
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Screening of Teacher Applicants: Voices of Public Elementary School Principals

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of twelve public elementary school principals in the City of Naga, Cebu, Philippines, regarding their participation in the Department of Education (DepEd) teacher screening system. Using individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this qualitative study examined the experiences, challenges, and aspirations for system improvement. Grounded in Sensemaking Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Organizational Justice Theory, the study employed thematic content analysis, revealing twenty-four emergent themes across three overarching categories. Findings indicate that while principals appreciate the systematic, transparent, merit-based screening process—particularly valuing demonstration teaching as the most revealing assessment component—they encounter significant challenges including severe time constraints compounded by heavy workloads, insufficient human resources at division and school levels, the emotionally demanding task of balancing objectivity with compassion, documentation issues with unprepared applicants, and tensions between standardized criteria and school-specific contextual needs. Principals navigate these challenges through strategic time prioritization and delegation, strict rubric adherence, collaborative consensus-building, constructive feedback delivery, and proactive communication. Their aspirations for improvement encompass nine comprehensive categories: sustainability and consistency in system implementation, enhanced digitization and technological solutions, improved processing efficiency and speed, strengthened human resource capacity, establishment of substitute teacher pools, refined evaluation rubrics and tools, comprehensive applicant orientation programs, sustained commitment to transparency and quality standards, and professional development support for principals as evaluators. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for policy refinement to balance standardization with responsiveness to local school needs, contributing to the understanding of educational leadership practices in developing country contexts.

KEYWORDS

Teacher screening, school principals, teacher selection, educational leadership, Philippine education, teacher quality.

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Introduction

Educational leadership stands at the forefront of shaping effective learning environments, with school principals serving as primary architects of academic excellence. Among their critical duties, selecting and hiring qualified teachers emerges as particularly consequential, as teacher quality directly influences student achievement and overall educational experience. Research consistently demonstrates that teaching quality is the most influential school-based factor affecting student achievement, with students who have access to highly qualified teachers achieving at higher rates regardless of other factors (Engida et al., 2024). Recent empirical studies across diverse educational contexts confirm this relationship, showing that differences in teaching quality account for substantial variation in student learning outcomes (Mejia-Rodriguez & Kyriakides, 2024; Teig & Luoto, 2024). Therefore, the mechanisms through which school leaders identify, evaluate, and select teaching candidates warrant careful examination given their extensive implications for educational outcomes.

Recent global trends in teacher selection reflect shifts toward more comprehensive and professionalized approaches. Analysis of international educational systems reveals growing emphasis on merit-based, transparent recruitment processes that balance standardization with contextual responsiveness (UNESCO, 2025). The 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report on leadership in education found that less than two-thirds of countries run competitive selection processes for principals, highlighting the widespread need for professionalizing educational recruitment (UNESCO, 2025). The growing trend of incorporating performance tasks and demonstration lessons allows school leaders to observe candidates' instructional abilities and classroom management skills in authentic contexts (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Technological advancements have transformed recruitment practices through digital platforms and online tools (UNESCO, 2022), while evidence suggests that early hiring processes create larger applicant pools and enable more successful teacher-school matching (EdResearch for Action, 2024).

In the Philippines, DepEd implements an entry-level teaching ranking system designed to ensure the selection of qualified educators through standardized approaches promoting fairness while efficiently recruiting high-quality teachers. Recent policy updates through DepEd Order No. 7, s.2023 reinforces the Department's commitment to merit, competence, fitness, accountability, transparency, and equal opportunity in recruitment, selection, and appointment processes. According to these guidelines and earlier DepEd Orders (No. 7, s.2015; No. 66, s.2007), principals whose schools have teacher vacancies participate directly in ranking processes, contributing to evaluating applicants. Research suggests that empowering principals as decision-makers is advantageous, as they possess the most detailed information regarding their schools' specific needs (Engel et al., 2018). However, principals' lived experiences within this system, particularly at the elementary level in specific local contexts, remain insufficiently explored.

While studies have examined teacher recruitment and selection in various contexts (Khanal & Regmi, 2024; Tejano, 2022; Hongo et al., 2023; Enad & Pabalan, 2023), a notable gap exists in research specifically addressing elementary school principals' experiences in City of Naga, Cebu, as they navigate complexities and potential limitations of the current system. International research on principal selection highlights persistent challenges, including overpoliticization, lack of transparency, and workload pressures affecting implementation (Khanal & Regmi, 2024). This study addresses these gaps through in-depth phenomenological exploration of how Filipino elementary principals experience, navigate, and envision improvements to teacher screening processes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Sensemaking Theory developed by Karl E. Weick (1995), which provides a lens for understanding how individuals contend with ambiguous, complex situations to construct meaning. Sensemaking is an ongoing process of retrospective interpretation and narrative creation through social interactions. Shaped meanings directly influence how people perceive themselves and what they consider possible or appropriate actions (Weick et al., 2005). Supporting this framework, Social Cognitive Theory by Albert Bandura (1986) explains how individuals learn and develop efficacy within social environments through reciprocal determinism—the ongoing interaction among personal factors, environmental forces, and behavioral patterns. Self-efficacy beliefs fundamentally shape an approach to challenges, persistence through difficulties, and ultimate success (Bandura, 1997). These efficacy perceptions develop through direct experience, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and interpretation of physiological states.

Organizational Justice Theory by Jerald Greenberg (1987) provides a third theoretical lens, exploring employees' perceptions of fairness within workplace settings. The theory posits that employees evaluate fairness across three dimensions: distributive justice (fairness of outcomes), procedural justice (fairness of processes and procedures), and interactional justice (quality of interpersonal treatment). These perceptions influence trust, commitment, and satisfaction with organizational processes (Colquitt et al., 2001). The theory is particularly relevant to employee selection processes, influencing applicant reactions to outcomes, methods, and interpersonal treatment (Gilliland, 1993). Together, these three frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for exploring principals' experiences with teacher screening.

This study addressed three interconnected research questions: (1) What are the experiences of informants in screening teacher applicants? (2) How do informants navigate challenges encountered in screening?, and (3) What are the informants' aspirations for improving the screening system?

Literature Review

Global Perspectives on Teacher Selection

Teacher selection practices worldwide have evolved significantly, reflecting growing recognition of teacher quality's critical importance for student outcomes. International research demonstrates that teaching quality is the most influential school-based factor affecting student achievement, with students who access highly qualified teachers tending to achieve higher rates (Engida

et al., 2024). Recent multi-country studies using nationally representative data confirm that teaching quality—encompassing classroom management, cognitive support, and instructional clarity—shows significant associations with mathematics achievement across diverse educational contexts (Mejia-Rodriguez & Kyriakides, 2024; Teig & Luto, 2024).

However, research on teaching quality and student achievement in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) remains limited despite education systems in these contexts often lacking consistent monitoring of teaching practices (Mejia-Rodriguez & Kyriakides, 2024). Studies examining seven LMICs through PISA for Development data found that classroom management showed positive associations with mathematics achievement in Cambodia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Zambia, though relationships varied substantially across countries. This variation underscores both the importance of teacher quality and the complexity of measuring and ensuring it across diverse educational settings.

Comprehensive selection processes typically incorporate multiple components evaluating different teaching capability dimensions. Recent surveys of school leaders reveal that principals prioritize alignment between teacher mindset and school vision, appropriate professional certification, experience managing student behavior, skill working with students, and overall job experience when making hiring decisions (Superville, 2023). Beyond traditional criteria, growing emphasis exists on cultural competence, adaptability, growth mindset, and technological proficiency as essential competencies for contemporary teaching contexts.

Principals' Role in Teacher Selection

Principals' role in teacher selection represents one of their most significant leadership functions, yet this responsibility exists within complex organizational and policy contexts that shape their autonomy and effectiveness. Recent analysis of international educational systems found that 42% of countries select principals at the central level, 23% at the local government level, 13% at the school level, and 22% at mixed levels, revealing substantial variation in how educational systems distribute selection authority (UNESCO, 2025). This variation in governance structures directly affects principals' autonomy in teacher hiring decisions.

Effective principals recognize that hiring decisions substantially impact instructional quality, school culture, and student outcomes, making teacher selection a strategic priority rather than merely an administrative task (Liu et al., 2019). Research on principal selection criteria and responsibilities reveals that implementation of educational policies regarding recruitment often faces challenges including overpoliticization in school management, top-down policymaking approaches, lack of transparency and awareness about policy provisions, and workload pressures (Khanal & Regmi, 2024). These systemic challenges affect principals' capacity to exercise professional judgment in teacher selection.

Despite the critical importance of this responsibility, many principals receive limited preparation for hiring, with professional development focused on teacher selection remaining relatively rare (Mason & Schroeder, 2010). Research suggests that while principals value alignment between teacher candidates and school needs, they do not always consistently prioritize applicants with higher scores on academic background and screening assessments, even when these factors predict teacher performance (EdResearch for Action, 2024). This highlights the complexity of principal decision-making in teacher selection and the need for ongoing support and development.

Teacher Selection Systems and Challenges

Teacher selection approaches range from decentralized school-based hiring to centralized standardized systems, each with distinct advantages and challenges (Liu & Johnson, 2006). Recent research emphasizes that early and open hiring processes create larger applicant pools and enable successful matching between teachers and schools. Teachers hired from positions posted between March and June are more effective and more likely to stay at their schools than those hired in late summer for fall (EdResearch for Action, 2024). Mutual consent hiring reforms that include early and open processes have increased teacher diversity by 27%, decreased first-year turnover by 9.8%, and improved student achievement by 0.09 standard deviations in mathematics (EdResearch for Action, 2024).

However, persistent challenges complicate effective teacher selection. Recent surveys reveal that 86% of public schools struggle to hire educators, with 53% reporting feeling understaffed entering recent school years (Superville, 2023; NCES, 2023). Time constraints compromise decision quality as rushed timelines limit thorough evaluation, with up to 20% of teachers in urban districts hired after school years start (EdResearch for Action, 2024). Bureaucratic constraints create tensions between standardization and professional judgment (DeArmond et al., 2010). The two most commonly reported challenges in filling teaching vacancies are too few candidates applying (70%) and lack of qualified candidates applying (64%) (NCES, 2023). Resource constraints particularly affect disadvantaged schools (Engel & Finch, 2015), while political pressures and stakeholder interests may influence decisions inappropriately (Grissom et al., 2015).

The Philippine Context

The Philippine DepEd operates one of Southeast Asia's largest educational systems, serving over 27 million students through approximately 47,000 schools (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). The teacher screening system represents a hybrid approach combining centralized standards with division-level discretion. Recent policy developments through DepEd Order No. 019, s.2023 reinforced the Merit Selection Plan, aligning the Department's internal recruitment, selection, and placement systems with Civil Service Commission regulations and the Program to Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM). This policy explicitly grounds selection in principles of merit, competence, fitness, accountability, transparency, and equal opportunity, providing systematic guidelines for recruitment of Teacher I positions across all levels including Senior High School.

Filipino principals report heavy workloads, limited administrative support, and resource constraints affecting screening capacity (Agarao, 2016). Recent research documents principals struggling to balance teaching duties, administrative requirements, behavioral management, and technology integration amid expanding responsibilities (Hungo et al., 2023). Philippine-specific research on teacher recruitment has identified challenges including nepotism, over-reliance on document-based evaluations, and political interference (Tejano, 2022). Enad and Pabalan (2023) found 81% of participants recognized significant problems in recruitment, selection, and placement systems, highlighting urgent need for reform. Despite these documented challenges and recent policy updates, limited research explores principals' lived experiences with screening in specific local contexts, particularly at elementary level where foundational learning occurs.

Methodology

This study employed transcendental phenomenology as founded by Edmund Husserl and conceptualized by Moustakas (1994) to explore principals' lived experiences with teacher screening. Phenomenology focuses on exploring principals' lived experiences with teacher screening. Phenomenology focuses on understanding shared experience essence from participants' perspectives, seeking to uncover how individuals experience phenomena without imposing external frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stolz, 2023). The phenomenological approach has seen a notable revival in educational research over the past two decades, offering valuable methodological tools for understanding complex human social experiences in educational contexts (Stolz, 2022; Gaus et al., 2022).

The transcendental phenomenological approach emphasizes epoché—the practice of setting aside preconceptions to perceive phenomena freshly—which was essential given the researcher's previous involvement in teacher screening processes. Recent phenomenological research in educational leadership contexts demonstrates the value of this approach for uncovering the nature and practice of leadership from participants' first-person perspectives (Gaus et al., 2022; Golis & Jones, 2024). Qualitative research is well-suited for this investigation because it allows in-depth exploration of complex, context-dependent experiences that quantitative measures cannot adequately capture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Marshall et al., 2022). The research process followed systematic phenomenological procedures: epoché or bracketing, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis integrating textural and structural descriptions.

The study was conducted in City of Naga, Cebu, focusing on 29 public elementary schools within DepEd Division of Naga. The city lies approximately 23 kilometers south of Cebu City, with schools distributed across urban and rural areas serving diverse student populations. Schools vary in size, resources, and specific educational challenges, providing a rich context for exploring principals' experiences.

Twelve elementary school principals served as informants: eight through individual in-depth interviews and four through focus group discussions. Purposive sampling ensured participants met specific inclusion criteria: currently serving as principal for at least five years and having participated in teacher ranking at least twice within the past five years. These criteria ensured informants possessed substantial leadership experience and specific, direct, repeated screening experience. Following phenomenological research principles, the most prominent criterion was participants' direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Gaus et al., 2022). To ensure diversity, selection considered varied characteristics: school location (urban versus rural), school size (small, medium, large), principal's years of experience (7 to over 20 years), gender, and frequency of screening participation (3 to 15 instances). Schools ranged from fewer than 200 to over 1,200 students.

Semi-structured, open-ended interview guides elicited rich, detailed experience descriptions. Interviews lasting 60-95 minutes balanced detailed exploration with respect for participants' time constraints. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, ensuring accurate narrative capture. Field notes documented non-verbal cues, environmental factors, and initial analytical insights. The interview approach aligned with phenomenological research principles emphasizing flexible, responsive activities oriented toward participants' lived experiences (Stolz, 2022; Golis & Jones, 2024).

The interview guide contained demographic questions, collecting contextual information and three main research questions exploring overall screening experiences, challenge navigation strategies, and improvement aspirations. The semi-structured format allowed adaptation based on each informant's unique experiences while ensuring all research questions were addressed. Follow-up interviews clarified points and explored emerging themes in greater depth, continuing until data saturation—the point where no new information emerged from further collection (Gaus et al., 2022).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) systematic approach. The process involved: data familiarization through repeated readings, initial coding using descriptive, interpretive, and in vivo codes, categorization grouping similar codes into broader classifications, sub-theme identification representing specific groupings, and emergent theme development capturing overarching central concepts. Analysis generated twenty-four emergent themes, ultimately classified under three overarching themes addressing research questions. Throughout analysis, the researcher attended to both convergent themes common across informants and divergent experiences representing unique aspects.

Trustworthiness was established through four criteria aligned with qualitative research standards (Marshall et al., 2022). Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with data, member checking, allowing principals to review transcripts and provide feedback, peer debriefing with experienced qualitative researchers, and thick description presenting findings with rich detail. Transferability was enhanced through detailed context description enabling readers to assess applicability and maximum variation sampling ensuring diverse perspectives. Dependability was ensured through maintaining detailed audit trails documenting all research decisions and employing systematic analysis procedures. Confirmability was addressed through reflexivity practices wherein the researcher critically examined her influence on the research process.

Ethical considerations adhered to four principles: beneficence (maximizing benefits), non-maleficence (avoiding harm through privacy protection, respectful conduct, and transparency), autonomy (obtaining informed consent and respecting voluntary participation), and justice (ensuring fair selection and equitable dissemination of findings) (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). The researcher practiced epoché by bracketing personal preconceptions and maintained reflexivity regarding her position as a private school administrator with previous screening experience. The study received approval from DepEd City of Naga Division. These ethical practices align with contemporary standards for phenomenological research ensuring trustworthiness and protection of participants (Golis & Jones, 2024).

Results/Findings

Data analysis revealed three overarching themes with twenty-four emergent sub-themes comprehensively addressing research questions. These findings illuminate the complex reality of implementing rigorous teacher selection within Philippine educational constraints, revealing both system strengths that principals value and areas requiring attention for improvement.

Theme 1: Experiences in Screening Teacher Applicants

Principals' experiences revealed a complex landscape characterized by both professional fulfillment and significant challenges. The majority described participation as "rewarding," emphasizing the critical importance of selecting competent educators directly impacting student learning. However, this positive sentiment coexisted with substantial frustrations related to systemic constraints.

Positive Experiences

Systematic Screening Process. Informants described structured multi-staged approaches: document verification by Administrative Officers, teaching demonstration observation, and evaluation through reflection forms and interviews. Teaching demonstrations emerged as the most significant and revealing component. Principals overwhelmingly preferred this assessment method because it provided direct observation of applicants' teaching competence, classroom management skills, and ability to connect with students. As one informant explained: "The most important thing is to be able to connect with students. Applicants received minimal preparation time—typically one hour—before conducting demonstrations in actual classrooms with real students. This approach intentionally assessed the ability to think on their feet, adapt to authentic teaching environments, and demonstrate genuine pedagogical skills rather than rehearsed performances."

Passion and Dedication. Despite technical and administrative demands, principals consistently identified witnessing applicants' passion and dedication as the most rewarding aspect. "When you see their love for teaching, it reminds you why this work is so important." These observations reflected principals' belief in identifying teachers who are both competent and deeply committed. However, this dimension also presented emotional challenges. One principal recounted: "There was this applicant who scored 70 out of 100 and cried after the demonstration because she desperately wanted to be included...I had mentored her before...It was

so hard to see her disappointment." Another described applicants who "freeze up completely from nervousness," highlighting tensions between maintaining objective standards and showing empathy.

Transparency and Fairness. Principals valued progressive improvements, particularly self-rating mechanisms allowing applicants to verify their scores. During open ranking, "applicants rate their own folders, check their training and experience, and see their scores." This transparency holds evaluators accountable and reduces suspicions of favoritism. Principals contrasted current merit-based systems favorably with previous practices: "In 2014, there was mass hiring and even without experience, teachers were hired." This shift toward transparency aligns with contemporary understanding of fairness in educational assessment and reflects a broader movement toward merit-based hiring systems minimizing bias (Klassen & Kim, 2019).

Professional Growth. Repeated participation sharpened principals' ability to assess teacher quality, strengthened leadership capabilities, and deepened understanding of effective teaching. "It sharpens my decision-making, strengthens my leadership, and deepens my understanding of teacher quality." Through repeated participation, principals reported becoming more efficient and objective in evaluating applicants' strengths and teaching potential. They developed a refined understanding of what constitutes effective teaching in 21st century context, including the critical importance of technological competence and interactive methods. Several principals noted that participation helped them understand what instructional materials and support systems their schools must provide, transforming screening from a burden into an opportunity for leadership development.

Quality Education. Principals expressed a strong conviction that rigorous screening contributes directly to better student learning outcomes. The phrase "cream of the crop" recurred throughout responses, reflecting high standards and belief in the system's impact. "We need to get the cream of the crop. The standards are strict, yes, but that's good because our students deserve the best teachers." Principals viewed the current system as "very strict" in its standards, which they regarded positively despite additional workload it creates. They believed stringent requirements ensure only highly qualified candidates enter the profession: "If you don't have competent teachers, how can we achieve that quality education?"

Negative Experiences

Despite appreciation for system strengths, principals identified five categories of significant challenges:

Time Constraints and Workload Management. The most pervasive challenge was severe time constraints created by screening responsibilities in relation to the existing workload. Principals described overwhelming volumes: "Imagine, there are almost 200 applicants...we were given 12 of them in a day. But then it really needs a lot of manpower." This resulted in delayed reports, postponed classroom observations, and accumulated leadership responsibilities. "I have to postpone the schedule of the observation classes." The addition of intensive screening to already substantial workload created work intensification where heavy workload translates into multiple competing priorities principals must navigate simultaneously (Cranston & Ehrich, 2002). This tension between screening duties and regular leadership functions emerged as a critical concern affecting both effectiveness and sustainability.

Balancing Objectivity with Compassion. Principals struggled to maintain objectivity while showing compassion for applicants. This tension manifested in several ways, representing one of the most emotionally demanding aspects. "The hardest part is giving the score after the demonstration... We must not help the applicants, but we need to assess. We have to be polite also in saying those things to her." The dilemma intensified when evaluating applicants with prior relationships: "There are times the applicant is related to the supervisor, or sometimes to my co-principal...my friend will text me, she is my niece. Please give her high marks. This really upsets me." Principals must navigate these situations while maintaining evaluation integrity and adhering strictly to rubrics.

Insufficient Manpower and Resources. Limited human resources at both school and division levels emerged as a critical constraint aggravating time pressures. "I hope they will also add manpower for the HR part. They're handling so many applications from all the schools in the division." Bottlenecks at the division level created delays affecting schools' ability to fill vacancies timely. At school level, principals relied heavily on Administrative Officers managing multiple responsibilities. The number of evaluators for demonstrations often proved insufficient given high applicant volumes, contributing to time pressure and workload challenges.

Unprepared Applicants and Documentation Issues. Principals dealt with applicants submitting incomplete documentation requiring follow-up, adding to the workload. Some applicants were inadequately prepared for demonstrations, lacking music teaching materials or demonstrating poor lesson planning. Applicants experiencing extreme anxiety or mental blocks presented particular challenges: "We've had applicants who freeze up completely from nervousness. We try to help them through it, but at some point, you have to evaluate what you're actually seeing." These preparedness issues suggest the need for better applicant orientation and support prior to screening.

Standardization versus Contextualization. Principals experienced tension between applying standardized evaluation criteria and considering each school's unique needs. "I followed DepEd guidelines but also considered the school's priority areas when evaluating applicants. For example, if my school really needs someone strong in mathematics, that is a factor for me. "Some informants expressed that while rubrics provide necessary structure and objectivity, they may not fully capture all teaching quality dimensions or school-specific needs. "The rubric is good for ensuring consistency, but teaching quality is complicated. Some things that matter for my school's situation aren't explicitly in the rubric." This tension represents a fundamental challenge in any large-scale selection system requiring ongoing dialogue and refinement.

Theme 2: Navigating Implementation Challenges

Despite facing significant challenges documented in Theme 1, principals demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness, developing sophisticated coping strategies that enabled them to fulfill screening responsibilities while maintaining other essential leadership functions. Their approaches reveal not merely reactive problem-solving but proactive, strategic adaptations reflecting deep professional commitment and pedagogical wisdom. These strategies emerged organically from lived experience rather than formal training, representing practical knowledge developed through repeated engagement with screening demands. Analysis revealed five distinct but interrelated strategic approaches principals employed to navigate the complex terrain between policy requirements and practical realities:

Strategic Time Management and Prioritization

Principals confronted severe time constraints through deliberate reorganization of their professional schedules and strategic prioritization of competing demands. Rather than allowing screening to overwhelm all other responsibilities, they developed systematic approaches to time allocation during intensive screening periods.

Calendar restructuring involved blocking dedicated time segments specifically for screening activities, protecting these blocks from routine interruptions. Principals rescheduled regular meetings, postponed non-urgent initiatives, and communicated clearly with staff about temporary shifts in availability. "I will tell my teachers upfront: for these two weeks, I'm primarily focused on screening. Unless it's urgent, we'll address other matters forward." This transparent communication helped manage expectations and secured staff cooperation.

Extended work hours represented a common but demanding strategy. Multiple principals described working evenings and weekends to prevent critical leadership responsibilities from accumulating dangerously. "I come in early, stay late. It's exhausting, but screening only happens at certain times of year. I can rest afterward." While effective short-term, this approach raised sustainability concerns, highlighting the need for systemic solutions to reduce workload intensity.

Principals also engaged in **advance preparation**, reviewing screening materials and rubrics before intensive periods began, organizing evaluation teams, and ensuring all necessary resources were available. This preparation minimized time wasted during actual screening on logistical issues or unclear procedures.

Strict Adherence to Standardized Rubrics and Criteria

Maintaining objectivity while facing various external pressures emerged as a critical challenge requiring conscious, consistent effort. Principals relied heavily on standardized rubrics and evaluation criteria as both practical tools and professional shields against inappropriate influences.

Consistent rubric application served multiple functions. First, it provided a structured framework guiding evaluation, reducing cognitive load during rapid assessment of multiple applicants. "The rubric keeps me focused. I know exactly what to look for rather than making subjective judgments." Second, rubric adherence protected against bias, ensuring all applicants were evaluated using identical standards. Third, and perhaps most importantly, strict rubric use provided defense against external pressure for favoritism.

Several principals described situations where relatives, friends, or influential community members requested favorable treatment for specific applicants. In these situations, principals could point to standardized criteria and scoring systems: "I explain that I don't control the rubric—DepEd does. I'm simply implementing the guidelines consistently for everyone. This makes it impersonal rather than me personally rejecting someone's request."

Documentation practices reinforced objectivity. Principals maintained careful records showing how scores were calculated based on rubric criteria, providing audit trails demonstrating fairness if assessments were questioned. "I keep detailed notes showing exactly how each score was determined. If anyone challenges a decision, I can show the specific evidence."

However, principals acknowledged tensions between strict standardization and professional judgment. While rubrics provided essential structure, they sometimes constrained ability to recognize unique strengths or consider contextual factors. Balancing fidelity to standardized criteria with appropriate exercise of professional expertise represented ongoing negotiation requiring careful judgment.

Collaborative Consensus-Building and Peer Support

Recognizing that screening decisions carried significant weight and complexity, principals actively engaged colleagues in collaborative processes, distributing responsibility and improving decision quality through multiple perspectives.

Formal collaborative structures included screening committees where multiple evaluators jointly assessed applicants. These committee settings enabled real-time discussion of borderline cases, calibration of rubric interpretation, and collective responsibility for final decisions. “When we’re uncertain about a candidate, we discuss as a group. Sometimes someone notices something others missed. The collaborative process makes our judgments stronger.”

Informal peer consultation also proved valuable. Principals described seeking advice from experienced colleagues who had conducted screening multiple times: “I ask veteran principals for guidance on difficult situations. They’ve seen everything and can offer wisdom I don’t have yet.” This mentoring relationship provided a professional development opportunity while strengthening the broader principal community.

Calibration discussions helped ensure consistency across evaluators. Particularly early in screening processes, evaluators would jointly review sample demonstrations or applications, compare preliminary scores, and discuss discrepancies. This calibration improved inter-rater reliability and developed a shared understanding of rubric application. “We practice together first, make sure we’re seeing things the same way. This prevents huge scoring differences later.”

Emotional Support from peers proved equally important. Screening created stress, especially when principals faced difficult decisions affecting people’s livelihoods. Collegial relationships provided space to process these emotional demands: “It helps to talk with other principals who understand the pressure. They get it in ways others don’t.”

Constructive and Compassionate Feedback Delivery

Delivering honest assessment results while maintaining respect for applicant’s dignity emerged as a particularly demanding aspect of screening, requiring careful attention to both content and manner of communication.

Principals developed sophisticated approaches to **feedback delivery balancing honesty with compassion**. Rather than simply reporting scores, they contextualized results, explaining specific areas where applicants demonstrated strength and areas needing improvement. “I don’t just say ‘you got 70.’ I explain parts that were strong, which need work, and offer specific suggestions.”

Feedback framing emphasized growth potential rather than fixed deficits. Principals positioned current results as snapshots of current performance rather than permanent judgments of teaching capability. “I remind them this is one moment in time. Many excellent teachers didn’t pass the first time. What matters is learning and improving.”

Specific, actionable guidance proved most valuable. Rather than vague comments like “improve your teaching,” principals offered concrete suggestions: “I noticed you didn’t use formative assessment to check for understanding. Next time, try asking specific questions during the lesson to gauge whether students grasp concepts. That’s something you can practice and improve.”

Several principals emphasized cultivating a **“tough love” approach**—being honest about deficiencies while expressing genuine care for applicants’ professional development. One principal’s advice captured this balance: “Rate the participant honestly. Do not give her or him false hope. If in actuality he’s not performing well, be honest and help by giving technical assistance. Then they can still come back next time.”

Private, respectful delivery contexts protected applicants’ delivery dignity. Principals ensured feedback occurred in private settings rather than public spaces where others might overhear. “Respect means giving feedback privately, not embarrassing anyone publicly.”

Follow-up support extended beyond initial feedback. Some principals maintained contact with unsuccessful applicants, offering ongoing mentoring and checking progress in areas identified for improvement. This sustained support demonstrated authentic investment in applicants’ professional growth rather than merely completing administrative duties.

Proactive Communication and Applicant Orientation

Recognizing that many difficulties stemmed from applicant confusion about expectations and procedures, principals developed proactive communication strategies providing clarity and reducing preventable problems.

Advance information dissemination helped applicants prepare adequately. Principals provided detailed written guidance about required documents, evaluation criteria, demonstration teaching expectations, and timelines. “We send information packets explaining everything. This reduces last-minute questions and incomplete applications.”

Pre-screening orientation sessions offered opportunities for face-to-face explanation and question-answering. Some principals held group sessions where prospective applicants could learn about the process, ask questions, and receive clarification: “We hold an orientation meeting. Applicants learn what to expect, see sample rubrics, and ask questions. This makes them less anxious and better prepared.”

Clear timeline communication prevented confusion about deadlines and next steps. Principals provided written schedules showing key dates and what would happen when: “We give them a timeline showing: document submission due this date, demonstrations happen these days, results released this date. People appreciate knowing what to expect.”

Transparency about evaluation criteria demystified the process. By sharing rubrics and explaining exactly how scoring worked, principals helped applicants understand what evaluators would assess: “We show them the actual rubric beforehand. No secrets. They know exactly what we’re looking for.”

Responsive communication during the process maintained applicant confidence. Principals or their staff responded promptly to questions, clarified confusing points, and kept applicants informed about their application status: “We don’t leave people wondering. If documents are missing, we notify them immediately. If there are delays, we communicate that.”

Problem identification allowed preventive intervention. Based on previous screening experiences, principals identified common issues—frequently missing documents, misunderstandings about demonstration format—and addressed these proactively in communications: “We know certain documents always cause confusion, so we provide extra explanation about those specifically.”

These proactive communication strategies reduced administrative burden by preventing problems before they occurred while simultaneously supporting applicants through what many found to be a stressful, high-stakes process. This dual benefit—operational efficiency and humane treatment—exemplified principals’ commitment to both system effectiveness and ethical responsibility toward applicants.

Theme 3: Aspirations for System Improvement

Principals articulated comprehensive visions for system improvement grounded in their lived experiences with current challenges and opportunities they observed. Their aspirations reflected both pragmatic responses to immediate obstacles and strategic thinking about long-term system development. Drawing from their firsthand knowledge of what works, what doesn’t, and what possibilities exist for enhancement, principals proposed nine distinct categories of improvements.

Sustainability and Consistency in System Implementation. Principals strongly emphasized the critical importance of maintaining current improvements regardless of leadership changes at the division level. They expressed genuine concern that positive developments in the screening system, particularly transparency mechanisms and merit-based selection principles, might not persist if dependent solely on individual superintendents’ preferences rather than being institutionalized through formal policy. “What’s good about the current system should be continued even when there’s a change in leadership. These improvements shouldn’t disappear just because there’s a new superintendent.” This concern reflects principals’ historical experience with educational reforms that flourished under supportive leadership but withered when administrators changed. Principals advocated for several specific mechanisms to ensure sustainability: clear documentation of procedures, explicit policy statements preserving key features like open ranking and self-rating, regular training to ensure consistent implementation across personnel changes, and organizational culture supporting merit-based selection. They emphasized the need for codifying improvements in formal policy rather than relying on individual leadership commitment.

Digitization and Technological Enhancement. Principals strongly advocated for comprehensive digitization of the screening process, viewing technology as a solution to multiple current challenges, including administrative burden, processing delays, and physical storage requirements. Their vision encompassed several specific technological enhancements. Online application systems would enable centralized digital platforms where applicants submit all required documents electronically, eliminating physical paper handling and reducing lost or misplaced documents. Such systems would allow applicants to track application status in real-

time and receive automated notifications about missing documents or next steps. Digital document verification through automated systems could verify credentials against official databases, reducing manual verification workload and improving accuracy. Integration with Professional Regulation Commission databases could automatically verify teaching licenses, while connections to higher education institutions could confirm academic credentials. Automated ranking processes could calculate scores based on objective criteria like education level, LET ratings, and years of experience, reserving human evaluation for subjective components like demonstration teaching and interviews. Automation would reduce computational errors, speed up processing, and allow evaluators to focus on qualitative assessment. Digital portfolio systems would enable applicants to maintain comprehensive digital portfolios including lesson plans, accessible to screening committees and potentially reducing the need for redundant document submission across multiple applications.

Enhanced Efficiency and Speed in Processing. Beyond technology, principals desired fundamental improvements in processing speed to enable timely filling of teaching vacancies before school years begin. Current delays often mean teachers are not in place when the school year starts, disrupting instructional continuity and student learning. Principals suggested several approaches. Earlier processing timelines would involve starting screening processes earlier in the year, ideally completing rankings before end of previous school year, allowing newly hired teachers to participate in pre-service orientation, become familiar with school contexts, and prepare for their assignments before students arrive. Streamlined approval processes would reduce bureaucratic steps between screening completion and final appointment, accelerating teacher placement. Principals suggested clearer delegation of authority, reduced approval layers, and faster Civil Service Commission processing. Continuous rolling applications rather than single annual screening cycles would enable continuous processing where qualified applicants could be screened and added to registries throughout the year, allowing more flexible response to unexpected vacancies.

Strengthened Human Resource Capacity. Recognizing that insufficient manpower represents a fundamental constraint on screening effectiveness, principals called for substantial increases in staffing dedicated to screening functions at both division and school levels. Specific recommendations included dedicated division-level screening teams focused exclusively on teacher recruitment and screening during peak periods, rather than assigning screening responsibilities to already-overloaded Human Resource personnel handling multiple functions. School-level administrative support would ensure all schools have adequate administrative officer capacity to handle initial document screening, preventing this function from falling entirely on principals who have numerous other responsibilities. Larger evaluation panels would increase numbers of trained evaluators available for demonstrations teaching assessments, reducing per-evaluator workload, allowing more applicants to be screened simultaneously, and providing multiple perspectives on candidate performance.

Establishment of Substitute Teacher Pools. Principals suggested an innovative approach of creating pools of pre-screened qualified applicants who could serve as substitute teachers while awaiting permanent positions. This aspiration addressed multiple objectives simultaneously. Immediate coverage for vacancies: When permanent teachers leave mid-year or take extended leave, pre-screened substitutes could quickly fill gaps without requiring emergency hiring processes that might compromise selection standards. Extended probationary observation: Having applicants serve as substitutes would provide extended opportunities to observe their actual teaching performance, classroom management, and professional behavior in authentic school contexts, offering richer assessment data than brief demonstration lessons can provide. Professional development opportunities: Time spent as substitutes would allow applicants to gain valuable experience, receive mentoring from experienced teachers, and address any gaps in preparation. This would help both schools and applicants assess fit, potentially improving long-term retention and satisfaction when permanent placements occur.

Improved Rubrics and Evaluation Tools. While appreciating existing rubrics for providing structure and consistency, principals recommended refinements to better capture teaching quality dimensions relevant to diverse school contexts. Context-sensitive criteria would involve developing evaluation frameworks that allow consideration of school-specific needs while maintaining fairness. For example, rural schools might prioritize multi-grade teaching capability, while urban schools might emphasize ability to work with large class sizes. Refined demonstration teaching rubrics would enhance rubrics to better capture critical teaching competencies including differentiated instruction, formative assessment use, student engagement strategies, and technology integration, reflecting current pedagogical priorities. Weighted criteria based on technology integration, reflecting current pedagogical priorities. Weighted criteria based on position needs would allow flexibility to weight certain criteria more heavily when specific expertise is needed, such as emphasizing mathematics pedagogy expertise when filling mathematics teacher positions, ensuring flexibility without compromising merit-based selection principles.

Better Applicant Orientation and Support. Recognizing that many documentation and preparation issues stemmed from applicant confusion about expectations, principals suggested comprehensive orientation programs. Pre-application orientations would conduct sessions where prospective applicants learn about requirements, timelines, evaluation criteria, and demonstration teaching expectations before they apply, reducing incomplete submissions and improving preparation quality. Clear guidelines

and examples would provide detailed written guidance with examples of strong demonstration lessons, proper document formats, and successful interview responses, helping applicants understand expectations concretely. Practice opportunities would offer optional practice demonstration teaching sessions where applicants could receive feedback before formal screening, particularly beneficial for less experienced candidates.

Transparency, Fairness, and Quality Over Quantity. Principals emphasized maintaining and strengthening transparency mechanisms while ensuring quality standards are not compromised by pressure to fill positions quickly. Continued open ranking would preserve and potentially expand the open ranking system where applicants witness evaluation processes and can verify their scores, as this transparency mechanism has proven effective in building trust and reducing bias perception. Published standards and outcomes would make evaluation criteria, rubric details, and aggregate outcome statistics publicly available to demonstrate system fairness and allow continuous improvement through stakeholder feedback. Quality thresholds would maintain minimum competency standards even when facing teacher shortages, rather than lowering standards to fill all positions quickly. Principals preferred temporary vacancies to placement of unqualified teachers.

Support for Professional Development. Finally, principals requested training and support for themselves as evaluators, recognizing that effective screening requires specific expertise. Evaluator training programs would provide regular training on effective screening techniques, interviewing skills, demonstration teaching assessment, bias recognition and mitigation, and balancing objectivity with compassion in feedback delivery. Inter-rater reliability development through calibration exercises where evaluators jointly assess sample demonstration lessons and compare ratings, identifying inconsistencies and developing a shared understanding of rubric application. Ongoing support and updates would provide regular communication about rubric refinements, policy changes, and best practices, ensuring evaluators remain current with system developments and can provide informed feedback for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study reveals that public elementary school principals in the City of Naga, Cebu experience the DepEd teacher screening system as simultaneously rewarding and challenging. While appreciating systematic, merit-based processes—particularly demonstration teaching as the most revealing assessment—principals navigate severe time constraints compounded by heavy workloads, insufficient human resources, emotional complexities of balancing objectivity with compassion, documentation issues with unprepared applicants, and tensions between standardization and contextualization. Their resourcefulness is evident through strategic time prioritization, strict rubric adherence, collaborative consensus-building, constructive feedback, and proactive communication.

The findings validate and extend theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Sensemaking Theory illuminates how principals construct meaning from ambiguous screening situations through retrospective reflection and social interaction. Social Cognitive Theory explains how repeated participation develops self-efficacy and capability through mastery experiences, observation, and feedback. Organizational Justice Theory provides lens for understanding strong appreciation for transparency mechanisms and concerns about maintaining fairness. These theoretical contributions advance understanding of educational leadership practices in developing country contexts.

Based on findings, evidence-based recommendations emerge for DepEd and policymakers: implement comprehensive digitization of applications and verification processes; substantially increase human resource capacity through dedicated division-level screening teams and enhanced school-level administrative support; develop comprehensive applicant orientation programs providing clear guidance on requirements and expectations; establish pools of pre-screened qualified applicants serving as substitutes while awaiting permanent positions; provide regular professional development for principals and evaluators on effective screening techniques and bias mitigation; refine evaluation rubrics to better capture teaching quality dimensions relevant to diverse school contexts while maintaining fairness; and ensure sustainability of improvements through formal policy codification, clear documentation, and regular training ensuring consistent implementation across personnel changes. These recommendations balance standardization with contextual responsiveness, addressing identified challenges while preserving valued system strengths.

Study limitations include focus on a single division, potentially limiting transferability to other Philippine contexts, relatively small sample of twelve principals appropriate for phenomenology but not capturing all possible variations, and reliance on retrospective accounts, possibly subject to memory biases. Thorough triangulation across multiple informants and data collection methods helps mitigate this. Future research could conduct comparative studies across multiple divisions or regions illuminating how local contexts shape experiences, longitudinal investigations tracking how principals' experiences evolve over time and how system changes affect perceptions, quantitative research examining relationships between screening process characteristics and teacher quality

outcomes, studies investigating applicants' perspectives providing important counterpoint to principals' views, and action research implementing and evaluating specific improvements suggested by principals to generate practical knowledge about intervention effectiveness.

Ultimately, this study underscores that effective teacher selection systems require not only sound policy frameworks but also adequate implementation support, recognition of local contextual factors, and ongoing dialogue between policymakers and school-level implementers. The voices of these elementary school principals illuminate pathways toward more effective, efficient, contextually responsive teacher screening systems serving the ultimate goal of ensuring quality education for all Filipino learners. Principals occupy critical positions at the intersection of policy and practice, translating centralized standards into localized implementation while navigating diverse stakeholder interests and contextual constraints. Their experiences reveal both possibilities and limitations of hybrid selection systems attempting to balance standardization with responsiveness. By honoring their expertise, attending to their challenges, and acting on their aspirations, educational systems can develop teacher selection processes that truly serve both quality imperatives and contextual realities. The quality of education depends fundamentally on teacher quality in classrooms. Getting teacher selection right represents one of the most consequential decisions educational systems make. This research contributes to that vital endeavor by documenting how those closest to the process experience it, what works well, what needs improvement, and what possibilities exist for creating better systems worthy of the teaching profession and students who depend on excellent teachers for their educational success.

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