



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Collaborative Decision-Making Practices Among School Heads: A Qualitative Inquiry into Influencing Factors and Leadership Effectiveness

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Jan 19, 2026	This qualitative research explores the collaborative decision-making practices among school heads in the Isabela City Schools Division and examines the factors that influence their effectiveness in educational leadership. Through in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions with 48 school administrators, this study reveals how collaborative practices transform school management across six critical domains: strategic planning, resource allocation, curriculum development, staff development, problem-solving, and organizational culture. The findings demonstrate that school heads actively employ consultative, participative, and consensus-based approaches in their leadership, with organizational culture, leadership styles, communication channels, and diversity of perspectives serving as key influencing factors. Narratives from respondents illustrate both the benefits and challenges of collaborative governance, revealing a transformation from hierarchical to participatory leadership models. The study contributes to educational leadership literature by providing rich, contextualized insights into the lived experiences of school administrators navigating the complexities of collaborative decision-making in a diverse socio-cultural environment.
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational leadership, the shift from hierarchical, top-down decision-making to collaborative, participatory approaches have become increasingly prominent. Schools today operate as complex organizations where multiple stakeholders—including teachers, students, parents, and community members—have vested interests in educational outcomes. This complexity necessitates decision-making processes that are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to diverse perspectives (Harris, 2008).

Collaborative decision-making refers to a process where multiple stakeholders participate actively in identifying problems, generating solutions, and implementing decisions that affect the educational community. Research has demonstrated that such practices can lead to improved teacher morale, enhanced student performance, and increased community involvement (Fullan, 2014). By fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders, collaborative decision-making creates more supportive and inclusive school environments, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes.

The Department of Education in the Philippines has emphasized the importance of participatory governance in schools, encouraging school heads to adopt collaborative decision-making practices (Department of Education, 2012). However, the implementation of these practices varies significantly depending on local contexts, highlighting the need for research that explores the specific experiences and challenges faced by school heads in different regions. Isabela City Schools Division, located in the southern Philippines, presents a unique context characterized by its diverse cultural and socio-economic landscape. Understanding how school heads in this region navigate collaborative decision-making can provide valuable insights for improving educational leadership practices in similar contexts. There are some researchers conducted on leaderships such as the study

of Indal and Arriola (2022) about the leadership competencies of the head of different agencies in Basilan Province. Another study focusing on the leadership styles of school heads (Mohammad-Samat & Arriola, 2024) and transformational leadership impact on well-being for tertiary teachers (Calago & Arriola, 2024).

Recent research consistently demonstrates that collaborative approaches in educational leadership yield significant benefits for school performance and organizational development. Studies show that transformational and distributed leadership styles enhance collaborative practices, creating more effective professional learning communities where leadership responsibilities extend beyond principals to include teachers and stakeholders with relevant expertise (Harris, 2008; Smith & Brown, 2023). Schools implementing systematic collaborative decision-making report measurable improvements in teacher satisfaction, engagement, commitment, organizational climate, teacher retention, and student outcomes, particularly when teachers feel their voices are genuinely valued in decision processes (Thompson & Nguyen, 2023). Cross-cultural research across Asia and context-specific studies in the Philippines confirm that while cultural nuances shape implementation, collaborative practices universally benefit educational settings, with participatory governance being especially well-suited to contexts where community involvement is culturally valued (Chen, 2020; Department of Education, 2012; Young, 2022).

Despite these documented benefits, researchers have identified significant implementation challenges that educational leaders must navigate. While schools often embrace participative decision-making in instructional domains, managerial decisions frequently remain hierarchical, with trust and collective responsibility serving as critical enablers of sustained collaborative capacity (Meintjes, 2018). Common barriers include time constraints inherent in collaborative processes, resistance from staff members accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures, and insufficient training in facilitation and conflict resolution skills necessary for managing collaborative dynamics (Garcia & Patel, 2023). These findings underscore that successful collaborative decision-making requires not only commitment to participatory values but also intentional professional development, organizational support structures, and cultural transformation to build the trust and competencies necessary for authentic stakeholder engagement in educational governance.

Statement of the Problem

This qualitative study investigates the collaborative decision-making practices of school heads within the Isabela City Schools Division, examining how these educational leaders engage with stakeholders in making critical management decisions and identifying the factors that enhance or hinder their effectiveness. The research explores school heads' lived experiences with collaborative decision-making across various dimensions of school management, including the specific contexts in which they employ collaborative approaches and the outcomes resulting from such practices. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the facilitating and constraining factors that shape collaborative decision-making processes, as well as the challenges school heads face when implementing these approaches and the strategies they utilize to overcome these obstacles. Ultimately, the research aims to understand how collaborative decision-making has influenced and potentially transformed school management practices within the division, providing insights into the complexities of shared leadership in educational settings and contributing to the broader understanding of participatory governance in Philippine schools.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of school heads engaging in collaborative decision-making in the Isabela City Schools Division, Basilan, Philippines—a unique educational context characterized by cultural diversity, socio-economic challenges, and geographical considerations as an island community (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The phenomenological design was chosen to gain deep, contextualized understanding of how school administrators experience, perceive, and make sense of collaborative practices in their daily leadership work, focusing on the meanings they ascribe to these practices and how these experiences shape their leadership identities and effectiveness. Using purposive sampling with specific inclusion criteria (current service as school heads, minimum two years' experience, active engagement in collaborative decision-making, and willingness to share experiences), 48 school heads participated from four districts (East, West, North, and Island), ensuring diverse

representation across urban and rural settings, different school sizes, and varying resource availability levels.

Data were collected through two primary methods: in-depth semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with 8 experienced school heads lasting around 60 minutes each, and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with 6 participants lasting around 90 minutes, organized by district to facilitate comfort and open sharing among colleagues. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies including credibility (member checking and triangulation through multiple data sources and peer debriefing), transferability (thick description of context and processes), dependability (comprehensive audit trail), and confirmability (reflexive journaling to examine researcher biases).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The Landscape of Collaborative Decision-Making Practices

School heads in the Isabela City Schools Division described employing collaborative decision-making across a wide spectrum of school functions and contexts. Three distinct but interrelated approaches emerged: consultative, participative, and consensus-based practices.

Consultative Practices: Seeking Input Before Deciding

Consultative practices involve school heads actively seeking input from stakeholders before making final decisions. One principal described this approach:

"Before adjusting our class schedules, I consulted each grade level coordinator about their challenges. Their feedback pointed out issues I hadn't considered. While I made the final decision, it was informed by their input, and because they felt heard, implementation went smoothly [KII-R1]."

Another school head emphasized the value of regular consultation:

"We regularly consult employees before making decisions that affect their work [KII-R4]."

However, some school heads acknowledged that consultation, while valuable, has limitations. One participant noted:

"We ask for input and listen, but ultimately the decision rests with me as school head. I've learned that for really important decisions that fundamentally affect our operations, we need to go beyond consultation to true participation or consensus [KII-R5]."

Participative Practices: Shared Involvement in Decision-Making

Participative practices represent a deeper level of collaboration, where stakeholders are not merely consulted but actively involved in the decision-making process itself. School heads described creating structures and processes that enabled genuine shared decision-making.

One principal shared a powerful example:

"I formed a committee with teachers, parents, and strong student readers. We met weekly for a month and together designed every aspect—curriculum, schedule, participants, and success metrics [KII-R3]."

Another school head described how participative practices transformed staff development:

"We shifted from me deciding what professional development teachers needed to teachers having direct say in identifying their needs and planning Learning Action Cell sessions. They're involved in defining their own professional growth goals [KII-R6]."

The impact of participative practices extended beyond specific decisions to influence overall organizational culture. As one participant eloquently stated:

"We promote a culture of shared decision-making—it's part of our school's identity. New teachers are sometimes surprised, coming from schools where principals make all decisions. But they quickly see that here [KII-R4]."

Consensus-Based Practices: Seeking Agreement Through Dialogue

Consensus-based practices represent the most intensive form of collaboration, where decisions emerge through dialogue and mutual agreement rather than being imposed by authority. While more time-consuming, school heads described this approach as particularly powerful for complex or contentious issues.

One school head shared a compelling narrative:

"We faced a serious bullying case that divided our community. Rather than deciding top-down, I brought together the involved teachers, both sets of parents, our guidance counselor, and student leaders. We spent hours listening and understanding different perspectives [KII-R1]."

Another principal described how consensus-building improved decision quality:

"When we use consensus, decisions are almost always better than what any of us would have come up with alone [KII-R4]."

However, participants also acknowledged that consensus-building has challenges. One school head noted:

"In a crisis, you can't spend days building consensus—you need swift decisions. I've learned to be strategic [FGD-R4]."

Theme 2: Factors Influencing Collaborative Decision-Making Effectiveness

School heads identified four critical factors that influence the effectiveness of their collaborative decision-making practices: organizational culture, leadership styles, communication channels, and diversity of perspectives.

Organizational Culture: The Foundation for Collaboration

Participants consistently emphasized that organizational culture—the shared values, beliefs, and norms within the school—profoundly shapes the feasibility and effectiveness of collaborative practices.

One principal described the challenge of cultural transformation:

"When I arrived five years ago, the culture was hierarchical, teachers followed instructions. Implementing collaborative decision-making felt like swimming upstream. Teachers didn't trust it, thought it was a trick or that I was avoiding responsibility. It took two years of consistent modeling—showing I genuinely valued and acted on their input—before the culture shifted [KII-R6]."

Another school head emphasized how positive organizational culture sustains collaboration:

"Our culture promotes collaboration and effective decision-making. Teachers naturally consult each other, form ad hoc committees to solve problems without being asked, and involve parents and students. It's just how things are done here [KII-R5]."

Several participants noted that trust is the core of collaborative culture. As one school head powerfully stated:

"If teachers don't trust their input will be genuinely considered, they won't engage. If I don't trust teachers have the school's best interests at heart, I'll be defensive and controlling [FGD-R5]."

Leadership Styles: Modeling Collaborative Approaches

Participants identified leadership style as the most influential factor in collaborative decision-making effectiveness. School heads who model supportive, transformational leadership create environments where collaboration can flourish (Leithwood et al., 2004).

One principal reflected on this:

"When teachers see I don't have all the answers and that I value their expertise, it changes the dynamic [FGD-R3]."

Another school head described how transformational leadership inspires collaboration:

"When I articulate a compelling vision for where we're going and show confidence that together we can get there, people are motivated to bring their best ideas [FGD-R4]."

Several participants contrasted collaborative leadership with more authoritarian approaches. One noted:

"I've seen authoritarian principals who just dictate everything. Teachers comply, but there's no real commitment—no energy or creativity [FGD-R3]."

Communication Channels: Infrastructure for Collaboration

Effective communication channels emerged as critical infrastructure enabling collaborative decision-making. School heads described investing significant effort in creating and maintaining diverse communication pathways (Fullan, 2014).

One principal detailed their communication strategy:

"We use different ways to communicate—faculty meetings, team meetings, online platforms, suggestion boxes, and open-door times when people can just drop by [KII-R6]."

Another school head emphasized the importance of two-way communication:

"I try to create spaces where people feel comfortable raising concerns, challenging ideas, or pushing back. That's when you get the real insights that lead to better decisions [KII-R4]."

Several participants noted that communication breakdowns are often at the root of collaboration failures. As one stated:

"Someone didn't get the information they needed, or there was a misunderstanding about what was being decided, or feedback was shared but not heard. So, I've learned to be almost obsessive about checking for understanding, documenting conversations, following up [KII-R3]."

Diversity of Perspectives: Enriching Decision Quality

School heads described how actively seeking and valuing diverse perspectives substantially improves decision quality and stakeholder buy-in.

One principal shared a revealing example:

"When we were designing our school-based feeding program, I initially consulted with our teachers and parent-teacher association. We came up with what we thought was a solid plan. But then one teacher suggested we also talk to the students themselves—after all, they were the ones who would be eating the food! [FGD-R5]"

Another school head reflected on the value of dissenting voices:

"We actively look for diverse perspectives before deciding anything. When we do that well, we end up with much stronger decisions that have been looked at from all angles [KII-R1]."

Several participants noted that diversity of perspectives extends beyond formal position to include personality, experience, and viewpoint diversity. One eloquently stated:

"On my leadership team, I've intentionally brought together people who think differently—some are innovators wanting to try new things, others are more cautious about what could go wrong. Some see the big picture; others focus on details. At first it was challenging because they'd clash. But over time, they've learned to appreciate each other's strengths. Our decisions are so much better now because we've got all these different perspectives examining each issue [KII-R6]."

Theme 3: Transformational Impact on School Management

Participants described how collaborative decision-making has fundamentally transformed school management across six key domains: strategic planning, resource allocation, curriculum development, staff development, problem-solving, and organizational culture.

Strategic Planning: From Top-Down to Inclusive Visioning

School heads described a dramatic shift in how strategic planning occurs, moving from principal-developed plans to inclusive processes that engage the entire school community (Hopkins, 2007).

One principal shared:

"When I develop our School Improvement Plan now, it's not me sitting at my desk writing goals. We hold planning sessions with teachers, parents, students, and community partners. We start by analyzing data together—where are we succeeding, where are we struggling? Then we collectively develop goals and strategies [KII-R3]."

Another school head described the impact on plan quality:

"Our plans used to be compliance documents—we'd write them because the division office required them, but they didn't really drive what we did day-to-day. Now, because they're developed collaboratively, they're living documents that actually guide our work [KII-R7]."

Resource Allocation: Transparent and Needs-Based Distribution

Collaborative approaches have transformed how schools allocate financial and material resources, creating more equitable and effective distribution systems.

One principal described this transformation:

"Before, I would allocate the budget based on my assumptions about what different departments needed. But when I started involving teachers and stakeholders in budget allocation decisions, I realized my assumptions were often wrong. What I thought was a priority wasn't actually what they needed most urgently [KII-R2]."

Another school head emphasized how collaboration ensures resources reach genuine needs:

"Last year, we had funds to upgrade classroom technology. Rather than making assumptions about what to buy, I convened a committee of teachers to research options and make recommendations. They identified tools I wouldn't have thought of, and because they were the ones who would use the technology daily, they were invested in learning how to use it effectively [KII-R4]."

Curriculum Development: Teacher-Led, Student-Centered Innovation

Collaborative decision-making has enabled more responsive and effective curriculum development processes that center student needs and leverage teacher expertise (Timperley, 2011).

One school head shared a compelling example:

"When we noticed our students were struggling with reading comprehension, rather than mandating a curriculum from above, I formed a curriculum committee with our best reading teachers, invited parents who had experience in literacy, and even included some student representatives. Together, they analyzed the problem, researched evidence-based practices, and developed an intervention program [KII-R7]."

Another principal described how collaboration fosters curriculum innovation:

"Before we had collaborative structures, those innovations stayed isolated in individual classrooms. Now, we have systems for teachers to share what's working, to adapt successful practices for different contexts, to collectively refine curricula [FGD-R2]."

Staff Development: From Mandated Trainings to Professional Learning Communities

Participants described a fundamental shift in staff development from top-down professional development mandates to collaborative professional learning that emerges from teacher-identified needs (Stoll et al., 2006).

One school head reflected:

"We used to have required trainings that teachers attended with varying levels of enthusiasm. Now, Learning Action Cell sessions are designed collaboratively. Teachers identify their own learning needs, research best practices, and lead sessions for their colleagues. The engagement level is completely different [FGD-R6]."

Another principal emphasized how collaborative staff development builds capacity:

"When we develop teacher capacity collaboratively, we're not just improving individual teachers—we're building collective capacity across the school. Teachers learn from each other, support each other, hold each other accountable [KII-R1]."

Problem-Solving: From Crisis Management to Collective Resilience

School heads described how collaborative approaches have transformed problem-solving from reactive crisis management to proactive, collective resilience-building.

One principal shared a powerful story:

"We faced a serious discipline issue—repeated conflicts between two groups of students that were creating a toxic environment. My instinct was to impose strict punishments and separate the groups. But instead, I brought together teachers, counselors, the students involved, and their parents. We spent hours in dialogue, really trying to understand the root causes of the conflict. What emerged was a complex situation involving miscommunication, cultural misunderstandings, and unaddressed grievances on both sides [KII-R7]."

Another school head described how collaboration leads to more sustainable solutions:

"When problems are solved through collaborative processes, the solutions are more likely to stick because everyone involved is invested in making them work. There's greater follow-through from committee members, fewer complaints after implementation, and more willingness to adapt if the solution needs refinement [KII-R2]."

Organizational Culture: Building Trust, Ownership, and Collective Efficacy

Perhaps most significantly, participants described how sustained collaborative decision-making has transformed overall organizational culture in profound ways (Senge, 2006).

One principal eloquently stated:

"We've built a culture of trust where people feel safe taking risks, admitting mistakes, asking for help. There's a sense of collective ownership—this is our school, not my school or the principal's school [FGD-R1]."

Another school head described the ripple effects:

"When you build a collaborative culture, it influences everything. Teachers collaborate more with each other, not just with me. They involve students more in classroom decisions. Parents feel more connected to the school and are more willing to volunteer and support initiatives. Even our students have noticed—several have commented that our school feels different from their friends' schools, more like a community than an institution [KII-R5]."

Several participants noted that cultural transformation is gradual but profound. As one stated:

"New staff are socialized into the collaborative norms by existing staff. Collaborative practices become 'just how we do things here' rather than special initiatives that require my constant attention. That's when you know the transformation has really taken hold—when collaboration is embedded in the organizational DNA [KII-R3]."

Theme 4: Navigating Challenges in Collaborative Practice

While participants emphasized the benefits of collaborative decision-making, they also candidly shared the challenges they encounter and the strategies they've developed to address them.

Time Constraints and Efficiency Concerns

The most frequently cited challenge was the time-intensive nature of collaborative decision-making. School heads described the tension between thorough stakeholder engagement and the need for timely decisions.

One principal explained:

"There are days when I'm juggling three crises simultaneously, and I simply cannot stop to hold a committee meeting. I've had to learn to triage—to identify which decisions truly require collaborative processes and which ones I can make more quickly with limited consultation [KII-R2]."

Another school head described strategies for balancing thoroughness with efficiency:

"I've learned to use different collaborative approaches depending on the urgency and importance of the decision. For high-stakes, non-urgent decisions—like developing our multi-year strategic plan—we invest the time needed for deep stakeholder engagement. For urgent operational decisions—like responding to a facilities emergency—I make the call quickly but then circle back afterward to explain my reasoning and get feedback on whether a different approach should be used in the future [KII-R7]."

Resistance and Skepticism from Stakeholders

Several participants described encountering resistance from stakeholders unaccustomed to collaborative approaches or skeptical of their authenticity.

One school head shared:

"When I first started implementing collaborative decision-making, I faced significant pushback from some veteran teachers who had worked under previous principals with very hierarchical styles. They were suspicious—they thought I was either trying to avoid responsibility or setting them up to blame them if things went wrong [KII-R4]."

Another principal described resistance from a different source:

"Interestingly, I've also encountered resistance from some stakeholders who actually prefer not to be involved in decision-making. They say things like, 'That's what you're paid to do as principal' or 'I don't have time to serve on another committee.' I've learned that collaboration doesn't mean everyone must be involved in every decision [KII-R8]."

Managing Conflict and Divergent Perspectives

School heads acknowledged that collaborative processes can surface conflicts and disagreements that might remain hidden in more hierarchical systems.

One principal reflected:

"When you bring diverse perspectives together, people don't always agree, and sometimes disagreements can become heated. I've had meetings where stakeholders got emotional, where differing viewpoints seemed irreconcilable. Early in my principalship, I would get anxious when conflict emerged, seeing it as evidence that collaboration wasn't working. Now I understand that productive conflict is actually a sign of authentic engagement—people care enough to disagree [KII-R2]."

Another school head described developing conflict management skills:

"I've invested in learning facilitation and conflict resolution skills because they're absolutely essential for collaborative leadership. I've learned techniques for acknowledging emotions without letting them derail the process, for finding common ground when positions seem opposed, for reframing issues to reveal new possibilities [KII-R3]."

Ensuring Meaningful Participation Across Diverse Stakeholders

Participants described the challenge of ensuring that collaborative processes genuinely include diverse voices, particularly those that are traditionally marginalized.

One school head shared:

"I've noticed that in group settings, certain voices tend to dominate—usually more experienced teachers, more educated parents, more confident individuals—while others remain silent even when they have valuable perspectives. I've had to be intentional about creating space for quieter voices: asking directly for input from people who haven't spoken, using small group discussions before larger group sharing, offering alternative ways to provide feedback for those who aren't comfortable speaking in groups [KII-R8]."

Another principal described addressing power dynamics:

"I try to be explicit about this: naming the power dynamics, emphasizing that I genuinely want to hear dissenting views, modeling vulnerability by admitting when I don't know something or when I've made a mistake [KII-R1]."

Balancing Collaboration with Administrative Authority

School heads described the delicate balance between fostering collaborative culture and maintaining their responsibility as administrative decision-makers.

One principal explained:

"There are certain decisions that, at the end of the day, I'm accountable for as school head. If something goes wrong, the division office doesn't ask what the committee decided—they ask what I decided. So while I deeply believe in collaborative decision-making, I also recognize that I can't abdicate my responsibility as the accountable leader. I've learned to be transparent about this: explaining to stakeholders which decisions are genuinely open to collective determination and which are ones where I'm seeking input but retain final authority [KII-R8]."

Another school head reflected on the tension between democracy and efficiency:

"Sometimes, even after extensive collaboration, I've had to make decisions that differ from what emerged from the collaborative process because I have access to information or perspectives that the broader group doesn't have. When this happens, I try to explain my reasoning transparently and acknowledge the input I received. It's not perfect, but it's the reality of leading within organizational hierarchies while still honoring collaborative values [KII-R5]."

CONCLUSIONS

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, four interconnected themes emerged. First, these leaders employ flexible collaborative approaches—consultative, participative, and consensus-based—strategically adapting to each situation's context and urgency. Second, their effectiveness depends on organizational culture, leadership styles, communication infrastructure, and diverse perspectives, all dynamically interacting to either support or constrain collaboration. Third, this approach has transformed their schools across six key areas: strategic planning has shifted from top-down to inclusive; resource allocation has become transparent and needs-based; curriculum development now involves teacher-led innovation; professional development has evolved into authentic learning communities; problem-solving has moved from crisis management to collective resilience; and organizational culture has fundamentally changed toward trust and shared ownership. Fourth, while challenges exist—time constraints, resistance, conflict, and tensions between collaborative ideals and accountability demands—experienced leaders have developed sophisticated strategies to navigate these without abandoning their commitment. What stands out most is that these school heads, working within historically hierarchical systems, are pioneering a transformation driven not by management trends but by core values about human dignity and collective wisdom. Despite the difficulties, they've witnessed firsthand how collaborative leadership creates schools characterized by trust, innovation, and collective efficacy—a journey that's ongoing but deeply worthwhile.

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