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Leadership beyond access: adaptive management and peacebuilding in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas in the Philippines

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This study examines how school heads in the southern Philippines enact adaptive leadership and peacebuilding in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). In these contexts, which are marked by resource scarcity, cultural diversity, and geographic isolation, educational leadership extends beyond administrative management to encompass adaptability, collaboration, and ethically grounded decision making. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered from seven school heads through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document review. Thematic analysis revealed two overarching dimensions: adaptive leadership and community peacebuilding. Within adaptive leadership, themes such as community engagement, resourcefulness, and moral stewardship in decision making emerged as vital leadership attributes. Leaders demonstrated flexibility in managing limited resources, fostering collective problem-solving, and sustaining school operations despite constraints. In the domain of peacebuilding, strong community partnerships, inclusive communication, and collaborative decision making surfaced as mechanisms for maintaining social harmony and ensuring educational continuity. Observation data further illustrated how leadership practices were embedded in material school conditions, including deteriorating infrastructure, long travel distances, and reliance on community labor. These findings highlight the fact that effective leadership in GIDAs depends on

contextual adaptability, shared responsibility, and ethical commitment. Leadership beyond access, therefore, signifies not only coping with adversity, but also navigating tensions between sustainability, leader well-being, and chronic scarcity while positioning schools as spaces of peace and social cohesion.

KEYWORDS

adaptive leadership, community engagement, educational leadership, geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), peacebuilding

Introduction

Educational leadership in the 21st century has transformed from a managerial task to a dynamic, value-driven process that shapes the moral and cultural fabric of education systems worldwide. Rather than reiterating definitional discussions, this study situates leadership within the context of structural inequality and fragility. Leadership now functions as a catalyst for equity, sustainability, and inclusivity, principles central to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on quality education and lifelong learning (Cha et al., 2016). Globally, leaders are challenged to respond to complex and interrelated crises such as pandemics, environmental degradation, technological disruption, and social inequality, which demand adaptive and forward-thinking approaches (Hill et al., 2024; Gardner Mctaggart, 2025). The growing recognition that education must foster not only cognitive development but also emotional intelligence, global citizenship, and environmental awareness has led to new expectations from school leaders (Strohschen, 2022; Müller et al., 2022). Leadership grounded in collaboration, resilience, and cultural empathy is now considered fundamental to building educational systems capable of withstanding uncertainty and promoting inclusive development (Howard et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2023). Studies across continents have revealed that effective leaders adopt flexible strategies to confront emerging challenges, shifting from top-down administration to participatory and context-sensitive management (Evangeline, 2025; Bottery, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools that cultivated strong professional networks and a culture of shared inquiry were more successful in sustaining learning continuity (De Voto and Superfine, 2023). Therefore, leadership has become a collective enterprise that balances accountability with compassion, technology with humanity, and innovation with cultural relevance (Arar et al., 2023). This evolution reflects a paradigm shift: educational leadership is not merely about maintaining order, but also about transforming systems, nurturing communities, and enabling learners to thrive amid global complexity.

Within this global landscape, Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines, have aligned their educational systems with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; however, persistent disparities remain. In the Philippines, challenges, such as geographic fragmentation, socioeconomic inequality, and limited infrastructure, continue to shape the educational experiences of millions of learners (Oo et al., 2025). National reforms such as the Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030 aim to institutionalize adaptive and empowered school leadership

by promoting inclusivity, accountability, and local autonomy (Department of Education (Philippines), 2022; Charamba and Ndhlovana, 2025). The BEDP 2030 underscores that leadership is essential to achieving equitable learning outcomes, especially in communities most affected by poverty and marginalization. It envisions school heads not only as administrators but also as agents of transformation who bridge policy and practice through collaboration and innovation (Ghamrawi, 2023). Moreover, educational leaders in the Philippines have unique contextual demands. As an archipelagic country frequently struck by natural disasters and is characterized by ethnolinguistic diversity, the nation's education system must reconcile national standards with local realities. During the pandemic, Filipino school heads demonstrated notable adaptability by embracing digital platforms and cultivating teacher motivation despite limited resources (Tanucan et al., 2022; Baldera et al., 2025). These examples of digital and distributed leadership illustrate how resilience, empathy, and collaboration can sustain teaching and learning under crisis conditions. Similarly, research highlights that culturally responsive leadership through integrating local traditions, faith-based values, and community participation enhances educational relevance and strengthens social trust (Brooks and Brooks, 2019; Arquiza, 2006). In this context, leadership becomes a moral practice aimed at inclusion, equity, and nation-building.

Moreover, leadership assumes a complex and transformative role in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). School heads in these regions operate amid logistical constraints, fragile peace conditions, and chronic underresourcing. Their leadership responsibilities frequently extend beyond instructional supervision and include infrastructure repair, conflict mediation, and community coordination (Chua Reyes et al., 2022; Chua, 2019). Although adaptive leadership has been widely theorized (Heifetz et al., 2009) empirical studies examining how such leadership unfolds in GIDAs, particularly as a peacebuilding practice, remain limited. In island communities such as Tawi-Tawi, school heads lead through collaboration, engaging parents, local leaders, and religious authorities to promote school-community partnerships that sustain learning despite isolation (Akmad et al., 2025). These leaders exemplify flexibility, moral courage, and visionary thinking, transforming constraints into opportunities for innovation and peace. Moreover, peacebuilding has emerged as both a leadership approach and educational outcome in GIDA contexts. Schools often serve as spaces for dialogue, reconciliation, and coexistence in Mindanao and other conflict-affected areas. Educational leaders who foster inclusive participation and moral stewardship contribute significantly to community

resilience and social cohesion (Dela Peña, 2025; Sahijuan et al., 2026; Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024). By embedding peace education, participatory decision making, and intercultural understanding into their school culture, these leaders transformed schools into microcosms of peace. However, despite the growing recognition of their roles, empirical studies on adaptive and peace-oriented leadership in geographically isolated schools in the Philippines remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining educational leadership as a force for continuity, equity, and peacebuilding in marginalized settings. By examining how school heads navigate resource scarcity, cultural diversity, and isolation, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of leadership as a mechanism that stabilizes and transforms sustainable education. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do schoolheads exercise adaptive leadership and resource management in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas?
2. How does community involvement and partnerships with stakeholders contribute to sustaining educational continuity and peacebuilding in these areas?

Literature review

Adaptive management and context-responsive leadership

Leadership in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) requires dynamic decision-making in response to uncertainty, scarcity, and local realities. Studies have revealed that adaptive management enables school leaders to respond to evolving challenges through learning-oriented strategies and contextual reflections. In rural Andalusia, Spain, leaders implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) foster shared leadership and community ownership, mitigating teacher turnover and isolation (de la Hoz Ruiz et al., 2025). Similarly, adaptive leadership in Chilean low-performing schools emphasized absorptive capacity, leveraging external support to strengthen organizational learning and continuity during disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheung et al., 2024). Barrientos et al. (2025) highlighted that, despite limited infrastructure and resources, teachers and leaders deployed to remote areas sustained education through improvisation, community partnerships, and resilience. These adaptive mechanisms mirror Klar and Brewer's (2014) findings in rural U.S. schools, where effective leadership requires localized strategies aligned with community values and the empowerment of local actors. Importantly, these studies also caution that adaptive practices often compensate for systemic deficiencies, raising questions about sustainability and leadership burden. Similarly, in the Philippine context, leadership in GIDAs demonstrates adaptive features that are rooted in cultural understanding and local responsiveness.

Leadership for equity, social justice, and inclusion

Beyond administrative competence, leadership in disadvantaged settings embodies principles of social justice and equity. Gümüş et al. (2025) demonstrated how Turkish school leaders mobilize social capital and informal community networks to serve diverse student populations. This aligns with Potter and Chitpin's (2020) work in England, which emphasizes reflective professional learning as a means of strengthening data-informed decision-making and equitable outcomes. Therefore, leadership has become a moral endeavor that prioritizes fairness, representation, and the dismantling of exclusionary practices. Equity-oriented leadership intersects peacebuilding and inclusion in conflict-affected or marginalized Philippine areas. Educational leaders in these regions balance cultural diversity and social reconciliation by employing participatory approaches to mitigate historical tension and promote inclusive education. By integrating justice-oriented decision making into adaptive management, leaders contribute to both educational access and community cohesion, bridging the divide between equity and peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding and community resilience

Peacebuilding-oriented leadership expands the traditional scope of school administration toward reconciliation, collective healing, and sustainable peace. Globally, schools in disadvantaged contexts serve as spaces for social transformation (Riley, 2013). However, peace-oriented leadership may also involve trade-offs, such as the normalization of unpaid labor or reliance on personal sacrifice. Riley (2013) observed that leaders in disadvantaged urban communities in the UK cultivate trust and social capital, fostering a sense of safety and belonging that is crucial for peace-oriented education. Similarly, Cheung et al. (2024) underscored how resilience frameworks during crises promote not only institutional stability, but also psychosocial well-being, a foundational aspect of peacebuilding. In the Philippine GIDA context, peacebuilding leadership manifests itself through localized collaboration, cultural respect, and shared governance with indigenous and Muslim communities. Such leadership models embody both adaptive management and transformative peace education, advancing what (Leithwood et al., 2020) termed "leadership for collective efficacy." By aligning adaptive learning, conflict sensitivity, and inclusivity, school leaders can help sustain a peace infrastructure through education and community empowerment.

Theoretical underpinning

Adaptive Leadership Theory offers a flexible approach to tackling intricate issues and driving transformative changes within organizations. Unlike conventional leadership models, this theory differentiates between technical challenges, which can be addressed with existing expertise, and adaptive challenges, which necessitate fresh learning and innovation (Abukalusa and Oosthuizen, 2023; Lei, 2025). This concept involves establishing an environment in

which stress is managed effectively, enabling teams to navigate challenges without becoming overwhelmed (Lei, 2025; Seibel et al., 2023). Leaders need to concentrate on the most pressing issues, ensuring that the team remains engaged and productive (Lei, 2025). This involves empowering teams through shared leadership networks, in which leadership roles are decentralized and tailored to meet the demands of specific challenges (Xu et al., 2022). This approach is crucial for resolving conflicts, promoting a culture of adaptability, and enhancing leaders' flexibility (Boyar et al., 2023; Lei, 2025). In practice, adaptive leadership is particularly effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by schools in GIDAs such as limited resources and high teacher turnover. This strategy involves understanding and responding to specific needs and limitations of the local context (Alene et al., 2025; de la Hoz Ruíz et al., 2025; Doguş and Kilinç, 2025). Engaging in local communities is therefore essential. School leaders in GIDAs often rely on community relationships and informal networks to address their students' academic, material, and emotional needs. This helps to create a supportive environment that can alleviate some of the disadvantages these schools face (de la Hoz Ruíz et al., 2025; Gümüş et al., 2025). Therefore, fostering a collaborative culture within schools is crucial. Adaptive leadership plays a key role by involving teachers in decision making and promoting a shared sense of responsibility. This approach can enhance teacher performance and create a unified school atmosphere (Doguş and Kilinç, 2025; Kurniady et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the adoption of adaptive leadership may result in resistance due to entrenched norms and practices. To overcome this, it is essential to build trust and highlight the advantages of adaptive methods (Nadeem, 2024). Schools in GIDAs often function with limited resources; therefore, adaptive leadership must creatively utilize what is available and seek community support to tackle these limitations (Alene et al., 2025; Doguş and Kilinç, 2025). This study extends the Adaptive Leadership Theory by applying it to the specific context of GIDA schools, resulting in an Adaptive Peacebuilding Leadership framework. As illustrated in Figure 1, this framework integrates technical and adaptive challenges with moral commitment, relational strategies, and leadership flexibility, ultimately producing peacebuilding outcomes, such as social cohesion, conflict resolution, and educational continuity. In this study, the theory served as a guide rather than a rigid conceptual framework, employing an inductive approach to explore how school heads enact adaptive leadership in challenging, resource-constrained environments.

Based on the themes identified in the Results, Figure 1 presents the Adaptive Peacebuilding Leadership framework, illustrating how school heads in GIDA schools navigate complex challenges. The framework integrates technical challenges (e.g., infrastructure, funding, and limited resources) and adaptive challenges (e.g., trust building, collaborative problem-solving, and community engagement) with a leadership core characterized by moral commitment, flexibility, and adaptive decision-making. These leadership practices, grounded in both Adaptive Leadership Theory and the empirical findings from this study, produce peacebuilding outcomes such as social cohesion, conflict resolution, and educational continuity. The diagram visually synthesizes how the leadership strategies of school heads transform constraints into actionable solutions, highlighting the relational, ethical, and

context-sensitive aspects of adaptive leadership in marginalized, resource-constrained educational settings.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore the dynamics of leadership beyond access, focusing on adaptive management and peacebuilding practices in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). Case study research provides an in-depth understanding of complex and context-specific phenomena (Yin, 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for examining leadership behaviors, decision-making processes, and peacebuilding initiatives in challenging educational environments. The flexibility of the case study method allows for the integration of multiple data sources, thereby providing a holistic and nuanced understanding of real-life experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). By emphasizing participants' lived experiences and narratives, the case study approach legitimizes their voices and highlights their adaptive strategies within unique school contexts (Payne et al., 2009). This study investigates how school heads exercise adaptive leadership and resource management in GIDA schools, and how community involvement and stakeholder partnerships contribute to sustaining educational continuity and peacebuilding.

Research locale and participants

The study was conducted in selected GIDA schools located in Tawi-Tawi, one of the southernmost provinces in the Philippines, which is characterized by geographical isolation and multicultural communities. These schools face unique challenges related to accessibility, limited resources, and security concerns, making them ideal settings to understand adaptive leadership and peace-oriented management. Seven heads from different GIDA schools were selected as participants (see Table 1). The inclusion criterion required participants to be current school heads who directly managed the schools within the identified GIDA zones. The participants represented diverse school sizes and community contexts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the leadership practices in various environments.

Data collection and analysis

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institution (approval code 2025-10). Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study objectives and procedures and ensuring their voluntary participation and the protection of confidentiality and anonymity. The interview guide was developed through a peer-review process involving educational leadership experts and field education program supervisors familiar with GIDA settings.



FIGURE 1 Adaptive peacebuilding leadership framework in GIDA schools. This diagram illustrates how school heads in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs) navigate technical challenges (e.g., resourcefulness and innovation, resource mobilization) and adaptive challenges (e.g., community partnerships, trust and communication, collaborative problem-solving) through core adaptive peacebuilding leadership practices (moral commitment, flexibility, personal sacrifice, and adaptive strategies). These practices, grounded in both Adaptive Leadership Theory and empirical findings, produce peacebuilding outcomes including social cohesion, conflict resolution, and educational continuity, highlighting the relational, ethical, and context-sensitive dimensions of leadership in resource-constrained and socially complex school environments. *Note.* Authors’ own work.

TABLE 1 Demographic profiling of the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Plantilla position	Years of experience as school head	Years leading GIDA school
1. School Head A	Male	Head Teacher—III	10 years	Not specified
2. School Head B	Female	Principal—I	22 years	20 years
3. School Head C	Female	Principal—I	24 years	24 years
4. School Head D	Female	Head Teacher—II	9 years	9 years
5. School Head E	Male	Head Teacher—III	Not specified	Not specified
6. School Head F	Female	Principal—I	26 years	20 years
7. School Head G	Male	Principal—II	28 years	28 years

Note. Authors’ own work.

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of key questions on adaptive leadership, resource management, community partnerships, and peacebuilding initiatives. The guide was validated by an education faculty member and an extension specialist to ensure contextual appropriateness and clarity. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min and was recorded with participants’ permission. All data were transcribed verbatim and stored securely on encrypted devices. In addition to interviews, field observations documented school conditions, including makeshift classrooms, weather-damaged roofs, and absence of basic utilities at some sites.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, allowing themes to emerge naturally from participants’ narratives. Coding was conducted manually and collaboratively among the researchers to ensure consistency and rigor. First, the researchers coded the

transcripts line-by-line. Second, the researchers grouped the codes according to theme. The emerging themes were grouped under major dimensions reflecting adaptive management, stakeholder engagement, and peacebuilding strategies. Patterns were compared across the participants to identify shared experiences and practices. The final report was written clearly and cohesively, employing academic rigor and enhanced linguistic precision through digital language tools.

Results

Field observations documented that many participating schools were situated in remote locations, often requiring one–three hours of travel from the nearest town center. Access

to these schools involved small boats, narrow footpaths, or motorcycle travel over uneven and unpaved terrains. School facilities reflect persistent material limitations, including classrooms with leaking roofs, temporary plywood partitions, shared instructional spaces, and limited access to electricity and potable water. At several sites, teachers and learners shared multi-grade classrooms, and instructional materials were minimal and required frequent improvisation. These observable conditions formed the everyday environment in which school leadership and school operations were carried out. Table 2 summarizes the themes associated with the evaluation of adaptive leadership practices and community peacebuilding efforts in geographically isolated and disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs).

Within these settings, the evaluation of adaptive leadership and resource management places strong emphasis on community engagement and support, highlighting the integral role of active barangay participation, parental collaboration, and stakeholder partnerships in sustaining school operations. Coordination for these efforts was often informal and relationship-based, led directly by school heads who relied on trust and personal communication, rather than formal mechanisms.

The themes of resourcefulness and innovation reflect how school heads maximize limited financial and material resources through creative solutions and external assistance from the government and private entities. Another key theme, adaptive leadership style, demonstrated flexibility in decision making, shared governance, and collaborative teacher leadership, particularly in responding to logistical challenges and fluctuating school conditions. Personal sacrifice and commitment emerged as an enduring dimension, revealing how professional passion, family inspiration, and emotional resilience enabled school leaders to remain dedicated, despite isolation and scarcity. Additionally, building strong community partnerships emphasizes the importance of barangay collaboration, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) support, and volunteer engagement in sustaining educational programs and maintaining school facilities.

Regarding community involvement and partnerships for educational continuity and peacebuilding, several themes illustrate the collaborative and relational nature of leadership in the GIDAs. Active community participation underscores how parental involvement, civic activities, and local fundraising initiatives strengthen school–community ties and enhance learner engagement. Collaborative problem solving captures shared efforts to address logistical and instructional challenges through barangay cooperation, capacity building, and bayanihan-inspired teamwork. Building trust and communication highlights transparent leadership practices and open dialogue among teachers, parents, and local officials, reinforcing mutual accountability and cooperation. Resource mobilization through partnerships demonstrates the significance of financial support, government aid, and project implementation facilitated through multi-sectoral alliances. Finally, peacebuilding through education encapsulates the integration of conflict mediation, value education, and social inclusion programmes that foster community harmony and collective resilience. Collectively, these themes reveal that adaptive leadership and peacebuilding in GIDAs operate through deep

TABLE 2 Summary of themes.

Categories	Themes	Top five codes
School heads adaptive leadership and resource management in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas	1. Community engagement and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active barangay participation • Parental collaboration • Stakeholder partnership • Private sector assistance • Local volunteerism
	2. Resourcefulness and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial management • Creative solutions • Classroom shortage • Material scarcity • Government assistance
	3. Adaptive leadership style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership flexibility • Shared decision-making • Teacher collaboration • Role balancing • Behavioral management
	4. Personal sacrifice and commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal dedication • Professional passion • Family inspiration • Emotional resilience • Time commitment
	5. Building strong community partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barangay collaboration • NGO support • Volunteer engagement • Facility repairs • Community unity
Community involvement and partnerships for educational continuity and peacebuilding in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas	1. Active community participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent engagement • Learner mentoring • Local fundraising • Community workshops • Civic programs
	2. Collaborative problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared solutions • Capacity building • Bayanihan approach • Barangay cooperation • Training workshops
	3. Building trust and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual trust • Transparent leadership • Open communication • Team cooperation • Shared responsibility
	4. Resource mobilization through partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support • Government aid • Stakeholder alliance • Barangay partnership • Project implementation
	5. Peacebuilding through education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict mediation • Values education • Community harmony • Learner inclusion • Social unity

The authors created this table.

community embeddedness, creative resource management, and moral commitment to education as a unifying force.

How Do School Heads Exercise Adaptive Leadership and Resource Management in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas?

Community engagement and support

Across all cases, school heads emphasized that community engagement was essential for school survival, rather than supplementary. Observations during Brigada Eskwela documented parents, barangay officials, and local volunteers repainting classrooms, repairing damaged chairs, and clearing school grounds (Figure 1—Adaptive Challenges/Community Partnerships). Engagement relied heavily on personal relationships and informal coordination led by school heads, demonstrating the relational nature of leadership in these contexts. Community members often contributed beyond official duties, showing a commitment to both student welfare and school operations. Such practices reinforced a sense of shared responsibility and collective ownership over the school's success. Some participants mentioned the following.

“Parents are very supportive in school activities such as Buwaning Wika and Brigada Eskwela.”

“During school events, barangay officials and some stakeholders provide financial assistance or materials.”

“Community support is evident during Brigada Eskwela when parents and volunteers help clean the school and prepare it for classes.”

Community involvement strengthens school operations while highlighting potential dependency on informal networks.

Resourcefulness and innovation

School heads and teachers faced constant resource constraints, requiring them to prioritize essential needs and find creative solutions. Field notes indicated the use of recycled materials for instructional purposes, delayed repairs due to limited School Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE), and temporary repurposing of offices or libraries as classrooms (Figure 1—Leadership Core/Flexibility). Resourcefulness is not only practical but also a form of leadership, allowing continuity of learning and operations in challenging contexts. These practices reveal the adaptability of school heads in effectively managing both material and human resources. They noted that,

“Teachers often provide from their own resources, while volunteers sometimes teach without Instructional materials (IMs).”

“We practice budget prioritization, using funds only for the most essential needs.”

“I encourage teachers to innovate and use available resources effectively.”

Such creative solutions sustain instructional continuity, but may mask structural inadequacies that could delay systemic improvements.

Adaptive leadership style

Leadership flexibility has emerged as a defining feature of school heads' practices. Observations showed consultation with teachers before making operational decisions, particularly during resource allocation, scheduling, and student support interventions (Figure 1—Leadership Core/Adaptive Strategies). Leaders adapted their approaches depending on situational challenges, demonstrating sensitivity to context and people. This flexibility allowed them to maintain team engagement and problem-solving effectiveness despite unpredictable circumstances. Some shared that,

“I always adjust my leadership approach depending on the needs of my teachers and the situation of the school.”

“When challenges arise, I consult with my team and modify our plans to fit the circumstances.”

“Being a leader here means being flexible — you must adapt because every day brings a new challenge.”

Shared decision-making fosters collaboration while maintaining responsiveness to situational challenges.

Personal sacrifice and commitment

Personal sacrifice has been consistently described as part of leadership practice, especially during emergencies or community activities (Figure 1—Leadership Core/Moral Commitment). School heads were observed to extend working hours and attend school on weekends and holidays. These sacrifices reflect a moral commitment to students' welfare and school operations. However, they acknowledged the physical and emotional costs of sustaining this level of dedication over time. Some participants expressed the following.

“I feel like a parent to the children and a beggar for resources.”

“I rarely take breaks, even during vacations, because I focus on school.”

“My motivation is personal and community-driven.”

Moral commitment sustains school operations, but may lead to fatigue and burnout, posing risks to long-term leadership effectiveness.

Building strong community partnerships

School heads actively cultivated trust-based relationships with parents, local leaders, and community organizations (Figure 1—Adaptive Challenges/Community Partnerships, and Trust and Communication). Schools were positioned as neutral and trusted spaces for dialogue between stakeholders. These partnerships enabled collective problem solving and increased community engagement in school programs. The continuous effort required to maintain these relationships highlights the relational dimension of leadership in GIDA schools. They shared that,

“An effective partnership is built on cooperation, shared responsibilities, and trust.”

“I practice transparency with teachers, manage conflicts with fairness, and treat them like family.”

“Success comes from active collaboration.”

Partnerships strengthen problem-solving capacity, but require ongoing efforts to maintain trust and engagement.

How Do Community Involvement and Partnership with Stakeholders Contribute to Sustaining Educational Continuity and Peacebuilding in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas?

Community involvement partnerships

Community involvement extends beyond infrastructure support to shared responsibility for school safety, learner well-being, and decision-making (Figure 1—Adaptive Challenges/Community Partnerships). Parents, barangay officials, and volunteers have actively contributed to school programs, health initiatives, and facility improvements. These practices reinforced the school as a central hub for social engagement and accountability. Engagement levels varied depending on community cohesion and resources, reflecting the context-sensitive nature of the leadership. Some of them said that,

“During Brigada Eskwela, parents, stakeholders, barangay officials, and men in uniform all worked together to repair chairs, repaint classrooms, and clean the campus. Without their help, we could not have maintained school operations.”

“Success comes from active collaboration. School programs are always more successful when parents and stakeholders are involved.”

“Community support is evident during Brigada Eskwela when parents and volunteers help clean the school and prepare it for classes.”

Active participation enhances ownership but may vary depending on community resources and cohesion.

Collaborative problem-solving

When urgent challenges arose, solutions were collectively negotiated. The findings highlighted instances where parents and local officials contributed labor, small funds, or materials to address immediate needs (Figure 1—Adaptive Challenges/Collaborative Problem-Solving). Collaborative problem-solving reflects both practical and relational leadership approaches. It allows schools to respond to local challenges while fostering trust and engagement among stakeholders. Some participants said,

“When we lacked funds for repairs, I sought help from the barangay government. For example, our stage was repaired with support from the barangay chairman.”

“A major challenge has been funding. Without enough MOOE, I sometimes relied on credit or sought support from petition officers.”

“One example was when we urgently needed to demolish an old classroom. Parents and the Parent-Teacher-Community Association (PTCA) immediately contributed ₱10,000 during a meeting.”

Collective problem-solving builds resilience while occasionally slowing urgent decision-making.

Building trust and communication

Trust and clear communication are central to the effectiveness of leadership. Observations showed that school heads mediated conflicts among learners, parents, and teachers, fostering dialogue and inclusive participation (Figure 1—Adaptive Challenges/Trust and Communication). School heads actively cultivate relationships that support social cohesion and accountability. Ongoing communication helped prevent the escalation of conflict and reinforced the school's role as a community hub. They said,

“Effective school-community partnerships are built on trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility.”

“When parents and officials feel included in decision-making and see that their contributions are valued, they are more willing to support the school.”

“I see myself as a peace builder by promoting collaboration and resolving issues through dialogue.”

Trust-building supports peace and cohesion but requires ongoing emotional and relational labor.

Resource mobilization through partnerships

Community engagement facilitates resource mobilization, allowing schools to address infrastructural and operational needs

despite limited budgets (Figure 1—Technical Challenges/Resource Mobilization). School heads leverage local networks to acquire labor, materials, and small financial contributions. These practices reflect the adaptive and collaborative use of limited resources. They also illustrated the central role of relational leadership in sustaining operations in resource-constrained contexts. They expressed that,

“Support comes from BLGU, which provides financial assistance and counterparts for projects.”

“I would use additional support to expand training opportunities for teachers and improve facilities.”

“Parents usually provide volunteer help, especially during Brigada Eskwela or PTCA activities.”

Mobilizing resources enhances operational capacity but risks dependence on irregular community contributions.

Peacebuilding through education

Peacebuilding has emerged as an integral component of school leadership. School heads acted as mediators and facilitators, resolving conflicts, encouraging dialogue, and using inclusive decision-making strategies (Figure 1, Peacebuilding Outcomes). These practices create safe and cohesive school environments, reinforcing trust among students, parents, and the community. Although informal, peacebuilding efforts demonstrated the intersection of the ethical, relational, and practical dimensions of adaptive leadership. Some participants mentioned the following.

“I consider myself a peace builder. I mediate conflicts between pupils and sometimes between parents.”

“Supporting learners’ education also contributes to peace in the community.”

“By promoting cooperation and ensuring that both teachers and parents are involved in school matters, I help maintain harmony.”

Integrating peacebuilding strengthens social cohesion and trust, but may be limited without broader structural support.

Discussion

This case study examines how adaptive management and peacebuilding practices are exercised by school heads in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). The findings demonstrated that leadership in these contexts extends beyond ensuring physical access to education, encompassing adaptability, collaboration, relational work, and moral commitment. Consistent with these results, school leadership in GIDAs is enacted under conditions of persistent material scarcity, geographic isolation, and social complexity, requiring leaders to respond flexibly to situational demands, while sustaining instructional continuity and community trust. These conditions differentiate

leadership practices in GIDAs from more resourced and centrally supported school environments where technical solutions and formal systems are often sufficient.

Adaptive leadership emerged as a central mechanism through which school heads navigated these challenges. In line with Heifetz et al. (2009), school heads mobilized teachers, parents, and local stakeholders to confront complex problems that could not be solved through technical expertise alone. Rather than relying solely on formal authority, leaders facilitate shared responsibility, collective learning, and context-sensitive decision making. This is in contrast to purely technocratic or compliance-driven leadership approaches, which prioritize procedural efficiency over contextual responsiveness. This finding aligns with Yukl and Gardner (2020), who emphasized that adaptability, participatory leadership, and shared accountability are critical in unpredictable environments. As demonstrated by the results, school heads adjusted leadership approaches depending on resource availability, teacher well-being, and community dynamics, balancing authority with empathy to maintain morale and engagement.

Beyond adaptive management, peacebuilding surfaced as an integral dimension of leadership practice rather than as a discrete or formalized program. Schools in GIDAs function as social anchors where conflict resolution, dialogue, and reconciliation are embedded in everyday leadership actions. Through inclusive communication, mediation, and participatory decision-making, school heads cultivate trust among parents, barangay officials, and teachers, reinforcing cooperation that extends beyond school boundaries. These practices reveal how leadership responds not only to organizational demands, but also to broader social tensions present in marginalized and geographically isolated communities. These findings echo Novelli et al. (2017), who contend that education systems can either reproduce or transform social divisions. In this study, leadership practices grounded in inclusion and dialogue positioned schools as spaces for social cohesion, rather than sites of tension.

At a deeper level, the findings highlight leadership as moral stewardship. The documented personal sacrifices of school heads, such as extended working hours, personal financial contributions, and sustained presence during crises, reflect what Fullan (2020) describes as “moral purpose,” an intrinsic commitment to improving lives through education. These practices resonate with Christie (2010), who asserted that transformative leadership in disadvantaged settings requires moral courage, ethical responsibility, and relational trust. At the same time, reliance on personal sacrifice exposes structural limitations within the education system, raising concerns about leaders’ well-being, sustainability, and the normalization of chronic resource scarcity. While such sacrifices enable schools to function amid systemic inadequacies, the findings echo broader debates on the risks of overreliance on individual commitment in structurally constrained systems.

Taken together, these findings illustrate a holistic leadership paradigm in which adaptive management and peacebuilding are interconnected rather than separate domains. The ability of school heads to integrate resource management, emotional resilience, community engagement, and conflict mediation demonstrates how

leadership in GIDAs operates at the intersection of the technical, relational, and moral dimensions. This study conceptualizes Adaptive Peacebuilding Leadership as a contextual form of leadership that extends the existing adaptive leadership and peacebuilding frameworks by foregrounding everyday relational labor, moral responsibility, and community embeddedness in marginalized settings. This study extends the existing literature by showing that adaptive leadership in marginalized contexts does not merely sustain operations, but also fosters social cohesion and community resilience. In this sense, leadership “beyond access” signifies not only administrative effectiveness but also the cultivation of human and social capital essential for long-term educational continuity and peacebuilding in geographically isolated and disadvantaged communities.

Theoretical implications

This study expands Adaptive Leadership Theory by applying it to the realities of school leadership in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). Leadership in these settings extends beyond administrative management and becomes a process of adaptation, inclusion, and peacebuilding. Observations of schools in remote locations, often accessible only by small boats or narrow footpaths, have revealed persistent material scarcity, such as leaking roofs, shared multi-grade classrooms, and minimal instructional materials. These conditions require leaders to adapt continuously to both operations and relationships. Regarding Adaptive Leadership Theory, this study shows that GIDA leaders practice context-responsive and relational adaptation. They adjust not only school operations, but also community relationships, reflecting empathy, cultural sensitivity, and shared decision-making. This broadens the theory to include embedded adaptiveness, where leadership effectiveness depends on collaboration, trust, and relational labor rather than formal authority or established structures. In addition, this study contributes to the Transformative Peacebuilding Framework (TPF) by introducing the concept of pedagogical peacebuilding, in which leaders utilize everyday school practices to foster trust, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Thus, peacebuilding occurs not only through formal programs but also through mediation, dialogue, and inclusive decision-making embedded in daily leadership. Integrating these perspectives leads to a new conceptual model called Adaptive Peacebuilding Leadership, which links adaptive learning to social transformation. This model extends the existing adaptive leadership and peacebuilding frameworks by foregrounding moral commitment, relational labor, and community embeddedness, highlighting how leadership in marginalized contexts simultaneously sustains learning, equity, and social cohesion.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational leadership and policy within the Department of Education’s framework in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs). These implications

emphasize the need to strengthen the leadership mind-set, community engagement, and overall resilience of schools in challenging contexts.

Institutionalize adaptive leadership development: School heads should receive continuous training that enables them to think critically, make informed decisions in uncertain situations, and efficiently manage limited resources. Leadership programs should prioritize real-life problem solving and innovation, enabling school heads to effectively address emerging issues in remote and diverse educational settings.

Strengthen community-based peacebuilding mechanisms: Schools in GIDAs should serve as centers of peace and understanding. Encouraging inclusive dialogue, restorative practices, and mutual respect among teachers, learners, and community members can prevent conflicts and promote unity. When schools become safe spaces for cooperation, learning becomes increasingly meaningful and sustainable.

Promote inter-sectoral partnerships: Collaborative efforts with local governments, private organizations, and community stakeholders are vital in addressing the challenges of isolation. Partnerships can provide additional resources, infrastructure support, and shared responsibility to ensure that education remains accessible and relevant to learners in disadvantaged areas.

Embed well-being and moral resilience in leadership standards: Educational leadership should recognize the emotional demands of leadership in isolated or highly stressful environments. Supporting the mental health, moral resilience, and overall well-being of school heads can help them sustain motivation and compassion while managing multiple responsibilities.

Limitations and future directions

Although this study provides meaningful insights into the leadership practices of school heads in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDAs), it has several limitations. These findings were drawn from a small group of participants within specific local contexts, and may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across all regions. Because the study relied mainly on qualitative narratives, the interpretations reflected personal experiences rather than broad generalizations. Future studies may expand this scope by including more participants from various cultural and geographical settings to ensure a wider perspective of adaptive and peace-oriented leadership. Mixed-method research designs can also be used to combine personal narratives with measurable data on school performance and community outcomes. Long-term investigations are encouraged to explore how adaptive leadership initiatives influence school resilience, peace, sustainability, and learning recovery.

Conclusion

This study explored how school heads in GIDAs embody leadership beyond access through adaptive management and

peacebuilding to understand how leaders navigate scarcity, isolation, and cultural plurality to sustain learning and social cohesion. In these contexts, leadership is defined by flexibility, collaboration, and moral commitment, allowing school heads to transform limitations into opportunities for collective growth. The findings revealed that leaders managed multi-grade classrooms, navigated logistical isolation, and coordinated community resources, demonstrating both adaptive and relational capacities. School leaders displayed innovation in resource management, community engagement, participatory problem solving, and peacebuilding, fostering social cohesion while sustaining instructional continuity. At the same time, reliance on personal sacrifices and informal networks exposes potential risks, including burnout and structural dependence. The findings emphasize the importance of embedding adaptive and peace-oriented principles into national leadership frameworks, investing in mentorship, intersectoral collaboration, and localized models that recognize cultural, geographic, and social realities. Future research should explore empirical, comparative, and long-term studies of adaptive leadership models, including technology-supported solutions and community-based innovations. Ultimately, leadership beyond access in GIDAs illustrates how empathy, courage, and relational labor transform isolation into inspiration and education into a force for peace.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by departmental based review of the first author's institution (PEM301 Class-approval code 2025-10). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

ND: Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Formal analysis, Software, Resources, Visualization, Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Investigation, Data curation. NC: Validation, Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AH: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. A-SS: Investigation,

Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. PU: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Conceptualization. SJ: Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. SH: Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. RR: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. ZS: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. KM: Software, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. RAA: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Resources. RSA: Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. AT: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. AS: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Methodology. DS-O: Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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