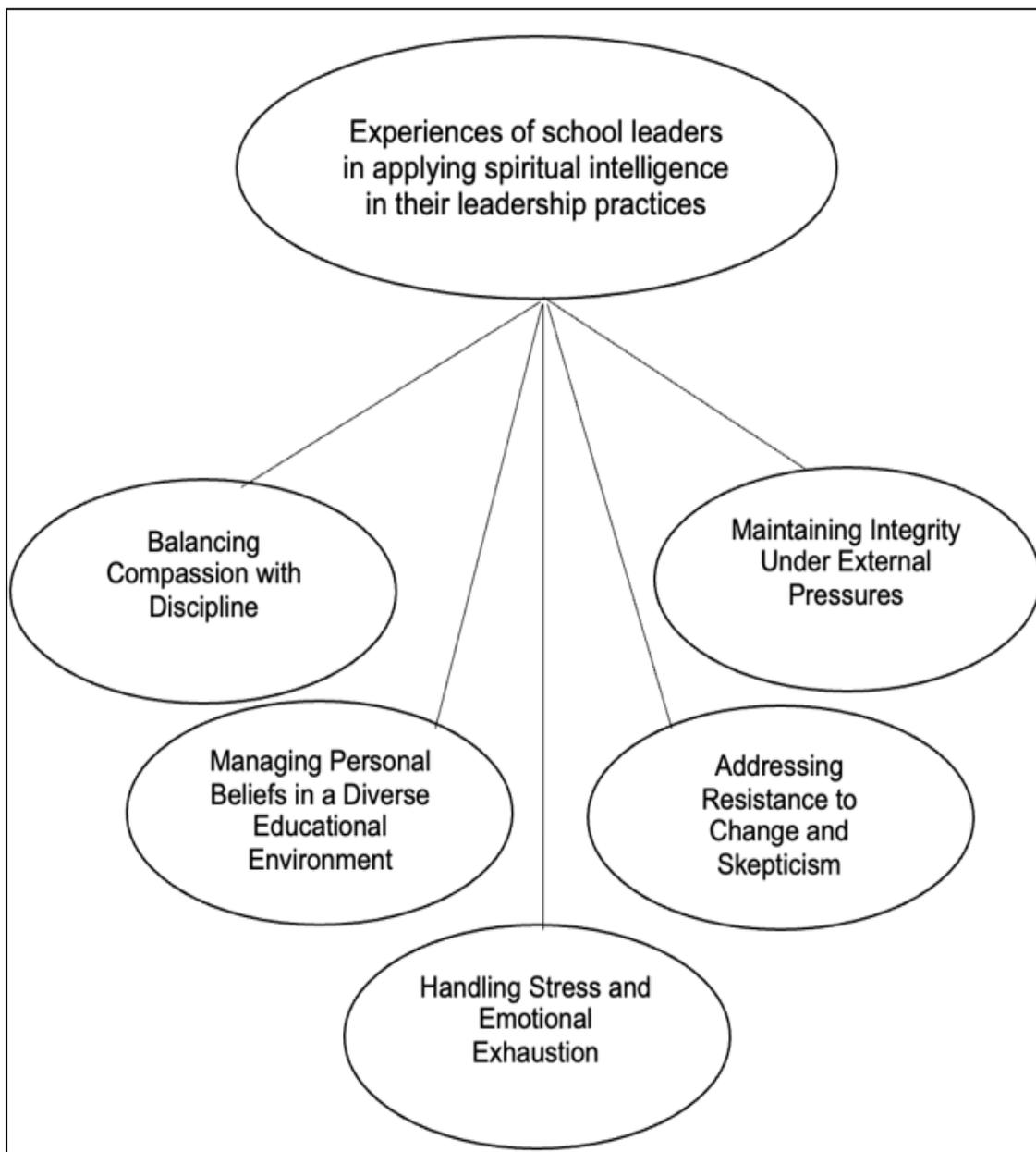


Fig 1 Experiences of School heads on Spiritual Leadership

In the second section, the school heads employed several coping strategies to effectively apply spiritual intelligence in their leadership despite challenges. They balanced discipline with empathy to enforce rules fairly, embraced inclusivity by respecting diverse beliefs, and practiced mindfulness, self-care, and reflection to manage stress. They also fostered open communication to build trust and collaboration among stakeholders, and grounded their decisions in ethical principles and institutional values.

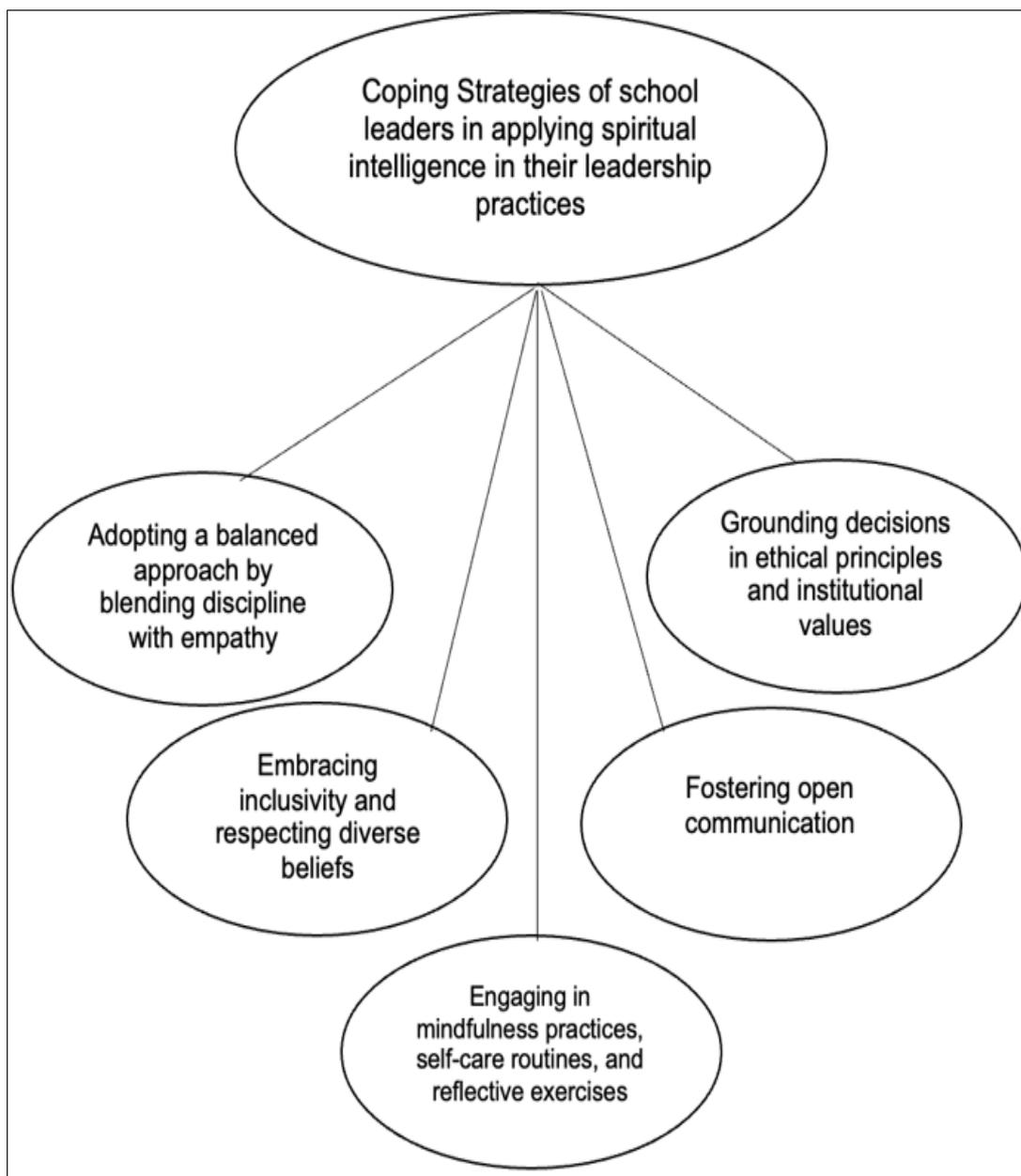


Fig 2 Coping Strategies of School heads on spirituals Leadership

School heads gained valuable insights from integrating spiritual intelligence into their leadership roles, shaping their decision-making, communication, and overall management. They found that spiritual intelligence helped them navigate leadership complexities with wisdom, ethical integrity, and emotional resilience. Their reflections showed that effective leadership involved fostering balance, inclusivity, and self-awareness rather than just exercising authority. The findings highlighted three key insights: first, leading with spiritual intelligence required balancing discipline and empathy while upholding policies; second, inclusivity meant respecting diverse perspectives without imposing beliefs; and third, self-reflection and mindfulness were essential for maintaining emotional stability and making thoughtful decisions.



Fig 3 Insights of School Heads on Spirituals Leadership

The study revealed that school heads encountered several challenges in applying spiritual intelligence within their leadership practices. They struggled to balance compassion with discipline, needing to enforce rules while remaining fair and understanding. Managing personal beliefs in a diverse environment was difficult, as they aimed to maintain inclusivity without imposing their values. Additionally, leaders faced stress and emotional exhaustion due to the demanding nature of their roles. They also had to address resistance to change and skepticism from some stakeholders and maintain integrity amid external pressures, such as political or administrative expectations.

To cope with these challenges, school heads employed various strategies aligned with spiritual intelligence. They adopted a balanced approach by blending discipline with empathy, ensuring rules were enforced compassionately. They embraced inclusivity by respecting diverse beliefs, keeping leadership neutral and open. Mindfulness practices, self-care, and reflective exercises helped them manage stress and maintain emotional resilience. Open communication fostered trust and strengthened relationships, while grounding decisions in ethical principles and institutional values helped them navigate complex situations with fairness and integrity.

From their experiences, school heads gained valuable insights into the role of spiritual intelligence in leadership. They learned that effective leadership requires a continuous balance of wisdom, empathy, and authority. They understood that inclusivity means finding common ground rather than imposing beliefs, ensuring everyone in the school community feels respected. Lastly, they recognized the importance of self-reflection and mindfulness in making sound decisions, managing emotions, and promoting a leadership style rooted in ethical responsibility and well-being.

The challenges school heads face in applying spiritual intelligence highlight the need for training in ethical leadership, emotional resilience, and inclusivity. Integrating spiritual intelligence into development programs can help balance discipline with empathy, manage diversity, reduce stress, and maintain integrity. Support systems like mentorship and peer discussions are vital. Emphasizing mindfulness, values-based decision-making, and self-care can strengthen leadership, while clear policies ensure ethical governance.

Future directions include integrating spiritual intelligence training into DepEd leadership programs to enhance ethical decision-making and resilience. Policies should support inclusive, values-driven leadership. School heads are encouraged to practice self-reflection, mindfulness, and foster inclusive cultures while networking with peers. Teachers can receive training in mindfulness and inclusive teaching to improve empathy and school climate. Students may benefit from programs promoting self-awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility. Future research should explore the impact of spiritual intelligence on leadership and school performance across different educational settings.

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