

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-09

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SHAPING SCHOOL POLICIES: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN THE KAPALAWAN CLUSTER AND OLD KAABAKAN SGA BARMM MAGUINDANAO

*Sandra D. Abu

Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology, Doroluman, Arakan, Cotabato,
Philippines.

Article Received: 02 April 2026

*Corresponding Author: Sandra D. Abu

Article Revised: 22 April 2026

Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology, Doroluman, Arakan, Cotabato,
Philippines

Published on: 12 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.1470>

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the challenges teachers face in influencing school policies, the opportunities available to them in shaping those policies, and how they effectively advocate for policy changes in elementary schools within the Kapalawan Cluster and Old Kaabakan Special Geographic Area (SGA) of BARMM, Maguindanao, Philippines. Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 20 teacher-participants selected from the same SGA BARMM context. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Braun & Clarke). Three global themes emerged: (1) Challenges of Teachers in Influencing School Policies, organized around two themes—parents' support as a limiting factor (economic constraints, low educational attainment, time-work conflicts, communication barriers) and administrative overload over support (paperwork, non-teaching tasks, excessive meetings); (2) Opportunities of Teachers in Shaping School Policies, organized around career growth and voice in decision-making; and (3) Teachers Effectively Advocate Policies, through PTA meetings and relying on instructions from school heads. These findings reveal that while systemic barriers constrain teachers' policy influence, professional growth pathways and participatory governance structures provide meaningful channels for teacher leadership, with the most effective advocacy emerging at the intersection of community engagement and institutional collaboration.

KEYWORDS: *qualitative; phenomenological; teacher challenges; school policies; teacher leadership; BARMM; Maguindanao; thematic analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

In many educational systems, teachers are both the primary implementers and potential architects of school policies. Yet in geographically isolated and resource-constrained settings like the Special Geographic Areas (SGA) of BARMM, teachers often operate as 'street-level bureaucrats'—reinterpreting and adapting national policies to fit local realities without formal recognition of their policy-shaping contributions (Ingersoll, 2017; Fullan, 2007). The gap between policy design and classroom practice is particularly pronounced in the Kapalawan Cluster and Old Kaabakan SGA, where low parental education, agricultural livelihoods, and administrative overload constrain the collaborative governance mechanisms that effective school policy requires.

Quantitative Phase 1 findings from this mixed-methods study confirmed that teachers in this SGA context experience school policy challenges at an Agree level and perceive opportunities for professional growth and participation, with opportunities demonstrating significantly stronger associations with teaching effectiveness and student outcomes than challenges. However, the mechanisms through which these challenges manifest in teachers' daily professional lives—and the strategies teachers employ to shape and advocate for school policies—cannot be captured by survey data alone. This qualitative inquiry addresses that gap through phenomenological exploration of teachers' lived experiences.

The study is anchored in Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006), the Teacher Leadership Framework (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), Epstein's School-Family-Community Partnership Model (2011), and School-Based Management principles (Caldwell, 2005).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design. A phenomenological qualitative design was employed to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding their challenges in influencing and opportunities in shaping school policies (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants. Twenty teacher-participants were purposively selected from elementary schools in the Kapalawan Cluster and Old Kaabakan SGA BARMM based on the criteria of being full-time public elementary teachers with direct experience in school policy implementation and willingness to participate.

Data Collection. Individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted using a self-made, validated semi-structured interview guide covering three domains: (1) challenges in influencing school policies, (2) opportunities in shaping school policies, and (3) effective strategies for policy advocacy. Sessions lasted 45–90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and validated through member-checking.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was applied: data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and narrative report production. Trustworthiness was established through credibility (member-checking), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (expert validation).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Global Theme 1: Challenges of Teachers in Influencing School Policies

Organizing Theme 1.1: Parents' Support as a Limiting Factor

Teacher-participants consistently identified weak or inconsistent parental support as a significant barrier to meaningful school policy influence. Economic constraints, low parental educational attainment, work-schedule conflicts, limited awareness of school governance, and communication barriers collectively reduce the external pressure and community legitimacy needed for collaborative policy development.

"The major challenge we encountered was parents support. This is because some parents are saying 'I can't attend, that's one day of income lost.'" (T3)

"The parents didn't finish school, so they feel they can't help." (T6)

"The parents are busy when we call them for PTA meetings. That's the only chance for us to share the school policies with them, but some of them are not active." (T10)

"The major challenge we encountered was parent's communication barriers. This is because some parents are saying 'I can't communicate because I don't have a mobile phone.'" (T1)

These accounts align with Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement (2011), which emphasizes that effective school improvement requires strong home-school partnerships—partnerships that are systematically constrained when parents face economic disadvantages and logistical barriers. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) similarly documented that structural and practical barriers such as work schedules and communication gaps significantly hinder parental engagement in school decision-making, leaving teachers isolated in their policy advocacy efforts.

Organizing Theme 1.2: Administrative Overload over Support

Teacher-participants identified administrative overload as the second major systemic barrier to policy influence. Paperwork and documentation requirements, non-teaching ancillary tasks, and frequent meetings and seminars consume the cognitive and temporal resources that teachers require for reflective practice and institutional leadership.

"To tell you honestly, the school heads play a crucial role in advocating school policies; however, they are focused mainly on paper works and other school compliance." (T3)

"Compare to other regions, we don't have clerical or administrative positions and EO; by that, the school heads have lack of support from other stakeholders because of overload tasks." (T19)

These findings reflect OECD TALIS (2019) documentation that teachers across education systems experience excessive administrative workloads reducing time for instructional improvement and collaborative governance. From the perspective of Role Theory, role conflict occurs when teachers must fulfill multiple expectations beyond teaching, reducing their capacity for policy development and strategic leadership (Idris, 2011). Gudelos and Mabitad (2025) and Angtud et al. (2023) confirmed that administrative emphasis on procedural compliance depletes professional agency, relegating teachers to the role of policy implementers rather than contributors.

Table 1. Challenges of Teachers in Influencing School Policies

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Specific Themes
Challenges of Teachers in Influencing School Policies	Parents' Support as a Limiting Factor	Economic constraints; low educational attainment; time and work conflict; lack of awareness; communication barriers
	Administrative Overload over Support	Paperwork and documentation overload; non-teaching ancillary tasks; frequent meetings and seminars

Global Theme 2: Opportunities of Teachers in Shaping School Policies

Organizing Theme 2.1: Career Growth

Teacher-participants identified career growth as a primary opportunity for transitioning from classroom practitioners to policy advocates. Participation in seminars, training, and leadership development programs strengthened teachers' confidence, competence, and formal authority to contribute to school-wide policy discussions.

"We are given opportunities to attend seminars and trainings that benefit us for our career growth. By that, we are unable to share to the school and the community the strategies that can uplift school relationship to its stakeholders." (T16)

"Aside from being a teacher inside the classroom, I do not have any goal because this is part of our job but I am very thankful that I have an opportunity to enhance my career and ease relations to our heads to seek help on external activities related to school like benchmarking, and any outgoing activities." (T20)

These experiences align with the Teacher Leadership Development Theory (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), which emphasizes that leadership emerges through expanded professional roles rather than formal positional authority alone. Schott et al. (2020) documented that teacher leaders invest in continuous professional development, creating cycles of institutional improvement. Career growth provides what Cobb (2012) describes as 'expert power'—the legitimate authority needed to sit on school planning teams and influence resource allocation.

Organizing Theme 2.2: Voice in Decision-Making

Teacher-participants articulated that having a genuine voice in decision-making processes transformed their relationship with school policies from passive compliance to active co-construction of institutional environments.

"We are the first to involve in shaping or implementing policies of school especially those things that works and what doesn't. I interact with students and parents so we have a decision to make strategizing the implementation of policies." (T15)

"Talking to school stakeholders are common to us and policies is more practical and sustainable for students, parents and other stakeholders." (T9)

Spillane's (2006) Distributed Leadership Theory confirms that leadership is not confined to administrators but distributed across all school community members with instructional expertise. Ingersoll (2017) emphasized that when teachers possess genuine voice in managerial domains, they bridge the gap between policy design and classroom reality, creating higher ownership and sustainability of school-wide initiatives.

Table 2. Opportunities of Teachers in Shaping School Policies

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Specific Themes
Opportunities of Teachers in Shaping School Policies	Career Growth	Career growth transitions teachers from classroom practitioners to teacher-leaders and policy advocates through professional development and leadership opportunities
	Voice in Decision-Making	Having a voice in decision-making shifts teachers from policy 'objects' to 'architects' of the school environment through participatory governance structures

Global Theme 3: Teachers Effectively Advocate Policies

Organizing Theme 3.1: PTA Meetings as Collaborative Advocacy Platforms

Teacher-participants identified PTA meetings as the most accessible and effective mechanism for policy advocacy, transforming parents from passive recipients into active partners in educational governance.

"The general meetings and homeroom meetings are the easiest way to introduce policies disseminated easily from stakeholders." (T10)

"Parents can understand the policies and we have direct communication to them and policies was done for their child safety." (T18)

Epstein (2011, 2018) documents that effective PTA meetings move beyond information dissemination to institutionalize school-home partnerships that transform policy mandates into community commitments. This participatory advocacy aligns with Caldwell's (2005) SBM framework, which emphasizes decentralized, stakeholder-informed decision-making as a driver of policy relevance and sustainability.

Organizing Theme 3.2: Relying on Instructions from School Heads

Within hierarchical governance structures prevalent in SGA BARMM, teacher-participants also described a directive-based advocacy pathway where policy implementation follows structured guidance from school leaders.

"In implementing policies of the school particularly here in BARMM, school heads have the authority to approve and oversee policy implementation." (T20)

"The school heads can offer resources and support to help us implement policies effectively." (T19)

This reflects bureaucratic organizational theory (Weber, 1947) and Hallinger's instructional leadership model, wherein structured directives minimize implementation gaps by providing a standardized framework for staff behavior and performance. Spillane (2006) notes that even within hierarchical systems, leadership is distributed through feedback loops where teachers' implementation experiences indirectly contribute to policy refinement.

Table 3. Teachers Effectively Advocate School Policies

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Specific Theme
Teachers Effectively Advocate School Policies	PTA Meetings	PTA meetings transform parents from passive recipients to active partners in school governance, providing a forum for collaborative and context-responsive policy development
	Relying on Instructions from School Heads	Teachers implement and provide feedback on policies directed by school heads, contributing to policy refinement through bottom-up experiential input within hierarchical governance structures

CONCLUSION

This qualitative inquiry reveals that teachers in Kapalawan Cluster and Old Kaabakan SGA BARMM navigate a complex policy landscape shaped by significant systemic barriers—particularly parental non-participation and administrative overload—and meaningful opportunities through career growth and participatory decision-making. Policy advocacy is most effectively conducted through PTA meetings and within institutional structures guided by school leadership directives. These findings affirm that strengthening school-community partnerships, reducing administrative burdens on school heads, and creating structured channels for teacher voice in decision-making are essential conditions for transforming teachers from policy implementers into policy architects. In the unique socio-cultural context of SGA BARMM, culturally responsive and community-embedded advocacy strategies hold particular promise for bridging the gap between institutional policy and ground-level educational reality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher sincerely thanks all 20 teacher-participants of the Kapalawan Cluster and Old Kaabakan SGA BARMM for their generous participation in this study. Gratitude is extended to school administrators and district supervisors for facilitating access to research sites.

REFERENCES

1. Angtud, M. A., Ligaray, M. L., & Tan, G. S. (2023). School work environment in relation to teacher motivation and teaching competencies. *Ascendens Asia Singapore Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(1).
2. Caldwell, B. J. (2005). *School-based management*. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning.
3. Cobb, C. D. (2012). School resource allocation. In C. L. Glenn & J. De Groof (Eds.), *Balancing school choice and equity*. Wolf Legal Publishers.
4. Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Westview Press.
5. Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (3rd ed.). Westview Press.
6. Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
7. Gudelos, J. B., & Mabitad, M. L. (2025). Instructional supervision and teacher professional agency. *Philippine Journal of Educational Leadership*, 7(1), 23–41.
8. Harris, A. (2008). *Distributed school leadership: Developing tomorrow's leaders*. Routledge.
9. Hornby, G., & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model. *Educational Review*, 63(1), 37–52.
10. Idris, A. (2011). Role conflict and teacher professional identity. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(4), 389–405.
11. Ingersoll, R. M. (2017). *A comparative study of teacher preparation and qualifications in six nations*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
12. Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders* (3rd ed.). Corwin Press.
13. Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
14. OECD. (2019). *TALIS 2018 results (Volume I): Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners*. OECD Publishing.
15. Schott, C., van Roekel, H., & Tummers, L. L. G. (2020). Teacher leadership: A systematic literature review and future research agenda. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 100347.
16. Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
17. Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organization*. Free Press.

18. York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255–316.
19. Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. L. (2011). Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement. SEDL.