

Instructional Leadership Challenges and Adaptive Strategies of 21st Century Master Teachers

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Abstract: Master teachers play a pivotal role in the 21st century education. Understanding their experiences is helpful in enhancing instructional leadership practices and improving school effectiveness. In this context, this study examined the challenges encountered by master teachers as they navigate their roles and the strategies they employ. This study utilized a qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach to explore and describe the experiences of master teachers. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, while the focus group discussion was done online. Ten master teachers participated in this study. They are assigned in different districts of Malaybalay City Division, Malaybalay City Bukidnon, during the School Year 2025–2026. Thematic data analysis revealed two major themes: initial instructional leadership challenges and adaptive strategies employed. The first theme include three categories: balancing expanded roles, work pressure, and role uncertainty. The second theme consisted of three categories: strategic role and time management, collaboration, and continuous professional development. The findings revealed that master teachers encountered several challenges related to increased responsibilities, performance pressure, and uncertainties. Despite these challenges, master teachers persevered by employing strategies such as effective role and time management, collaborative leadership approach, and continuous professional development. The study highlights the importance of role preparedness, building competence, and enhancing support. These enable master teachers to effectively perform instructional leadership functions in response to the demands of 21st century quality education.

Keywords: *Instructional Leadership, Challenges, Strategies, Master Teachers.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Master teachers are considered as frontliners in addressing the learning demands of today's generation. Instructional leaders' direct influence on the teaching and learning instruction is up to 77.2% (Ngatini, et al. 2025). As mentors to colleagues, master teachers have the opportunity to address instructional concerns. However, master teachers are not solely instructional leaders, they also have teaching responsibilities classes while doing leadership roles.

DepEd Order No. 5, s. 2024 highlights the key functions of master teachers as instructional leaders which include mentoring, coaching, and extending technical assistance. Instructional leaders are expected to perform these ancillary tasks without compromising their teaching duties.

As master teachers navigate these roles, challenges are inevitable due to increased responsibilities (Barclay, 2015; Lucero & Ocampo, 2019), elevated expectations (Moore, 2015), and lack of authority (Alegado, 2018).

Thus, it is essential that they employ strategies to cope with challenges. This research highlights the adaptive strategies to effectively function the responsibilities regardless of the situation.

This study explored the experiences of master teachers that covered the challenges they encountered and how they managed them. As a qualitative research, it utilized phenomenological approach. This research sought to bridge the gap between real situations in the educational field and the ideal standards as found in the literature.

It is anchored on Instructional Leadership Theory of Philip Hallinger (2003) which maintains that instructional leaders follow structured functions. This theory stands that managing instructional programs and promoting a positive learning outcome are springboards for effectiveness. This includes mentoring, collaboration, and professional development.

This study explored the experiences of master teachers. It was conducted in Malaybalay City Division during the

school year 2025-2026. This research sought to answer this question:

- What are the experiences of master teachers as they navigate their instructional leadership roles?

The findings of this study offer significant information to school heads for valuable insights of master teachers' experiences that could serve as basis for planning of activities and providing support to instructional leaders.

The study was delimited to exploring the experiences of ten master teachers of Malaybalay City Division during the school year 2025-2026.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The position of master teachers was established through Executive Order No. 500 s. 1978. This order was made to ensure that teachers have the opportunity to advance their career while keeping their teaching position instead of pursuing an administrative path. To highlight the duties and responsibilities of master teachers, Result-Based Performance Management System (RPMS) manual was released through DO No.42, s. 2017 which states that they should: (1) have an in-depth and wide understanding of the teaching and learning process; (2) manifest high education-based contextual cognition; (3) conduct peer mentoring; and (4) continually seek development of competence. Further, DepEd Order No. 5, s. 2024 clarified these key functions. It emphasized that master teachers are expected to mentor, coach, and extend technical assistance.

Researches on instructional leadership provide information on challenges associated with instructional leadership covering heavy workloads (Cansoy et al. 2025) and gaps between theories and practice (Prestoza et a; 2025). They also inform how master teachers manage instructional programs. Studies reveal that they are actively engaged in instruction, research, mentoring and coaching, observation, and supervision functions (Cardno et al., 2019). Although instructional leadership is associated with school principals (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), several studies found master teachers perform this role through planned programs and designs (Brown et al. (2020). To promote positive learning outcome, they conduct classroom observations (Caratiquit & Pablo, 2021) and share best practices (Cosenza, 2015). Instructional leadership initiatives made significant impact towards effective instruction Kraft et al. (2018).

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative research design, specifically transcendental phenomenology. Developed by Edmund Husserl, this method aids in describing the participants' experiences that are free from personal biases. This approach enables the researcher to present the challenges they encountered and how they managed them as purely as experienced by the participants.

The study was conducted in Malaybalay City Division to ten elementary master teachers assigned in separate districts during the school year 2025-2026. The division is composed of ten districts and 69 elementary schools.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on the length of service, position, and school location. This sampling suits the purpose of the study which is to explore the experiences of master teachers in the 21st century.

The participants are composed of female master teachers who have been in the position for not more than five years. They were promoted on 2020 and thereafter. Most of their school assignments have low internet connection and inconvenient transportation mode.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussion were conducted to gather information. Questions were prepared beforehand to serve as guide in uncovering the experiences of master teachers. These were validated by three experts to ensure correctness in grammar, content, and ethics. Data gathering was done after the approval by the Schools Division Superintendent and permission by the participants through their signed consent. Then, these were transcribed and coded. For credibility of the paper, member checking was done to give the participants opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of their intended meanings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis of data, initial instructional leadership challenges and adaptive strategies employed. The first theme include three categories: balancing expanded roles, work pressure, and role uncertainty. The second theme consisted of three categories: strategic role and time management, collaboration, and continuous professional development.

➤ *Initial Instructional Leadership Challenges*

Initial challenges refer to the participants' experiences during the first few months of promotion. Matrix 1 shows the categories that emerged from the first theme as shown in the table.

Table 1 Challenges Encountered

Emerging Theme	Categories
Initial Instructional Leadership Challenges	* Balancing expanded roles
	* work pressure
	* Role uncertainty

Interviews revealed that master teachers encountered several challenges in the initial phase of leadership. These are related to increased responsibilities, performance pressure, and uncertainties. Participants described this stage as the most challenging phase in their career due to increased responsibilities, which require more time. Six participants mentioned they needed to make adjustments because aside from hectic schedule, they also encountered pressure from colleagues and school head expected too much. Specifically, one participant narrated she was reprimanded for failing to join a contest though she had a valid reason. She recalled there was one line she was told that marked significantly in her mind and it says, “You are a master teacher!”. That remark taught her that margin for error is very small for those holding higher position like hers. Participants share the same sentiments with regards to high expectations. For example, two of them experienced being asked by their colleagues not to inquire but to test their credibility. In addition, participants experienced uncertainties on how to start their roles. Most of them had to wait for instruction from the school head about what to do. Although most participants attended an orientation before being deployed, they revealed being in the field as instructional leaders is different. One participant said, “I was unsure, I felt overwhelmed and doubtful if I was ever ready”.

The statements of participants indicate initial instructional leadership brings challenges involving to extended responsibilities and teaching duties, pressure from work and colleagues, and doubts about self-capabilities and role coverage. This further suggests that while master teachers are well-oriented on their duties and responsibilities, certain aspects are fully understood once they are already in the position. In addition, initial instructional leadership is crucial because the challenges can be overwhelming.

Hallinger’s theory on instructional leadership supports that instructional leadership is challenging in its initial period due to expanded responsibilities and contextual constraints. Recent studies also reveal that heavy workload (Cansoy et al. 2025) and gaps between theoretical concepts and real-world constraints (Prestoza et a., 2025) make it difficult.

➤ *Adaptive Strategies Employed*

Challenges encountered provide master teachers an opportunity to apply their leadership skills. To manage the challenges, participants revealed they employed adaptive strategies such as effective role and time management, collaborative leadership approach, and continuous professional development. These are shown in table 2.

Table 2 Adaptive Strategies

Emerging Theme	Categories
Adaptive Strategies	* role and time management
Employed	* collaboration
	* professional development

The data collected revealed that participants employed various strategies in mentoring, coaching, and extending technical assistance. Master teachers said they applied informal and formal ways in performing these roles. 90% of the participants mentioned quick and short mentoring worked well with their schedule. Further, coaching was conducted as soon as the need arose, but made it brief so classes would not be disrupted. Technical assistance were usually scheduled ahead of time and were done during vacant period.

strategies are helpful in attaining quality education of the 21st century.

Instructional leaders also utilized collaboration as one of their adaptive leadership strategies. As revealed in the interviews, all participants involved colleagues in decision making. They listened to colleagues’ ideas and practiced exchanging of insights. One participant shared that her fellow teachers showed active participation in LAC sessions and other school activities because they were engaged in planning them.

Research supports the idea that role and time management is essential in improving performance. Ranjan et al. (2025) states that managing both role and time enhances productivity allowing leaders to achieve the goal more efficiently. In addition, collaboration is also essential in the workplace. Andaya et al. (2025) found that collaboration contributes to improved educational outcomes. Furthermore, continuous professional growth contribute much to better performance of instructional leadership. Professional development enables instructional leaders be updated on how to support teaching and learning and achieve school improvement (Kilag et al., 2023).

V. CONCLUSION

Participants also indulged themselves in continuous professional development that include trainings, seminars, and self-study activities in both face-to-face and online platforms. They revealed being involved in learning activities enable them to be updated on the latest trends in education.

Master teachers are exposed to various challenges as they perform their dual roles of teaching and instructional leadership functions. They encounter uncertainties as they step up the leadership role, conflict of schedule that come with expanded responsibilities. They also experienced pressure from people’s high expectations that come with the position. Nevertheless, master teachers were able to manage these challenges through effective role and time management, promoting collaboration, and maintaining professional growth. These equipped them to respond to the challenges of providing quality education through effective instruction and responsible leadership.

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