



## Strategic Adaptation in Focus: Unfolding Stories of Novice Principals

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### ABSTRACT

Published Online: October 05, 2024

Being novice principals is a transformative experience that entails effective leadership principles. Their ability to adapt to varied circumstances can yield excellent outcomes in the educational setting. This study explored the experiences of novice principals in strategic adaptation to the newly assigned schools. It utilized qualitative research design, particularly phenomenological approach. In-depth Interview was used to generate responses from the participants. There were ten novice principals involved in the study selected through purposive sampling. Based on their experiences in strategic adaptation, there were six themes emerged: strong support and collaboration with stakeholders, building good social relations and open communication, teacher empowerment, difficulty in adjusting to deeply rooted culture, shortage of budget allocation, and constraints on implementation of instructional delivery and maintenance of physical facilities. On the other hand, their collaborative planning practices were captured in four dominant themes: conducting interactive dialogue and consultation through regular meetings, practicing transformational leadership style, empowering teachers and stakeholders, and developing strong sense of commitment and shared responsibility. However, they adopted coping mechanisms to address the challenges by establishing democratic and consultative work environment, identifying priority improvement area, instituting generation of financial resources, adopting clear scientific approach to problem solving, and lobbying support from DepEd authorities and multi-stakeholders. The findings have implications on stressing the need to promote or develop more the principals' leadership dimensions: educational, people, and strategic leadership especially in dealing with instructional delivery, financial management, collaboration with stakeholders, and instituting planning in schools.

### KEYWORDS:

novice principals, strategic adaptation, phenomenology, Davao del Norte, Philippines

### I. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are gaining complexities in terms of planning and collaboration. Additionally, schools are challenged with demands for near-constant change to address issues that are very complicated, often ill-understood, ambiguous, and with unclear results. For this purpose, the adaptability of school principals is being challenged and confronted with various issues and drawbacks.

Various issues have arisen worldwide as presented by new school principals. In the United States, particularly in Michigan, Henkenberns (2019) research demonstrated the complexities of the roles of new school principals in the first year. The responsibilities of the new school principal added

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*\*Cite this Article: Mike M. Leopardas, Ma. Melanie N. Edig (2024). Strategic Adaptation in Focus: Unfolding Stories of Novice Principals. International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies, 4(10), 1109-1115*

challenges, which explained the conflict over how local control and responsibility could be balanced, and there were few support structures to help them navigate this transition to leadership.

Further, in Malaysia, the research of Saidun et al. (2015) revealed that beginning principals experienced numerous challenges such as isolation, time management difficulties, failure to integrate theories with real practices, lack of position-related knowledge, and inability to adapt to the culture. These unfortunate conditions place undue stress on new principals and inhibit their performance at the start of their tenure. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, principal instructional leadership has shown a mismatch between the ideal instructional leader and the actual principal behavior patterns and further suggested that principals spent less efforts on the teachers' performance (Wendy Pan & Nyeu, 2015).

In Manila, Philippines, academic school principals also faced various challenges and struggles in leading schools during their first two years. Academic heads and principals

themselves thought of papers, school culture, methods, and procedures, expectations of superiors, and supervisor oversight as key obstacles to be addressed (Arrieta & Ancho, 2020). Similarly, principals encounter the gaps between theory, policy, and practice, but few studies have focused on these dynamics. Moreover, they pointed out that school heads encountered numerous obstacles such as changing of the curriculum and resolving conflicts that affect the adaptability skills of new school principals (Sutherland & Brooks, 2015).

Novice school principals share about their difficulties in leading change in schools. Building an effective strategic adaptation of novice principals in schools division offices in the region poses a greater challenge since they are not skilled enough in critical in strategic adaptation specifically in collaborative planning. This is partly due to the shortfall of the trainings provided by the Department of Education during their preparatory years in the field and the inadequacy of their skills' preparation prior to their appointment as school principals that would instill the significance of adaptability to address the ongoing challenge in introducing innovations and collaborative planning that are considered fundamental characteristics of a school leader.

There are various studies about the adaptability skills of novice principals and the challenges that they encounter (Quong & Walker, 2014; Lavigne, 2020). An example is research conducted by Fidan and Balci (2017) which states that administrators must have basic skills such as diagnosing patterns, developing, and manipulating the environment.

As a researcher, I have not come across a study that dealt on the strategic adaptation of novice principals in the locality. This urged me to conduct this study to explore adaptability skills of novice school principals in leading positive change in schools. However, one dimension of the acquired knowledge is that it can be used to develop various sectors of society particularly the education sector to fund numerous aspects in school that deal with enhancing or improving the skills of principals through the provision of trainings and other professional development activities. Further, the knowledge that is gained through this research can serve as jumpstart for becoming school leaders to fully develop their potentials in the aspect of educational leadership and supervision of schools.

## **II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the learning and challenging experiences of the novice principals in strategic adaptation particularly in the Divisions of Tagum City, Davao del Norte, and Panabo City. Further, this probed their collaborative planning practices as well as their coping mechanisms on the challenges they had encountered. This answered the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of novice principals in strategic adaptation?

2. How do novice principals establish collaborative planning practices in school?
3. How do novice principals cope with the challenges in strategic adaptation?

## **III. METHODS**

The research design employed in this study was qualitative utilizing a phenomenological approach. For this purpose, qualitative research aimed at gaining a deep understanding and description of the strategic adaptation of novice principals. As used in this study, this qualitative research explored how the principals experience particularly in strategic adaptation. Further, this also probed their collaborative planning practices, and how they addressed the challenges encountered in strategic adaptation.

The participants of this study were the novice principals from the schools' division offices in Region XI namely, Tagum City, Davao del Norte, and Panabo City. I followed some criteria in selecting the participants such as: the participants must be holding a Plantilla position at least as Principal I in the elementary and junior high school; the participants must be leading or handling a school for zero to three years to be considered as novice; and these novice school principals have shown exemplary performance (e.g., recipients of division, regional, and national awards). They were composed of both male and female novice principals from the identified schools' division offices in Region XI. Additionally, data were collected from the ten participants through an in-depth or virtual interview and that this number was already enough to deliver data relative to the opportunity to discover and produce the themes.

Further, data were analyzed through data coding and thematic analysis. Highlighters and colored pens were used on the text being analyzed that represent important and reoccurring themes. Then, the texts were grouped with the same color of pens and highlighter and described it with words and short phrases. Thematic analysis was done after the initial codes were identified. Then, categorizing and analyzing all the responses of the participants from general to specific followed. Responses with similar core ideas were extracted and grouped together to formulate comprehensive themes. Each theme should consist of at least three core ideas to make it valid. However, in this study, code names were assigned for each of the participants.

To familiarize the data, listening and transcribing the recorded interview of the participants were conducted and kept on reading it to identify similar answers given by the participants. After familiarizing the data, coding began. Coding was employed in which the data confirmed to arrive for particular themes, ideas and categories.

To strengthen the reliability of the data, data analyst was tapped who is an expert on the field and my adviser for further verification of the data. Lastly, research findings and interpretation of the data were presented.

In establishing trustworthiness of the study, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were ensured as cited in Shenton (2004). Moreover, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice were among the core ideas on which the Belmont Report (1979) established ethical consideration.

#### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

##### *Experiences of Novice Principals in Strategic Adaptation*

This section presents the learning and challenging experiences of the principals in strategic adaptation, which is the focus of this investigation. These experiences are relevant in terms of principals' capacity of leading the school, instituting planning, and decision-making processes. Based on their responses, there were six themes emerged namely, strong support and collaboration with stakeholders; building good social relations and open communication; teacher empowerment; difficulty in adjusting to deeply rooted culture; shortage of budget allocation; and constraints on implementation of instructional delivery and maintenance of physical facilities.

As discussed, it can be synthesized that, principals have both learning and challenging experiences in strategic adaptation. For their learning experiences, they experienced having a strong support and collaboration with stakeholders, building good social relations and open communication, and teacher empowerment. These learning experiences aided school principals' capability in strategic adaptation. However, they had encountered numerous challenges namely, difficulty in adjusting to deeply rooted culture, shortage of budget allocation, and constraints on implementation of instructional delivery and maintenance of physical facilities. But with their strong fortitude and commitment bolstered with stakeholders' support, they were able to cope with these challenges in pursuit of their quest to have successful school programs and projects.

This claim from participants is supported by Agi (2017) who discovered that teachers emphasized a connection between strategic planning, school improvement, and increased student academic success, school environment, and participation of stakeholders, along with staff professional development. A strategic strategy for attaining school objectives via an accurate evaluation of the school's requirements is essential to realizing school improvement (Hanover Research, 2015). Leadership of schools must provide clear, articulated objectives with explicit methods for execution and assessment of school success toward change (Huber & Conway, 2015). Additionally, Cina and Cummings (2018) postulated that communication is a vital component of efficient innovation implementation across sectors because it facilitates engagement and feedback amongst stakeholders.

This also indicates that Guerrero et al. (2018) found that teachers have a more holistic and integrative view of change leadership schemas than business employees; teacher change leadership schemas predict perceived effectiveness of

change management, and teachers' affective commitment to change; and perceived effectiveness of change management significantly mediates the effect of change leadership schemas on teachers' affective commitment to change. The finding from the participants is signified by various scholars stating that in elementary schools across the nation, principals serve a pivotal role in bringing about transformational change and building school culture (Fisher et al., 2016; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Change is unpredictable.

Further, there is a belief that sufficient resources should be accessible to a school to increase the quality of education. While this concept is vital, this article argues that school financial management capability is also an issue in most South Africa's public schools. Undeniably, this is supported by Aworanti (2016) highlighting Information and Communications Technology (ICT) shown to be a valuable learning tool worldwide. The results of the system are not just intended for Nigeria's educational sector, but for a worldwide community that creates and shares knowledge via information and communications technology. They explained the need of facilitating successful teaching via the use of ICT. The ideas under investigation include approaches to effective instructional delivery, information and communications technology (ICT), and the integration of ICT in education. In terms of physical facility management, Ibrahim et al. (2016) demonstrated that the facilities offered by the school affected parents' criteria for picking a good school. The authors' goal is to examine the requirements, planning standards, and recommendations for school building, and to research the quality of facilities in the study region. The site inspections were conducted to provide a clear picture of the school's components and surroundings. Inventory lists are used to document the data obtained during the site inspection. The suggestions were made to enhance the school facilities' condition.

##### *Practices Implemented for Establishing Collaborative Planning*

Another interesting area investigated in this study is exploring and describing the collaborative planning practices implemented by novice school principals. Discussed here are the interview which generated interesting results with four dominant themes; which are conducting interactive dialogue and consultation through regular meetings; practicing transformational leadership style; developing strong sense of commitment and shared responsibility, and empowering teachers and stakeholders.

As highlighted, it generated practices of principals for collaborative planning. It is of paramount significance that for principals to establish effective collaborative planning, they need to conduct interactive dialogue and consultation through regular meetings which engaged students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in planning as an important element of shared responsibility. Further, they practiced

transformative leadership style in setting clear visions, motivating, and inspiring teachers and stakeholders to unleash their latent capacity in the school. Finally, the development of strong commitment and shared responsibility where there is ownership of decisions amongst teachers, parents, and stakeholders, having a high expectation towards realizing the directions or plans of the school.

Such claims from participants are vouched by Kedian (2015) which affirms that today's school leaders seem to be confronted with a growing number of conflicting expectations and difficulties. Consequently, Williams et al. (2018) emphasized this assertion from participants in their review of the literature on transformational leadership, concluding that it has a direct effect on organizational performance because a leader's credibility and charisma contribute value to the organization's objectives. On similar vein, Lindsay-Law (2019) conducted a study examining the influence of teachers' commitment to the achievement of goals, drew out themes emerged from the research: Internal accountability necessitated a student-centered strategy characterized by teacher support, individualized professional development opportunities, and fair intervention. Internal accountability required collaboration among administrators and instructors.

For instance, in Indonesia, Kusumaningrum et al. (2019) characterize teaching as a profession with professional ethics organized in the teacher's code of ethics which serve as measurement of teacher empowerment. The code of ethics serves as a guide for teachers as they carry out their classroom tasks. The findings of the hypothesis testing revealed a favorable link between professional ethics and teaching performance. However, increased resources and reduced stress enhance family well-being. In family empowerment, sufficient perceived influence and shared decision-making by family and professionals appeared as critical determinants. More awareness of public services was linked to greater empowerment. Knowledge of the elements linked with parental empowerment may be used to strengthen parental empowerment and is useful in identifying parents who need assistance (Vuorenmaa, et al., 2016).

#### *Coping Mechanisms of Novice Principals on Addressing the Challenges Encountered in Strategic Adaptation*

This study also explored the coping mechanisms of the novice principals in addressing the challenges they had encountered in leading the newly assigned school. As novice principals, it is quite noteworthy to highlight their unique and interesting coping mechanisms in responding to problems, concerns, and challenges in the school. When the participants were asked about their experiences in addressing the challenges in school, there were five themes emerged namely, establishing democratic and consultative work environment, identifying priority improvement area, instituting generation of financial resources, adopting clear scientific approach to

problem-solving, and lobbying support from DepEd authorities and multi-stakeholders.

This captures the themes and core ideas of the principals in coping the challenges which they had encountered in their new work assignment and considered to be crucial towards achieving effective problem-solving. Among the challenges of the principals in strategic adaptation were difficulty in adjusting to the deeply rooted culture, shortage of budget allocation, and constraints on implementation of instructional delivery and maintenance of physical facilities. The principals had adopted varied coping mechanisms from the challenges they encountered in strategic adaptation as reflected from the table. Indeed, they were triumphant from the struggling circumstances because they underscored the pivotal roles of teachers, parents, and multi-stakeholders in their journey as novice principals to the newly assigned school.

The assertive statements abovementioned by participants are supported by Wolf and Floyd (2017) as they emphasized that establishing democratic and consultative work environment is critical in the strategic planning process for the long-term growth of schools because it generates a shared vision for school success that is focused on areas for improvement and an awareness of how thorough planning affects educational results. Further, views from Saputra (2018) highlighted that education in Indonesia, for example, education is regarded to be very important in fostering a nation's culture. In terms of novice principals' financial management, Myende et al. (2018) discovered a new set of accountability relations that operate in opposition to the hierarchical relationships amongst community and the schools, or between the department and the rural setting. These principals initiated an overt financial management training program to secure their own clarity and participation in a participatory management strategy, as well as that of their cooperating participants.

Furthermore, Meyers and VanGronigen (2020) underpinned that accurately analyzing and documenting the root causes—the why—of organizational failure, as is rather prevalent in other professions, may enhance principals' capacity to develop situationally and contextually appropriate solutions for their development plans addressing school resources. Moreover, Slegers (2015) underscored the fact that while school principals are often active in public relations with several stakeholders both internal and external of their own schools in daily practice often focuses on either linkage inside or outside schools.

## **V. IMPLICATIONS**

Results of this study are significant elements towards the improvement or development of policy, practice, theory, and ensuing research studies. It basically explains the importance of experiences of novice principals, both learning and challenging experiences in strategic adaptation towards a clearer view during their first three years in handling a school.



Unarguably, principals serve as pivotal role in bringing out significant changes in the school, community and very instrumental in building school culture. They are considered as drivers of change process and the think-tank of the planning and implementation of the school program, plans and projects. Hence, the role of school leader is unquestionably very crucial in leading and managing change in the school towards developing a better place for learning. The novice school principals, though, they are still learning on their management and leadership journey in school, but they have demonstrated professionalism and competence in leading the newly assigned schools. They might have encountered problems at varying magnitudes, but they managed to cope with the challenges or difficulties with their own coping strategies and approaches not to compromise social relations and in sustaining the gains emanated from stakeholders' support and collaboration.

Furthermore, though participants are just novice school principals, but they have put in place proper mechanism in their own work contexts, and they sounded like veterans in the field of leadership. Obviously, they possess good leadership skills of preparing teachers to become good leaders in the future. These practices are worth emulating and should be highlighted as good practices for novice school principals in leading the new schools.

However, the experiences of the novice principals can be said bittersweet experiences, but these boil down to significant implications for further consideration in DepEd authority. As part of their preparation of the new work assignment and new work environment, DepEd may incorporate initiatives, propose programs for novice principals that would develop their capability for effective financial management to educate them on essential priority settings of specific school expenses to incur and conduct periodic or regular monitoring of school financial accountabilities.

Further, the experiences of the newly installed principals implied that there is a need to come up with strong mentoring and coaching mechanisms from those outgoing principals and welcoming the new ones in their new work assignments. There should be intensive workshops on mentoring and coaching mechanisms to better prepare new school leaders to handle responsibilities and roles in the new school assignment.

Moreover, DepEd Division office may also intensify the conduct of periodic consultations and monitoring as venue for interactive dialogue with novice school leaders on their plight in leading the newly assigned schools. The interactive dialogue can be done in varied communication modes which allow for constant monitoring to prevent problems or challenges to surmount on the process. In so doing, the interactive dialogue and consultation with DepEd personnel in the Division level can obtain information and data which serve as valuable inputs for further plan of actions like

implementing appropriate performance monitoring and coaching for novice principals.

The principals must be strong implementers or supporters of the potential ideas outlined in the plan of actions pertaining to the effective performance of their leadership functions in school. One strategy for ensuring longer-term success is for the principals to cooperate with teachers and stakeholders to personally advocate and promote reform which is the improvement of classroom instruction and other intended school operations.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study explored the experiences of the novice school principals in leading a newly assigned school using a phenomenological approach with only in-depth interview being used as a data gathering tool in generating data and responses. This also delimits to ten newly appointed principals within Tagum City, Panabo City, and Davao del Norte Divisions. Specific actions are suggested that this study tries to resolve or needs to be taken about policy, theory, practice, or subsequent research in the future.

This study proposes immersion and induction program for new school leaders. DepEd Regional or Division Office may design immersion program for newly assigned school leaders before their official inception. The immersion program would enable the newly appointed school principals to have a feel of how it like is working in a new working environment. Further, this immersion activity would help principals to engage and connect with the school culture prior to their inception. An intensive needs-based induction program may also be considered by DepEd higher authorities to better prepare novice school leaders for the bigger responsibilities instore ahead of them.

It is also recommended to conduct mentoring and coaching program on effective fiscal management. To better prepare the novice school leaders in managing finances of the school MOOE and other financial resources, and in handling problems like insufficient and very limited budget not to meet the expected projects and programs of the school, DepEd authority, be it regional or division level, to design intensive mentoring and coaching mechanisms from experts and veterans in the field in terms of financial management and in developing financial literacy skills of novice principals. Further, principals may monitor data for expenditures regularly under the identified priority improvement areas, adhere policy on maintenance and other operating expenses of the school, and strictly follow procurement processes by consistently reviewing legislation on it with the support of school Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) who are responsible for this undertaking. As soon as possible, principals must reduce unnecessary administrative costs that entail inefficiencies thus, funds must be allocated to where it should be, for the benefits of school learners.

Moreover, principals must operate with transparency and accountability. Novice principals must earn

the public trust. Tailoring communications to specific groups helps organizations collaborate better by reducing communication barriers. Getting stakeholders involved in long-term planning helps with stakeholders' buy-in of the long-term strategic objectives for school operations like delivery of instructions and maintenance of conducive school physical facilities for teachers and students, thus seeking support from DepEd authorities and multi-stakeholders is of paramount importance.

This study also recommends implementing plan of actions on Instructional Leadership practices. Principals are considered instructional leaders in implementing the curriculum. For this purpose, to address the challenges with instructional delivery, the principals must effectively and diligently implement, monitor, and evaluate the conduct of teaching-learning process. They must advocate curriculum implementation to improve instructional activities and practices to increase students' engagement in the teaching-learning process and improve their academic achievement. Principals may frequently conduct periodic consultations with the master teachers about the mechanisms they adopted for strengthening performance monitoring and coaching of teachers.

Hence, it is strongly recommended for further research to use other data gathering tool, like Focused Group Discussion to triangulate the data and to arrive at more interesting findings and results. For this purpose, the participants of the study may also include novice principals in the senior high school to capture interesting and varying results which may serve as valuable inputs for DepEd personnel for further venturing into professional development trainings and capacity building. For further study, it also suggested that participants will not only be limited to school principals but involve teachers for the interview and other stakeholders for corroboration to further establish a more valid and reliable results and findings.

It is also ideal to conduct another study relative to the experiences of the novice principals by identifying schools situated in urban setting. The school setting matters a lot in the experiences of the new school leaders because their experiences may vary in managing big and/or small schools. To further generate a more valid and reliable result, it is recommended that another study may be conducted using the mixed method approach to strike a balance in generating data and information.

## **V. DISCLOSURE**

This study is undertaken exclusively for academic purposes as a requirement for our quantitative research subject. All collected data will be handled with the highest level of confidentiality, ensuring the anonymity of participants is maintained. This research is devoid of any potential conflicts of interest or financial benefits. Participation is voluntary, and individuals may withdraw at any moment without consequences. The results of this study

will be utilized exclusively for academic dissemination and will not be used for any commercial or unlawful uses.

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