

## Change of Role: A Case Study of a First-Time School Head in Bago City, Philippines

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the transition of a novice school principal in an upland, resource-limited region of Bago City, Philippines, where leadership challenges are influenced by geographical isolation and scarce resources. It seeks to comprehend how an inexperienced leader transitions from classroom instruction to school administration while handling augmented responsibilities and accountability. Employing a qualitative single instrumental case study design, data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review, subsequently analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. The findings identified four principal themes: motivation derived from experience and education, inclusive and deliberative decision-making, the cultivation of relational and adaptive leadership skills, and personal growth grounded in servant leadership. The change meant taking on more responsibilities and changing how people saw themselves as professionals, which required emotional strength and the ability to think in systems. The study shows that good leadership in marginalized situations is based on relationships, takes the context into account, and is based on moral behavior. These results show that new school heads need leadership development programs that are tailored to their needs and targeted support from their schools. This will help make educational leadership in underserved communities more inclusive and effective.

**Keywords:** Educational leadership, first-time school head, upland education, servant leadership, distributed leadership, resource-constrained schools, case study, Bago City, Philippines

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### Introduction

Education continues its crusade to combat socio-economic prejudices and seeks to equalize every human being with the equal opportunity that encompasses all barriers. In its long-standing journey lies the undermining representation of school leaders that faces insurmountable pressures and expectations by society and its comprising institutions (Cabildo, 2025). Moreover, the shift from being in the grassroots of teaching to an upholder of public administration only emphasized the multifaceted nature of being a leader, which hand in hand carries the magnitude of consequences in crafting educational decisions and community outgrowth (Redondo-Sama et al., 2025).

This global standpoint underscores the importance of grasping how school heads balance responsibility and ensure accountability in various educational decisions and contexts (Thessin & Louis, 2019).

Leadership in education across Asia often depicts the unique navigation of the contextualized cultural, social, and institutional framework. Like many countries on the continent, especially those with diverse and demographically dispersed communities, are facing challenges such as teacher shortages, resource limitations, socio-economic disparities, and corruption (See et al., 2025). These enumerated factors play an influential role in how school leaders assume their roles, particularly first-

time heads who are encouraged to be adaptive to quick response and management of the workforce, and at the same time, meet the community's expectations (Halevi & Schechter, 2023). Thus, in most places across the Asian continent, school leaders are normed persons extending beyond administrative duties in playing key roles in fostering educational equity and localized development.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the roles of school heads play a pivotal role in enriching the rosters of standard quality education, particularly in remote upland areas where resources are scarce. Likewise, Filipino school leaders are often deemed to deliver day-to-day school management operations, yet at the same time juggle between responding to community needs and implementing national educational policies and programs that secure children's overall welfare (Perez, 2023). Hence, the movement from the teacher role to administering the teaching force is often accompanied by an increase in accountability, tests of leadership skills, and resource management challenges (Gomez & Ramos, 2024). These overarching obstacles are further amplified in upland areas like Bago City, Philippines, where geography and socio-economic factors add layers of complexity to the governance (Chua Reyes et al., 2022).

This case study pertained to a newcomer who serves as principal for the first time at a public elementary school located in the mountainous part of Bago City, Philippines. Geographically, it is out of the way, and this economic underdevelopment is shown by the difficult transportation system and a shortage of vital information resources, such as books needed for teaching. The village where the school lies is inhabited mainly by poor families. Most of the parents, therefore, have no high level of educational background, and their children perform poorly in math and science. Yet these factors still present a myriad of obstacles for school leaders, as not only are they expected to manage the everyday operations of a school, but they also have to serve as mediators between cultures that are unique to upland settings and community dynamics evolving from centuries of isolation. While following the new leader's emergence, the paper can delineate this setting of geographical distance and paucity of resources in greater depth. It helps to define the limits of the decision-making experience for stakeholders, as well as expectations they may hold. It also outlines more clearly what is expected from leaders. This setting provides a case distinct from urban or well-endowed areas typically included in studies of school administration affairs.

Despite numerous efforts to grow interest in educational leadership (Abdurahman, 2021; Estacio & Estacio, 2022; Songcayawon et al., 2022), there remains a big research gap concerning the specific lived experiences of first-time

school heads in geographically challenging and resource-limited places like the upland Bago City. Admittedly, most existing studies highly focus on urban or affluent resource contexts, which leaves limited room for comprehending how leadership responsibilities and accountability are managed in more suburban or remote areas. In the same way, this gap undermines the need for localized and context-sensitive research (Khanal et al., 2021) that encapsulates the realities of educational leaders operating under these circumstances, and thus provides valuable insights that can either inform policy or practices tailored to such an environment.

This case study aims to provide a substantial exploration of the lived experience of a novice leader in the upland environment of Bago City, Philippines, by focusing on how the school head manages the transition from teaching to handling school administration tasks while balancing additional responsibilities and heavier accountability. The study seeks to fill the critical research gap concerning educational leaders in remote areas that are resource-limited. The findings in this research may have notable implications for the betterment of educational policy and practices, where it highlights the need for more context-sensitive support systems and programs that help recognize the unique demands being faced by first-time school heads in similar locales. Furthermore, this study will contribute some value-added information that can both inform and serve as a basis for crafting leadership development programs, resource allocation, and strategies for effective community engagement, which are tailored to uplift the quality of effective administration in upland areas or other marginalized localities.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative study that used a single instrumental case study method to explore the complexity and contextualized lived experiences of a first-time school head in the upland area of Bago City. An instrumental case study is a research methodology that focuses on the understanding of a particular phenomenon that offers a thicker description of a certain site, individual, or occupation as a basis for anchoring pre-existing theories (Stake, 2005). In this study, the participant is the identified case bound in a specific time and space. The result of this study aims to fill the realities and nuances faced by first-time school heads stationed in upland areas, such as in Bago City.

### **Participant**

The participant, a 35-year-old male, is a newly transitioned teacher-in-charge from one of the schools in the upland

area of Bago City, Philippines. His case is bound within the academic year 2025-2026. His latest appointment as a school head, where circumstances and responsibility could feel a little alienating by nature, led to the selection for this purposive sampling. Thus, this sampling strategy ensures that the participant has met the new leadership role criteria, thereby providing relevant and perceptive data regarding the hindrances and adjustments during this pivotal change period.

### **Instrument**

The main research instrument used to gather data was a semi-structured interview guide made specifically for this study. It was designed to elicit a circumstantial narration about the participant's experiences, points of view, and realization of the dual responsibilities of the teaching and administrative roles. Given the flexible nature of this instrument, this allows the researchers to probe further into emerging new themes. At the same time, the interview protocol enabled the researchers to maintain the focus on key areas of decision-making, accountability, and community involvement.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection procedure comprised a series of steps, beginning with securing informed consent from the participant. Then later on, interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting within the school's vicinity that fosters a safe environment to be vulnerable in the process of interviewing. The interviews were divided into several sessions that, overall, lasted up to 190 minutes, and were audio recorded with permission. In addition, observations of the participant during school events, as well as a review of school-related documents, were also utilized to supplement the interview data to provide further contextual understanding. In this manner, a field note was meticulously curated and maintained throughout the process.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

In analyzing the data, inductive thematic analysis was employed. This process commenced with a verbatim transcription of the interview recording and followed by multiple readings to dive into the data (Khokhar et al., 2020). The initial codes were generated based on the relevance of the statements to the study's focus. Later on, these codes were organized into broader thematic categories that manifest the participant's experiences related to accountability, responsibility, and decision-making in the school leadership role. With its iterative nature, this allowed a further refinement of themes and ensured that interpretations were grounded on the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researchers observed the standards of qualitative research. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the four general criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (Stahl & King, 2020) to observe data trustworthiness. By following those criteria, the researchers aimed to provide confidence to the readers and fellow researchers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study rigorously implores ethical considerations throughout the study. The participant was provided with informed consent and shared the purpose and procedures of the study, with the notion that participation is based on willingness to participate. Confidentiality was highly regarded, as data were being collected. Data and information are kept anonymous, and all written and recorded transcripts are securely stored. Furthermore, the participant was informed of his right to withdraw from the study at any time without restraint or negative consequences.

### **Results**

After conducting a semi-structured interview with the participant, four themes emerged that define how a novice leader in the upland area experiences the transition. These are motivation, decision-making, leadership skills, and personal growth. These themes help one understand the realities faced by new educational leaders that interplay in their new environment as they fulfill these expectations of them.

#### **Motivation influenced by Experience and Education**

The participants' journey to educational leadership began with the numerous exposures to different school administrators who govern schools in various leadership styles. He shared,

*"I was fortunate to be able to experience being a teacher in another school, a volunteer/LSB teacher at J. Montilla Elementary School, and a regular teacher at Bago City Elementary School, then, transferred to Dr. PF Elizalde Elementary School. I was able to observe leadership styles of different school heads, was able to compare, and got the chance to reflect, especially with the words from a great colleague before... If you don't want the way a SH runs the school, try to be an SH for you to see the other side of the coin."*

These words back then for the participant sparked a motivation and came into fruition as the participant decided to enroll himself in the master's program. Later on, in his completion of the studies, he made it a goal, with the influence of his previous school head, to make

a difference in reshaping leadership in schools, in which he claimed: *“I never regret it right on the first day of my appointment.”*

Motivation for the participant was not just a mere aspiration but grounded in the reflective learning and academic preparation that provided a strong backbone for the desire to lead, coupled with the passion and conceptual tools needed to embrace the new role with confidence. That reflects the emphasis put on the role of both experiential and formal education in shaping aspiring school heads (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

*Emotional Transition: Nervousness to determine.* The participant could clearly remember that day he felt upon receiving his appointment as teacher-in-charge. This emotional run only encapsulates the importance of resilience and the growth mindset while on a transitional journey. The participant’s openness reflects that human factor that often underlies leadership studies, supporting the dynamic and ongoing nature of progressive leadership development (Kohn, 2024).

*“It’s normal to feel nervous, but I was very excited... I am willing to learn and even today, I am still learning and I am enjoying it.”*

*A Shift: Individual to Whole-School Focus.* With the positional shift in the participant’s role comes the profound change in responsibilities and the pressure of accountability. He reflected,

*“If you happened to ask my colleagues before, I went to school at 7:20 or 7:30 for 8 years. I didn’t have an advisory class, but before my journey ended as a teacher, for 5 months, I had my advisory. Before, it was okay to be late at school because I didn’t have learners to attend to, but today, as much as I want, I need to be in school as early as possible... Before, I just focused on my advisory class, but today, the whole welfare of the school is my top priority. Maybe it’s the scope and intensity that have changed, but in the end, I am just an ordinary school head, a servant of all and the leader of all.”*

This transition from a teaching focus to a systematic school-wide focus signals a widened scope of responsibility that frames the effective school governance in a broader leadership lens (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023).

### **Decision-Making: Deliberative and Inclusive**

Decision-making is regarded as the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several possible alternative options. The participant emphasizes how he comes up with the decision in his narrative below:

*“Learners’ welfare will and must be the top priority.... I do*

*not take personal relationships over professional work.... It was highlighted that weighing the pros and cons and the involvement of stakeholders are highly regarded as part of arriving at a solution.... I always involved all, not to make things easier for me, but to help me sort things and make all the stakeholders feel part of this community.... For me, fostering an inclusive approach promotes transparency, shared ownership, and collaboration, which resonates with contemporary perspectives on engaging leadership....”*

### **Leadership Skills**

As part of the growing responsibilities and deepening degree of accountability, the participant sees active listening and collaboration as core skills. He shared:

*“It is my responsibility as a leader to listen to their stories, their wants, their inputs, their objections, and all comments. It will not distract my constituents nor add to their burden, but their inputs will help me lead the school to our common goal.... They will be my mirror, my guide, and my critique, not to let me down, but to evaluate my performance. I don’t care if I am being corrected, because I love to learn, and I need to be corrected to remind me that I am not just a leader, but I am a servant leader.”*

It is through humility and respect for cultural and legal principles that the participant is able to effectively manage stakeholder expectations. He added:

*“We always solve things like conflict in our stakeholders because we give them the opportunity to be heard... we always meet halfway.... Moreover, operating in a constrained-resource area like the upland only necessitated creativity.... “We need to be resourceful... look for other financial sources or we need to budget our funds properly... and I try my best to involve everyone in decision-making.”*

### **Personal Growth: A Servant Leadership Philosophy**

Leadership requires experience, as it is a transformative journey. The participant can vividly remember his servant leadership experience.

*“It changed my perspective in life, that I need to be a good model to my colleagues and be the best version of myself.... I embrace a servant type of leadership where service is valued above authority.... I make sure that I don’t act as a boss in school... I respect every single person.... I enjoy the ride and continue to learn.... We see to it that we meet halfway to come up with more comprehensive and target-lock decisions.... That is why I always involve all my colleagues in planning and even decision-making, not to make things easier for me, but to help me sort things and make my colleagues feel that they are part of this community.”*

This transformative personal leadership philosophy underlies the ethical and relational foundations that are equally important in sustaining long leadership tenure and the consistency with adhering to the servant leader model that is highly regarded in humility and community focus.

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the transition of a novice school head in an upland, resource-limited environment from classroom instruction to school leadership. The results, categorized by motivation, decision-making, leadership competencies, and personal development, provide significant insights that both validate and enhance current research on educational leadership, especially in marginalized and geographically remote contexts.

### From Situated Experience to Leadership Motivation

The participant's motivation, influenced by previous exposure to various leadership styles and bolstered by formal graduate education, substantiates the perspective that leadership development is both experiential and developmental. This corresponds with the assertion of Ghamrawi et al. (2024) and Khan et al. (2025) that proficient school leaders frequently emerge from continuous professional development integrated with reflective practice. The participant's account illustrates how observational learning and critical reflection on previous administrators serve as informal yet potent methods for leadership preparation.

Furthermore, the emotional progression from anxiety to resolution exemplifies what Oberholzer and Macklin (2024) characterize as the non-linear and affective essence of leadership development. Becoming a school head is not just a technical change; it also involves rebuilding one's identity, as people renegotiate their professional roles and how they see themselves. This finding supports the idea that being ready to lead does not just depend on technical skills; it also depends on being emotionally strong and having a growth mindset, especially in new and stressful situations.

### *Expanding Accountability: From Classroom to Whole-School Leadership*

A major change found in this study is the shift from individual classroom responsibility to whole-school accountability. This change is in line with what the literature says about how school leadership roles are becoming more complicated (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Rørstad Welle & Gunnulfsen, 2025; Oldervik, 2026). The participant's recognition of increased responsibilities, encompassing instructional oversight and community engagement, exemplifies the multifaceted expectations imposed on school leaders, particularly within the Philippine context (Fosco, 2022).

Significantly, the results indicate that this transition is not solely quantitative (i.e., an increase in tasks) but also qualitative, entailing a shift towards systems thinking. Mincu (2022) implies that effective school leadership entails viewing the school as a whole system rather than a set of separate classrooms. In upland areas like Bago City, this systems view is made even more difficult by problems with infrastructure and the economy (Susilowati, 2025), which makes things even harder for new leaders.

### **Inclusive and Deliberative Decision-Making in Resource-Constrained Contexts**

The participant's focus on decision-making that includes everyone and is driven by stakeholders fits well with the idea of distributed leadership, which says that leadership is a shared process rather than the job of one person (Nadeem, 2024). The school head promotes a sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility by including teachers, parents, and community members. This is especially important in situations where resources are limited and community support is essential.

This method also fits with Özen and Yavuz (2024) research, which shows that adaptive leadership is necessary for dealing with complicated and unpredictable school settings. In the current study, inclusivity is not only ideological but also functional – it functions as a strategy to consolidate limited resources, improve transparency, and foster trust among stakeholders. This is particularly pertinent in upland communities where social cohesion and relational trust are fundamental determinants of institutional efficacy.

Additionally, putting the well-being of learners first when making decisions shows that you are an ethical leader. This supports modern views that see moral purpose as the most important part of educational leadership (Arar & Saiti, 2022). It also suggests that leaders who work in marginalized settings often base their decisions on values-driven frameworks instead of just administrative logic.

### **Leadership Skills: Relational Competence and Contextual Adaptability**

The participant's emphasis on active listening, collaboration, and conflict resolution in their leadership practice highlights the significance of relational leadership. These results corroborate the assertions of Redondo-Sama et al. (2025), who contend that dialogic and participatory practices are fundamental to effective school governance. The participant exhibits a reflexive leadership style that emphasizes feedback and ongoing enhancement by framing stakeholders as "mirrors" and "guides."

Furthermore, the need for resourcefulness in a limited environment underscores the importance of adaptive expertise. As Chua Reyes et al. (2022) point out, leaders

in Philippine schools often have to deal with systemic problems that require them to come up with new ways to solve problems and manage resources in a flexible way. The participant's strategies, like looking for other ways to get funds and making the most of tight budgets, show how difficult situations can lead to creative leadership.

This adaptability is especially important in upland areas, where formal support systems may not be available and school leaders have to come up with their own solutions. Consequently, the findings augment the existing literature by demonstrating the varied enactment of leadership competencies in response to contextual constraints, thereby underscoring the necessity for more context-sensitive leadership frameworks (Brauckmann et al., 2023).

### **Personal Growth and the Centrality of Servant Leadership**

One of the most interesting things about this study is that the participant chose servant leadership as his guiding philosophy. Greenleaf (1998) thought of leadership as service, where the main job of the leader is to meet the needs of others. This fits with that idea. In the Philippine context, where collectivist cultural values prioritize community and relational harmony, servant leadership seems especially fitting (Kilag et al., 2023).

The participant's focus on humility, respect, and collaborative decision-making illustrates the ethical and relational aspects of leadership frequently emphasized in modern academic discourse. This supports the idea that good leadership in marginalized settings is based on relationships, not authority. Additionally, the participant's dedication to perpetual learning and self-enhancement exemplifies leadership as a continuous developmental process (Ahsan, 2025) rather than a static condition.

This finding adds to the growing body of research that shows servant leadership can work well in schools (Swart et al., 2022; Kilag et al., 2023; Anshori et al., 2023; Doğan, 2025), especially in communities where people are having trouble with money. It indicates that effective leadership in these contexts may prioritize trust-building, empowerment, and collective agency over hierarchical control.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

When considered collectively, the results of this study support and broaden current theories of educational leadership by placing them in a context that is both socioeconomically and geographically marginalized. Although ideas like servant leadership, distributed leadership, and adaptive leadership are well-established in the literature, this study shows how these frameworks are put into practice in real-world situations with limited resources and complex cultural norms.

The study also emphasizes how important it is for leadership development programs to include context-sensitive training that takes into account the particular difficulties faced by upland and remote schools. Developing skills in resource management, community engagement, and culturally sensitive leadership are all part of this. To facilitate the transition and improve leadership efficacy, policymakers should also think about offering specialized support systems for new school administrators, especially in underprivileged areas.

### **Conclusion**

This case study illustrates that the transition from teacher to school head in an upland, resource-limited environment is a multifaceted and profoundly personal journey influenced by experience, introspection, and emotional fortitude. As duties grow from teaching in a single classroom to leading the whole school, effective practice needs systems thinking, making moral choices, and being responsible. The results show that leadership in marginalized settings is naturally relational and sensitive to the situation. It depends on making decisions that include everyone, being flexible, and getting the community involved. The participant's approach is based on the idea of servant leadership and focuses on humility, service, and the well-being of the group as a whole. In the end, the study shows how distributed, adaptive, and servant leadership work in real life. It also shows that effective leadership depends on aligning values, relationships, and contextual realities to support meaningful educational improvement.

The case study shows that good school leadership comes from a mix of formal training, experience, and reflective practice. It also shows that moving from teacher to school head requires a big change in how you see yourself and how you think. It is important to be emotionally strong and have a growth-oriented attitude when taking on new responsibilities, especially when resources are limited and things are uncertain. Inclusive decision-making, relational skills like active listening and collaboration, and the ability to change strategies to fit local needs all make leadership more effective. In marginalized environments, servant leadership – rooted in humility, service, and the welfare of the collective – demonstrates significant efficacy in fostering trust and empowering stakeholders. In the end, long-term success as a leader depends on being able to learn new things all the time and bring together moral values, relationships, and the needs of the situation.

### **Practical Relevance of the Study**

This study offers practical insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and institutions focused on leadership development, especially in resource-constrained and

geographically isolated environments. It emphasizes the significance of context-specific leadership training that incorporates experiential learning, emotional resilience, and community involvement. The results show that school leaders who want to be or are already school leaders should make decisions that include everyone, be flexible, and be able to deal with problems in their own community. The study can also help shape policy by showing how important it is to have targeted support systems, mentoring programs, and resource allocation strategies that are specifically designed for first-time school heads in underprivileged areas.

## Limitations

This study is constrained by its reliance on a singular instrumental case, concentrating on one participant within a particular upland context in Bago City. Consequently, the results may not be applicable to all school leaders or contexts, especially those situated in urban or resource-rich environments. The dependence on self-reported data via interviews may introduce subjectivity or bias, notwithstanding attempts to ensure reliability through triangulation and stringent qualitative methodologies. Additionally, the study encompasses experiences within a constrained temporal context, potentially failing to represent the enduring evolution of leadership practices.

## Direction for Future Studies

Subsequent research could build upon this study by incorporating bigger number of participants from various upland or remote regions, facilitating comparative analysis and wider generalization. Longitudinal studies may also be undertaken to investigate the evolution of leadership practices over time, especially as inexperienced school leaders accumulate experience. Furthermore, subsequent research may investigate the viewpoints of various stakeholders – including educators, parents, and students – to attain a more comprehensive understanding of leadership efficacy. It would also be useful to look into how structured mentoring programs and policy changes affect first-time school heads in areas that are often left out.

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