THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GRADE HEAD TEACHERS AS EMPOWERED EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: AN INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative-phenomenological study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of grade head teachers as educational leaders. This also elaborates on how these experiences empower them, as well as how do they cope with the challenges they encounter in the delivery of their duties as educational leaders. There were fourteen (14) participants who took part in this study selected through purposive sampling technique. Of these 14 participants, seven (7) grade head teachers underwent in-depth interview and the remaining seven (7) were grade head teachers underwent focused group discussion. The data gathered were analyzed through thematic analysis. The study was conducted in three (3) selected public secondary schools in Sto. Tomas East district, Division of Davao del Norte. Results revealed six (6) major themes on their experiences: creating best practices as an educational leader, difficulty with the additional workload, managing different roles, maintaining a supportive and conducive environment, providing technical support, and collaborating with stakeholders. To respond to the challenges encountered, participants revealed five (5) coping mechanisms: delegating tasks to colleagues, maintaining collaboration within the team, strategizing on achieving the goals, keeping an open and honest communication and engaging on professional development. Lastly, they have cited five (5) insights that can contribute to better implementation of distance learning modality. These includes: opportunity for personal growth, necessity to adjust to situations and people, provide relevant support to the school, help implement quality and effective education and prioritize self-care. These insights, extracted from participants' reflections on their experiences and challenges, provide a holistic perspective on the multifaceted roles of grade head teachers and their key takeaways.

KEYWORDS: *Educational leaders, grade head teachers, quality of education, qualitative-phenomenological study, thematic analysis, Sto.Tomas East District, Division of Davao del Norte*
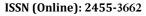
INTRODUCTION

Grade head teachers collaborate with colleagues at their department level to set educational goals and seek ways to achieve them. To successfully carry out these roles, grade head teachers need to receive the necessary training to become effective educational leaders (UNESCO, 2019). However, not everyone received these learning avenues to enhance themselves. While some grade head teachers improve through years of experience, others remain to lack in knowledge and skills to juggle their different priorities and become effective role as effective educational leaders in the school (Miao, 2018).

In Malaysian schools, grade head teachers are empowered to identify problems and provide interventions on their own level, though some of them failed to appropriately contextualize the situations (Sampat, 2020). Due to unfamiliarity of pandemic-related school lockdowns, some grade head teachers were unable to boost students' academic performance. Likewise, in China, there was a need to promote teacher leadership to mobilize school improvement and effectiveness (Supovitz, 2018), especially on resolving conflict and addressing problems in school (Miao, 2018). Likewise, in Thailand, some grade head teachers were reported ineffective in addressing situational challenges and contributing to learning-centered leadership (Kulophas & Hallinger, 2021).

In the Philippines, a study conducted in Nueva Ecija revealed that grade head teachers needed to develop adequate supervisory and leadership skills, not just interpersonal skills, to better solve problems in their grade level (Villanueva et al., 2021). Likewise, in Schools Division of Antique, grade head teachers were urged to maintain their managerial skills while focusing on the key result areas outlined in the performance standards, especially given that some find it difficult to balance their managerial responsibilities and their instructional responsibilities (Songcayawon et al., 2022).

A study was conducted in Sto. Tomas Municipality revealed that among the factors of crisis leadership, grade heads scored lowest in situation factor. Relevant training on solving school issues is necessary as most of the grade head teachers lack knowledge and experience. Grade head teachers are that their solution is not always the best especially on situations that are new or unfamiliar to them (Eñano, 2022).

The topic of the experiences of grade head teachers is not a common topic among researchers as most study centers on school heads. But it cannot be ignored that grade head teacher contributes to managing teachers and learners in their own grade level, and to school achievement. By investigating on this topic, grade head teachers can receive proper attention and training for them to enhance their leadership skills and

contribute better to the success of the school. Findings of this study may help craft necessary institutionalized program that will empower the grade head teachers, and further uplift educational quality.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders. This also elaborates on how these experiences empower them, as well as how do they cope with the challenges they encountered in the delivery of their duties as educational leaders.

At this stage of research, the experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders will be generally defined as to include their experiences, coping mechanism, and their insights gained from their experience. Their experiences were described both their functions and challenges encountered as educational leaders. Their coping mechanism explained how they were able to surpass and adjust to their encountered challenges, and their insights reflect their valuable lessons gained from their experiences which were deemed worthy to be shared to others.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The study aims to answer the following research questio
1. What are the lived experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders in the school?
2. How do grade head teachers cope with the challenges encountered as empowered educational leaders in the school?
3. What are the insights of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders in the school that can be shared to others?

METHODS

This study employed qualitative research particularly using the phenomenological approach which sought to explore the lived experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders. Phenomenological study was used to describe and understand the lived experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders. Besides, phenomenological study could interpret the perception and beliefs of the grade head teachers.

The participants of this study were the 14 selected grade head teachers of Sto.Tomas East district, Sto. Tomas Davao del Norte. According to Creswell and Poth (2019), in order to produce a thorough and comprehensive description of the phenomenon under inquiry, the sample size for a phenomenological study may range from three to 25 people. I purposefully selected fourteen (14) research participants for this study, representing grade head teachers as educational leaders. Seven participants would undergo In-Depth Interview (IDI) and seven participants would have the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The interview was done face to face in the selected large schools in Sto. Tomas East district. The participants of this study were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. The following criteria was used in selecting the participants: they are designated grade head of their respective schools for at least a year, they are regular teacher, and they are teaching in public secondary school in Sto. Tomas- East District.

Furthermore, thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that involves reviewing a data collection and looking for patterns in meaning throughout the data to extract themes.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Grade Head Teachers as Educational Leaders

Educational leadership enables leaders, such as grade head teachers, to connect with other teachers and their roles in school (Bush, 2020). Grade head teachers, having less authority than school administrators, are in constant contact with teachers in their departments to fulfill their responsibilities as educational leaders. Similarly, they also become a contributing member that encourages collaborative school culture as they encourage teachers in their department to help the school achieve its educational goals (Lin et al., 2018).
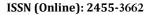
Furthermore, as educational leadership, grade head teachers have formal duties and authority that contributes to students' learning and the school's organizational structure (Miao, 2018). To illustrate, grade head teachers' responsibilities encompass both leadership (such as goal-setting or teacher evaluation) and management duties, such as resource management, designation of task within the department (UNESCO, 2018).

In the same way, grade head teachers contribute in establishing an organizational culture necessary to provide quality teaching (World Bank, 2018). They can help provide educational tools and activities that every student needs. This allows provide them opportunity to think out of the box and be flexible within their actions in solving the problems. As such, grade head teachers as educational leadership is important in promoting school equality and equity (Spillane et al., 2019).

Moreover, as grade head teachers become actively involved in school as educational leaders, they also become motivated to make a difference. Their role is important in impacting the students and teachers in their department (Burns, 2019). Thus, they need to be wise on making decision and in deciding what is best depending on existing conditions (Chen et al., 2020). Likewise, they also need to carefully weigh their actions and their potential outcome as there are a lot of people that will be affected (Bagwell, 2020).

Furthermore, grade head teachers, as problem solvers, are expected to develop the right mindset, knowledge and skills to address the many challenges in their role as educational leaders. Also, they need to have wider perspectives so that they can come up with a sound judgement based on the situation that they need to handle (Netolicky, 2020).

Accordingly, Republic Act 9155, known as the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, serves as a legal basis for the designation of grade head teachers. This provides school heads the discretion to create school-based management allowing them to designate teachers and staff to contribute to the leading goals. This aims to enhance administrative efficiency in delivering educational services (Official Gazette, 2001).

Furthermore, the decentralization put grade head teachers an increasingly important role in serving as educational leaders in the school. Grade head teachers contribute to managing colleagues and improving the quality of learning of the students by facilitating programs, and services that fit the needs of the department or grade level. This culture of shared governance allows grade head teachers the opportunity to participate in decision-making at their department level (Calvo, 2021).

Challenges Encountered by Grade Head Teachers

Grade head teachers must feel at ease with their position. If they are not satisfied with their designation as educational leader in school their willingness to perform for the school is affected (Ihnatiuk et al., 2023). Grade head teachers who are happy with their jobs are also committed to their work. They are enthusiastically doing their function to professionally grow and advance their careers (Zulkifli et al., 2022).

In connection, grade head teachers also need to motivate their colleagues to participate in achieving educational objectives. They should know how to navigate across diverse and differing personalities and guide their colleagues to contribute in improving plans and executing them to achieve the deliverable (Alviz, 2019). Giving support and showing concern to struggling colleagues will help boost their moral and satisfaction to stay committed to the aims of the organization (Gonzales-Morales et al., 2018).

Another struggle that grade head teachers may encounter is conflict within their department. As grade head teachers they must make their members united and supportive with each other (Petriglieri, 2020). Grade head teachers must be able to create a team for them to set goals and collectively achieve them (Bagwell, 2020). If group are more inclusive and coherent, they can actively positive outcomes as they are more organized and they help one another to achieve organizational success (Rigby et al., 2020).

Grade head teachers could better comprehend not only the issues and objectives of the organization but also spot members' requirements for personal growth and gaps in their knowledge and abilities. They could fill the gaps by mentoring to improve the performance of their colleagues (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

Grade head teacher contribute in building organizational resilience and self-efficacy through teamwork, where their colleagues to feel competent and contented with their work. By Interacting with colleagues, grade head teachers could inquire about their contributions, ideas, and innovations (Crawford, 2018). Fostering a coherent and inclusive culture will allow the organization to better address the problems that they will encounter (Heath & O'Hair, 2020).

Grade Head Teachers Empowerment

Empowerment includes professional development, autonomy, and decision-making (Snodgrass, 2020). Grade head teachers must be free to switch between different roles, skills, and leadership modalities in order to serve the needs of the school (Harris, 2020). Through this, they can adapt based on the context to choose the strategy that will be most effective (Southern Cross University, 2019).

Consequently, the capacity to make independent decisions about issues is one of the aspects of empowerment (Jiang et al., 2019). They could contribute to school issues, which helped them feel more effective in their profession (Ahrari et al., 2020). They could work with others and use resources to make sure everything is in line with the strategy (Sampat, 2020). This also entailed having knowledge of the operating procedures that work best for the group's and the school's continual improvement (Southern Cross University, 2019).
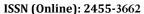
Supportive learning environment allows effective guidance and training for grade head teachers (UNESCO, 2019). As schools become also empowered through efficient school-based management, greater autonomy for grade head teachers allows them to contribute to the decision-making (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2019). For instance, Chinese Ministry of Education mandates training of high-quality teachers who were innovative and with deep educational feeling to develop lifelong learning education leaders (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018).

However, there are some barriers to empowering grade head teachers which may include, such as structural barriers, personal barriers, and relational barriers (Almanthari et al., 2020). It is important that grade head teachers know their role and are given support in terms of adequate knowledge and skills for them to navigate on their duties as educational leaders (Wang & Zhao, 2020)

ESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Grade Head Teachers as Educational Leade

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Creating Best Practices as an Educational Leader	• providing innovative teaching strategies • having the opportunity to impact student success and professional development • making a meaningful difference in the education and development of students and educators • developing inclusive classroom and giving support to cater the needs of the students and teachers • dedicating oneself to offering support • committing to foster a positive and inclusive learning environment • collaborating with fellow teachers to share best practices and building teamwork

	• developing one's personal skills through active listening and communication • prioritizing open communication and collaboration among teachers, staff, students, and parents
Difficulty with Additional Workload	• taking time away from direct instruction and classroom contact due to administrative duties • having a heavy workload that constraints time to function in nurturing the learners as a classroom teacher • being stressed with more responsibilities than as regular teachers • having activities competing with time for classroom preparations • challenging to balance many priorities • having difficulty in balancing administrative tasks other than teaching
Managing Different Roles	• managing not only one's class but also other sections • performing different tasks within the grade level • helping the principal to carry out certain tasks and facilitating certain activities • creating meaningful impact in school
Maintaining a Supportive and Conducive Environment	• keeping a clean environment and harmonious relationship with one another • giving support to teachers especially those who are struggling with academic functions • fostering a positive and inclusive environment that prioritizes growth and development. • promoting diversity and inclusion within the school • making an environment supporting the students' needs
Providing Technical Support	• supporting teachers who are struggling with academic functions • sharing knowledge for colleagues to be updated on the use of technology • mentoring and motivating teachers and students to realize their potential • guiding the teachers to assist students with academic difficulties
Collaborating with Stakeholders	• encouraging teachers to participate actively in achieving the goal of the school • needing to hear the voice of your colleagues on matters relevant to school concerns • communicating and collaborating with fellow teachers to participate in group discussions to solicit feedback • communicating with parents, teachers, and students through homeroom meetings and parent assembly • collaborating with stakeholders on decision-making • engaging with parents and the community

Creating Best Practices as an Educational Leader

It provides me with innovative teaching strategies, fostering a more effective and engaging learning environment IDI-07
Being designated as a grade head teacher offers advantages, including leadership experience, the opportunity to impact student success. FGD-01
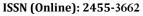*In order to support teachers in developing inclusive classrooms that cater to the many needs of our students. IDI-04*

Grade head teachers shape innovative teaching methods and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. They are also socially responsible in providing guidance and support, particularly to students facing challenges. Through these efforts, grade head teachers contribute to the development and implementation of best practices that enrich the educational experience for both educators and students.

In connection, Anderson (2019) in his study supported this statement that being grade head teachers is a dynamic and influential duty. They have the opportunity to shape the educational landscape by promoting innovation in teaching, leading professional development and fostering inclusivity within the school community.

In addition, collaboration and effective communication are identified as critical components of successful educational

leadership. Cooper (2023) stressed the importance of collaborative efforts among teachers, the sharing of best practices, and the cultivation of a strong sense of teamwork and unity.

Difficulty with Additional Workload
It can be difficult to balance administrative tasks with teaching, and this could result in a greater workload. IDI-04
If I rate the seatbacks, top of it is the heavy workload. IDI-06
Conflict of your workloads. FGD-03

Grade head teachers confirmed that the designation of being a grade head were challenging on their part, especially that they were still performing duties as classroom teachers. Being assigned as a department leader, they take on responsibilities to not only manage their respective classes but also the academic situations within their grade level.

Moreover, Lambert (2023) supported this finding in his study stressing that lack of time and increasing workloads among middle leaders, such as grade head teachers were key source of stress. This challenges when continuous to dissatisfied middle leaders who were soon to assume higher leadership position will disappoint them, and will lead them not accepting the administrative responsibilities

Likewise, Lipscombe et al., (2023) added that middle leaders, such as grade head teachers, may often felt uncomfortable as they are set to mediate between teachers and their school administrator. Their main duty is to influence their colleagues while also impose change that were sometimes directed by the higher authority. It is on their responsibility on how to translate the task and motivate their colleagues to work and participate on the achievement of these educational goals.

Managing Different Roles
LAC Sessions were conducted to discuss instructional matters in order to cater students and teachers concerns. IDI-01
I would create a conducive learning environment and promote overall growth and development of students. FGD-02
I can lead in the development and implementation of innovative teaching strategies. IDI-07
Grade head teachers had been subjected to many and different roles which were often in conflict to their other duties. They are often tasked with fulfilling responsibilities that encompassed both instructional and administrative. These lead them to loss focus on what to prioritize and be confused on how to hit the educational targets.

Accordingly, Sampat (2020) also shared the same idea saying that as educational leaders, grade head teachers were expected to plan. The planning does not only cover their classes handled but to plan for the productivity of their entire grade level being managed. The task does not end in just planning but there are also challenges on how to execute this plan for the student's achievement and the enhancement of their colleagues in the department. Thus, it is a challenge for them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge on these different roles that they will take up so that they can translate ideas into actions, and actions into relevant and sustainable outcomes.

Furthermore, Wang and Zhao (2020) emphasized that as grade a head teacher, one must know their role to effectively involve in the operations and development of the school. However, since not all grade heads had been trained prior to their designation, most of them learn through experience on how to manage these different roles as educational leader. Their duties had been recognized to affect operational efficiency, student's achievement and engagement of teachers under their department.

Maintaining a Supportive and Conducive Environment
Fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment that prioritizes the growth and development of both students and staff. IDI-04
Create a conducive learning environment and promote overall growth and development of students. FGD-02
Keep our environment clean, having a harmonious relationship to one another IDI-02

One of the duties of a grade head teacher is to maintain a supportive and conducive learning environment. A supportive environment is where teachers are encouraged to contribute meaningfully in achieving the collective educational goals. While conducive environment pertains to keeping a learning environment that is motivating and supportive of students' achievement and success. Thus, grade head teachers are expected to assess and study the situations concerning their managed grade level, and if they can address the issue on their level.
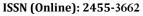
Woods and Robert (2019) also explained that grade head teacher contribute in maintaining order within their grade level and in the entire school. They can develop a workplace that upholds ethical issues and connects school's vision and values by monitoring the actions and practices of their teachers and students. By doing this, they can ensure that the learning environment nurture positive impact not just for the students, but also for the teachers under their team.

Murphy and Louis (2018) additionally stated that grade head teachers establish a favorable learning environment by finding ways on how to improve the situations in school, especially those that requires immediate intervention since they are the one that were exposed that the school administrators. Their role includes monitoring and evaluating the performance of their department, which is a good basis for improving the conditions and identifying key educational objectives.

Likewise, Heath and O'Hair (2020) furthermore mentioned that grade head teachers as educational leaders contribute in fostering a coherent and inclusive culture which translate into a better working condition for their teachers and a supportive learning space for their students. They are key to encouraging and communicating with students and teachers in their department to take their part in achieving the educational goals.

Providing Technical Support
We are also expected to give support to teachers. FGD-03
I set an example by incorporating technology into their teaching. FGD-07

Encourage a culture of continuous learning and reflection and helping one another to stay updated with the latest trends in education. IDI-07

Grade head teachers are also expected to provide technical support to their colleagues, especially those are struggling to deliver their academic functions. They conduct school-based seminars, activities and meetings that enhance and give support to their teachers so they improve in the delivery of their duties and impact greatly the academic achievement of their learners. Since grade head teachers were deemed knowledgeable, they were looked up for innovations and strategies that improves the conditions of the school and provide viable alternative when their will be issues encountered.

In connection, Murray et al., (2021) expressed that similar to school heads, they provide teachers under their grade level necessary support for them to improve their teaching practices. This ensures that teachers contribute effectively to the academic quality and success of the school. Grade head teacher plan and organize professional developmental plan for their teachers, especially that they know what are the needs of the teachers in their respective department.

Moreover, McDonald (2020) also emphasized that grade head teachers should focus on initiatives that improves the teaching capacity of their colleagues and the learning outcomes of their students in their department. This can be done by disseminating learning resources and enlisting the aid of grade head teachers during teacher observation and evaluations.

Several new innovations in education may have resulted in broad adoption of online learning by the year 2020. The absence of Internet availability in some places, mainly rural areas, and the fact that various family members have changing expectations for how to use technology at home are just two examples of the persistent challenges this sector faces. Yet, creative approaches have emerged to provide students and families with the tools they need to engage in and successfully complete academic work (Darling et al., 2020).

In general, embracing change enhances the likelihood that it will be implemented effectively. Students must also consider change as a realistic way to accomplish educational goals in today's world and act as change agents if they want to develop professional abilities (Du et al., 2020).

Collaborating with Stakeholders
I always communicate with my fellow teachers to collaborate especially in decision making. FGD-05
I frequently participate in group decision-making processes. IDI-04
This means regularly meeting with stakeholders like Homeroom meetings and General Parent Teachers Association Assembly to address concerns, share ideas, and ensure everyone feels heard and valued IDI-07

De Nobile (2018) findings is related to the result of this study as it emphasizes that since grade head teachers were mostly skilled in instruction and are more aware of teacher and classroom culture, they can better translate educational mandates to be suitable based on the context of the team they managed. They firsthand experience and observe problems and they know what will work and not.

Furthermore, Supovitz (2018) also added that the role of grade head teachers in improving the school includes being able to communicate the goals to their colleagues and learners. Since they were exposed to the people in their grade level, they effectively influence them to contribute to the achievement of these educational goals.

Similarly, grade head teachers quickly respond because of the important information that they have about their grade level. This results to mediate issues which might not necessarily be needed to escalate to the school heads if they can resolve it within their department. This calls for grade head teachers to discuss matters effectively, solicit suggestions and hear feedbacks (Parker, 2019).

Table 2
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanism of Grade Head Teachers on the Challenges Encountered as Educational Leaders

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Delegating Task to Colleagues	• prioritizing tasks and delegating them when possible • designating tasks to fellow teachers and communicating with them for a good output • sharing duties and looking for assignments with team members • dividing the tasks by assigning work to teachers • designating the tasks to the teachers to lighten the work
Maintaining Collaboration within the Team	• collaborating with colleagues to share insights and best practices • seeking solutions together with colleagues • sharing best practices, resources, and strategies to address the demands at work. • establishing a shared vision and encouraging teamwork • seeking clarification from superiors and collaborating with colleagues to make the tasks more manageable
Strategizing on Achieving the Goals	• assessing the situation to have a focus on one's effort • adopting a proactive approach to manage the situation effectively • creating a list of responsibilities and priorities • prioritizing what is the most important task to be done to avoid stress
	• establishing a regular check-in process with the principal

Keeping an Open and Honest Communication	• encouraging colleagues to express opinions and concerns • establishing open lines of communication, especially during regular meetings • encouraging colleagues to voice their ideas, concerns, and question • establishing openness in communication • placing a high value on open and honest communication
Engaging on Professional Growth	• participating in professional development to advance skills • engaging in education and training to learn • investing time in professional training to acquire necessary knowledge and skills • seeking mentorship, and professional development • attending professional workshop sessions • mentoring and coaching valuable source of support and guidance

Delegating Task to Colleagues

I designate the task to my fellow teachers and communicate them as well so that we can come up a good outcome or output. FGD -04

I look for assignments that may be given to team members at other grades or work with other educators to share duties IDI-04

You must delegate task to your teachers within your grade (level) to make the task easy FGD-07

Grade head teachers employed in resolving the challenges they encountered through delegation. This means that they identified the task, divide it into smaller tasks and assigned members to do it. Through this, grade head teachers encourage involvement with her teachers under her department while also giving them opportunity to discover and enhance their potentials.

In connection, Scroggins (2019) also mentioned that it is important for grade head teachers to know how to set up groups n-charge of planning for the entire grade level and not just own most of the responsibilities. This will enable colleagues to develop different and novel interventions to a problem, while also making sure communication and cooperation within their grade level.

On the other hand, Hoff (2018) added that delegation led to maximizing output and efficiency as there are more task that get done because of the engagement of teammates. Grade head teachers should be able to make members know their responsibilities clearly and delegate the right people for a certain task, along with the proper timeline attached. By this, teachers can focus on a same task and keep a steady line of productivity.

Moreover, Bursch (2020) also shared the same concept saying that it is important for teachers to know exactly what they should be doing and if in case there is confusion or lack of competence, they should be trained or assisted. Delegation allows teachers to come up with solution as they engage on a task and face challenges, instead of fully depending on instruction from their grade head teacher.

Maintaining Collaboration within the Team

I collaborate with colleagues to share insights and best practices, and I stay updated on new educational updates IDI-07

Collaborate with colleagues to find better strategies or provide additional support to teachers. IDI-05

Collaboration and sharing the best practices, resources, and strategies for managing the demands of the role. FGD-01

This theme is in line with the idea of Lysberg and Rusk (2022) explaining that actions and decisions should be made together with their team. Through collaboration, ideas flow easily and there is variety of suggestion on how to resolve a problem. Likewise, this is also related to Di Mario's (2022) concept on the importance of instilling a sense of community among teachers and students. With this, they can drive members of the department toward attainment of a common goal.

Furthermore, enhancing involvement supports innovations, academic standards and positive change as everyone in the grade level realize their part on the attainment of institutions' objectives. Grade head teachers' vision should be translated among each member so that they may understood it and take part in achieving educational success (Ocampo, 2019). Grade head teachers can influence the school culture by reinforcing cooperation and collaboration with colleagues, especially in sharing ideas and best practices (Wang & Zhao, 2020).
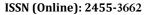
On the other hand, Lowery et al., (2018) also emphasized on the relevance of managing a group to have a greater effect on student's achievement. Grade head teachers have the influence to encourage support, unity and collaboration within their team. Moreover, Haslam et al., (2020) also added that despite the challenge of developing the same enthusiasm among each member towards work, grade head teachers should at least develop teachers' willingness to work as a team and participate actively.

Strategizing in Achieving the Goals

I first take a step back to assess the situation whether it is a complex disciplinary issue or struggling pupils. IDI-07

I create a clear list of my responsibilities and prioritize them based on importance and urgency. IDI-04

For me, I am going to prioritize task. FGD-07

Mahdzir et al., (2022) explained that as grade head teacher, they are expected to handle issues in their department. With this they should be consistent in their actions and look for avenues to create an impact. Likewise, they should be able to connect their actions to the personality of peer the entire group, and if solutions leads to a greater good (Bush, 2020).

Likewise, Lin et al., (2018) also added that since they serve as middle leaders between the teachers under their department and

the school administrator, grade head teachers should be able to find strategy to influence and encourage teachers in their department to contribute in achieving the educational objectives.

Furthermore, grade head teachers are deemed problem solvers and are expected to have the right mindset to address the challenges in their department. For them to be able to do this, they should use their experiences, skills and knowledge and transform them into effective direction for the group to follow (Hodge, 2019). Likewise, grade head teachers contribute to decision-making as they were given the autonomy to identify approaches based on the context of their team and the department that they are managing (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2019).

Keeping an Open and Honest Communication
I will establish open lines of communication. IDI-07
It is also a good practice to schedule regular team meetings to discuss progress, challenges, and opportunity.FGD-02
If there are problems, they need to also be open to share the issue. FGD-03

Maintaining communication is essential in creating a positive learning environment. Grade head teachers impact others if they are good in communication as it allows their members to trust and build confidence on them. Allowing colleagues to share their thoughts also offer solutions to problems. By taking time to listen to their idea, grade head teachers can glean valuable insights leading a more prudent decision. This also makes members felt validated and part of the group (Parker, 2021).

On the other hand, Pandey (2022) also mentioned that grade Head teachers should be good communicators to be able to inspire and empower their colleagues. By clearly communicating desired goals and responsibilities to their members they ensure better productivity. This also devoid miscommunication and quarrels as thoughts are transform into clear instructions for members to fulfill. Patel (2023), on the other hand, shared that communication skills among grade head teachers can also boost organization's resilience as it unites the group.

Furthermore, Mousena and Raptis (2021) emphasized that effective communication of educational leaders promotes positive school climate. When teachers and students felt heard, the more they become satisfied and willingly participate in the activities and program of the school.

Engaging in Professional Growth
I invest time in professional development. IDI-04
I seek mentorship, professional development, and use available resources. IDI-05
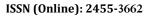*I may attend professional development workshops or training sessions. IDI-07*

Ihnatiuk et al., (2023) supported this theme, expressing that grade head teachers can only grow if they engage in professional development programs to develop their potentials. Through this, they gain essential leadership skills and expand their knowledge. Moreover, Sorensen et al., (2022) also added that they can better deal with problems they encounter if they are knowledgeable of leadership strategies. By having adequate competence from experience and education, they continue to improve their capacity as educational leader and perhaps go further in their career.

Consequently, Nsabayezu (2023) also shared that as grade head teachers continue to engage and actively participate in leadership trainings, they create new set of goals and understand better the landscape of their function as educational leader. These activities unlock their full potential as they continue to improve in knowledge and competence.

On the other hand, Grade head teachers should also be equipped with existing and current technologies and approaches in leadership. By knowing these various techniques, they manage people and resources efficiently. Current leadership trends help them manage both human resources, and allocate material resource to achieve productivity while maximizing what is readily available (McDonald, 2020).

Table 3
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Grade Head Teachers as Educational Leaders

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Necessity to Adapt to Situations and People	- develop skills to adjust to people and become flexible in handling situations - acquire the ability to actively listen and be adaptable to changes - be open-minded to other people's suggestions and opinions - remain calm despite the challenging demands - foster strong relationships with teachers, students, and other people - develop a good attitude towards colleagues
Opportunity for Personal Growth	- professional development opportunity that enhances leadership skills - access to additional professional development opportunities - grow professionally with learnings and experiences - develop professionalism and capability to handle a situation - opportunity to be better and create impact in the school
	guide the educational journey of specific grade level

Provision of Relevant Support to the School	• help in the proper and religious implementation of programs and projects • provide essential leadership and coordination within assigned grade level • contribute to the school's mission of providing quality education
Aide in Implementing Quality and Effective Education	• help maintain high standard of education • ensure curriculum is effectively delivered • manage alignment of curriculum with standards • advocate best educational practices • assess teaching methods and classroom environment
Prioritizing Self-Care	• taking care of own well-being • keep a healthy work-life balance • maintain general well-being • take a break and relax • cope with stress and unload burdens

Necessity to Adapt to Situations and People

I can develop my social and emotional skills because everyone has a different personality gauge FGD-06
Effective leadership demands empathy and the ability to listen actively. IDI-04
Be open-minded when there's a time that you need to ask for suggestions, opinions from your fellow teachers. FGD-04

Chen (2018) stated that in coming up with wise decision, assessment of situation is necessary to adjust the actions to be taken. this ensures that approaches consider what possible limitations set by the existing conditions that the team will have to deal. Likewise, Bagwell (2020) also added in doing these actions should be carefully laid out and weighed as it may have impact not just on their productivity but to the people who will be facilitating the action.

Likewise, Netolicky (2020) also explained that as a grade head teacher, one must have a wider perspective to handle different situations and come up with a sound judgement. As a grade head teacher, you may have to deal with a different situation, which also require a different approach, a different perspective. Likewise, Snodgrass (2020) also added that these opportunities where grade head teacher's flexibility and adaptability is put into a test, is a chance to be empowered as they were given autonomy in decision-making.

Aide in Implementing Quality and Effective Education

We provide essential leadership and coordination within their assigned grade level, ensuring consistency in teaching methods, curriculum delivery, and student assessments. IDI-07
Grade head teachers often serve as mentors and advocates for their students. FGD-02
Aligning curriculum with standards, providing targeted support for teachers, and implementing effective instructional strategies. IDI-04

Calvo (2021) shared that the role of grade head teachers is essential in improving the quality of instruction. They lead programs and services to enhance learning based on what is needed by their department. They also provide technical support for their teachers. All of these is due to their knowledge on what is required by their department and that may be need may be different from each grade level. Grade head teachers participate in decision-making and crafting necessary changes while putting into consideration what seem to be relevant to improve their department.

While not all grade head has equal knowledge and skills in leading, they must respond quickly to the different demands in their department. As grade head teacher, they must take part in the educational procedures and monitor the performance of their department of grade level. Through constant and relevant evaluation, they can establish their positive impact to the school and to the learners (Polatcan & Cansoy, 2019).

Opportunity for Personal Growth

I could say it develops my professionalism and second, it helps develop my personality as a person. FGD-04
You became able to know like how to manage time, develop management skills and become organized because of your responsibilities, like managing your time as a subject teacher and a grade head. FGD-05
The (grade heads) can also direct professional development, assisting teachers in staying up to date with best practices and adjusting to changing educational demands. IDI-04

As grade head teachers immerse to their role as educational leaders, they gain authentic leadership activities that can help them grow professionally. They acquire firsthand knowledge and skills, especially when they participate in decision-making and managing people in their department. These activities are different when you read and learn it from books and trainings than when you put the idea and concepts in real-life situations and practice. This is because sometimes what is taught may need to be adjusted depending on the existing circumstances (Eggleston, 2019).

Similarly, Alviz (2019) shared that being a grade head is essential, especially when you want to assume a higher leadership position in the future. The first-hand experiences will allow them to test their theoretical knowledge in actual situations. These experiences help them build necessary leadership skills and behaviors. Parker (2019) also added that they can better address situations if they have experience with it. These meaningful experiences will help them grow as a leader as it will give them opportunities to learn more strategies and approaches in educational leadership, which sometimes were not taught in books.

Furthermore, Sorensen et al., 2022) also explained that grade head teachers should actively look for opportunities to demonstrate their skills. They can actively involve in activities that test their decision-making skills, managerial skills and even how they allocate resources. These experiences will help them test which skills they lack and improve.

Provision of Relevant Support to the School
Grade head teachers guide the educational journey of a specific grade level, ensuring curriculum alignment, effective teaching practices, and student progress. IDI-04
Grade heads are the partners of school heads and master teachers in the development and implementation of curriculum and instruction. IDI-06
We provide essential leadership and coordination within their assigned grade level, ensuring consistency in teaching methods, curriculum delivery, and student assessments IDI-07

Grade head teachers help in facilitating activities and supervising the teachers and students in their department are relevant support provided to school administrators as it improves delivery of quality service and enhance academic success.

This school-management that allows the designation of grade head teachers to take on leading role enhances the efficient delivery of educational services as reflected in Republic Act 9155. It can be noted that since grade head teachers are more exposed to instructional roles, they help school administrators craft necessary programs and activities by suggesting what will work considering the educational situations they encountered as teachers in the field. This was also supported by the findings of Vecaldo (2019) sharing that grade head teachers can encourage major innovations in school and can also shape the school governance.

Moreover, Comeros (2019) also stressed that assigning grade head teachers help school heads to organized and supervise as grade level and department. In the past, operations were coming from the higher authority but now schools can create a selection committee, or have a faculty meeting to assign teachers in important leadership functions in school.

Furthermore, as grade head teachers have the knowledge of the operating procedures that work best for the group's, they ensure the department and the school's continual improvement (Southern Cross University, 2019). Likewise, they actively involve in school as educational leaders by simply becoming motivated to make a positive difference to the teachers and students. Their role is important in impacting the students and teachers in their department (Burns, 2019).

Prioritizing Self-Care
I recommend prioritizing self-care, seeking support when necessary, and consistently investing in your professional development to excel in your role. IDI-05
Take care of your own well-being to avoid burnout. FGD-02
I will also prioritize self- care and stress management techniques. IDI-07

The report of getting burn-out and struggling on mental health is also observed among educational leaders. At worst, this lead for some to reconsider their job and leave because of the dissatisfaction they get (Education Support, 2020). On the other hand, Santiago (2023) also suggested that grade head teachers should take break time as a coping mechanism to the pressure of work. This will give them time to recharge and gain more clarity of their work.

Furthermore, Jackson and Fransman (2018) reported that high work pressure lead to poor physical, psychological and emotional well-being which may o reduced productivity and increased absenteeism. A healthy work-life balance is necessary to provide better well-being. Stress coping strategies are also necessary to be taught to teachers such as mindfulness and emotional intelligence.
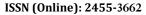
CONCLUSION
This exploration into the experiences of grade head teachers as empowered educational leaders has been incredibly enlightening for me. By delving into the varied and insightful narratives provided by these teachers, I've gained valuable understanding of the obstacles they encountered, how they dealt with them, and the beneficial results they achieved through this distinctive educational journey.

Grade head teachers faced challenges due to a heavier workload and expressed worries about handling extra duties. It's crucial to foster a supportive atmosphere conducive to learning, shedding light on factors that nurture a positive educational environment. Moreover, grade head teachers must offer technical assistance in adapting to the technology-driven educational landscape. Engaging in conversations about critical educational issues highlights their role in shaping decisions. These observations underscore the importance of grasping the particular challenges grade head teachers confront in their roles.

Grade heads have the opportunity to undergo personal growth, highlighting how their roles serve as catalysts for professional development. This necessitates the ability to adapt to various situations and interact effectively with different individuals, demonstrating the adaptive skills crucial for navigating diverse challenges and interpersonal dynamics within the educational sphere. By providing pertinent support to the school, grade head teachers underscore their pivotal role in contributing to the overall welfare and functionality of the educational institution. Moreover, their focus on facilitating the implementation of quality and effective education reflects their dedication to enhancing the educational experience for students. Additionally, prioritizing self-care underscores the acknowledgment of the significance of personal well-being amidst the demanding nature of their roles.

In summary of the above, this study has served as a profound revelation, illuminating the myriad experiences of grade head teachers as influential leaders in education. The insights gleaned underscore the imperative of ongoing personal and professional development, crucial for providing pertinent support to schools in delivering quality education effectively. The coping mechanisms employed by grade head teachers offer invaluable lessons in resilience and perseverance, pertinent for
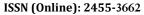
all entities invested in the educational journey. Moving forward, it is imperative for all stakeholders within the education sector to unite efforts in implementing measures that address the challenges outlined in this study and to enhance the support structures for grade head teachers which ultimately contribute to the improvement of the overall educational environment.

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