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Leading Digital Transformation with Mission: Lived Experiences of Adventist School Principals

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Abstract. Digital transformation places school principals at the center of decisions about technology, yet little is known about how leaders of faith-based schools carry it out without losing institutional mission. Qualitative accounts from Adventist basic education are lacking, which leaves these leaders without evidence drawn from their own context. This study explored how twelve Adventist school principals in Bukidnon, Philippines, experienced and made meaning of leading digital transformation during School Year 2026–2027. It used a descriptive phenomenological design guided by Husserlian principles and framed by adaptive leadership and the Adventist philosophy of whole-person education. Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling and interviewed privately using a validated semi-structured guide. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, checked by participants, and analyzed through significant statements, meaning units, and thematic clustering, with peer review supporting trustworthiness. The principals began digital transformation to relieve paperwork, make lessons more engaging, keep schooling going during disruption, and keep their schools faithful to Adventist purposes. Their challenges were technical, namely limited budgets, devices, connectivity, and uneven teacher readiness, and adaptive, namely keeping technology from crowding out worship, character formation, and whole-person development. They responded by starting with available resources, using the mission as the test of every tool, sharing the work with teachers and the school community, and sustaining the effort through prayer and patience. Their advice to peers was to settle purpose before tools, build teacher capacity before expansion, involve the community, and keep the child whole. The study adds a mission-centered account to digital leadership scholarship and offers practical guidance for principals, school boards, and church education offices.

Keywords: Adventist Education; Digital Transformation; Mission; Phenomenology; School Principals

Introduction

Digital transformation has become part of the daily work of school leaders. Schools now use digital tools for instruction, communication, assessment, reporting, and administration, and principals decide which tools enter the school, how teachers are prepared to use them, and how much of school life should move online. Navaridas-Nalda et al. (2020) found that principals' leadership, their reading of available digital resources, the school context, and technical support were associated with schools' digital transformation. AlAjmi (2022) reported that digital leadership by principals supported teachers' technology integration, while Banoğlu et al. (2023) found that principals' technology leadership contributed to a learning-organization culture. More recent work continues to examine how principals understand the purposes of digital transformation and respond to the demands it creates (Mizova et al., 2026; Ruloff & Petko, 2025).

Philippine studies show similar concerns with contextual differences. Torrato et al. (2021) identified school policy development, teacher professional development, blended learning, and teaching strategies as areas where administrators exercise technology leadership, while Mendoza and Catiis (2022) found high technology competence among public high school administrators and teachers, although administrators' leadership did not substantially account for teachers' proficiency. Malonzo (2024) found that Filipino private-school principals experienced technology integration through rapid changes in online learning, unequal access, and support needs, and Pelayo et al. (2025) identified visionary leadership, collaboration, adaptability, and resource allocation among principals known for digital leadership. Tamonan (2026) reported infrastructure limitations, generational differences, socioeconomic conditions, and adaptive leadership among rural Philippine principals.

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The Adventist setting adds a dimension less visible in the wider literature. Adventist schools pursue technological development inside a faith-based educational mission, so their leaders must weigh not only instructional usefulness and cost but also ethical use, stewardship, student well-being, digital citizenship, and consistency with the purposes of Adventist education. Lim and Wilczynski (2024) emphasized that technology decisions in Adventist education call for leadership, professional preparation, financial stewardship, ethical judgment, and discernment, including attention to emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence.

Research Questions

This study aims to describe the lived experiences of Adventist school principals in leading digital transformation while keeping the mission of their schools. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What experiences led the principals to initiate and sustain digital transformation in their schools?
2. What challenges do the principals encounter in leading digital transformation while maintaining the mission and values of Adventist education?
3. How do the principals cope with and address the challenges they encounter in leading digital transformation?
4. What strategies and recommendations can the principals share with other Adventist school principals in effectively leading digital transformation while advancing the mission of Adventist education?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study covered twelve principals and school heads of Adventist basic education institutions in the Province of Bukidnon, Philippines, during School Year 2026–2027. It was limited to their own accounts of initiating and leading digital transformation, the challenges they met, the ways they addressed them, and their advice to peers. Teachers, parents, learners, and church officials were not interviewed. The findings describe how digital transformation was experienced in these schools and are not offered as a description of Adventist schools elsewhere or of school leadership in general.

Literature Review

Principals and Digital Transformation in Schools

Digital transformation in schools involves more than acquiring devices. It changes how schools teach, communicate, assess, and are managed, and principals stand at the point where those changes are approved, resourced, and explained. Navaridas-Nalda et al. (2020) found that principals' leadership, their reading of available digital resources, the school context, and technical support were associated with schools' digital transformation. AlAjmi (2022) reported that digital leadership by principals supported teachers' technology integration in Kuwait during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Banoğlu et al. (2023) found that principals' technology leadership practices contributed to a learning-organization culture in public K–12 schools. Qualitative and case-based work has begun to ask how principals understand the purposes of digital transformation: Mizova et al. (2026) examined the perspective of school principals on leading it, and Ruloff and Petko (2025) related principals' educational goals to their leadership styles in upper secondary case studies. These studies suggest that principals' own educational goals shape how digital change is led, which makes the goals of a faith-based school a relevant factor that has not yet been examined.

Digital Leadership in the Philippine Context

Philippine studies place digital leadership within conditions of unequal access and uneven readiness. Torrato et al. (2021) identified school policy development, teacher professional development, blended learning, and teaching strategies as areas of administrators' technology leadership. Mendoza and Catiis (2022) reported high technology competence among public high school administrators and teachers but found that administrators' leadership did not substantially account for teachers' proficiency. Malonzo (2024) described how Filipino private-school principals experienced technology integration through rapid change in online learning, unequal access, and support needs, and Pelayo et al. (2025) identified visionary leadership, collaboration, adaptability, and resource allocation among principals known for digital leadership. Tamonan (2026) reported infrastructure limitations, generational differences, socioeconomic conditions, and adaptive leadership among rural principals. In Bukidnon, De Los Reyes and Paglinawan (2024) examined work adaptability and leadership competence in relation to the digital fluency of school administrators. Across these studies, access, infrastructure, teacher readiness, and adaptability recur, but none examined how principals weigh digital decisions against a faith-based mission.

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Technology and Mission in Adventist Education

Adventist education rests on a philosophy that aims at the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of the learner and gives the school a redemptive purpose (White, 1903; Knight, 2006). This philosophy supplies a test that goes beyond efficiency: a tool is judged by whether it serves the formation of the whole person. Lim and Wilczynski (2024) applied this concern to technology, emphasizing that decisions in Adventist education call for leadership, professional preparation, financial stewardship, ethical judgment, and discernment, including attention to emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence. Their discussion identifies what Adventist leaders should weigh; what is still missing is a description of how principals actually weigh it in the daily work of small schools.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design anchored in descriptive (Husserlian) phenomenology. Phenomenology suits questions about experience and meaning because it seeks the shared structure of how a phenomenon appears to those who live it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Two traditions were considered. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) gives priority to the detailed, case-by-case interpretation of how a small and fairly homogeneous group makes sense of a significant experience, with the researcher interpreting the participants' own interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Husserlian phenomenology instead aims to describe the phenomenon as it is experienced, to set aside the researcher's presuppositions through epoché, or bracketing, and to identify the meanings shared across participants (Husserl, 2012; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The Husserlian approach guided this study for three reasons. First, the research questions ask what the principals experienced and how they responded, which calls for a faithful description of experience rather than an interpretive account of each person's sense-making. Second, twelve principals from schools with different resources were interviewed, and the aim was to identify meanings shared across them while keeping differences visible, which suits a cross-case descriptive analysis better than IPA's idiographic focus. Third, the researchers are affiliated with the Central Mindanao Mission of Seventh-day Adventists, the organization that oversees the participating schools, so the emphasis on bracketing gave a disciplined way to set aside their own assumptions about Adventist education and digital technology. Recent studies of school leaders have used both traditions: Malonzo (2024) examined Filipino private-school principals' experiences of technology integration phenomenologically, and Tamonan (2026) used interpretative phenomenological analysis with rural Philippine principals.

Research Locale

The study was conducted among Adventist basic education institutions in the Province of Bukidnon, Philippines. The participating schools included elementary schools and schools with multi-grade classes operating under Central Mindanao Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Education Department management. The schools differed in size, in the number of teachers, and in the equipment available to them. Some had an internet connection but no display devices in classrooms; others were still using computers that had been in service for several years; and in some, teachers were only beginning to use digital tools for records and reports. These conditions formed part of the setting in which the principals made their decisions about technology.

Research Participants

The participants were twelve principals and school heads of Adventist basic education institutions in Bukidnon during School Year 2026–2027. They were assigned codes P1 to P12, and no school names or other identifying details are reported. The school situation each participant described is shown in Table 1 in the Results and Discussions.

Research Instrument

A validated semi-structured interview guide was used, with questions drawn from the four research questions and follow-up probes on specific experiences, the factors behind decisions, available support and resources, lessons learned, and what the participant would do differently. In keeping with phenomenological practice, the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and used field notes to record observations during the interviews.

Data Gathering Procedure

After ethics clearance was obtained, the researcher secured permission from the schools and from the responsible school boards and church education offices. Interviews were held privately at a time and place agreed upon with each participant, audio-recorded with permission, and supported by field notes. Recordings

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were transcribed verbatim, reviewed against the audio for accuracy, and returned to participants for checking. Verified transcripts and field notes were then organized for analysis.

Results and Discussions

The findings are presented by research question. Each theme is followed immediately by its discussion, which interprets the pattern and relates it to the framework and to earlier studies. Excerpts have been condensed to the phrases that carry the meaning, and ellipses mark omissions that do not alter it. Table 1 presents the participants, and Table 2 at the end of this section summarizes the themes, the participants who contributed to each, and their interpretive reading.

Table 1. Participant codes and school situations described in the testimonies

Code	School situation described in the testimony
1. P1	School serving families with unequal access to devices and connectivity
2. P2	School where teachers wrote three hard copies of SF10 for each pupil
3. P3	School operating on limited resources
4. P4	School with teachers using old or phased-out gadgets
5. P5	School with internet access but no display devices in classrooms
6. P6	School affected by the suspension of face-to-face classes during the pandemic
7. P7	Multigrade classroom
8. P8	School with a heavy load of records, reports, and administrative tasks
9. P9	School working on the balance between digital learning and whole-person development
10. P10	Small elementary school managing records, financial reports, and accreditation requirements
11. P11	School where the principal drew on personal experience of using technology in teaching
12. P12	School gradually introducing computers, CCTV, and digital records

Table 1 shows that the participants led schools in very different conditions: unequal access to devices (P1), limited resources (P3, P10), old equipment (P4), internet without classroom displays (P5), multigrade teaching (P7), and heavy administrative loads (P2, P8). The entries are limited to what participants themselves disclosed. The differences matter for interpretation, because the same technology decision could be a small step in one school and a major commitment in another.

Research Question 1: What experiences led the principals to initiate and sustain digital transformation in their schools?

Emerging Theme: Digital Transformation as a Response to Workload, Disruption, and Educational Purpose

The principals did not begin digital transformation for its own sake. Each described a point at which something in the work of the school had become difficult or something in the needs of learners had become clear. Four strands ran through their accounts.

Lightening the Paper Load in School Operations

Paperwork was the most immediate starting point. P2 traced the first step to School Form 10: "teachers experienced significant fatigue manually writing three hard copies for each pupil." P8 described the same pressure from the office, citing records, reports, and tasks that "often required a lot of time and effort." P10 added that a small school must also keep financial reports, teachers' documents, and accreditation requirements, and P4 and P12 described grade computation, pupil records, and communication with parents becoming easier with digital tools. Digitizing forms and records offered a low-risk first step: the benefit was visible to teachers at once, the skills required were modest, and the change did not touch classroom practice or the identity of the school. This may explain why P2 later recommends starting there (see Research Question 4).

Reaching Learners through More Engaging Instruction

Other principals began with teaching. P2 paired the paperwork with a classroom aim, equipping rooms with displays and reliable internet so lessons would be "more engaging for students." P5 held the same aim against a shortage of equipment: "we do not have televisions or other display devices inside our classrooms." P7, teaching a multigrade class, needed lessons "that address their varying learning needs while keeping them engaged," and P11 reached the same point through classroom experience. In these accounts the purpose came before the means. P5 wanted digital resources in lessons without having the devices to show them, and P7 turned to digital tools because of the structure of a multigrade school, not because of novelty.

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Responding To Disruption and To What Learners Will Need

The pandemic appeared as the moment when technology stopped being optional. P6 realized that "technology was no longer optional but necessary for educational continuity." For P1, remote learning also acted as a diagnosis, because it "exposed how many teachers lacked training and reliable systems" and revealed inequitable access to devices and connectivity that were already present. P12 looked ahead instead, noting that pupils "need basic computer skills to prepare them for the future." Disruption therefore worked as a trigger and as a way of seeing existing gaps, and the gaps P1 named return as the challenges described under Research Question 2.

Anchoring the Change in the Adventist Mission

The principals did not treat efficiency as the whole purpose. P3 linked efficiency, teaching, and communication to the aim of providing "quality Christ-centered education." P9 raised the cost side from the start, weighing screen time against physical activity, mental health, and social interaction, and concluded: "I must ensure that digital transformation does not compromise our commitment to Christ-centered education and the development of the whole person." For P3 the mission was a motive; for P9 it was a boundary. The mission thus entered the decision before any tool was chosen, as both reason and limit.

Discussion

Taken together, the accounts show that the reasons for starting were practical and tied to purpose at the same time. In terms of adaptive leadership, the triggers were largely technical (paperwork, equipment, continuity), but the principals interpreted them through an adaptive question about what their schools exist to do. This corresponds to the practice of setting direction that Leithwood et al. (2020) describe, and it shows that for these principals direction was set by the mission before it was set by the technology. The pattern is close to what Malonzo (2024) reported for Filipino private-school principals, whose experience of technology integration was shaped by rapid change in online learning, unequal access, and support needs, and it matches Tamonan's (2026) account of infrastructure limits among rural principals. The emphasis on mission bears out Lim and Wilczynski's (2024) argument that technology decisions in Adventist education call for discernment about ethical use and institutional purpose, and it adds an observation: in these schools, mission was present at the moment of initiation, not only in later evaluation.

Research Question 2: What challenges do the principals encounter in leading digital transformation while maintaining the mission and values of Adventist education?

Emerging Theme: Thin Resources, Uneven Readiness, and the Weight of Protecting the Mission

The challenges were not separate problems to be solved one at a time. Limited funds produced limited equipment, limited equipment slowed teacher training, and the need to protect the mission shaped how quickly any of it could be done.

Working Within Limited Budgets, Devices, and Connectivity

Shortage of money and equipment appeared in nearly every account, and several principals tied it to how the school is funded. P2 explained, "We have a tight budget and cannot raise tuition fees too high, as parents might transfer their children to other schools." P10 described competing claims on the same fund: "teachers' salaries, instructional materials, school facilities, and other essential needs." P6 added that, "As an Adventist school, we also need to prioritize other spiritual and educational activities." P3 named connectivity and varying teacher skills together, and P4 described teachers working with "phased-out or old gadgets." These accounts show that technology spending was a trade-off among legitimate priorities, including salaries and spiritual programs, and not only a shortage. Because the schools depend on tuition, the principals could not solve the problem by charging more.

Meeting Teachers Where They Are

The principals did not describe teachers as one group. P8 said that "some teachers find it difficult to use digital tools" in preparing reports and materials, P12 observed that some teachers and pupils "need more time to learn new technologies," and P4 spoke of "teachers who are reluctant to learn how to use electronic gadgets." P1 also named resistance to change. Most of these accounts treated readiness as a matter of time and training, and only a few described reluctance. P7 listed teacher training among the scarce resources, which links readiness to the budget problem: where money is short, so is training.

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Keeping Technology from Crowding Out Faith and Whole-Person Formation

The most distinctive challenge concerned the mission. P1 described a tension that runs through every decision, "ensuring technology never becomes an end in itself," and named the risk that online and AI-driven tools could "displace the relational, character-forming dimensions of Adventist education." P9 saw it in the daily life of the school, where teachers "become so focused on completing digital activities that they have less time for personal interaction, outdoor activities, or spiritual reflection." P5 stated the working rule that technology remains "a tool to support learning and character development, not a replacement for our faith, spiritual growth, and personal relationships." P2 added a physical concern about the children's eyes, P11 summarized the task as balancing technology with the mission and values of Adventist education, and P4 questioned whether the school's own performance measures reflected its identity. Read together, the accounts name spiritual, relational, and physical risks, which parallel the spiritual, social, and physical dimensions of the Adventist concept of whole-person development, and they add an institutional risk, that the school may measure what it does not value. Among the excerpts presented, P1 alone named AI-driven tools explicitly.

Discussion

Seen through adaptive leadership, the first two sub-themes are mostly technical challenges, because money, devices, and training are resources that can in principle be obtained, while the third is adaptive, because it asks what the school is and what it must protect. The testimonies suggest that the two kinds were experienced together and not in sequence: the same decision to buy displays was also a decision about screen time and about funds for spiritual activities (P6, P2). This is why the mission question could not be postponed until the equipment was in place. The infrastructure and access constraints agree with those reported by Malonzo (2024) and Tamonan (2026), and the financial pressure P2 and P10 described is consistent with the resource conditions those studies reported. What these testimonies add is the way the mission question entered routine decisions. The principals were asking not only whether a tool worked and whether the school could afford it, but whether it would displace prayer, personal relationships, or character formation. That framing reflects Lim and Wilczynski's (2024) point that Adventist technology decisions involve stewardship, ethical judgment, and discernment, and it shows how the point plays out in small schools with modest budgets.

Research Question 3: How do the principals cope with and address the challenges they encounter in leading digital transformation?

Emerging Theme: Small Steps, Shared Work, and Prayerful Stewardship

The principals described not a single strategy but a way of working that moved between what the school had, what the mission required, who could help, and what they believed about the outcome.

Beginning With What Was Already On Hand

Most principals started with the resources already in the school. P6 said, "Instead of purchasing all the equipment at once, we introduce technology gradually based on our available budget," and P3 and P12 described using available resources and adding tools step by step. P2 combined fundraising and donations for Smart TVs with restraint: "We buy equipment slowly, one room or item at a time, to keep costs low." P10 presented the pace as a deliberate choice: "Digital transformation cannot happen overnight, especially in a small school with limited financial and technological resources." Gradual adoption was therefore not only a second-best response to scarcity. It was a form of stewardship, and in P2's case it protected parents from tuition increases, which answers the constraint P2 named under Research Question 2.

Making the Mission the Measure Of Every Tool

Several principals applied a test before adopting anything. P1 described "anchoring every decision in a mission-first rubric," asking whether a tool strengthens faith integration, character formation, relationships, and equitable access, and added safeguards of "content review, filtering, AI-use guidelines, and explicit screen-time and face-to-face formation practices." P9 described a 'Tech-in-Balance' approach with "clear boundaries for technology use while preserving time for spiritual, physical, and social development," linking digital research to hands-on activities such as Pathfindering, gardening, and community service. P2 set a simpler rule: "We do not use TVs all day," mixing TV lessons with reading, writing, and play. The three principals turned an abstract value into an operating routine, a rubric, a boundary, or a daily mix. The routines differ in sophistication, but they serve the same function, which suggests that mission-guided leadership does not depend on elaborate policy. P1's mention of AI-use guidelines also points to an area where written guidance may be most needed.

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Sharing the Load with Teachers and the School Community

The principals did not carry the work alone. P8 described "learning alongside my teachers, and never being ashamed of asking somebody's help," and P11 relied on "open communication with teachers and school leaders." P1 described structures that made sharing regular: "teacher leadership, peer coaching, and protected collaboration time." The circle also widened outward. P6 discussed needs "with the school board" and explored support "from parents, alumni, and the church community," and P7 asked the board and parents for support while keeping Christ-centered education as the priority. The sharing took informal forms (P8) and structured forms (P1), and it served two purposes: it spread the work of learning, and it brought in resources and understanding from outside the school.

Holding the Work in Faith and Patience

A number of principals described their coping in spiritual terms. P5 said, "We pray for wisdom, patience, and provision as we make decisions for the benefit of our learners." P10 named "prayerful leadership" alongside careful planning, teamwork, resourcefulness, and continuous learning, and P12 closed an account of step-by-step adoption with "proper planning, and God's guidance." Prayer appears in these accounts as part of the leader's repertoire next to planning and not as a substitute for it. P5's three petitions can be read as answers to the challenges above: wisdom for the mission question, patience for the slow pace and uneven readiness, and provision for the shortage of resources.

Discussion

The strategies were practical but not only technical. Resourcefulness addressed money and equipment; boundary-setting and content review addressed the mission question; peer coaching and consultation addressed uneven teacher readiness; and prayer and patience sustained the effort over time. In adaptive leadership terms, the principals did more than apply technical fixes. They set limits, learned alongside others, and shared responsibility for the change, which are the moves that adaptive challenges call for. This combination is consistent with the adaptive responses Tamonan (2026) reported among rural principals and with the collaboration and resource allocation Pelayo et al. (2025) identified among principals recognized for digital leadership. The emphasis on consultation and gradual introduction also fits what Malonzo (2024) described as the adaptability private-school principals needed when access and readiness varied. Prayer does not appear among the practices reported in the studies reviewed above, so this study suggests that for Adventist principals spiritual practice is a recognized part of how digital change is led.

Research Question 4: What strategies and recommendations can the principals share with other Adventist school principals in effectively leading digital transformation while advancing the mission of Adventist education?

Emerging Theme: Advice Grounded In Purpose, Readiness, and the Whole Child

When asked what they would pass on to fellow principals, the participants gave advice that followed the shape of their own experience: it began with purpose, moved to people, widened to the school community, and ended with the child.

Settle the Purpose before Choosing the Tools

P1 advised starting "with a mission-first vision" that defines what digital transformation must strengthen "before selecting any tools." P9 asked principals to anchor transformation in the school's mission, vision, and philosophy so that "technology supports rather than replaces the spiritual foundation of education." P10 stated that it "is not simply about using computers or modern technology," and P4 asked that every digital initiative support the spiritual and educational mission. This advice mirrors the principals' own practice of using the mission as the measure of every tool, and it reverses a technology-first sequence by placing purpose ahead of procurement.

Build Teacher Capacity before Widening the Change

The principals were consistent about pace. P2 advised, "Start by digitizing tedious paperwork (like SF10) so teachers see that tech makes their jobs easier," which repeats the entry point described under Research Question 1. P6 said that schools "do not need to acquire all the latest technologies immediately" and should identify urgent needs and introduce tools gradually. P3, P8, and P11 gave nearly the same advice in three parts: begin with simple tools or available resources, provide continuous training, and encourage teamwork. That principals from different schools converged on this sequence suggests that early, visible benefit and shared learning were what made change last in their schools.

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Bring the School Community into the Plan

P5 urged principals to "involve parents, the school administration, and the community in finding solutions." P6 explained why: "When everyone understands the purpose of digital transformation, it becomes easier to gain cooperation and sustain the program." P7 recommended working with parents and the school board while keeping Christ-centered education as the main priority, and P12 tied the plan to what the school can afford, recommending "a clear plan for digital transformation based on the needs and budget of the school." In this advice, understanding precedes cooperation, so explaining the purpose to parents, board, and church becomes a leadership task and not an afterthought.

Keep the Child Whole and Christ at the Center

The final strand concerned the learner. P2 asked principals to "set strict rules on screen time and alternate digital tools with traditional textbook reading and outdoor play." P5 offered a way to judge success: it "is not measured only by the number of devices a school has, but also by how effectively technology improves learning while preserving Christian character and faith." P12 stated the aim behind the rest: "Our goal is not only to develop smart learners but also to lead children closer to Jesus." These statements redefine success from inputs, such as devices, to outcomes that agree with the mission.

Discussion

The advice was shaped by what had constrained the principals. Because money and equipment were short, they recommended starting with what exists. Because teachers were at different points, they recommended training and teamwork before expansion. Because the mission was at stake, they recommended deciding purpose first and holding to it. The three recommendations correspond to the core practices Leithwood et al. (2020) describe: setting direction through purpose, developing people through training, and redesigning the organization by involving the community. The ordering is also close to what Pelayo et al. (2025) described among principals known for successful digital leadership, where vision, collaboration, adaptability, and resource allocation appeared together, and it reflects the discernment Lim and Wilczynski (2024) called for in Adventist technology decisions.

Integrative Discussion

Across the four research questions, the twelve principals describe a consistent experience. Digital transformation began with concrete problems, was complicated by technical and adaptive challenges that arrived together, was managed through small steps, shared work, and prayer, and was handed on as advice that puts purpose first. For these principals, leading digital transformation with mission meant treating each technological decision as also a decision about the purposes of Adventist education. Table 2 brings together the themes, the participants whose excerpts contributed to each, and the interpretive reading developed above.

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Table 2. Themes, contributing participants, and interpretive reading

Theme / sub-theme	Participants	Interpretive reading
1. Research Question 1: Reasons for initiating and sustaining digital transformation		
Lightening the paper load	P2, P4, P8, P10, P12	Technical trigger; a low-risk first step with immediate benefit to teachers
More engaging instruction	P2, P5, P7, P11	Teaching purpose came before equipment; multigrade conditions drove adoption (P7)
Disruption and future needs	P1, P6, P12	The pandemic acted as a turning point and as a diagnosis of existing gaps
Anchoring in the mission	P3, P9	Mission present from the start as both motive (P3) and boundary (P9)
2. Research Question 2: Challenges encountered		
Limited budgets, devices, connectivity	P2, P3, P4, P6, P10	Technical; spending is a trade-off among legitimate priorities in tuition-dependent schools
Uneven teacher readiness	P1, P4, P7, P8, P12	Technical and relational; mostly a matter of time and training, with some resistance
Protecting the mission	P1, P2, P4, P5, P9, P11	Adaptive; spiritual, relational, physical, and institutional risks
3. Research Question 3: Coping and addressing the challenges		
Beginning with what is on hand	P2, P3, P6, P10, P12	Gradual adoption as stewardship, not only a response to scarcity
Mission as the measure	P1, P2, P9	Values turned into rubrics, boundaries, and daily routines
Sharing the load	P1, P6, P7, P8, P11	Shared responsibility; the principal as co-learner; outward to board and church
Faith and patience	P5, P10, P12	Prayer as part of the leadership repertoire alongside planning
4. Research Question 4: Strategies and recommendations		
Purpose before tools	P1, P4, P9, P10	Setting direction; mission placed ahead of procurement
Capacity before expansion	P2, P3, P6, P8, P11	Developing people; early visible benefit and continuous training
Community in the plan	P5, P6, P7, P12	Redesigning the organization; understanding precedes cooperation
Keeping the child whole	P2, P5, P12	Success redefined from devices to outcomes consistent with the mission

Table 2 shows that every theme drew on at least two participants and that the mission-related themes (anchoring in the mission, protecting the mission, using the mission as the measure, and keeping the child whole) cut across all four research questions. The mission was thus not a separate topic in the testimonies but the thread that connected reasons, challenges, responses, and advice.

Ethical Considerations

The study was reviewed and approved by the office of the Education Superintendent of Central Mindanao Mission of SDA and was issued Ethics Clearance No. 2026-001 before data were gathered. It observed informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and secure handling of data. Participants were told the purpose and procedures of the study and were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw without penalty. Because the Adventist school community in the province is small, codes were used in place of names, and school names and other details that could identify a participant were removed from the excerpts and from Table 1. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were kept securely, used only for research purposes, and handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

Conclusion

Among the twelve Adventist school principals who took part in this study, digital transformation began with concrete problems: paperwork that consumed teachers' time, lessons that could be made more engaging, classes that had to continue when face-to-face instruction was suspended, and learners who would need digital skills in the world ahead. The principals held these practical reasons together with the purposes of Adventist education, and this combination shaped what they were willing to introduce and how quickly. The challenges they described were connected rather than separate. Limited budgets produced limited equipment, limited equipment slowed training, and the mission question governed how far technology could go into the life of the school. The principals responded by using what was already on hand, introducing changes in steps, setting limits on screen time and content, consulting teachers, drawing on the school board and church community, and sustaining the effort through prayer and patience. Their advice to fellow principals followed the same order: settle the purpose, build teacher capacity, bring the community into the plan, and keep the child whole.

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The study contributes to educational leadership literature in three ways. It adds mission as an explicit criterion in the study of principals' digital leadership, showing that in a faith-based school the question of purpose comes before the question of tools. It shows that technical challenges of resources and readiness and adaptive challenges of identity were experienced together, which supports reading digital transformation in schools through adaptive leadership. And it gives an experience-based account from Adventist basic education in the Philippines, a context that earlier studies of principals' digital leadership did not address. These conclusions are drawn from the accounts of twelve principals in Adventist basic education institutions in Bukidnon during School Year 2026–2027. They describe how digital transformation was experienced and interpreted in these schools and are not offered as a description of Adventist schools elsewhere or of school leadership in general.

Recommendations

For Adventist school principals, decide what digital transformation is meant to strengthen before deciding which tools to buy. Begin with tasks that clearly ease teachers' work, such as digitizing forms and records, so that teachers see the benefit early. Introduce changes in steps, allow teachers time to practice, and keep a working limit on screen time in favor of reading, outdoor activity, and face-to-face interaction. For school boards and church education offices, consider the pattern of needs that appeared in these testimonies: equipment, connectivity, technical support, and training were usually short at the same time. A schedule of small, predictable support, such as one classroom equipped per year or a shared fund for connectivity, may be more workable for small schools than a single large outlay. Guidance on data privacy, content filtering, and the use of artificial intelligence tools would also help principals who are making these decisions without written policy. For teachers and school communities, consultation before major changes appeared to reduce resistance in these accounts. Teachers who are already comfortable with digital tools can be asked to assist colleagues, and parents and church members can be informed of the purpose of each initiative so that their support is based on understanding rather than on assumption. For future researchers, studies that follow a small number of Adventist schools over a longer period could show whether the step-by-step approach described here holds up, and what happens to teacher practice and to learners when equipment is added or connectivity improves. Research in other Adventist school contexts, including secondary and integrated schools, would show whether the mission-related tensions described by these principals take different forms. Studies that include teachers, parents, and learners would also test whether the priorities principals describe are experienced the same way by those who receive them.

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