

Navigating the New Normal: A Phenomenological Study on the Leadership Experiences of School Heads in the Transition to Full Face-to-Face Classes

Bren Chrisman Colita¹; Dr. Remigilda D. Gallardo²

¹Researcher, ²Co-Researcher

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Abstract: This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of school heads as they transitioned from modular and online learning to full face-to-face classes in public elementary and secondary schools. It specifically examined their ordeals, coping strategies, and insights throughout this shift. Using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the study uncovered five major challenges: Inadequate Infrastructural and Resource Support, Challenging Health and Safety Management, Resistant and Hesitant Stakeholder Responses, Overwhelming Administrative and Policy Demands, and Heightened Emotional and Psychological Stress. In response, school heads employed corresponding coping mechanisms such as Resourceful Planning and Adaptive Utilization, Strict Protocol Enforcement and Health Coordination, Collaborative Communication and Community Engagement, Strategic Delegation and Time Management, and Emotional Resilience and Peer Support Networks. From these experiences, school heads gained insights that emphasized the importance of teamwork, transparency, flexibility, and innovation in overcoming limitations and leading effectively during a crisis. The study's findings contribute to strengthening school leadership and policy formulation in preparation for future disruptions in the education sector.

Keywords: School Heads, Face-To-Face Classes, COVID-19 Transition, Educational Leadership, Qualitative Research, Public Schools.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some argue that the sudden transition to online learning done without proper preparation, training, or reliable internet access creates a weak learning environment that may hinder long term effectiveness. On the other hand, others foresee the rise of a blended approach to education, combining digital tools with traditional methods to bring notable advantages. It is believed that the use of technology in teaching will continue to expand, and that online learning will remain a vital part of formal education, even once schools fully return to in person classes.

About two years ago, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, leading to school closures worldwide and requiring institutions to adapt to continue learning. While distance education was widely used, the effectiveness of blended learning compared to fully online learning was not fully explored, though students valued the integration of virtual and classroom-based methods. In the Philippines, the

government gradually reopened face-to-face classes under strict health protocols, allowing only schools that met safety standards, gained local approval, and were in low alert areas. Thousands of schools passed readiness assessments, enabling a progressive expansion of in-person learning while maintaining safety measures.

As the Philippines shifted from distance learning, whether online or modular, school heads encountered various challenges. This study aimed to explore their experiences as they reopened schools and welcomed students back to full face-to-face classes, focusing on the difficulties they faced, the coping strategies they applied, and the insights they gained.

This phenomenological study aimed to examine the experiences of school heads as they moved from online or modular learning to full face-to-face classes. It investigated the challenges they encountered, the strategies they used to address these difficulties, and the insights they gained, which

may serve as guidance for others undergoing similar situations.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the ordeals of school heads as they navigate on the transition to full face to face classes?
- What are the coping strategies of school heads as they navigate on the transition to full face to face classes?
- What are the insights of school heads as they navigate on the transition to full face to face classes?

As the researcher, it was hoped that this study would benefit several groups. For the Department of Education officials, the findings could have served as a basis in formulating provisions to help teachers implement policies for the safe conduct of face-to-face classes during the pandemic. School principals and head teachers could have used the results to effectively guide teachers in carrying out the transition and management of full face-to-face classes. Students, on the other hand, could have gained from more efficient classroom practices that maximized learning while ensuring safety within the school premises, ultimately experiencing the positive outcomes of good governance during this period of transition.

Face-to-face learning is a teaching approach in which lessons and materials are delivered directly to students in person. This setup allows real-time interaction between teachers and learners, making it the most traditional form of instruction. Students also benefit from engaging with their peers, while being accountable for their progress during scheduled class sessions. This method promotes stronger comprehension and retention of lessons and provides opportunities for building connections among classmates. Additionally, it is generally teacher-centered and its application differs across cultures. However, many modern education systems have gradually moved away from this traditional format, focusing instead on approaches that address the individual needs of learners.

This study is grounded on the Theory of Change, which explains how desired outcomes occur by linking program activities to long-term goals through identifying necessary conditions and their relationships in a participatory process. It also draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which defines transitions as events or non-events that change roles, routines, or relationships, with perception determining whether an experience is seen as a transition. Though focused on adults, the theory also applies to young people, highlighting that responses to transitions depend on their type, context, perception, and impact.

II. METHOD

In qualitative research, the ontological assumption recognizes multiple realities, acknowledging that participants, researchers, and readers may perceive experiences differently, which is reflected through varied evidence and perspectives. The epistemological assumption emphasizes closeness to participants, gathering knowledge

from their subjective experiences within their real-life contexts, often requiring prolonged engagement in the field. The axiological assumption accepts the value-laden nature of research, where researchers openly acknowledge their own biases and the influence of participants' values. Methodologically, qualitative research is inductive and flexible, with procedures evolving based on the researcher's interactions, emerging insights, and adaptations during data collection and analysis to deepen understanding of the research problem.

Interpretivism, also called social constructivism, is a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the idea that truth is not something that can be measured objectively but rather something that people make sense of through reflection and interaction. Its foundations can be traced back to Socrates and Plato, who believed that truth could only be approached through dialogue and thoughtful consideration, even if only partially understood. From this standpoint, reality is shaped through shared discussions and collective meaning-making.

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, also known as descriptive phenomenology, which is widely used in the social and health sciences. This approach focuses on exploring and describing how individuals experience a particular phenomenon by asking what the experience is like, what it means, and how it is lived from the participant's perspective. Such experiences may include perceptions, thoughts, memories, emotions, and imaginations, often gathered from a relatively small group of participants. The analysis seeks to identify themes or patterns and, when possible, make broader generalizations about how the phenomenon is understood.

The main research tool utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview guide, created to examine the lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of school heads during the shift to full face-to-face classes. It consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives, enabling participants to share their perspectives in depth while giving the researcher the freedom to ask follow-up questions when necessary. To ensure clarity and appropriateness, the guide was evaluated by field experts.

This study focused on the experiences of ten school heads as they transitioned from online and blended learning to full face-to-face classes, and participants were chosen through purposive sampling. The criteria required that school heads had served in their role for at least five years, held the position prior to the pandemic, and continued to do so during the study. Five participants were selected for in-depth interviews and another five for a focus group discussion. Purposive sampling, also called judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability method where researchers rely on their knowledge and judgment to choose participants who meet specific criteria, ensuring they fit the profile needed to provide meaningful insights for the study.

For data collection, I first conducted in-depth interviews followed by focus group discussions, both facilitated through online platforms like Google Meet and Facebook Messenger.

In-depth interviews involve one-on-one conversations that allow participants to share their experiences in detail, while focus group discussions are semi-structured interviews with multiple participants guided by a moderator. During the FGD, the facilitator asked broad, open-ended questions to encourage dialogue and exchange of ideas, with the aim of generating diverse perspectives and maximizing participant interaction within the allotted time.

Qualitative analysis is used in fields like psychology, education, health, business, and the social sciences to interpret complex, unstructured data and identify themes or patterns that answer research questions. Since each study is unique, there is no single correct method, but most analyses rely on transcribed interviews or focus groups as the main data source. A common approach is coding, where categories are created to organize recurring ideas and tag relevant text. The ultimate goal is to make sense of the data, summarize key findings, and use participant quotations to support

interpretations in research outputs such as theses, dissertations, or papers.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part outlines the difficulties faced by school heads as they moved from distance learning back to full in-person classes. The findings revealed five key themes that captured the complexities of school leadership during this transition. First, many schools lacked sufficient infrastructure and resources, leaving facilities and materials inadequate. Second, managing health and safety was demanding, with leaders tasked to strictly enforce protocols despite limited staff. Third, some stakeholders, including parents and teachers, showed reluctance or fear about returning to classrooms. Fourth, school heads dealt with constant changes in policies and administrative requirements, creating added strain. Lastly, the process took a toll on their mental and emotional well-being, as they bore the responsibility of safeguarding both education and safety.

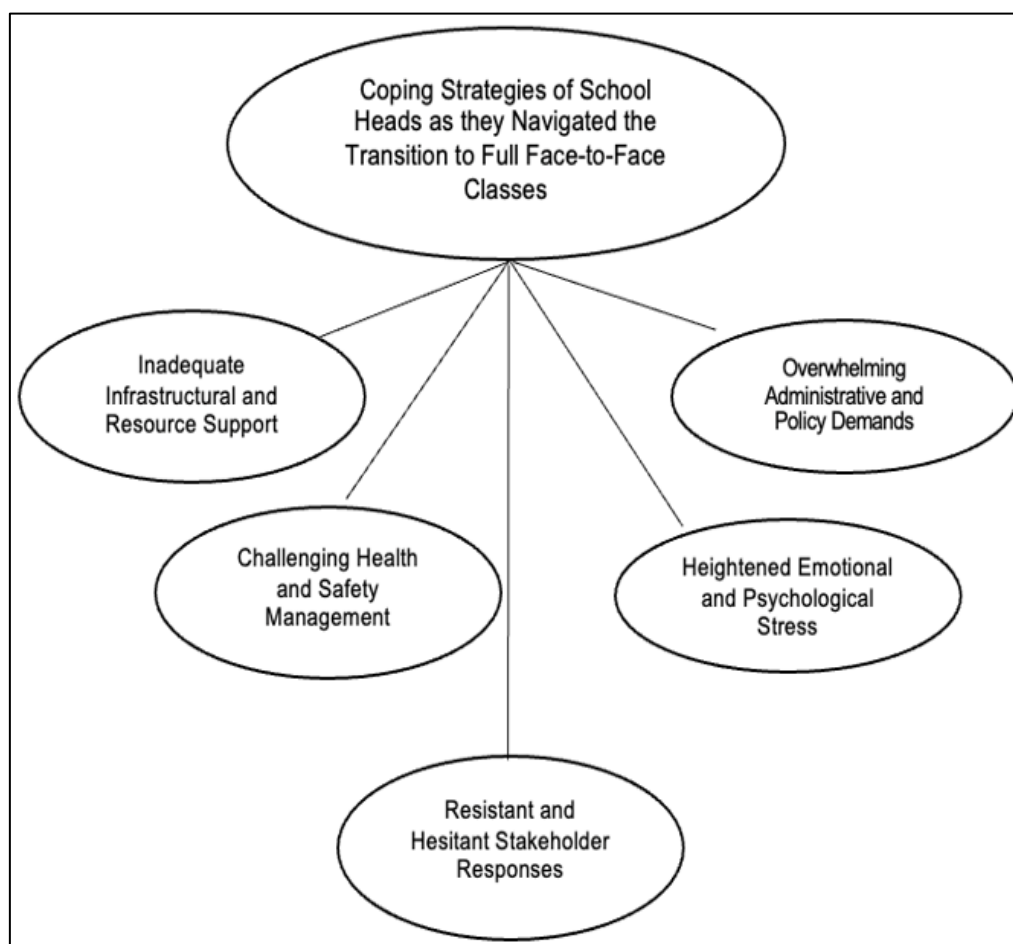


Fig 1 Coping Strategies of School Heads as they Navigated the Transition Full Face-to-Face Classes

This section highlights the coping mechanisms school heads adopted in managing the transition to full face-to-face classes. Five main strategies emerged: making the most of limited resources through creative planning, enforcing health protocols to protect students and staff, strengthening communication and community involvement, delegating tasks and managing time effectively, and relying on resilience and peer support to maintain well-being. These approaches demonstrate how school leaders adapted and sustained operations amid constant challenges and uncertainty.

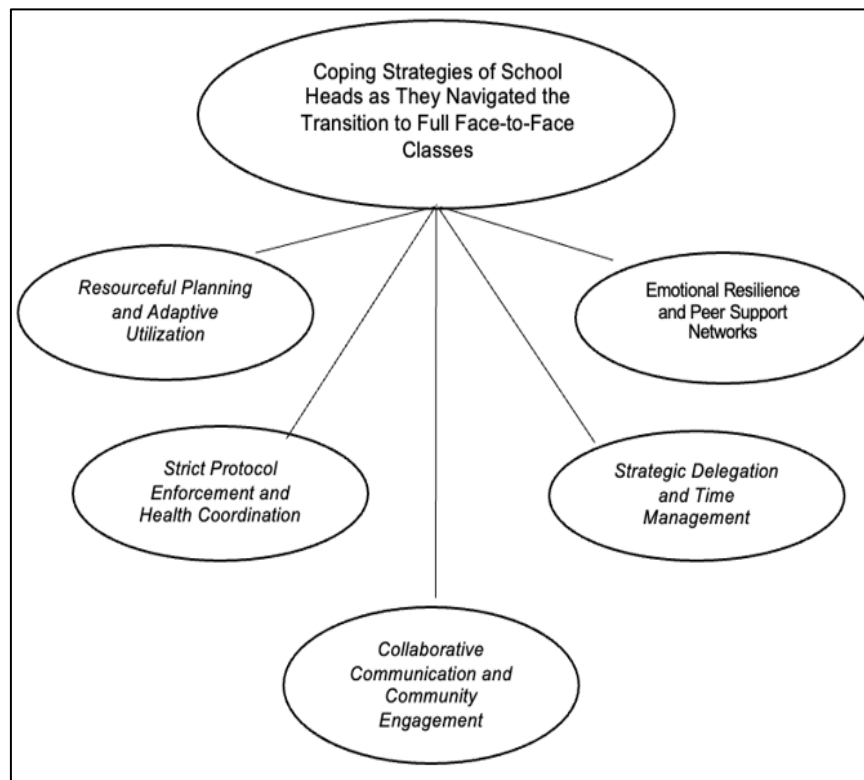


Fig 2 Coping Strategies of School Heads as they Navigated the Transition to Full Face-to-Face Classes

This section shared the insights school heads gained from their experiences during the shift to full face-to-face classes. They emphasized the importance of innovation and resourcefulness in addressing limited resources, the need for vigilance and teamwork to maintain health and safety, and the value of trust built through open communication with stakeholders. They also recognized that flexibility and awareness were essential in managing changing policies, while emotional support and solidarity made the challenges more bearable. These reflections demonstrated their resilience and offered practical guidance for other school leaders facing similar transitions.

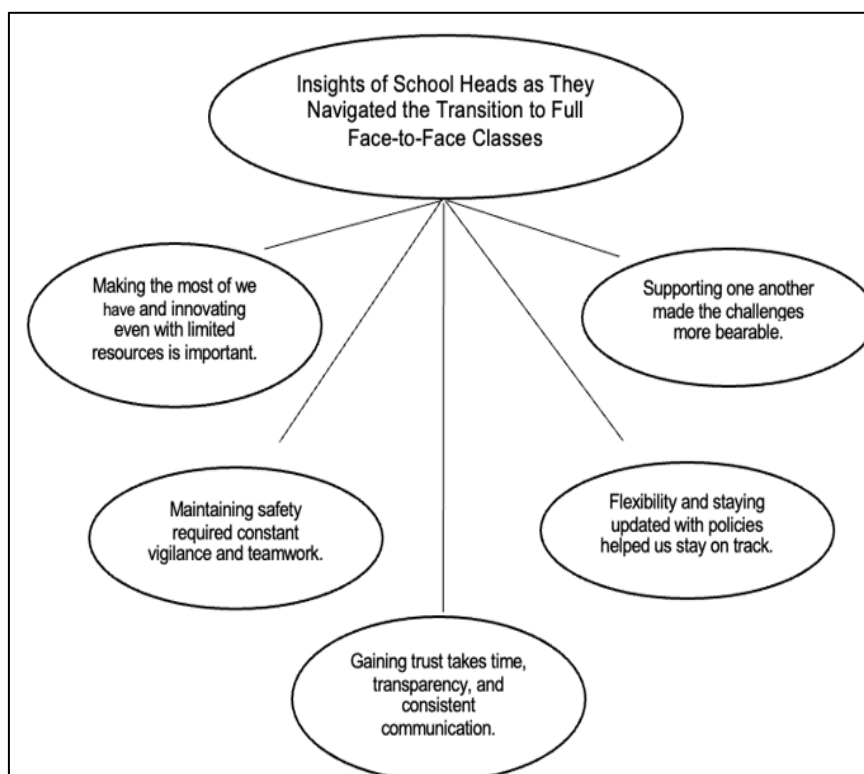


Fig 3 Insights of School Heads as They Navigated the Transition to Full Face-to-Face Classes

The study revealed that during the shift to full face-to-face classes, school heads encountered a range of complex challenges. These included insufficient facilities and resources, difficulties in enforcing health and safety measures with limited staff, hesitancy or resistance from parents and teachers, constant adjustments to evolving policies, and significant emotional strain. Together, these concerns painted a picture of the heavy logistical, administrative, and personal burdens carried by school leaders during this critical transition period.

In navigating these demands, school heads relied on various coping strategies and gained meaningful insights. They responded with creativity in resource use, strict health coordination, collaborative engagement with stakeholders, effective task delegation, and emotional resilience supported by peer networks. Through these experiences, they came to value innovation, vigilance, open communication, adaptive leadership, and solidarity. These reflections not only demonstrated their professional growth but also offered practical lessons for leading schools through periods of uncertainty and change.

The challenges encountered by school heads during the shift to full face-to-face classes highlighted the pressing need for stronger systemic support in terms of facilities, resources, and clearer policy directives. Policymakers and local government units should take these realities into account when creating recovery and preparedness plans so schools are not left to manage transitions in isolation. Improving infrastructure and simplifying administrative processes would significantly lessen the load carried by school leaders during future crises.

The strategies and insights of school heads emphasized the value of adaptability, collaboration, and resilience in educational leadership. Leadership development should focus on strengthening crisis management skills, teamwork, and stakeholder engagement, while schools could institutionalize practices that encourage shared leadership and coordination. Professional growth opportunities in strategic planning, time management, and emotional well-being would better prepare leaders for future transitions.

The findings of the study closely align with Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Theory of Change. Schlossberg's framework is reflected in how school heads perceived and responded to the challenges of shifting from remote to in-person learning, adapting to new roles, routines, and expectations. The Theory of Change is evident in their focus on achieving safe and effective school reopening by enforcing health protocols, engaging stakeholders, and optimizing limited resources.

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