# From Teaching to Leading: A Phenomenological Inquiry on Overcoming Challenges from the Lens of Novice Principals

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## **Abstract**

Literature suggests that the high school principal position is one of the most essential, complex, and challenging assignments in the public education system. While efforts to understand the nature and dynamics of the transition from being a principal have been undertaken in different studies worldwide, a gap in literature exists in the context of Philippine education. It is relevant to explore and subject to inquiry the experiences of Filipino novice principals on overcoming challenges along their transition from teaching to leading thus, this study was conducted with five novice principals (n=5) as participants. From the thickness and richness of the descriptions of the field text gathered in this research, an interesting conceptualization labeled as the Leader Continuum Movement emerged. The novice principal milieu circumscribes facets associated with preparations and influences (motivation to move), transition challenges (the big move) and meeting halfway (steadfast). Identifying the ways on how to cope up with the challenges of being a teacher to a school head from this study underscore a continuum movement for school leaders. Through the experiences, they exemplified sophisticated interpretations and reflections on their practices, which is unique for novice principals at their stage of learning and development. The findings of this research will be valuable to current principals, teachers transitioning to a leadership role, and those aspiring for a leadership position.

Keywords: novice principal, overcoming challenges, Philippines

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#### Introduction

For an accomplished teacher, advancing into an administrative position is a significant avenue for professional growth and important career achievement as well. It is undeniable that the best candidates for school administrators have previously held positions as successful teachers. Nevertheless, novice administrators are also shocked to discover the number and variety of responsibilities and demands embedded in their new frontline position and the dramatic psychological effects that it has on their personal lives (Armstrong, 2012, 2014; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Even those administrators who feel prepared to perform administrative tasks often find themselves unprepared for the social and emotional changes that accompany both their exit from teaching and entry into administration (Armstrong, 2012). Many variables influence administrators' transitional trajectories, among which are individual personalities (Hohner, 2016), the nature and location of their role, (Manard, 2017) and the social, political, and cultural contexts and climates (Morillo, 2017) within which their transitions occur (Armstrong, 2009; 2012). When administrative trajectories take place in environments of deep structural change, they create additional layers of challenge and uncertainty. (Armstrong, 2012).

It is a known fact that most if not all school administrators were teachers at some point in their career, and the experiences as a teacher help many school heads to better understand their responsibilities and thereby guide them in performing their duties more effectively and efficiently. The decision making of the school head and the strategies employed in problem-solving are critically important in the attainment of the goals of the school. School principals face many challenges, especially in their first year at a school, when they must function effectively in a new environment and assimilate quickly to a new culture. (Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto, 2012). These challenges also include; differentiation of instruction, classroom management, and the unexpected expectations required of the teaching profession (Brubaker, 2016). In the study of Bayar in 2016, several types of challenges were experienced by novice principals which include: violence families' negative attitudes towards school, immigrant students/families, teacher unions (syndicalism), teachers' attitudes and behaviors to principals, and the increasing undesired behaviors inside the school/classroom.

The principal's major role as manager of teachers and students is a significant contributor to the success of a school. The efforts exerted by the principal to staff cohesion are a primary determinant in improving the school's achievement. (Burkhauser et.al.,2016) The principal's effort in building culture and relationships within the school community, forming leadership teams, and promoting teacher professional development are a few of the strategies on which novice principals focused their time. The most effective principals develop these networks both within the school system (teachers, district administrators, division administrators) and in their local communities. It seems particularly important for school principals to have the support of their Barangay Captain, the neighborhood official with the most authority in a community. (Brooks & Sutherlands, 2014) The principal is not working in isolation apart from others, one way of finding meaning to the role of the school head is recognizing the value of working and collaboration with parents, and students. Through the principal's interaction and involvement, a sense of awareness of what is going on in the school's internal and external environments is being developed. This

awareness enables the principal to possess a high degree of sensitivity to and sensibility of the needs, problems and concerns of both students and parents (De Guzman & Guillermo, 2007).

In the Philippine educational system, school heads shall have authority, accountability, and responsibility in managing all affairs of the school following national educational policies, plans and standards (RA 9155, 2001). Thus, the success and failure of the school are greatly influenced by the kind of school head it has. Understanding the principal's most difficult leadership experiences is relevant in revealing the key aspects of how teachers cope up with the challenges they face as a new school administrator. The support from the Philippine government to the educational system and on how K to 12 classrooms are managed to meet the challenges of the 21st century is substantial in ensuring that every school is effectively led by dynamic school heads. The National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP) has been mandated to continuously develop school personnel including school managers for professional competence as well as management and leadership excellence in the educational community. NEAP was created through the Department of Education (DepEd) order number 111 series of 2001. This undertaking is one of the key reform initiatives of the department under Republic Act No. 9155 on the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001). Principals in the Philippines work in a unique political and social context. They have many challenges but also work hard to educate students and to serve their community (Brooks & Sutherlands, 2014).

In preparation for the K to 12 curricula, the Department of Education through the National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP) conducted the pilot run of the School Heads' Development Program (SHDP) for Senior High School (SHS) School Heads in 2015. NEAP responds to the demand for professional competence as well as management and leadership excellence in the Philippine educational community. To fulfill this mandate one of the components of NEAP is the training and development component. The NEAP School Heads Development Program (SHDP) Foundation Course is a competency-based educational leadership and management development program that aims to enable school heads to lead and manage K to 12 schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a three-module course that covers the principal's role in delivering the curriculum and core programs, managing school processes, strategic human resource management and development, fiscal management, partnership, and leadership. The regional Human Resource Development Department (HRDD)- NEAP started this course in 2016. The curriculum development and training of facilitators of SHDP are supported by the Basic Education Sector Transformation Program (BEST) through the Development Academy of the Philippines. These efforts were made consequently to provide quality assurance in delivering educational services among Filipinos.

According to Bridges, (2013), there is a difference between change and transition; change happens quickly while transitions occur slowly over time. He suggests that change is situational and happens without people transitioning, whereas a transition is psychological and is a process where people gradually accept the details of the new situation and the changes that come with it. However, although recent literature provides a rich understanding of the different variables influencing the transition from a teacher to a school administrator there is a need to have a focus on the motivations for making the move, uncovering why they made the transition from teacher to an

administrator as well as their perceptions of the role versus their current realities in the principal position (Carey, 2017).

Hence, the major intent of this qualitative investigation is to describe the transition from teaching to leading as viewed by a select group of novice principals from public secondary schools in the Philippines. Specifically, the present study sought to answer the following questions; 1. What are the motivations of teachers as they ascend to administrative positions; 2. What are the challenges and coping up mechanisms of novice principals as they take on their new positions as school head. The collective descriptions generated by this phenomenological inquiry will help the Department of Education to understand the task faced by school heads, particularly the newly appointed principals to guide them in their recruitment and support initiatives for aspiring principals. The challenges faced by the teachers and how they were able to overcome these challenges and managed to move up to an administrative position, is an inspiring experience that will provide learning for aspiring principals, teachers who are transitioning to a leadership role and veteran school heads to emerge as stronger leaders.

## **Findings**

From the individual and collective articulations shared by select Filipino novice principals, a continuing movement of concerns emanating from their experiences as a teacher, as an aspiring principal and a newly designated school head was observed Labelled as the **Leader Continuum Movement** (see **Fig.1**), the model provides a clear nature and dynamics of the movement creating gradual steps in overcoming challenges along the transition of the novice principals' spectrum that encompass aspects that are related to preparation and influences (motivation for the move), transition challenges (the big move), and meeting halfway (steadfast).



Figure 1: Leader Continuum Movement

In this study, the experiences of the novice principals' way back when they are new into the teaching profession were taken into account, as a new teacher in a secondary school is the most challenging experience for the participants. This occurs when the demands of the new teaching profession start to unfold such as dealing with students, piles of papers to grade, lessons to plan and increasing amount of paper works. As one principal recalled, "At the start of my teaching profession, nothing is easy, everything is challenging. I have to handle subjects that are not my area of specialization. I have to teach 5 to 6 sections in a day, each having 70-90 students. Checking outputs, recording their grades, checking assessments is a tough job" (P1)

"I experienced handling pilot section, middle section and the last section students that are usually composed of misbehaving students. There was also difficulty in dealing with the parents of these students who are usually frequent visitors to the Guidance Office in the school. Aside from the usual class records that I need to be prompt of preparing, I need to have a guidance notebook that keeps track of the cases. There was also a time that I handled two advisory class at the same time." (P2)

Aside from dealing with various types of students and the tedious clerical works bothering the teachers who were new on the profession they also experienced pressures from colleagues, as shared by another participant,

"During my first year of teaching, I experienced negative feedback from other teachers regarding the way I teach and how I deal with my students. You really cannot please everybody. Since I am a new teacher, I was also asked to do the task of other teachers" (P1)

Remarkably, the entry into the teaching profession was never easy as transpired on the experiences shared by the participants. The pressure was from different sources such as students, parents, paper works and relationships with colleagues. The pressure brought about by the profession leads them into different realizations; as another participant declared,

"On my first month, my voice was gone and I have to use lapel, I have to utilize strategies like hand signals and sign language which is a sort of understanding between me and the students. Nevertheless, I happen to develop a deeper concern with the students. Most of the students in public school came from poor families and if the teacher will not give concern to them, who else will?" (P3)

"I became more sensitive to the needs of the students and that of colleagues. I realized that I should not stop learning and improving myself." (P4)

Notably, the challenges faced by the new teachers in the profession has its impact on the personal outlook of the teacher, as stated by another participant, "my experiences when I was a teacher provided me opportunities for learning, as a leader of a school you have to know what is happening inside the classroom, you cannot be an effective principal if you do not have a technical know-how of being an effective teacher" (P5) Another participant sharing the same insights, "All the experiences I have as a teacher helped me to pass the qualifying examination for school heads, everything is in there." (P1) Moreover, in their role as a teacher they develop a deeper sense of responsibility as another participant added, "In the examination for principals, I know that if my answers were really to point out what's for the best for the students, I know I'm on the right track." (P2)

"The road of becoming a school head is very steep, you need to equip yourself to fit in the position. There is a tough competition among others who are also aspiring for the position",

as stated by another participant. Moreover, to qualify for a school head position entails professional growth and qualification standards. The participant added that "since it's difficult to earn points for the qualification standards, it is important to attend to trainings and seminars." (P4)

"I joined international conferences and presented my research, I published my research works and strengthen my connections. I have trainings, national competency certificates, I have also several trainers' methodology certificates." (P5) According to the respondents, attending graduate studies and earning certificates from trainings and seminars are all relevant preparations for aspiring school head. Another participant declared, "I'm ambitious and I have plans to finish my graduate studies and I know I have to work hard for it" (P3)

Leadership opportunities are the stepping stone of teachers aspiring for a principal position. Seemingly, the participants shared how their immediate superior entrusted them for administrative functions along with their teacher tasks. As the participants articulated, "Leadership skills is already embedded in me, I was motivated by my former school head, who trusted me as her Officer-In-Charge" (P3) "I was a subject chairman, I already planned to be a school head because I'm always with the principals since I'm into sports and at the same time a coach and most of the time the principals are present during sports meet." (P4)

The participation in administrative responsibilities helps shape the outlook during the transformation because these new responsibilities are different from those of a classroom teacher. The novice principals also shared instances wherein they have to accept every task given to them without complaining, as verbalized;

"You have to do the work assigned by the principal to do, do not take it negatively, because at the end of the day you will benefit from it. Accept those as chances for learning." (P1)

"I've been designated as an academic coordinator, department chairman, year level coordinator and subject group head. The experiences I had are my best teacher, it gives me a sense of confidence that I already been there and I already know what to do". (P2)

During the transition phase, the most challenging part is in dealing with teachers, (subordinates) this is even supported by the following comments;

"It's very difficult to adjust to the different cultures of teachers, specifically those negative teachers who have a lot of side comments on programs, projects and activities of the school to the point that these programs will not be done because of their negativities." (P3)

"The most challenging part is in handling varied types of teachers, with a lot of master teachers, dealing with their diversities, indifferences and unpredictability" (P2)

Moreover, aside from the challenges mentioned by the participants with regards to transition, they also shared that managing fiscal resources is demanding, as verbalized:

"The most challenging is on how to run the school, considering finances, all these are in my mind, how can I send teachers to trainings, seminars or even meetings if we do not have the budget or resources." (P1)

"The SBM or School Based Management has a very large scope, wherein early morning, my thoughts are already pondering on what to do in school." (P5)

"It's really hard to operate a school without money, and if you have the budget it is still harder to liquidate" (P4)

The challenges arising on the transition period from being a teacher to a school head gives way to coping up strategies as mentioned by the participants;

"You should have the heart and the firmness or objectivity. No room for extremes, it should be in between." (P2)

"I run a survey regarding the effectiveness of my management strategies, it takes a lot of courage to welcome that what you see, what you perceived about yourself is different from how others see you. Nevertheless, through the survey, it will reflect the voice of the customer". **(P3)** 

Notably, the participants were able to reflect and developed a sense of transformation just to cope up with the demands of the transition, in addition to these participants claimed that:

"I have my support group; these are the group of friends I have which are also in the same endeavor. It's a good feeling that you have someone who will understand your agony and will listen to your predicaments especially when things get rough." (P2)

"I always consult my mentors which are all veteran school heads of other schools. Seeking their expertise during situations that I need to make decisions on some critical cases". (P1)

Based on the accounts given by the participants, it is evident that in adversities they turn on to their family and friends who will listen and support them. Moreover, the participants also seek advice coming from their mentors concerning leadership technicalities.

This phenomenological inquiry emerged a model labeled as the Leader Continuum Movement, the model provides a clear nature and dynamics of the movement creating gradual steps in overcoming challenges along with the transition from teaching to leading of the select group of Filipino novice principals. High school principal position is one of the most essential, complex, and challenging assignments in the public education system (Pounder and Merrill, 2001). In this study, the motivation for the move described as the experiences of the novice principals' way back when they were new to the teaching profession are also the same experiences

that influenced the participants' outlook as a teacher. Many teachers were school leaders before moving into an administrative role; however, Newton, Riveros, and da Costa (2013) argue that many classroom teachers are hesitant to move into a leadership role, as they fear to lose their connection to the classroom and teaching and learning. Their research study found that a lot of the teachers who eventually take on leadership roles do not start with a desire to move into formal leadership or administrative positions.

The teachers gain experience in leadership positions within the school which builds their capacity and promotes their leadership capabilities (Newtown, Riveros, & da Costa, 2013). The challenges they have experienced during their entry into the service as professional teachers were accounted which includes dealing with students, piles of papers to grade, lessons to plan, increasing amount of paper works and pressure from colleagues. As reported by Headden (2014), teachers are consumed with tasks other than instructional obligations including accelerated accountability, making their jobs increasingly "much harder" than a decade ago. As verbalized by the participants these experiences that they had been a former classroom teacher made them realize and develop a deeper sense of responsibility for the welfare of the students. Armstrong (2010) suggests that teachers may be ready to seek a new challenge beyond the classroom and that they would like to learn more about education and be involved in school policy. Many aspiring leaders also want to make a difference for students' in a school as a principal rather than as a classroom teacher (Armstrong, 2010). Principal leadership is about inspiring others to rally behind a common vision or reach an ultimate goal and the ability to see the big picture while not losing sight of the process along the way (Williams & Lindsey, 2011).

Another issue observed by the novice principal participants is the difficulty in qualifying for a principal position, this is due to the tough competition among other aspiring teachers who also want to be in the administrative position. The struggle to qualify for the position entails the participants to earn post-graduate degrees, attend to trainings and seminars and do research work not only for presentation but for publication as well. Aspiring principals and administrators consider a Master's degree in educational leadership or educational administration to start their transition. This degree prepares them to move from the classroom into administration with practical training in establishing a successful culture and climate of continuous improvement by managing teachers and staff, setting goals, preparing and managing budgets, and working with parents and the community. It also helps the aspiring principal in understanding the social, economic and political landscape that they will be facing.

Along with the motivation to move, novice principals in this study also experienced the **big move** which encompasses their transition challenges from being a teacher to a school head. From this point, the participants shared that their immediate superior has a great impact on their transition period. According to the participants, the leadership opportunities entrusted to them by their immediate superiors helped shaped their outlook during the transformation. In her research, Armstrong's (2015) participants identified the support of their principal and mentoring as a significant factor in their growth and development as new administrators. The development of leadership involves internal motivation, access to leadership opportunities, and mentoring (Morillo, 2017). Another concern pointed out by the participant during this process is their difficulty in dealing with teacher subordinates. They pointed out that leading a

diverse group of teachers is their most challenging experience in the transition. (Armstrong, 2012) found a similar situation experienced by the participants in her study, she stated that, while technical skills were easier to acquire, developing personal and people management skills were more difficult because of the unpredictability of their role and the different people and constituency groups to whom they were accountable.

In this study novice principals also shared, how the challenges made them reflect and develop a sense of transformation in coping up with the transition. Novice principal leadership experiences are often described as overwhelming, pressure-filled "reality shocks" (Spillane & Lee, 2014). This is outlined as the steadfast or meeting halfway, through the challenges faced by the participants in this study, they were able to develop coping up strategies in dealing with the struggles. Crossing over to the principal role represents a sizeable shift for most newcomers, and often abrupt change in perspective, expectations, and work tasks for novices (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Principal leadership is about growth, personal responsibility, and accountability (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). In another study, effective leadership is intensely interpersonal as a leadership challenge, elevating the important role principals hold in establishing relationships built on collaboration, commitment, and trust (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). Moreover, the participants also verbalized that in moments of adversities they turn into their support group which includes their family and friends. The participants claimed that they always consult their mentors which are veteran school heads specifically in decision making on some critical cases. (Manard, 2017) reported that, novice principals receive support from other principals, they valued opportunities to discuss their experiences and challenges with more experienced colleagues, and they appreciated their guidance. They also connected having someone to "vent to" and "knowing that they were not alone" to their ability to grow as administrators and put things into perspective.

It is important that principals put student needs above all others and approach student support from a holistic perspective, looking first to meet their basic needs such as nutrition, and then building on that by developing capacity for excellent instruction (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Moreover, communication and building a strong support network is a key in effective school management, this can be done internally between teachers and students; and or externally from stakeholders and the community which includes parents. Sharing of ideas and best practices from other school heads within the District and Division levels ensures a greater chance of coping up with struggles faced by the novice principal in the first year as a school head. Constant meetings and dialogue with the constituents of the school enhance the ability of the Principal to get to recognize their job well. In so doing, the reflective space in the life of the principal starts to develop and expand. As the principal dwells and communes with this reflective space, a certain kind of serendipity takes place where she begins to witness the language of her tasks as a school leader. (De Guzman & Guillermo, 2007)

Novice principals face varied conditions in the plight as school head, this could be school conditions which includes the degree of decision-making autonomy, parent support, teacher capacity, the degree of staff cohesiveness, and the level of pressure to raise test scores. District conditions include resources, consistency of district priorities, and quality of district-provided professional development. Among these factors, the teaching capacity and cohesiveness are closely related to student outcomes. Principals

reporting higher teacher capacity with regards to skills to help other teachers improve and the ability to promote learning among all students were more likely to see achievement gains. (Burkhauser et.al., 2016)

Capitalizing on the unique power of naturalistic inquiry to research, this phenomenological paper purported to capture and describe how the experiences of educators who transitioned as novice principals in public secondary schools in the Philippines. Impliedly, the emerged model Leader Continuum Movement afforded an eidetic description of the dynamics of the prevailing transition from classroom teaching to leading a school. The novice principal milieu circumscribes facets associated with preparations and influences (motivation to move), transition challenges (the big move) and meeting halfway (steadfast). Identifying the ways on how to cope up with the challenges of being a teacher to a school head from this study underscore a continuum movement for school leaders. Through the experiences, they exemplified sophisticated interpretations and reflections on their practices, which is unique for novice principals at their stage of learning and development. Hence, educators, aspiring principals, and veteran school heads are challenged for the need to widen their perspectives to contribute to a better school system.

While the findings of this study cannot make generalizable statements that can reflect local and international principals' transition milieu, this paper progresses the current literature by shedding light on the experiences of Filipino novice principals which is not previously cited although concurring with previous international investigations. It is suggested that the emerged Leader Continuum Movement model served as a fecund foreground that is noteworthy to spearhead future research initiatives such as scale development and modeling. This study concludes to increase scholars' cognizance to problems related to the transition of teachers to being school heads and the best possible ways to support them on their plight and address their needs.

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