LEADERSHIP AND INTEGRITY IN PHILIPPINE PRIMARY EDUCATION: 
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON GOVERNANCE IN THE MIDST OF 
CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The role of a school administrator is critical to the success or failure of a learning institution. Good governance, as well as transparency and accountability in exercising administrative authority in the educational institution, therefore is expected from the leader. In the Philippines, a school administrator faces challenges especially during the transition period when routine shuffling of principals occurs between primary schools. Challenging the school principals, in general, to finish improvement plans before the end of each tenure because of changes in dynamics. This study sought to understand the context and the norms that permit the exercise of change management in a public-school setting where leadership tenure is short-lived. An ethnographic approach was used in the study with the aim of coming up with common themes based on observations and interview with key informants. The themes were from a series of thematic analyses collected during the course of the study. The key informants were native to the educational institution. This study showed that successful change management in the public elementary school would require the leader to develop a plan to fit the organizational culture. Establishing good working relationship has become an instigating factor for the leader to smoothly introduce change.

Keywords: Dependency, Ethnography, Good governance, Leadership, Organizational culture.

INTRODUCTION

The educational system in the Philippines, since its establishment during the American occupation, has required students to undergo six years of elementary education and has been that way ever since. The country has two types of primary education providers—public and private—and the distinction depends on whether the institution is funded by the government or not. These six years have provided the fundamental frame on which secondary and tertiary levels banked on, thus proving that elementary school is inherently important as a foundational base for future knowledge development of students in the Philippines.
Of the two types of elementary schools, public schools are controlled and managed by the government in which budgets, systems, and structures are dictated upon by the Department of Education (DepEd). The “establishment and maintenance of free public education in the elementary and high school levels and the implementation of compulsory elementary education for all children of school age” (DECS, 1988) are the main purposes of DepEd, as aligned to the 1987 Philippine Constitution. To comply with this mandate, the Philippine government granted to the department the largest share of the Philippine budget, with an even significant 31.5% increase for 2017 as compared to the previous year (Philippine Government Official Gazette, January 2, 2011).

**REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Given such important role in the formative years of young students in the Philippines, DepEd utilizes school administrators for each of the public schools, each aligned to the mandate of the department. Referred to in the public-school system as ‘principals,’ these individuals lead each public elementary school unit, acting as administrators and leaders of the school. They have the authority and act as representatives of the government in continuing the task of providing quality education. According to *Batas Pambansang Pamuhay* [Philippine laws, statutes, and codes] No.232 of 1982, or also known as the “Education Act of 1982,” the following were the roles of school administrators or principals:

1. Perform the duties and responsibilities to the school according to the mission and vision of the institution;
2. Be accountable for the actions exercised as an administrator;
3. Develop and encourage academic freedom and effective learning;
4. Maintain professionalism in dealing with stakeholders;
5. Provide adequate and timely feedback to personnel;
6. Exercise fairness and due process when disciplinary action is required; and
7. Practice correct and honest record-keeping to be submitted to the Department of Education.

Despite this string of responsibilities and tasks, most principals do not finish their tenure in the schools they are assigned to. More often than not, principals were rotated within units handled by regional district offices. Thus, they assumed leadership roles within a limited amount of time—an average of four years. Certain strategic plans and projects they devised at the start were unaccomplished. These principals knew that their tenure is at the discretion of DepEd, their performance or length of service in the office, and the subsequent recommendation of the local government units.

In light of this, change strategies developed and planned by the principals or school administrators in accordance with their mandates were left unfinished. The shifting of posts led to shoving aside of the unmaterialized plans by the prior principal, or consequently, the new school administrator will draw new plans again. However, such schemes rested upon the temporariness of the position (Higgs & Rowland, 2000; 2005). This study, therefore, aimed to describe the dynamics of implementing change efforts in a public school system, focusing mainly on the exercises of leadership in an academic context.
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Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the organization with concurrent administrator changes on an elementary educational institution at the principal level. While there are fundamental differences between the desired plans of past and present school administrator or ‘principal’, there are overlaps between these projects that may or may not be pursued. However, more than the projects, the elementary school principal has other representative functions in the school as it interacts with the society and the government.

**Structural Functionalism as Framework**

Using the changing approaches in the notions of leadership as background, cultural overviews were considered for review in the following concepts: 1) leadership in the pre-modern world: the non-state; 2) leadership within the pre-modern world: the monarchical state; 3) leadership within the modern world: the nation-state and the business corporations; and 4) leadership within the post-modern world: preamble state, global organizations, and networks. Since the school is controlled and managed by the government (i.e., budgets, systems, and structures are dictated by the department of education in the Philippines) the study focused on the notions of leadership that specifically centers on governance in republic organizations. In this case, the study resorted to the third approach in changing motions of leadership (i.e., leadership within the modern world: the nation-state and the business corporations.) It is important to note that this notion of leadership focuses on the emergence of human sciences (e.g., history, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and management studies) thus, analytical and pragmatic application in the fields of sociology and anthropology were considered for this study. The concept of structural functionalism served as the backbone of the ethnographic study. Focusing on this theory that perceives society as a complex system with components and parts working together to promote stability, structural functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (e.g., norms, standards, customs, and traditions) in the institution (Perrin, 1973). This framework allowed the study to be presented in macro-sociological evaluation.
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comprehensively focusing on social structures that form the elementary school as society and as a whole.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research, specifically the use of ethnographic approach, was used to synthesize data gathered from participatory observation and open-ended interviews with the subject and key informants. Common themes were highlighted to gain a deeper understanding of organizational practices concerning administration in the school, and to appreciate the essential and critical role of leadership in the organization. The data were collected through a series of conversations conducted by the researcher. The key informants were identified since the veracity of the ethnographic study is dependent upon the reliability of the key informants. The researchers triangulated every observation made by the key informants with that of others to assess the accuracy and prevent bias. Semi-structured interview was used as the qualitative method of inquiry to allow for a free exchange of ideas between researcher and key informants. During these interviews, a set of common themes were derived from the data collected.

The Participant and Key Informants

The school principal, as well as the key informants, were interviewed by the researchers on separate occasions. The teachers, who were the key informants, were selected through the criteria of tenure, and richness of qualitative information that these members may contribute to the study. These key informants also had first-hand knowledge of the current conditions in the elementary school. They were selected from a narrowed down list of potential key informants. The key informants were interviewed while the researchers were conducting their observations of the school community; as such, this led to more spontaneous answers.

Research Objectives

This research aimed to describe the implementation of change processes by a principal in a public school setting. It sought to understand the context and the norms that would permit the exercise of change management in a short-lived leadership tenure setting This paper specifically asked the following questions:

1. What are the strategies and processes used by the school principal of a public school to instill change in the institution?
2. How do the employees of the organization adapt to the changes implemented?
3. How do the leader and followers adjust to the transitionary role of the principal in the public school?

These questions were answered through the qualitative research, specifically the ethnographic method, since it would provide the answers to these questions in their “natural surroundings” (Arce 2001).
Research Setting

What determines the selection of place and people in an ethnographic study is the nature of the research question are asked (Fetterman, 1998). Given the questions addressed, the study focused on a public elementary school, one of the oldest elementary schools in the National Capital Region (NCR) of the Philippines located in the City of Marikina. Each elementary school was selected based on the size of its student body and the number of its staff. The researchers ensured that the research questions would be justified in the selection of the research locale.

The elementary school was located at one of the oldest barangays in Marikina City. As of September 2016, the school had a student population of 2,000. Its teaching force was composed of 50 full-time employees, while administrative support was composed of 10 volunteers mostly from LGU’s. The school was bordered by a local police station, an activity area, a church, a grocery store, a shopping center, and the “barangay” [town] Hall that house the health center. Other communities that surrounded the school were as follows: 1) a private Higher Education Institution (HEI); 2) a national high school; 3) a private grade school, 4) a pastoral institute; 5) school of theology; and 6) a Catholic integrated school.

The School Principal as a Leader

The current principal of the elementary school started to head the school on 03 May 2011, initially designated as Officer-In-Charge (OIC). It was on 15 June 2012 when the formal duty as principal of the school was assumed. As a school head, the school principal was viewed to be very effective by the colleagues and by the entire community (i.e., parents, students, nearby LGUs surrounding the school.) The principal was described by most the members of the school community to be very transparent (i.e., use of budget, and school resources), industrious, a role-model, and well-loved by parents and students. The principal was also a person known by the community as someone who would not talk a lot about personal achievements, but rather talk about plans, visions, and dreams for the school community. More often than not the principal would phase-in the members of the community to changes by talking about the various possibilities of improving bits and pieces in the school (e.g., cleanliness, orderliness, discipline, honesty, etc.).

According to some of the colleagues, the principal would talk about success stories of the school to parents, teachers, students, and most especially to visitors of the school. This was perceived to be the way of the principal to motivate the community and the way of expressing gratitude to the people who had been directly and indirectly involved in the realization of the projects. In general, the school principal was perceived to have a very good working relationship with subordinates, established a positive relationship with the parents of children studying in the school through school activities fostering camaraderie, and friendship, and won the hearts of the students because of the cordial, and affectionate way of dealing with them.

Data Collection Procedure

Interview with the principal and with the key informants, and direct observations of the school environment were used as data collection methods. The initial step was for the researchers to select possible key informants narrowed down from a list of potential
persons with relevant knowledge and experience pertinent to the identification of key points in the study.

A face-to-face interview was conducted because one-on-one interviews would be more likely to generate a free-flow of ideas being exchanged leading to more detailed responses as opposed to the more detached telephone interview. According to USAID (1996), interviews are:

qualitative, in-depth interviews of people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest. The interviews are loosely structured, relying on a list of issues to be discussed. Key informant interviews resemble a conversation among acquaintances, allowing a free flow of ideas and information. Interviewers frame questions spontaneously, probe for information and take notes, which are elaborated on later.

The interviews were conducted separately among the principal of the elementary school, and two teachers under the leadership and authority of the principal. The interview with the principal was conducted at his own office on a pre-scheduled date. The key informants were teachers of the school selected through the criteria of tenure, and the richness of qualitative information that these members may contribute to the study. The key informants were interviewed while the researchers were conducting their observations of the school community; as such, this led to more spontaneous answers.

Observation

The researchers took several days to observe the elementary school grounds, taking note of visible and observable information that would allow the researchers to make initial inferences about the work environment (Constantine, 2013). It gave information on the behavior of other people, with objects, events or processes and other data sources (Arce, 2001). In addition, observing allowed the verification of information given by all those interviewed to see if the changes mentioned were all implemented. The researchers took notes and pictures to support such claims.
Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in examining the data. This meant listening, reading and re-reading the interview transcriptions and highlighting important responses to the questions. This was matched with the observable behaviours manifested by the students, teachers, and community. According to Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012), a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data.

Thematic analysis was used because it is essentially a method for identifying recurring patterns and analyzing these identified patterns in qualitative data. This analysis method is useful especially in data involving people’s experiences or understanding of their immediate surroundings. In the course of the analysis, themes were identified. These themes were coherent and meaningful patterns in the data that were relevant to the research questions. As such, the researchers had to reflect on whether the identified themes would tell a convincing story about the qualitative data gathered.

RESULTS

This research sought to understand the change management practices and implementation done by a public school principal to his own academic institution. The results focused on the directly observed information and on the analysis of the themes based on the thematic responses of all those interviewed the in light of the theoretical framework.

Functionality in the Organization

The school’s organizational chart seen outside the principal’s office served as a functional tool depicting the staffing order of the community. Illustrated in a hierarchical format (i.e., from principal down to the administrative staff), the organizational charts would help those visiting the school to identify “who does what in an organization”. It also showed the number workforce in the school, and the chain of command in the institution. However, the school may not be conscious of the ineffectiveness brought by the “notions of functionality” leading to a very bureaucratic way of running the organization. On the lighter side, it has been observed that the school system already established rules and procedures allowing monitoring on its own simple way (i.e., attendance of employees, quality assurance in teacher’s delivery of instruction, local accreditation etc.) As expected, bureaucracy would create “rules” referring to a plethora of restrictions leading to rigidity (e.g., decision making). This would make the school community respond “too bureaucratic” to the demands of its constituents for quality education and excellent service delivery.

Dependency from the Local Government Units (LGUs)

The school’s dependence to the local government units (LGUs) was very visible (i.e., office of the city mayor, congressman, barangay captain, etc.) Acknowledgments of donations were observed within the campus, as well as names and insignias of the politician or the government official who contributed or spearheaded a particular project.
for the benefit of the school were observable in the school vicinity. The provision of basic services (e.g., health care, social welfare and among others) was all sourced out by the school to LGUs. The office of the congressman provided and maintained infrastructure facilities intended primarily to serve the needs of the school residents (e.g., additional classrooms, chairs, and tables, etc.) Additionally, the school community also benefited a lot from the support given by the government to the barangay [town]. The services and facilities related to general hygiene, sanitation, and solid waste collection; multi-purpose halls and pavements; and water supply systems were all coming from the funds of the city mayor’s office and other sectors of local government. It has been observed that the capabilities of the school in terms of providing better services to its stakeholders were enhanced by the support provided by the local government units, especially from the help extended by the municipalities and barangays

**Competitive Spirit in the Organization**

The commendations received by the school in various award-giving bodies, as well as the recognition's received by its students, teachers, and staff were all placed in an area that could easily be noticed when you enter the principal’s office. This reflected the drive, and the motivation of the school officials to continuously improve its performance every year. The competitive spirit in the school community was evident in a very positive way. Much attention was directed by the school head to better service delivery and academic excellence that could be achieved through utilizing the available talents in the community. The following factors were all identified to be contributing factors to the success experienced by the school as a community today: the commitment of the school head; the motivation and aspirations of the teachers; the core capabilities of the management team (i.e., LGUs); the aspiration of the school’s stakeholders; and the ability of the community to build and maintain alliances

**Good Working Relationship**

It has been observed that relationships of teachers with their colleagues gave a huge impact in creating a good working environment. The teachers who have been in the school for more than 20 years were considered to be an epitome of good working relationship with the past and present school heads, along with the past and present heads of the LGUs surrounding the school. It is important to note that teachers were significant in the academic, moral, and personal lives of the children, and that teachers would play a vital role in the children’s education. Other than the children’s parents, the teachers would be the adults that may give the most impact on the children. This is why good working relationships with teachers are important, for the child and the parent. During the interview, it was observed that the good attitude of the teachers on daily activities made their day to day work more fun and satisfying. This created a positive outlook that increased their productivity. The principal also encouraged this type of relationship within and outside of the institution

**Orderliness, Discipline, and Control within the School Community**

The institution’s governance arrangements demonstrated probity, strategic vision, accountability, awareness, and management of risk, and effective monitoring of performance. Additionally, the school was also guided by the philosophy of cleanliness
as a way of life; this created a wholesome attitude, clean surroundings that facilitated effective real teaching, learning, and working to take place. The orderliness, discipline, and control within the school community created a positive impact on the clarity of rules and the tidiness of the learning environment. This was very evident in the classrooms, offices, comfort rooms, and the school grounds.

The Success in a Complex Locality and Effective Use of Various forms of Capital

Reflecting on the insights of Bourdieu (1997) on the fundamental guises of capital coming from the leadership perspective, the researchers considered that the ability of the leader to recognize capital in its various semblances enables the leader to easily promote creativity and innovation in the organization. The economic capital which may be institutionalized in the form of money and property rights according to Bourdieu (1997) can easily be channeled to organizational efforts of providing training to people, building infrastructure, and buying sophisticated equipment to increase efficiency because of the readily available financial resource. In the case of the elementary school in focus, it capitalized on the following: 1) linkage to LGUs; 2) goal oriented-ness and the culture of positive competitiveness; 3) good working relationships; 4) orderliness, discipline, and control; and lastly 5) the school’s structural functionality. Similarly, the cultural capital which may be institutionalized in the form of education and training in running an organization (Bourdieu, 1997) can be used by the leader as an advantage over other organizations without proper schooling in product development or service enhancement for instance (e.g., the leader’s experience in high school administration). Additionally, social capital, which Bourdieu (1997) has termed as “connections,” can be used by the leader to strengthen its linkages, and social support system (e.g., LGUs). Among the three fundamental guises of capital, we believe that social capital has the most significant effect to generative (i.e. a type of leadership allied to creativity and innovation) and transformational leadership (i.e. type of leadership allied to transcendence). More often than not, it is true that when one, has a meaningful relationship with another person, one tends to work more effectively together. It is also important to note that when people in the organization have common goals and consistent purposes, it is easy to channel organizational efforts toward the same common outcome. As pointed out by Mathew (2009), effective leaders recognize the importance of building solid relationships in the organization.

CONCLUSION

Successful change management would required the school administrator and leader to develop a plan that fits the organizational culture. Establishing good working relationship has became an instigating factor for the leader to smoothly introduce change. Transparency has been used by the leader as an input to strengthen the present organizational structure. The leader’s approach of making the people in the organization appreciate the reasonable use of limited resources has increased the trust of the various stakeholders that the school would depend on (e.g., LGUs, other donors). As an output, the organization would experience orderliness in the campus, discipline imbibed by the community. Similarly, the members of the community would be triggered to continuously improve their present performance by controlling the factors that may hinder progress. Thus, a competitive spirit would be develop within the community.
The organization would conform to the changes implemented by:

1) Willingness to compromise. When people have not been informed about pending change, or when change occurred without the leader communicating what was going on, problems would occur. Leaders and followers would need to maintain open lines of communication with everyone in the organization and release as much information about pending changes as possible;

2) Stepping back. This refers to having time to analyze situations thoroughly and view actions and circumstances from different angles and perspectives to gain an accurate understanding of what has happened;

3) And Through positivism.

Managing change is also managing your feelings concerning the change. Rather than noticing negative aspects of the change occurring, one should focus on the positive. Change should be viewed as a way of to improve and maintain a positive attitude. The leader and the followers should adjust to the transitional role of the school head with a positive outlook. “Visualizing a great day ahead” where there would be a readiness to meet new challenges head-on, creating a positive attitude that would develop confidence in individual abilities (e.g., getting used to be visited for accreditation, etc.) and having an outlook to developing a rewarding and enjoyable career such as retirement.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Directions for future research may involve the use of other research methodologies to further understand good governance in the academe (e.g., quantitative evaluation) to gather feedback on the ethical or unethical practices, if any, in the academe. The subject of accountability and transparency in the academic institution could be explored further in future studies. School-based financial management can also be a specific focus for possible studies since budget scrutiny at school level especially in public institutions is rarely done. And on a similar capacity, the same ethnographic approach should be deployed but with longer time spent in the study – longer observation periods, more key informants interviewed, more time spent in looking at the infrastructure, systems, and organizational practices for better inference. Future research may also include a wider scope with the involvement of more than one school and higher school level and tertiary level institutions both private and public.

REFERENCES


