

REVEALING SCHOOL HEADS' EXPERIENCES IN THE NEW NORMAL LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Leadership is challenging, especially when the pandemic has stricken the world. COVID-19 affected all educational institutions. Hence, the new normal called for a new form of leadership for the school heads (SHs). The study characterized the lived experiences of the SHs employing their new normal leadership. A transcendental phenomenology was employed. Ten SHs volunteered to participate in the interviews for data collection. The data were transcribed and used for the Thematic Analysis. The findings were then returned to the participants for validation. The study revealed six relevant themes which described the SHs lived experiences in the new normal leadership. They are undisputable commitment, transformational leadership, openness to self-improvement and innovation, flexible management skills, school and community collaboration, and sustaining accountability and transparency. Despite the challenges, difficulties, and risks, the SHs show profound and flexible leadership, which shaped their character and dedication to their respective assignments.

Keywords: New Normal Leadership, Lived Experiences, School Heads, Phenomenology.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly changes the lives of individuals. Many people adjust to cope with the new normal. School heads (SHs) have encountered many challenges and struggles during the pandemic. In response to the pandemic threat, SHs had to develop new ways to maintain the quality of learning delivery as mandated by the Department of Education (DepEd).

In a disaster, leadership is more important than management because it focuses on getting people to work together better. COVID-19 is no exception. They were all affected by economic and educational crises. As a leader, it is necessary to build a group with trust and respect to be consistent [9]. SHs supervise, organize, plan, make decisions, take care of the management and financial tasks, and ensure that teachers teach effectively and adequately. In this challenging time, a school leader's skills are being tested [25]. Teachers have also found ways to improve job satisfaction, manage human organization, and bring about change at school. The educational procedures were undertaken online as educational establishments stayed closed. Overnight, there was a big change on how the administrators ran the school, which changed their roles and responsibilities [18]. Consequently, the academic planning process initiated and implemented in educational institutions for 2019-2020 was completely altered [7].

The establishment of a new normal leadership during these times was demonstrated by the SHs each day, in a single moment, and wherever they were, to elevate the quality of education in the country. More problems and challenges have been much harder to solve. Job complexity comprises eight categories: management, complexity, and learning challenges. It also looks at the relationships with different groups, such as problems with educational authorities and policies, staff and how they teach, students, families, the school community, and society [23].

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The studies on SHs' lived experiences focused on reactions to delicate crises such as school challenges and violence, teacher leadership in secondary schools, women leadership, leadership practices in senior high school, leadership for learning, rural and urban primary SHs' perspectives on staff appraisal systems, decision making, and experiences and perceptions of the university's performance management system [3, 13, 2, 14, 15, 1, 20]. Sadly, there is a lack of research on the SHs' lived experiences in public secondary institutions. Thus, there is a need to examine their experiences in the new normal to address the scarcity in this area. This study aims to describe the lived experiences of school heads in a period of educational crisis, especially on the joys, insights, difficulties, coping mechanisms, and strategies.

Statement of the Problem

The study's central question was, "What are the lived experiences of the SHs in new normal leadership?" It answered the following sub-questions: (1) What are the SHs' joys and challenges in new normal leadership? (2) What insights are the SHs gained from employing new normal leadership during the new normal? and (3) What are the SHs' strategies in addressing problems and difficulties in the new normal leadership?

Methodology

A transcendental phenomenological research design was employed to identify and determine how SHs experienced the new normal. The design supported the study in describing and characterizing the lived experiences of SHs in the new normal educational system. There were 10 SHs from eight public secondary schools in Sultan Kudarat, Mindanao, Philippines. They volunteered to participate in the series of in-depth interviews. The inclusion criteria include that SH has at least five years of experience, ages 24 to 64, a baccalaureate degree holder, holds any field of specialization, belongs to a big or small secondary school, and has been assigned to urban or rural areas.

The Thematic Analysis (TA) was utilized to describe the SHs' experiences in the new normal leadership [5]. The TA was employed in various studies [21, 22, 8, 16, 17]. The data familiarization through repetitions of reading data transcripts. Hence, significant statements (SS) were coded and identified. These written utterances represented their voices and experiences. After identifying the SS, initial themes (IT) were formulated. Data with similar meanings were grouped, and each group was represented by IT. Then, ITs with parallel concepts and meanings were coded and grouped to produce clustered themes (CT). Likewise, CTs were again coded thru similar meanings to formulate relevant themes (RT). RTs were defined based on the CTs and synthesized public SHs' experiences in the new

normal leadership. The themes were then returned to the participants for review and validation.

Results and Discussions

There were six RTs on the SHs' lived experiences in the new normal. These themes include undisputable commitment, transformational leadership, openness to self-improvement and innovation, flexible management skills, school and community collaboration, and sustaining accountability and transparency.

RT 1: Undisputable commitment

This first theme encompasses three initial themes: joys, sorrows, and challenges. They were aligned with what society expects of SHs in resolving productivity problems that put squarely unreasonable pressures on the SHs to solve the broad menu of education. Each school emphasized the importance of having genuine commitment. The following are the shared responses of the participants:

"I am satisfied. I experience genuine joy and satisfaction helping others succeed as learners. My journey toward the commitment to excellence in educational leadership began in my childhood." (P6)

"I was able to survive life and the lives of my fellow through my guidance. I became an instrument to help the government solve educational problems. I have completed SEAMEO short courses that provide additional knowledge on becoming the best leader." (P4)

"It is quite difficult for my teachers and I to implement the COVID-19 safety protocols because of the many areas to consider. We had no idea if it was possible, struggling with our health, as much as we wanted to organize it so that it did not compromise our health and the finances." (P7)

Quality education needs many changes in all school components, starting with a genuine commitment. To satisfy the school's main customers, we need to improve the performance, and perhaps in the transition process, everyone needs to reshape and refine themselves. All this empowerment may experience genuine joys, sorrows, and challenges in the education system. Education as a system only produces quality output and outcomes if the educational process is managed properly and through experience [4].

RT 2: Transformational leadership

This second theme centers on the role of the SHs in communication, responsibility, unity, and cooperation. Their functions are aligned with elements of transformative leadership to varying extents. Each school emphasized the importance of personal connection in providing information to

others. Communication with the teachers, students, parents, and communities is the SHs' goal to maintain the relationship between the channels. Here are the participants' responses:

"I consider communication a powerful tool in relating to others." (P1)

"Being responsible is a big word. Maintaining your dignity equals excellent education. So, I encourage my teachers to do their responsibility at their very best to deliver quality education based on the learning competencies in line with the learning modality chosen by the learners." (P2)

"Nothing is impossible in cooperation and unity. The transition and changes in the new normal require hard work and collaboration" (P3).

Most educational leadership theories emphasize the standardized character of a widely acknowledged effective leadership model. It is a norm to which everyone is expected to adhere, and the leader's actions are more essential than who they are [12].

RT 3: Openness to self-improvement and innovation

This third theme revolves-around keeping abreast of technological advancement, personal and professional development, and attendance to training, conferences, and seminars. These undertakings are the exhibited qualities of effective school leaders and mentors. For the participants, it is the driving force of continuous learning and improvements. The following are the insights shared by the participants:

"Maximize the time and utilization of available resources. I am thankful that the pandemic helped me improve my skills in using laptops and computers. The school leaders' communication was through social media. That is why I need to improve my computer literacy." (P2)

"Yes, I have attained my 20 years of service because the promotion is very fast. I have finished SEAMEO & NEAP, which have given me so much joy. I rendered my 6 years in service as SHs with many achievements attained." (P1)

"By ensuring that teachers do their task to provide the best quality education for the learners. Letting teachers enroll, join, and attend webinars and short online courses will help them become more equipped and skilled educators. It is one way to deliver the quality education and learnings the students need." (P5)

Open innovation is based on the belief that knowledgeable and creative individuals outside the institutions can also contribute to achieving strategic goals and that sharing intellectual property is useful for different parties in different ways [10]. The more

information is gained and longed for self-development, the more educated and powerful the decisions are.

The development process is not limited to individuals within the facilitating company [24]. In addition, the number of ideas is also higher, and it has empowered educators and learners with increased access to knowledge, innovative pedagogical practices, and a culture of sharing.

RT 4: Flexible management skills

This fourth theme shows the SHs' experiences at the management level, particularly in their flexibility in school interventions, considerations, initiatives, and activities. Several things must be considered, such as the learning needs of the students, the consensus of the teachers and administrators, the expectations of the community, and the current breakthroughs in the academic field. They are evident in the following participants' responses:

"For over a year, most students were using modular-distance learning. These students were studying at home and acquiring new things through the help and support of their parents or guardian. Surely, students have encountered social and emotional problems while fighting the challenges and demands of their academic journey. I have encountered my teachers/advisers conducting a 'Virtual Kamustahan' every month to monitor students' mental status, emotional concerns, and problems or issues encountered while facing the effect of the pandemic. The activity helped the teachers to communicate and reach out to their students at a distance. It was a systematic approach because teachers were obliged to prepare lessons about mental and health activities related to combat pandemics' effects, like anxiety, depression, death, self-esteem, and fear. The online monitoring was helpful because the students were mentally and emotionally disturbed, had experienced trauma and fear due to COVID-related deaths, had parents or guardians working overseas, and those living and working alone to survive." (P3)

Because time is such a limited commodity, SHs must ensure they use every available time in the best way possible. The data on students tell them that their instructional needs are so severe that they need highly intensive instruction.

Managing human and capital resources is a critically important responsibility. School administrators need to make the most of potentially scarce resources and align their resource management strategy with the mission and vision of the whole school community. It begins when administrators assess their schools to identify what resources their students and teachers need and ends when they make the necessary resources available. They must consider many potential investment areas throughout the process,

from teacher hiring to instructional materials and technological tools.

RT 5: School and community collaboration

This fifth theme emanates from the shared visions, voices, and accountability of the school and the community in sustaining strong partnerships and coordination. Collaborations and partnerships are essential for helping learners achieve their maximum potential. While parent and community involvement has always been a cornerstone of public schools, greater recognition and support of these collaborative efforts are needed. The following are the participants' statements:

"Vision gives us the energy, pride, and commitment to engage as team members in creating something of quality. The challenge of striving for success leads communities to achieve far more than they thought. As a school leader, I create a vision for our school. It can be shaped to fit the school's particular context and the needs and aspirations, and the wider community. Its design reflects the school's cultural identity, students attributes and their families' dreams. Stakeholders are involved in creating and realizing the vision. It is how the vision translates into action." (P8)

"I believe in the process of the give-and-take relationships, our school will be in a healthy environment. The community sees and participates in the relayed accountability of our school. These may include financial support, peace and order, security, and other ways." (P1)

The availability of tools or facilitation presumably promotes the collaboration process of teachers and vice versa. For example, groups with a clear focus might adopt tools or facilitation to contribute to this focus. Hence, investing in facilitation, feedback, and protocols is worthwhile if schools want to support teacher collaboration. These forms of guidance adequately address process elements such as collectiveness, critical analysis, and teacher participation. When sharing, cooperation is guided by personal characteristics [6].

RT 6: Sustaining accountability and transparency

A school is an institution where transparency and accountability go hand-in-hand and should be held as statutory obligations. Transparency in school administration should not be taken lightly. If a school is transparent, people can be held accountable for their actions. Public access to information is widely accepted as a key to greater transparency and accountability in education. The participants shared:

"School management should be aware of expenditure to prevent financial leakages. Creating trust in one another is essential as everyone requires transparency." (P2)

"Communication is very important. I make sure that I clearly deliver the plan we want to achieve with my teachers. The information is well disseminated and understood by the teachers. The successful journey of every school depends significantly on establishing trust. Establishing trust in every institution contributes to overall employer and employee positive relationship. Transparency in all aspects should be observed. It is important to establish trust with the students, parents, and stakeholders." (P9)

SHs can request the transparency of their organization before it becomes transparent. Even the other process in transparent organizations will be carried out transparently. The SHs know how to react to the organization in response to their behavior in transparent organizations. In transparent organizations, rules work, and arbitrary behavior decreases [19].

The personnel who are informed will be able to take a less negative attitude towards the supervision. Additionally, sharing information amongst others is a key characteristic of networked governance. Information sharing increases trust, enabling stakeholders to behave more effectively and efficiently in the network [11].

Conclusion

The SHs' lived experiences were testimonies of hard work, commitment, resiliency, cooperation, and collaboration. The joys and challenges of the SHs were portrayed by unquestionable commitment and dedication. They have inculcated transformational leadership relevant to the new normal education setting. Their openness to self-improvement and innovation paved the way for effective leadership. SHs indoctrinated lifelong learning, particularly in setting directions and technological advancement.

Certainly, the SHs were affected by the unpredictable rise and fall of COVID-19 cases which hindered their educational operations. The SHs insights included flexible management skills. The pandemic has strengthened their cooperation, unity, and responsibility, supporting them in crucial decision-making. SHs have purposely intensified school, parent, and community collaboration to reach elusive students, distribute instructional materials, and accomplish assignments. They have sustained accountability and transparency, which inspired the SHs to work even harder to provide relevant and unselfish leadership in the new normal.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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