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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HEADS TRANSFERRED TO SECONDARY INTEGRATED SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of elementary school heads who were transferred to secondary integrated schools in the Municipality of Glan, Division of Sarangani. Utilizing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the study examined the challenges, coping strategies, and leadership transformations experienced by five purposively selected participants. Grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory and Role Transition Theory, the findings revealed three major challenges during the transition: establishing leadership identity and credibility, adapting to a more complex secondary curriculum, and managing adolescent behavior. To navigate these, participants relied on peer mentorship, continuous professional development, and personal coping practices such as reflection and spiritual grounding. The transition also reshaped their leadership approaches, shifted their pedagogical perspectives, and contributed significantly to their professional and personal growth. The study underscores the need for structured support systems and targeted leadership training programs for school heads undergoing similar transitions. These insights offer valuable implications for educational policymakers and leaders aiming to strengthen leadership continuity and school effectiveness across academic levels.

KEYWORDS: *School Leadership, Elementary to Secondary Transition, Phenomenology, Educational Leadership, Coping Strategies, Transformational Leadership, Philippines Education System*

INTRODUCTION

School leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape, particularly in ensuring the smooth transition of school heads across different academic levels. In many educational systems, elementary school heads are sometimes transferred to secondary integrated schools due to administrative decisions, policy changes, or leadership restructuring. This transition presents unique challenges as elementary school heads must navigate new roles, manage adolescent learners, and adapt to a different curriculum structure (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

While there is extensive research on educational leadership transitions, limited studies have specifically examined the lived experiences of elementary school heads transferred to secondary integrated schools. Much of the existing literature focuses on general school leadership transitions, with insufficient attention to the unique challenges faced by school heads moving from elementary to secondary levels. Understanding these experiences is crucial for designing effective support systems and professional development programs for transitioning school leaders.

A study by Barnett and Shoho (2016) in the United States examined the experiences of elementary principals transitioning to secondary schools. The findings revealed that school heads faced difficulties in curriculum alignment, student discipline management, and stakeholder expectations. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of mentorship and structured leadership training programs in easing the transition. These findings suggest that leadership transition programs should address both administrative and psychological adjustments.

In the Philippine context, a study by Cruz and Reyes (2020) explored the challenges faced by school leaders in the K-12 transition, particularly those moving from elementary to secondary integrated schools. Their research found that school heads experienced difficulties in adapting to the subject specialization framework and managing older students. Furthermore, the study emphasized the need for targeted leadership training and policy reforms to ensure a smooth transition for school administrators.

The present study seeks to address this research gap by capturing the narratives of elementary school heads who have transitioned to secondary integrated schools in the Philippine setting specifically in the Division of Sarangani, Municipality of Glan. By exploring their lived experiences, this research aims to understand the challenges, coping mechanisms, and leadership adaptations they employ. The findings will contribute to policy discussions on leadership transitions, professional development, and school effectiveness.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and analyze the lived experiences of elementary school heads in Municipality of Glan in the Division of Sarangani who have been transferred to secondary integrated schools. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the challenges encountered by school heads during the transition, identify the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies they employ, understand how their leadership styles evolve in the new setting, and provide insights for policymakers and educational leaders on effective transition support.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges do elementary school heads face when transitioning to secondary schools?
2. What support systems and coping strategies help school heads manage this leadership transition?
3. How does the transition affect their leadership practices, perspectives and growth?

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is anchored on the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the Role Transition Theory (Ebaugh, 1988). Transformational Leadership Theory highlights how leaders inspire and motivate their followers through vision, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. In contrast, Role Transition Theory explains the psychological and social adjustments individuals undergo when shifting roles, emphasizing the phases of anticipation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization. These theories provide a framework for analyzing the experiences of school heads adjusting to new leadership demands in secondary integrated schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to capture the essence of the lived experiences of elementary school heads transitioning to secondary integrated schools. Phenomenology is appropriate as it seeks to understand how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected school heads who have undergone this transition. Thematic analysis will be utilized to extract significant patterns and insights from the narratives.

Research Site and Participants

The research took place at the Municipality of Glan, Province of Sarangani. This focused-on school heads under the Department of Education. According to Creswell (2013), three to twenty individuals is the ideal sample size for a phenomenological investigation. There will be 5 participants in this study who are selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method wherein individuals were selected for participation based on the researchers' judgment (Braun and Clark, 2015). The participants are School Heads who once handled a pure elementary school and then transferred to Secondary Integrated Schools. Each of the participants will have a thorough interview, This sampling approach relied on the researchers' discretion in selecting individuals, settings, or events that were deemed most likely to provide valuable insights aligned with the study's goals.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically examine and interpret the interview data. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes and patterns across interview transcripts, providing insights into the shared experiences of participants (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Attride-Stirling, 2001). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for uncovering meaningful patterns within qualitative data. Initially, the researcher engaged in data familiarization by thoroughly reviewing and analyzing the interview transcripts. A coding system was then established to categorize recurring concepts and experiences, with distinct codes assigned to both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These codes were subsequently grouped into overarching themes that encapsulated the participants' core experiences. The identified themes were refined to ensure their accuracy and relevance, with clear definitions and labels assigned to articulate their essence and alignment with the research questions. The final step involved systematically reporting the findings, integrating supporting narratives and interpretations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the school heads' lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the study, several trustworthiness criteria were observed. Credibility was established through triangulation, which involved member checking and peer debriefing to validate the findings. Transferability was ensured by providing rich, thick descriptions of participant experiences, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures, ensuring that the research process was transparent and replicable. Finally, confirmability was upheld by adopting researcher reflexivity to minimize bias, allowing the study's findings to emerge objectively from the data rather than personal interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured strict adherence to ethical guidelines mandated by the University of Immaculate Conception to prevent any exploitation or abuse of study participants, either directly or indirectly.

Informed Consent Before initiating the research, the researchers ensured that all participants had sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding their involvement. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent, and they were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives. Any concerns they had were addressed before distributing the survey questionnaires, ensuring that they fully understood their participation.

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Voluntary Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The researchers clarified to respondents that they were not obligated to complete the questionnaire. If any individual declined to participate, their decision was respected, and efforts were made to understand their concerns. Additionally, respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. Upholding voluntary participation is essential to ethical research, ensuring that participants' rights and dignity are protected.

Data Privacy To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, personal identifiers were omitted from the survey questionnaire. The researchers avoided collecting sensitive data that could potentially compromise participants' privacy. All collected information was strictly used for research purposes and handled carefully.

Gender Sensitivity The study was conducted with gender sensitivity in mind, ensuring inclusivity and respect for all participants. Gender-inclusive language was used in the survey and throughout the data analysis process. A diverse sample was recruited to ensure fair representation of different gender identities. The researchers took extra care to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes in the study design and the interpretation of findings.

Cultural Sensitivity The researchers prioritized cultural sensitivity by tailoring research methods and materials to be culturally appropriate. Interactions with respondents were conducted with respect for their cultural norms, values, and traditions. The study also acknowledged different communication styles, decision-making processes, and perceptions related to financial matters. The goal was to create a culturally inclusive environment where all participants felt valued and understood.

Ethical Guidelines and Autonomy The study was conducted in accordance with the moral principles outlined in the 1979 Belmont Report, emphasizing justice, beneficence, and respect for human dignity. Participants, identified as non-traditional leaders, were of legal age and had autonomy in participating in the research. The principle of respect for persons acknowledges individuals as autonomous agents while ensuring protection for those with limited autonomy (Zucker, 2004).

Informed Consent Form (ICF) An informed consent form (ICF) was provided to participants, detailing the study's scope, objectives, potential benefits, and risks. It also included information about the institutions involved, data collection methods, and relevant contact details. No participant was coerced into participating, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they experienced discomfort or harm.

Participant Support and Data Protection The researchers assisted participants with any challenges they faced, such as technical issues or scheduling conflicts. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study by using coded names instead of personal details like age and occupation. Permission was obtained before recording any interviews. Participants' well-being was a priority, with measures in place to maximize benefits and minimize risks, aligning with the principle of beneficence (Zucker, 2004).

Anonymity and Health Considerations To prevent unintended disclosure of personal data, all participant information remained anonymous. The study posed no known risks, but if concerns arose, appropriate support services were to be provided. The research also adhered to the health and safety policies set by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) in response to COVID-19.

Justice and Fair Treatment The principle of justice was applied in the selection of participants through purposive sampling. Eligible individuals were chosen based on predetermined criteria that aligned with the study's objectives. Participants were treated fairly, ensuring equal and just distribution of both research burdens and benefits (Zucker, 2004).

Research Convenience and Compensation The study was designed to be convenient for participants, utilizing online platforms and accommodating their availability. Interview locations were quiet and secure to prevent unauthorized access and information leaks. As a token of appreciation, participants were compensated for any costs incurred, such as internet expenses, in recognition of their time and effort.

Researcher Qualifications and Data Security The researchers were master's degree students in the University of Immaculate Conception's Philosophy in Educational Leadership program. Their research was supervised by a certified Doctor of Philosophy in Education, ensuring credibility and expertise in conducting the study. To protect participants' data, the researchers complied strictly with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act 10173). Coded names were assigned to participants, and all collected materials, including written and audio files, were stored securely in locked cabinets and encrypted folders. The data will be retained for three years and then permanently deleted or destroyed to maintain confidentiality.

Relevance and Ethical Research Practices All research methodologies and data collection techniques were carefully chosen to align with the study's objectives. The researchers emphasized ethical considerations to ensure participant safety and privacy. The literature review covered relevant topics, focusing on evaluation and feedback mechanisms. These elements were thoroughly examined to understand the study's ethical framework comprehensively.

RESULTS

Profile of Participants

The table provides a comprehensive profile of the participants involved in the study on the lived experiences of elementary school heads transferred to secondary integrated schools.

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Table 1
Profile of Participants

No.	Code	Sex	Age	Position	Years in Service
1	PO1-IDI	Male	29	Head Teacher I	7
2	PO2-IDI	Female.	51	Principal I	25
3	PO3-IDI	Male	58	Principal I	38
4	PO4-IDI	Male	41	Principal I	18
5	PO5-IDI	Male	38	Head Teacher II	15

The study involved five school heads from various integrated secondary schools in Glan, Sarangani Province, each purposively selected based on their transfer from elementary to secondary settings and their willingness to participate in in-depth interviews (IDIs). Table 1 provides a summary of their demographic profiles and professional backgrounds.

Among the participants, four were male and one was female, representing a diversity of leadership roles and lengths of service in the Department of Education. Their ages ranged from 29 to 58 years, reflecting both early-career and seasoned school leaders. Two of the participants held the position of Head Teacher—one as Head Teacher I and another as Head Teacher II—while three were designated as Principal I, indicating higher administrative responsibilities.

In terms of years in service, participants exhibited a wide range of experience, from as few as 7 years to as many as 38 years. This variance provided rich perspectives on leadership transition, institutional adaptation, and personal growth as they navigated the complexities of shifting from elementary to secondary education leadership.
The coding system (e.g., PO1-IDI to PO5-IDI) was employed to maintain participant anonymity while ensuring consistency in data analysis and reference throughout the study.

Table 2
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Challenges of Elementary School Heads face when transitioning to Secondary Schools

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Experienced a challenge in Role Displacement and Resistance in Transition	• Having difficulty in leading secondary schools like starting again from scratch. • Having difficulty in adjusting to the role, feeling like a newcomer and struggling to gain acceptance and credibility in a new setting. • Having management problems with teachers who have been teaching in high school for longer time.
Difficulty in navigating new academic and Organizational Structures in the Secondary Curricullum	• Having difficulty in the fragmented curriculum in the secondary setting. • Having difficulty in the different departments to handle in secondary schools. • Struggling in the management issues in the curriculum and subject coordinator heads.
Challenged by the Adolescent Behavioral and Emotional Dynamics of the teenagers	• Difficulty in dealing with the differences of child emotional needs to teenagers' emotional needs. • Challenged by the issues between the teenagers which are more complex to deal with. • Struggling discipline towards the students in the secondary is not the same in elementary.

Challenges in the Transition from Elementary to Secondary School Leadership

This section presents the findings based on the experiences of elementary school heads in Glan, Sarangani Province, as they transitioned to leadership roles in secondary schools. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, three major themes emerged from the narratives of five school heads with varying years of service and professional backgrounds.

Experienced a challenge in Role Displacement and Resistance in Transition

This theme captures the feeling of starting over as a leader, even for those with substantial experience in elementary settings. Participants expressed challenges related to earning respect and finding their place within established high school leadership teams. Although some of the participants are already seasoned, being transferred to secondary integrated schools feels new to

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them, dealing with the differences in almost all aspects. The theme is supported by three core ideas that highlighted the experiences of school heads based on the excerpts gathered from the in-depth interview. The first core idea expresses the school head's feeling like starting from scratch since elementary structure and dealing with the teachers is really different from secondary. The second core idea is the feeling of being an outsider since they are from holding elementary schools and the secondary schools are already established for a long time. The third core idea is having problems with teachers who have been teaching in high school for longer time. This is common to seasoned teachers who stayed in that certain school for so long.

PO1-IDI emphasized that:

> "*I came in thinking I'd just apply my leadership skills, but in secondary, it feels like I'm starting from scratch. 2 years ra biya ko sa multigrade, gikan 2 teachers gi transfer ko ug secondary holding 30 teachers*"
>
> (I came in thinking I'd just apply my leadership skills, but in secondary, it feels like I'm starting from scratch. I only hold a multigrade school for 2 years and suddenly transferred to secondary schools holding 30 teachers)

In connection, P04-IDI mentioned that:

> "Even with years of experience, I feel I'm still trying to earn the respect of teachers who've been in high school longer."

The same goes for P05-IDI, who said that:

> "It's tough to blend in. The team has worked together for years, and as a newcomer from elementary, I feel like an outsider."

Difficulty in navigating new academic and Organizational Structures in the Secondary Curricullum

Participants shared difficulties in adapting to the content-heavy and department-based structure of the secondary curriculum. They found it more complex and fragmented compared to the holistic approach in elementary education.

PO2-IDI emphasized that:

> "*I wasn't trained to handle so many subject areas. Kay gikan biya kog elementary day noh. Pila Ramay subject sa elementary. So sa secondary daghan kaayog department-department. I'm trying to understand how the departments work, but it's all new to me*."
>
> (I wasn't trained to handle so many subject areas. Since I came from elementary. There are just how many subjects in elementary. And then in secondary schools there are so many. I'm trying to understand how the departments work, but it's all new to me)

In connection, P03-IDI mentioned that:

> *"Lahi jud ang curriculum sa secondary. Labi na run na pilot sa matatag curriculum ang school na gihandle nako. Lahi ang JHS lahi sad ang SHS daghan changes. Dagha deparments, daghan paperworks."*
>
> (The curriculum in secondary is different. Especially now that the school that I currently handle is one of the Pilot School for Matatag Curricullum. JHS is different, SHS is also different. So many department to deal with, with many paperworks too.)

The same goes for P04-IDI, who said that:

> "Managing subject area heads is tricky. Each one has their own expectations, and I'm caught in between."

Challenged by the Adolescent Behavioral and Emotional Dynamics of the teenagers

A notable challenge expressed was the behavioral and emotional complexity of secondary students. The participants noted that managing teenagers involved a different set of emotional intelligence skills and strategies compared to handling younger children.

PO1-IDI emphasized that:

> "Handling teenagers is a whole new world. In elementary, we guided kids step-by-step with the basics. Here, the issues are more complex. It is sometimes far beyond as I can imagine"

In connection, PO2-IDI mentioned that:

> "Teenagers today… they don't just need academics. They need emotional support. It's draining, to be honest. And there are many temptations around, like social media. Also, teenage pregnancies. We were not dealing with that in elementary level"

The same goes for PO3-IDI, who said that:

> "Discipline here isn't the same. When you are good to them, they might be also good to you or worse, abuse your goodness. Teenagers challenge authority more. You need a whole new level of patience. There was also a time (na may) killing which involves our students in Senior High School"

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Table 3.
Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Support Systems and Coping Strategies in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School Leadership

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Building Peer Mentorship and Professional Networks	• Meeting of school heads during Monthly Meeting • Senior School Heads guide newbie school heads • Learning advise from nearby or easy to reach out high school heads.
Engaging in Training and Continuous Learning	• Attends different leadership training • Signed up for online webinars and modules on secondary curriculum • Review different rules and regulations for handling secondary schools including the latest update
Practicing Personal Coping and Reflection	• Keeping a journal for tracking challenges and needs in coping up • Grounding oneself and meditation when dealing with tough decisions. • Appreciate small wins.

Support Systems and Coping Strategies in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School Leadership

This section presents the findings of the study, highlighting the major themes and core ideas derived through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The analysis revealed three overarching themes that describe the coping strategies and support systems school heads relied upon during their transition from elementary to secondary schools in the DepEd setting of Glan, Sarangani Province.

Building Peer Mentorship and Professional Networks

The first theme underscores the role of interpersonal support systems, especially mentoring and collaborative relationships with other school heads.

PO1-IDI emphasized that:

> *"Since kalit man tong pag assign sa akua sa secondary schools, gi adopt-adopt ko sa isa ka senior principal para nay mag guide nako kay bata ug baguhan pajud ko niya kalit jud tong pag assign ni SGOD Chief sa akua. Na total shift jud ko, need jud kaau ug guidance"*
>
> (Since my transfer to secondary school is sudden, one senior principal kind of adopt me so that someone can guide me in handling secondary schools. I was really young and very much newbie as it was really a sudden notice from the SGOD; a total shift)

In connection, PO2-IDI mentioned that:

> "We have the Division Monthly Meeting or DMANCOM, a cluster of school heads who meet regularly for updates and. Just knowing I'm not alone in this struggle gives me strength."

The same goes for PO5-IDI, who said that:

> "Whenever I feel lost in the academic programs, I ask advice from nearby high school heads that is easy to reach out, especially if there are some urgent decisions that I need to address. Their help is practical and reassuring. Of course, they have longer experience than I do"

Engaging in Training and Continuous Learning

The second theme illustrates how capacity-building programs, both formal and self-initiated, help bridge leadership gaps and improve competence in secondary settings.

PO1-IDI emphasized that:

> "I signed up for online webinars and modules on secondary curriculum management. They helped me a lot. But of course sometimes, theory is quite different from the trainings"

In connection, PO3-IDI mentioned that:

> *"Though I'm older, siguro mga 18 years nasad ko as school principal, but this is really new to me, being a secondary school principal. I still attend orientation and seminars, sometimes I reviewed the rules and regulations in DECS, mao paman na tawag sa DepEd sauna, in dealing some situations that needs legal basis , I also learned a lot from my wife who is a long term secondary school principal. Learning never stops, especially when you're in a new environment."*
>
> (Though I'm older, I am about 18 years as a school principal, but this is really new to me, being a secondary school principal. I still attend orientation and seminars, sometimes I reviewed the rules and regulations in DECS, that is what we called the DepEd before, in dealing some situations that needs legal basis , I also learned a lot from my wife who is a long term secondary school principal.

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Learning never stops, especially when you're in a new environment.)

The same goes for PO4-IDI, who said that:

"There are leadership trainings provided by the Division or the Region in terms of the different curriculums offered in the secondary level. This helped me understand the structure and expectations in high school."

Practicing Personal Coping and Reflection

The third theme explores the use of internal strategies such as reflection, spirituality, and reframing success as ways to maintain emotional resilience.

PO2-IDI emphasized that:

"I keep a journal where I reflect on the challenges and how I handled them. Just like when I was a classroom adviser before, when there are some troubles in my classroom, I journalled it so that it can serve as a guide in the future. It helps me stay grounded."

In connection, PO3-IDI mentioned that:

"For all the years I've been serving the department, I pray and meditate every morning in silence. My spiritual routine gives me clarity when decisions get tough."

The same goes for PO5-IDI, who said that:

"I try to focus on small wins—every successful parent meeting or resolved issue reminds me I'm growing into this role."

Table 4

Major Themes and Core Ideas on the Impact of Transition on Leadership Practices, Perspectives, andGrowth

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Redefining Leadership Practices	• Learning to delegate tasks to different department heads • More strategic in bigger school and more staff, • Balancing academic and adolescence issues.
Shifting Perspectives on Teaching and Learning	• Having academic and specialization in different curriculums in secondary schools • Subjects are being taught differently than in elementary level. • Widened understanding on the different curriculums particularly in Grades 7-10 then another difference in handling Grades 11-12
Professional and Personal Growth	• Pushing out of the comfort zone. • Learning at old age. • Adaptation to new challenge and environment.

Impact of Transition on Leadership Practices, Perspectives, and Growth

This section presents the thematic findings from the experiences of elementary school heads who transitioned into leadership roles in secondary schools within the Department of Education setting in Glan, Sarangani Province. Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, three central themes were identified that reflect how this transition influenced their leadership practices, perspectives on teaching and learning, and professional growth.

Redefining Leadership Practices

Participants shared how the shift required them to adjust their existing leadership styles. From being hands-on and all-encompassing in elementary, they had to embrace delegation, broader strategic planning, and new dynamics with subject department heads in secondary schools.

PO1-IDI emphasized that:

"The transition made me realize that leadership in high school requires balancing both academic and adolescent issues."

In connection, PO4-IDI mentioned that:

"Before in elementary, I was very-very hands-on. But now, as secondary head, I am more strategic. Bigger school, more staff so I need to assign persons or group of people to a certain task.le used to be hands-on. But with a bigger school and more staff, I had to be more strategic and less reactive."

The same goes for PO5-IDI, who said that:

"Lahi sa elementary. Mamanage nako both the subjects labi na sa subject loadings noh kay pila raman and assigning teachers also is easy. But in secondary schools, it differs. You cannot assign a teacher to teach the whole grade level so you need to learn how to delegate and trust department heads."

(It is really different from elementary. I can manage both the subject loadings and the teacher. But in secondary schools, it differs. You cannot assign a teacher to teach the whole grade level so you need to learn how to delegate and trust department heads."

Shifting Perspectives on Teaching and Learning

Participants acknowledged a change in how they viewed curriculum and instruction. Exposure to specialized subject

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teaching at the secondary level deepened their understanding and appreciation of educational progression beyond the elementary years.

PO2-IDI emphasized that:

> "In elementary, we focused on foundational skills, more ton numeracy and communication skills. Now I value academic specialization, specially when you also handle a school with a Senior High School curriculum. There are different tracks and strand depending on what offering the school qualifies."

In connection, PO3-IDI mentioned that:

> "Subjects are taught differently. Well, now, the school is the pilot implementor of the Matatag Curriculum, I can observe it is quiet different from the previous one. *Medyu, mangapa pajud mi gamay*, though the support of the department is unquestionable, seeing how subjects are taught differently made me appreciate the depth required in high school education."

The same goes for PO5-IDI, who said that:

> "The exposure widened my understanding of curriculum flow from Grade 7 to 12. It's more connected than I thought."

Professional and Personal Growth

The transition was seen not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity for growth. School heads reflected on how adapting to a new setting renewed their professional enthusiasm and led to personal transformation.

PO2-IDI emphasized that:

> "There's a sense of achievement knowing I adapted. It wasn't easy, but it made me more resilient and reflective."

In connection, PO3-IDI mentioned that:

> "Even at my age, I'm still learning. The change forced me to update my skills and attend new trainings. Tiring but fulfilling."

The same goes for PO5-IDI, who said that:

> "It pushed me out of my comfort zone. I've grown more in the last two years than in my previous ten."

DISCUSSION

Challenges of Elementary School Heads face when transitioning to Secondary Schools

Experienced a Challenge in Role Displacement and Resistance in Transition. Transitioning from leading an elementary school to managing a secondary school presents a significant shift in leadership identity and relational dynamics. Participants reported feeling like they were starting from scratch, indicating a deep sense of role displacement. This includes difficulty in gaining credibility, especially among seasoned secondary teachers who may resist leadership from someone with an elementary background.

According to Barty et al. (2019), school leadership transitions are often met with resistance when there is a perceived mismatch between prior experience and the new context. Leadership in secondary settings demands a different approach due to departmentalization, subject expertise, and teacher autonomy (Day & Sammons, 2016). Additionally, Gurr and Drysdale (2016) emphasized that new school leaders often face identity shifts as they navigate unfamiliar school cultures and redefine their leadership stance.

In a Philippine context, Bañez & Barrot (2018) found that newly transitioned school heads often struggle with institutional acceptance, especially when senior staff question their qualifications or experience. The phenomenon of professional resistance highlights the importance of transitional mentoring and contextual leadership adaptation.

Difficulty in Navigating New Academic and Organizational Structures in the Secondary Curriculum. Participants expressed confusion and challenges in adjusting to the fragmented structure of the secondary curriculum, which includes both Junior and Senior High School levels, specialized tracks, and multiple departments. Elementary leadership experience does not fully prepare one for the departmentalized and track-based nature of secondary education.

As DepEd (2016) implemented the K-12 Basic Education Program, the introduction of specialized strands and academic tracks in Senior High School added layers of complexity to curriculum management. Muega (2017) highlighted that many school heads from elementary backgrounds found the secondary curriculum's scope and structure overwhelming, due to their lack of familiarity with subject specialization and performance-based assessment schemes.

Furthermore, Flores & Lopez (2020) noted that leadership in secondary schools requires proficiency in supervising subject coordinators and academic heads, roles which are less common in elementary settings. The organizational hierarchy and division of labor in secondary schools demand a shift in management style, collaborative planning, and distributive leadership (Harris & Jones, 2015).

Challenged by the Adolescent Behavioral and Emotional Dynamics of Teenagers. Elementary school heads transitioning to secondary schools also highlighted difficulties in dealing with the emotional, behavioral, and disciplinary complexities of adolescents. They noted that the developmental needs and issues of teenagers—such as identity formation, peer pressure, and mental health concerns—are far more nuanced and challenging compared to young children.

This aligns with the findings of Gareis & Tschannen-Moran (2016), who argued that adolescent learners require distinct behavior management strategies rooted in emotional intelligence and cultural responsiveness. In the Philippine context, Alampay

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& Jocson (2020) emphasized the rising behavioral concerns in secondary schools, including cyberbullying, truancy, and mental health issues, which necessitate responsive and adolescent-focused leadership practices.

Moreover, Zirkel & Barnes (2019) suggest that educational leaders must understand adolescent psychology to create supportive environments conducive to learning and development. This requires professional development in adolescent behavior management, which many elementary-trained school heads often lack.

Support Systems and Coping Strategies in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School Leadership

Building Peer Mentorship and Professional Networks. Newly transitioned school heads often rely on peer mentoring and professional networks as critical support systems during their adjustment to secondary school leadership. Participants highlighted the role of monthly meetings, mentorship from senior school heads, and informal consultations with nearby leaders as valuable resources for professional learning and confidence building.

According to Bush and Glover (2016), collegial networks and mentorship structures promote leadership efficacy and reduce feelings of isolation, particularly for novice or transitioning school leaders. In similar contexts, Parylo and Zepeda (2015) argue that formal and informal mentoring enhances leadership identity development and fosters a culture of continuous learning and shared expertise. In the Philippines, Maligalig et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of inter-school collaboration and district-level leadership support as a means to strengthen school-based management and leadership transition.

Mentoring relationships, especially those built within regional or division-level networks, serve as a bridge between policy understanding and real-life school leadership practices, helping school heads align their work with expectations while managing day-to-day leadership demands.

Engaging in Training and Continuous Learning. Another emerging theme is the emphasis on professional development and lifelong learning. Participants expressed that attending leadership training, enrolling in online modules, and reviewing updated secondary education policies were strategies they employed to adapt to their new environment.

Robinson et al. (2017) assert that school leaders who engage in continuous professional learning are more adaptive and capable of leading change effectively. The need for ongoing leadership training is even more pronounced in transition scenarios, where leaders must rapidly acquire competencies in a new educational tier. In the context of the Philippine K-12 curriculum shift, Oracion and Remedio (2020) found that leadership training directly influences school heads' confidence and readiness in implementing complex curriculum systems, particularly in Senior High School.

Furthermore, Ng (2019) explains that in the age of digital learning, online training and webinars provide accessible and flexible modes of professional development for busy school leaders, fostering reflective and self-directed learning that meets their situational needs.

Practicing Personal Coping and Reflection. Transitioning leaders also turned to personal coping mechanisms and reflective practices to manage the stress, ambiguity, and pressure of new roles. These include journaling, mindfulness meditation, and celebrating small wins, which help sustain motivation and emotional stability.

Leithwood and Azah (2016) highlight that effective school leaders engage in reflective practices to analyze their decisions and respond more effectively to complex challenges. Coping strategies are especially crucial during leadership transitions, where emotional resilience determines one's ability to adapt. Day and Gu (2015) identified emotional well-being and professional resilience as critical traits of high-performing school heads, which are often strengthened through self-reflection and inner grounding.

In the Philippine setting, Cruz and Gutierrez (2021) emphasized that self-care, resilience, and emotional regulation techniques such as journaling and quiet reflection are essential for sustaining school leadership in challenging contexts, including leadership reassignments and curriculum reforms.

Impact of Transition on Leadership Practices, Perspectives, and Growth

Redefining Leadership Practices. As elementary school heads transition to secondary integrated schools, they are compelled to redefine their leadership practices to adapt to the broader scope and complexity of the new environment. Participants highlighted the importance of delegating tasks to department heads, adopting strategic leadership approaches in managing larger schools, and balancing both academic and adolescent concerns.

According to Leithwood et al. (2017), successful school leadership requires distributed leadership models, especially in secondary settings where subject specialization demands more focused oversight. Delegation and the empowerment of middle leaders such as department heads help sustain instructional quality and staff motivation. Bush and Glover (2016) affirm that the role of secondary school heads is less about direct supervision and more about strategic coordination, vision-setting, and stakeholder management.

In the Philippine context, Dizon and Umali (2019) reported that school heads transitioning to bigger schools must shift from hands-on management to more strategic leadership, allowing them to prioritize systemic issues, data-driven planning, and holistic student development.

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Shifting Perspectives on Teaching and Learning. Transitioning leaders observed a significant shift in their perspectives on teaching and learning, particularly due to the fragmented nature of secondary education and the diversity of subjects and specializations across Junior and Senior High School. The curriculum structure and pedagogical strategies in secondary levels were noted to be vastly different from elementary teaching.

Flores and Day (2016) emphasized that understanding curriculum diversity is essential for instructional leadership in secondary schools. Unlike elementary schools where the curriculum is integrated, secondary education is compartmentalized, requiring heads to be familiar with varied subject demands and teaching approaches. Muega (2017) noted that Grades 11 and 12 introduce even greater complexity with the addition of academic tracks (e.g., STEM, HUMSS, ABM), requiring leaders to manage differentiated teaching strategies and specialized instructional materials.

Furthermore, DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017 outlines the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), encouraging school heads to support pedagogical approaches aligned with developmental and subject-specific needs. School leaders must ensure that teachers' instructional strategies align with both curriculum standards and adolescent learning requirements.

Professional and Personal Growth. Participants reflected that the transition brought about significant professional and personal growth, often describing it as a push beyond their comfort zones. Learning to manage secondary schools at an older age and adapting to unfamiliar environments were seen not just as challenges but opportunities for transformation.

Gurr and Drysdale (2016) argue that effective school leadership is rooted in continuous self-improvement and a willingness to embrace change. Personal growth often stems from leadership challenges that require resilience, adaptability, and a reflective mindset. Similarly, Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2015) emphasized that crises and transitions in leadership can catalyze deep personal development, forcing leaders to confront their limitations and grow in response to complex demands.

In a local study, Magsambol (2020) noted that Filipino school heads who faced new leadership roles later in their careers showed increased emotional intelligence, confidence, and expanded professional networks as a result of their willingness to evolve and persist through adversity.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further inquiry:

1. A longitudinal study could be conducted to track how school heads evolve over multiple years following their transition.
2. A comparative study between school heads who succeeded in their transition and those who struggled could reveal additional insights into effective support mechanisms.
3. Future research could also explore the perspectives of teachers and students under the leadership of newly transferred heads to gain a holistic view of the leadership impact.

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