

Leading from the Frontlines: School Principals' Perspectives on Crisis Management during the New Normal

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Abstract

The present study investigated the emergence of situational leadership during COVID-19 pandemic called new normal leadership among secondary school principals of Taganaan District, DepED-Surigao del Norte Division. Based on the criterion, all the five full-fledged secondary school principals in the district during the school years 2020-2022 are the participants. The study employed Husserlian phenomenological approach. Using transcriptions, codes, and triangulations of the data gathered, themes were extracted in the data analysis. Findings shows that the new normal requires school leaders to (1) embrace technology, (2) implement strict health protocols, (3) be adaptable, and (4) be well-informed. Additionally, (5) providing support for teachers and staff is crucial in maintaining the quality of education and ensuring their well-being. These findings suggest that school leaders must be proactive and responsive in adapting to the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

Keywords: *New normal leadership style, secondary school principal, phenomenological approach, COVID-19 pandemic, embracing technology*

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Introduction

In the Philippines, Francisco & Nuqui (2020) emphasized the necessity for leaders to be flexible, agile, and innovative in their leadership approach during the new normal. They argue that leaders must adapt to changing circumstances, pivot their strategies as needed, and maintain their dedication.

Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions face constantly evolving situations and the complexities of the communities they serve (Netolicky, 2020). School leaders in Taganaan District encounter significant challenges in effectively responding to their schools' needs, requiring them to navigate unforeseeable circumstances and make difficult decisions. District principals express fear and

uncertainties about their educational leadership in the new normal. Notably, most schools in Tagana-an District are located on islands, and some school heads are not residents of the area. This presents a major challenge in managing school operations, including sustaining classes, maintaining education quality, and fulfilling teachers' responsibilities, given that many teachers live far from the school.

In light of these circumstances, this research aims to investigate the following research question: How do school leaders in Taganaan District embrace the implementation of the new normal to address the needs of their clients during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis? The present study draws on various theoretical perspectives, including educational leadership and management, crisis management, and distance education.

Educational leadership and management theory, as introduced by Bush (2011), underscores the importance of effective communication, decision-making, and adaptation to changing circumstances in educational organizations. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these theories provide a framework for analyzing how school heads adapt their leadership styles to ensure educational continuity while prioritizing the safety of students, teachers, and staff.

On the other hand, crisis management theory (Jacques, 2010) offers a framework for analyzing how leaders respond to unexpected and high-stress situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective highlights the significance of contingency planning, crisis communication, and decision-making in times of crisis.

Lastly, Borje Holmberg's theory of distance education provides a framework for understanding how educational leaders are adapting to the shift towards online and distance learning in response to the pandemic (Simonson & Schlosser, 2009). This perspective emphasizes the importance of technology infrastructure, instructional design, and teacher professional development in supporting effective distance education. Additionally, it aligns with relevant provisions of Republic Act 9155, the "Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001," and is supported by DepEd Order No. 14, s. 2020, Guidelines on the Required Health Standards in Basic Education Offices and Schools, and DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2020, Adoption

of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for Schools in Light of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.

In summary, the theoretical framework of this study on new normal leadership styles of school heads during the COVID-19 pandemic is informed by a combination of educational leadership and management, crisis management, and distance education theories. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by school heads in the new normal and the strategies they employ to address these challenges and support effective education during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has accelerated educational reform, primarily driven by necessity rather than deliberate and thoughtful planning. Consequently, school heads have applied various leadership style approaches. Considering Taganaan District's experience with the new normal, it is of utmost interest to explore the leadership styles possessed by school heads to successfully lead and manage their schools in sustaining the education system.

Method

Research design

Husserlian phenomenology proves to be a suitable approach for analyzing the leadership styles of school heads during the COVID-19 pandemic's new normal. This approach focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and aims to understand the essence of these experiences by setting aside preconceptions and assumptions and examining the experiences themselves (Smith, 2018). Furthermore, the study's focus is to explore the personal experiences and perspectives of school heads regarding their leadership styles during the pandemic. Therefore, the Husserlian approach is appropriate for capturing and understanding the essence of these experiences.

Husserl's phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of human experience in its pure, unaltered form, devoid of preconceived notions or biases. This is achieved through a process called "phenomenological reduction" or "bracketing," where the researcher sets aside their own opinions, beliefs, and assumptions

and solely focuses on the data of the experience. The goal is to uncover the essential structures and patterns of experience that are common to all individuals, regardless of cultural, historical, or individual differences.

Through this process, Husserl believed that a deeper insight into the nature of human consciousness, the meaning of experiences, and the world we inhabit can be gained. This approach has had a significant influence in various fields, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and education. It has been used to study diverse topics such as perception, memory, ethics, and the experience of suffering.

Participants

The participants in this study are the fully appointed secondary school principals of Taganaan District in Surigao del Norte Division during the school year 2020-2021. Four secondary principals from the district met the criteria and were considered as participants. To protect their privacy in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, the researchers did not provide a detailed exposition of the respondents' identities.

Data collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted using a prepared interview guide. The survey questions were validated by experts in the field to ensure the elicitation of the necessary data. All interviews were audio-recorded to accurately capture the information. After transcription and analysis, the data were treated and carefully stored for confidentiality purposes.

To ensure efficient information collection, the researcher followed these procedures: (1) Requested permission and briefed participants about the study, seeking their full participation. (2) For ethical considerations, an informed consent form was provided to each participant, which they signed to indicate their willingness to participate. Additionally, a tape-recording consent form was presented, asking for permission to record the interviews. (3) Participants were provided with the interview guideline in

advance to allow them time to prepare. This facilitated information-rich responses. (4) Individual interviews were conducted in participants' respective offices to allow for in-depth understanding and flexibility in asking questions. (5) An audio recorder was used during each interview to ensure accurate recording, enabling participants to speak freely and share their experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and was conducted by the main researcher. (6) At the end of each interview, participants were reminded of a follow-up contact via telephone to discuss the study findings and ensure their experiences were accurately reflected. (7) The level of data saturation was determined by the researcher and a data consultant in parallel with data collection, reaching consensus on saturation.

Data analysis

To perform the Husserlian phenomenological analysis, the first step involved transcribing the data while preserving its essence. The data were read multiple times, paying close attention to the described experiences and perceptions. Essential structures of the experiences were identified, including common themes, patterns, and experiences. Descriptions were then formulated based on these essential structures, ensuring the accurate representation of the experiences. Themes capturing the essence of the experiences were developed from the identified structures. The findings were verified by cross-checking them against the original data. The results of the analysis, including themes and descriptions, were written in a clear and concise manner that accurately reflected the essence of the experiences described in the data.

Result

Primary Problem

How their leadership style being demonstrated by school principals during COVID-19 pandemic crisis especially in the educational system? The following are the responses of the randomly selected School Heads of Tagana-an District:

School Head 1

“By embracing the new normal implementation answering the correspond needs of our clientele. Applying the distance communication by guiding and instructions purposes. All over, the forms of executing as leader in school should used social media considering the availability of internet occurs and signal. Teachers and pupils should be pack into safety in continuing the educational system and also using the application since we are controlled by the policy of IATF health protocol and being persuasive in all the things we do”.

School Head 2

“by adopting the mode of implementation in which school leader communicate via social media or other means of communication for greater education in guiding and instruction purposes”.

School Head 3

“There is a new normal leadership in the sense that you are leading your teachers and your staff in a new kind of situation different from how things used to be or shall we call it different from normal conditions which is cause by the covid 19 pandemic. As a school head , I am assigned in tagana-an district but my original residence is Surigao City. At first, It challenged me especially when the lockdown was implemented since the IATF was very strict but I was able to adjust slowly. I demonstrated my new normal leadership trough the use of technology. Technology is very helpful in the new normal since all instructions and important communications like meetings, seminars, trainings go through social media such as facebook, youtube, google meet and zoom. I watched current events every now and then to be able to keep in touch with the new directives related to the new normal. As a leader you must be advanced and prepared on on what’s going to happen during the pandemic as it helps a lot in leading the teachers and your staff. In the normal, I lead accordance with the other government agencies to make sure no health protocol is deviated”.

School Head 4

“there is really a new normal leadership demonstrated during covid-19 pandemic crisis in the educational systems through strict implementation and observing health protocols inside the school premise like washing and sanitizing

of hands, social distancing, wearing of facemask at all times and checking of body temperature. Another is the implementation of the alternative work arrangement of the teaching personnel. We applied the 50% number of teachers who will stay in school. I also keep on giving updates and even technical assistance to my teachers even if they are on their work from home through our group chat”.

Utilizing the Husserlian phenomenological approach, we can explore the experiences and perspectives of school heads in their leadership styles during the new normal in education. School Head 1 underscores the significance of meeting the needs of their clientele by embracing the implementation of the new normal. This school head acknowledges the importance of communication through distance learning, particularly utilizing social media platforms. The use of technology is seen as a means to ensure the continuity of the educational system while adhering to the health protocols mandated by the IATF. Moreover, the school head emphasizes the necessity of ensuring the safety of both teachers and students.

School Head 2 places emphasis on the mode of implementation that involves school leaders communicating via social media or other means of communication to facilitate better guidance and instruction. This approach reflects the school head's recognition of the crucial role communication plays in sustaining the educational system during the new normal.

School Head 3 describes the leadership challenges faced by school leaders in the educational system during the new normal, which deviates from normal conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The school head highlights the utilization of technology as an essential tool in maintaining communication with teachers and staying abreast of new directives related to the new normal. Furthermore, the school head underscores the significance of being proactive and prepared for the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

School Head 4 underscores the importance of strictly implementing and adhering to health protocols within the school premises, such as regular handwashing, sanitization, social distancing, and the use of face masks, as well as conducting temperature checks. The school head also mentions the implementation of alternative work arrangements for teaching personnel, wherein only 50% of the teachers are physically

present in the school. Additionally, the school head emphasizes the importance of keeping teachers updated and providing technical assistance through group chat, even when they are working from home.

School Head 4 highlights the importance of strict implementation and observance of health protocols inside the school premises, such as washing and sanitizing of hands, social distancing, wearing of facemasks, and checking of body temperature. The school head also mentions the implementation of alternative work arrangements for teaching personnel, which involves the application of the 50% number of teachers who will stay in school. The school head also emphasizes the importance of keeping the teachers updated and providing technical assistance through group chat, even if they are working from home.

In summary, the experiences and perspectives of the school heads underscore several important factors for ensuring the continuity of education during the new normal in education. These factors can be summarized as follows:

- a. **Embracing technology:** All school heads emphasized the significance of utilizing technology, particularly social media, to facilitate communication with teachers and students. This highlights their recognition of technology's crucial role in maintaining education despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. **Implementing health protocols:** The school heads stressed the importance of strictly implementing health protocols to ensure the safety of everyone within the school premises. This includes practices such as handwashing, sanitization, social distancing, wearing face masks, and conducting body temperature checks.
- c. **Adaptability:** One school head shared the challenges faced during the lockdown and the slow adjustment to the new normal. This highlights the need for school leaders to be adaptable and proactive in responding to the evolving circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

d. Staying informed: Another school head emphasized the importance of staying up-to-date with current events and directives related to the new normal. This underscores the need for school leaders to be well-informed about the situation, enabling them to make informed decisions and lead effectively.

e. Supporting teachers and staff: One school head mentioned providing updates and technical assistance to teachers, even when they are working from home. This highlights the significance of offering support to teachers and staff during these challenging times.

Figure 1 illustrates a hierarchical representation that presents the themes derived from the analysis. This hierarchy visually demonstrates the relationships between the themes, with the main theme of "Embracing Technology" encompassing the sub-themes of "Being Informed" and "Support for Teachers and Staff," which further branch out into more specific sub-themes.

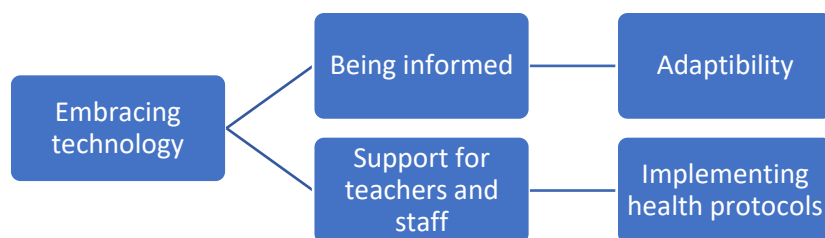


Figure 1. Hierarchical relationship of the School Heads' leadership style demonstrated during COVID-19 pandemic crisis

The main or overarching theme is "Embracing Technology," which represents the primary focus of the school heads' responses, emphasizing the importance of utilizing technology in the context of the new normal in education. Within this theme, two specific aspects, "Being Informed" and "Support for Teachers and Staff," serve as sub-themes that delve into different dimensions of the main theme, highlighting the

significance of staying informed and providing support within the context of technology adoption to address the challenges of the new normal in education.

The sub-theme "Being Informed" emphasizes the importance of staying updated about current events, directives, and changes related to the new normal in education. It underscores the need for school leaders to be knowledgeable about the latest developments and guidelines in order to make informed decisions and effectively navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Being informed enables school leaders to adapt their leadership approach and strategies accordingly.

On the other hand, the sub-theme "Support for Teachers and Staff" recognizes the significance of providing assistance, guidance, and updates to teachers and staff members during the COVID-19 pandemic. It acknowledges that the well-being and professional development of educators are essential for maintaining the continuity of education. Through support, school leaders can help teachers and staff navigate the challenges of remote teaching, alternative work arrangements, and the implementation of health protocols. This sub-theme emphasizes the role of school leaders in fostering a supportive and collaborative environment within their educational community.

Under the sub-theme "Being Informed," there is a connection to the sub-theme "Adaptability." This connection indicates that staying informed about current events, directives, and changes related to the new normal is crucial for school leaders to adapt and adjust their approach accordingly. It highlights the importance of being flexible and responsive to the evolving circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

Similarly, under the sub-theme "Support for Teachers and Staff," there is a connection to the sub-theme "Implementing Health Protocols." This sub-theme underscores the importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of teachers and staff by implementing and enforcing health protocols within the school premises. It emphasizes the role of school leaders in prioritizing the health and safety of their educational community. Overall, these themes and sub-themes provide a comprehensive framework for

understanding the experiences and perspectives of school heads in navigating the new normal in education.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the leadership styles of secondary school principals in the context of the new normal. The following insights unveil how school leaders adapted to the implementation of the new normal in response to the needs of their clients amidst the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

First, the use of technology, particularly social media, is crucial in communicating with teachers and students to ensure the continuity of education during the pandemic. School leaders with sufficient digital leadership skills have a great advantage as they are familiar with different communication tools and platforms, enabling them to effectively engage with their teachers and students. This finding confirms previous perspectives on the importance of school leaders' digital competence and their role in supporting teachers in using technology effectively for teaching and learning (Karakose et al., 2021). It also emphasizes the importance of integrating technology effectively and employing pedagogical practices to address these challenges and ensure quality education for all students during the pandemic (Starkey et al., 2021).

Second, the strict implementation of health protocols within the school premises is essential to ensure the safety of everyone. In this study, school leaders made sure that all their constituents adhered to the latest government guidelines and protocols for COVID-19. Moreover, they adjusted to the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic, becoming proactive in finding ways to ensure the continuity of education while keeping everyone safe. These findings support theoretical proposals that the implementation of COVID-19 protection protocols significantly impacted the teaching and learning process, including disruptions to the school calendar, reduced face-to-face instruction, increased workload for teachers, and changes in teaching methods (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Third, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and be proactive in addressing challenges is essential for school leaders during this pandemic. It is a vital trait that will continue to be necessary even after the pandemic has subsided. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to adopt new ways of teaching and learning, posing a significant challenge for many school leaders. One school head's experience highlights the need for school leaders to be adaptable and proactive in responding to the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Adapting to new circumstances is crucial for school leaders to continue providing quality education while ensuring the safety of their students and staff. Furthermore, the present study found that school heads recognized the necessity of keeping themselves updated on the latest news and directives related to the new normal, enabling them to make informed decisions and lead their teachers and students effectively. These outcomes justify the need for leaders to adapt to changing circumstances, remain flexible, and be proactive in finding solutions to challenges brought about by the pandemic (Bagwell, 2020).

Finally, the results reveal that school leaders in Taganaan District provided support and guidance to their teachers and staff. This includes providing updates, technical assistance, and addressing any concerns and issues that may arise during these challenging times. The findings emphasize the importance of encouraging teachers to communicate with parents and students about safety protocols and to be flexible in adapting to changing circumstances (UNICEF, 2020). The findings also demonstrate that school heads adhere to the role of schools in supporting the mental health and well-being of students and staff during these challenging times (WHO, 2021).

Conclusion

Despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the teachers and school heads of Taganaan District, DepED-Surigao del Norte Division have remained empowered and selfless in their commitment to ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning during the crisis. It can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the leadership style in schools. The school heads have demonstrated a new normal leadership style that centers on the use of technology, strict implementation of health

protocols, adaptability, being well-informed, and providing support to teachers and staff. These highlights underscore the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasize the need for school leaders to be flexible and responsive in their leadership approach. Further testing of this grounded theory using a quantitative approach is highly recommended to confirm and delve deeper into these findings.

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