Maturing into Leadership Role: Autoethnography of Young School Administrators

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ABSTRACT

Growth in leading is the central phenomenon in this research study. In context, this is about the growing in leading experiences of newly-appointed, beginners, novice, neophytes or new administrators who happen to be young in terms of age. In this autoethnographic research study, we explored how we, as researcher-participants experienced growth in leading as young school administrators in a Marist school in the Philippines. We narrate the various dimensions of our experiences growing in school leadership including our becoming school administrators, experiences of growth and significant insights from our encounters with people with whom we work and situations we have dealt with. Through our self-revealing narratives which may not always be flattering, readers may be able to relate to the subject and develop appreciation on the journey we have taken that is reflection. The themes revealed that growth in leading can be a rich yet complex journey of self-discovery, interconnectedness, and appreciating enabling encounters of growth.

Keywords: Growth in leading, Young Administrator, Autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

"Our capacity to grow determines our capacity to lead. It is simple. But simple does not mean easy. The power is in the application"- Blanchard and Miller (2012).

Growth is an important aspect of everyone's life. It is something inevitable. It happens to people at any point in their lives. We grow physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, socially and the other dimensions of our lives. To grow as a person is important as it helps one make better decisions and reach potential. When we are happy with who we are, it is easier to feel content with where we are in present life and to recognize what is truly important to us. By making progress towards goals that matter to us and devoting time to pursuing them, we create a path for our future that leads us towards greater success. In an article by Sobande (2023), he pointed out that the best way to measure developmental progress is to watch for signs of maturity.

As an educational leader, we have noted many likely signs of change in our being particularly when it comes to our behavior. It can be noted that maturity can be measured by developing some traits. A mature leader doesn't have to be an expert in every functional area; he is willing to admit that others know more than he does and is willing to learn from them (Sobande, 2023).

This autoethnographic research is an attempt to explore an emerging tradition in research which gives value and highlights the emic experiences of the researchers themselves on finding meaning on their own experiences in order to shed light on the phenomenon of interest. Growth in leading is the central phenomenon in this research study. In context, this is about the growing in leading experiences of newly-appointed, beginners, novice, neophytes or new administrators who happen to be young in terms of age. If we look at the profile of the school administrators of many academic institutions in the Philippines today, it is observed that the majority are young at age. Others may have perceived them as inexperienced but they qualify for the position because of academic and degree qualifications. What is the big deal with being young and being a

school leader at a young age? Age may not really matter when it comes to leadership. Any individual regardless of age may lead an organization for as long as they possess the necessary characteristics and qualifications to be called school leaders. Being young (by age) as school leader or administrator posits challenges in various dimensions such as judgment and perspectives. Wisdom may be questioned, making it difficult for them to build relationships with others. Gaining the trust and respect of the members may not be easy. Young administrators may have to strive to manage generational differences, adapting communication styles according to the needs of different people.

The path to increase influence, impact and effectiveness in leadership is personal growth. Yes, there's certainly more to leadership than growth, but we are all convinced that growth is the core of what creates and sustains great leaders. Growth is the leaders' fountain of youth (Blanchard and Miller, 2012).

The transition from being a classroom teacher to leading an office can be a difficult one as accountability measures demand increasingly more from school leaders (Brown, 2006 cited by Beam, et.al 2016). Young school leaders have no other choice but to thrive and learn the rope in school leadership and such a learning process has to commence somewhere, somehow and somewhat. The premise why this study was conceptualized stemmed from the question*"How did we learn to be administrators?", "How did we grow in school leadership?"* My co-author and I in this research study are of the same age bracket and both had experience of holding administrative positions at relatively young age for an administrator. In one of our several sharing of experiences, we try to recollect every encounter of our becoming and being administrators along with other individuals whom we have worked and journeyed with since the moment we have started until the present. We look into our personal journey of reflection, listening to our voices, recollecting the humble years when we had to discover so many things about dealing with various administrative concerns and dealing with people around us. Relative to this, I cannot help but to relate to the Marist document 'Marist Voices' , the part where it described how living authority as a service of leadership brings with it moments of great joy and satisfaction and at the same time, difficult situations that can easily impact a leader like us. It highlights that the journey of interiority and spirituality is important for a leader to identify what he or she perceives in terms of feelings and emotions, to welcome it within the silence, without judgment, processing and seeking to integrate it. There are times that we leaders can feel that something is directed towards us personally, but actually it is more on the roles we play. As part of the journey to interiority, it is worthwhile having someone who helps to re-examine what is happening. In this way, we seek not to walk alone but to enlist the support of others for our continued growth in leading (Barba, 2022).

In this autoethnographic research study, we explored how we, as researcher-participants experienced growth in leading as young school administrators in a Marist school in the Philippines. In this study, I placed myself in the position as one of the two participants with Leann as the second one that made this work an autoethnographic approach or self-ethnography. Thus, you will hear two different voices. The first one is my voice who narrates in the first person perspective *restorying* tidbits of my personal journey and encounters of growth in leadership having been an administrator of my present school where I started becoming an administrator at 23. The second voice is my study partner's voice, Lean. Lean's narratives are presented in direct statements where readers can directly hear her sharing her own narratives on growth in leading, being one among the youngest principles of the basic education in the region. Guided by Chang's *'chronicling the past strategy'* through personal memory in the form of self-reflection, we aim to examine the various dimensions of our experiences growing in school leadership including our becoming as school administrators, experiences of growth and significant insights from our encounters with people with whom we work and situations we have dealt with.

RELATED STUDIES AND LITERATURE

In this study, we have identified essential constructs where we believe the research findings would be of relevance. In school leadership or management, we consider transition, succession and growth and development and mentoring and other challenges.

Aging and Leadership

Population aging is a global phenomenon that will continue to affect all regions of the world. By 2050 there will be the same number of old as young in the world, with 2 billion people aged 60 or over and another 2 billion under age 15, each group accounting for 21% of the world's population (Harper, 2014). One implication of an aging world in the context of leadership is that positions are mostly held by older people (Johnston, et. al, 2021). According to psychology, older leaders have some distinctive qualities to lead as compared to the younger ones as mentioned in the article of Johnston, et. al (2021). Furthermore, it was mentioned in the same literature review that the age of a leader or subordinate can significantly impact how they view and interact with one another. These suggest associations between age and leadership, with older leaders taken as a source of inspiration by the teams. However, research has also shown that there may be important drawbacks to having older individuals leading team members who are significantly younger than them. Malang Wasira (2012) as mentioned by Johnston, et. al (2021), reported that age dissimilarity may lead to decreased job satisfaction through poor communication channels between older leaders and younger followers. In an attempt to reconcile these contradictory perspectives, Harrison et al. (2002) discussed that while age differences between leaders and their followers has some natural frictions at the beginning of the relationship, this strain is reduced over time, and often eliminated as they come to know and understand one another. While it is notable that the reviews were explaining that being old or being young may have some positive and negative association to effective leadership, this study doesn't dwell on comparing being old and being young as leaders. Maturity in this context is about aging too as age goes with maturity. Maturity in age has to do with leadership. In today's context the emergence of young leaders holding significant positions in the organizations has become quite apparent.

Leadership transition is viewed as an event in the life of an institution that is greater than the choice of its next leader' (Martin and Samels, 2004). Without careful planning, the transition may adversely affect the organization, put unnecessary financial strain on the organization and increase demands on existing personnel (Kane and Barbaro, 2016; Potts, 2016; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014 as cited by Ritchi (2019). If the transition period is well-organized and well-managed, then the community can stay united and vibrant throughout the process. Transition can be a time for reflection and assessment that allows for growth and preparation for new leadership. Martin and Samels (2004) advised that as an educational institution 'manages the uncertainties of its leadership transition more effectively, it becomes an institution more intentional in it systems, administration, and mission'. Weary (2004) wrote that transition offers the board an opportunity to strengthen the entire organization. He stressed the importance of setting up a structure during the transition period that names a person of authority so that all communication goes through that person until the new principal is named.

Leadership succession and the associated changes that new leaders make, can have profound impacts on organizations. There has been limited research examining succession from the point of view of employees and considers how their interpretations of organizational identity and proposed change shape their responses to leadership transitions (Balser & Carmin, 2009). Leader succession affects school performance. Organizational socialization provides evidence that leaders are shaped in their organizations. Socialization illuminates processes through which the outcomes of succession can be improved by successors and their superiors (Hart, 1991).

Leader Growth Model. Regardless of an individual's stage of development, the Leader Growth Model depicts how leader growth can be fostered. This model is defined as the deliberate, guided, and structured thinking about choices that allows individuals to make sense of their experience. Individual development experiences strengthen an individual's knowledge, strength, and abilities (KSAs) in ways that increase the leader's capabilities and expertise. These refers to tasks that demonstrate how the individual develops competence and performs at higher levels in the tasks. However, individual development is only one dimension of developing leaders of character. While individual development focuses on building leader skills in individuals, leadership development focuses on building competence for the act of leading by requiring leaders to practice leading others. The act of leadership occurs in a social and cultural context that impacts how they engage with each other to reach a common goal. This requires leaders to engage with followers. Thus, to develop leadership requires practice in following and practice in leading.

Learning to Lead: A Pedagogy of Practice. Leadership can be taught and learned through practice. Leadership is a learned experience combining the heart, heads and heart that is similar to the West Point formula- *'Being', 'Knowing' and 'Doing'.* The West point formulation describes the development of values that shape who one wants to be, the concept that enables individuals to understand where they want to go and the necessary skills needed to get there (Ganz & Lin, 2011). Following the Key Concepts of Development and Learning of theWest point Leader Development System WPLDS, it is informed by three interdependent areas of research namely individual leadership development, adult learning, and adult development. Individual leadership development focuses on building leader skills (human capital), whereas leadership development focuses more on building competence in social and cultural contexts (social capital). Second is Adult Learning. Learning is built upon prior experience and maturation. Further, adult learning involves both informational learning, or what one knows, and transformative learning, or how one thinks. Adult learning happens through interaction and is not solely cognitive. Relatedly, WPLDS integrates several schools of thought from the field of adult learning: experiential, self-directed, and transformative learning. Third is Adult Development where it incorporates the most relevant theories and practices of adult development. Applying these theories helps in the understanding of individuals developmental needs, provide appropriate challenges and support that promote growth and measure progression.

There are core practices identified in the paper of Ganz and Lin (2011) that interact with each other in the exercise of leadership. These practices include Building relationships committed to a shared purpose, translating values into sources of motivation through narratives, turning resources into a capacity to achieve purpose by strategizing, mobilizing and deploying resources as clear, measurable, visible actions and structuring authority so as to facilitate the effective distribution of leadership. These practices are either experientially learned by leaders or can also be through coaching or mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are essential in terms of enabling leaders to deal with uncertainty. Learning to mentor or to coach is vital and central to learning to lead (Omrod 2008, cited by Ganz and Lin 2004).

Similarly, Developmental Systems Theory provides evidence that developmental outcomes depend on interactions between an individual, the context, and how they relate to one another. Research shows that individuals develop character when they have high-character role models, and organizations develop character when their leaders set and enforce high standards. What this means for school leaders is that a significant opportunity exists to facilitate character growth over an individual'scareer through targeted educational practices and integrated policies and programs that comprise a culture of character growth.

Mentoring Dimension. Mentoring is a developmental relationship. Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn to engage with and contribute to the world around them (Search Institute, 2017). Mentor-mentee relationship interactions require a longer period of time to flourish than other developmental relationships. In essence, although mentoring relationships involve mentoring episodes, individuals can engage in mentoring episodes without being in mentoring relationships. The concepts of mentoring episodes capture the dynamic and fluid nature of relationships (Boyatzis, 2007). From this perspective, it can be noted that some professional roles like school leaders in the school setting are more suitable to grow into mentoring relationships.

Challenges: To identify more specific challenges faced by novice school leaders, various research studies have been reviewed by the researchers. Barnett, Shoho, and Oleszewski (2012) noted that the most commonly named challenges were workload and task management, conflicts with adults and students, and curriculum and instruction issues. Hertting's (2008) study resulted in a quite different list of demanding issues- diversity, reform initiatives, accountability measures, scarce resources, and inadequate support from supervisors. Tredway (2003) found student discipline to be the primary challenge for new administrators. A Turkish study (Sincar, 2013) identified major challenges of new school heads as bureaucracy, insufficient resources, resistance to innovation, lack of in-service training, and issues related to student poverty. A similar study conducted in Namibia (Mushaandja, 2013) mentioned chronic stress, overloaded schedule, simultaneous assimilation both to a new school environment and to a new leadership position, adjustment from teachers being peers to being subordinates, and the sense of isolation from supervisors. The challenges current novice administrators face may be quite different from those faced by their predecessors who may have been novices

several years or decades prior. Understanding challenges during school leaders' induction phase may serve to inform the structure and curriculum of school leader preparation programs (Beam, 2016). Challenges faced by new school leaders are not just task oriented. Northfield (2013) describes how new leaders must sometimes overcome leadership perceptions established by the previous administration. A new school leader might have to navigate the challenges of establishing credibility among individuals or groups that have obtained formal or informal power within the school. These sometimes negative perceptions of administration can add to the challenges faced by novice leaders. After combining similar terms, the following list of challenges was identified as Paperworks; Management and supervision of all special services; parent group and individual meetings, phone calls, electronic and paper communication, parent support organizations, after school parent activities, and conflict resolution; Day-to-day interaction with teachers, including classroom observations, formal evaluations, teacher meetings, e-mail and paper communication, professional development, and general supervision; proactive and reactive measures regarding student conduct, behavior management, teacher classroom support, assignment of consequences, and communication with parents and students and Curriculum and instruction such scheduling, course management, textbook and material management, data analysis, and testing. These tasks and more may not always be particular because one is a young administrator or not but, because we are looking into the overwhelming workload of a school administrator in general. To fulfill all the tasks, you would probably agree that it doesn't only take to have the skill and knowledge. Some functions would have to necessitate a great deal of experience and wisdom in order to provide a high level of value judgment.

Why Autoethnography

Autoethnography or personal ethnography is a qualitative research form, an approach to research and writing that aims to describe and systematically analyze (*graphō* in Ancient Greek, 'writing') personal experience (*autós* in Ancient Greek, 'self') to understand cultural experience (*éthnos* in Ancient Greek, 'nation' or 'culture'). Autoethnography fits into the tradition of confessional tales in ethnography in which the researcher, who is repositioned as an object of inquiry , writes detail-rich stories from an emotional perspective to depict a particular socio-cultural setting in terms of personal awareness and experience. Autoethnography consists of well-crafted writing that can be respected by critics of literature and social scientists alike and must be emotionally engaging as well as critically self-reflexive of one's sociopolitical interactivity. Bad autoethnography can be criticized for embodying the worst excesses of post- modernism, as the author creates a too self-indulgent, narcissistic, and individualized narrative. Good autoethnography shares voices that might not have been heard, and insights that might have been too subtle to elicit.

Doing Autoethnography

Using tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography*, auto ethnographers use hindsight to retrospectively and selectively write about past experiences (i.e., autobiography) that stem from studying (or being part of) a particular culture (i.e., ethnography), and/or possessing a particular cultural identity. Social science publishing conventions require autoethnography to analyze these experiences or *epiphanies* (i.e., remembered moments that have significantly impacted a person's life) using theoretical or methodological tools, and research literature. Autoethnography produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience by identifying patterns of cultural experience based on field notes, interviews and/or artifacts, thus making characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders (i.e., cultural members) and outsiders (i.e., cultural strangers). Auto Ethnographers use storytelling, showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice to produce accessible texts that describe these patterns, with the aim to reach a more diverse mass audience than the traditional research readership. Usually written in first person, autoethnographies can sometimes be expressed as a conversation between the author and the reader with the aim to offer lessons for further dialogue.

Theoretical Lens

Growth is associated with changes. Mostly, these changes are positive and/or desirable changes. Bridges' Model highlights three stages of transition that people go through when they are faced with change. These are: *Ending, Losing, and Letting Go.* Transition starts with an ending. This is paradoxical but true. This first phase

of transition begins when people identify what they are losing and learn how to manage these losses. They determine what is over and being left behind, and what they will keep. These may include relationships, processes, team members or locations. Secondly, *The Neutral Zone.* The second step of transition comes after letting go: the neutral zone. People go through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new is not fully operational. It is when the critical psychological realignments and repatterning take place. It is the very core of the transition process. This is the time between the old reality and sense of identity and the new one. People are creating new processes and learning what their new roles will be. They are in flux and may feel confusion and distress. The neutral zone is the seedbed for new beginnings. Thirdly, *The New Beginning.* Beginnings involve new understandings, values and attitudes. Beginnings are marked by a release of energy in a new direction – they are an expression of a fresh identity. Well-managed transitions allow people to establish new roles with an understanding of their purpose, the part they play, and how to contribute and participate most effectively. As a result, they feel reoriented and renewed. Bridges says that people will go through each stage at their own pace. For example, those who are comfortable with the change will likely move ahead to stage three quickly, while others will linger at stages one or two. This framework is being used because the flow of transition is from being a classroom novice into being who have seen significant growth in their leadership. In the study, this theory is essential to draw the data and information from the participants' growth viz, transition experience.

Research Problem

In this autoethnographic research study, we explored how we, as researcher-participants experienced growth in leading as young school administrators in a Marist school in the Philippines. We narrate the various dimensions of our experiences growing in school leadership including our becoming school administrators, experiences of growth and significant insights from our encounters with people with whom we work and situations we have dealt with.
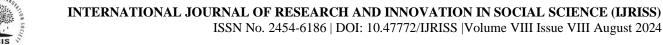
METHODS

In this study, the researchers utilized a collaborative autoethnographic approach in exploring the experience of growth in leading as young school administrators. The key distinction in *Collaborative Autoethnography* is that the narrative co-mingles two or more autoethnographies which may include letter-writing correspondence, co-interviews, and parallel responses to common themes (Chang, 2021). In our study, we utilized co-interviews and parallel responses to common themes.

Data was gathered through constant and series of conversations between us guided by predetermined questions but allowed open sharing of narratives through personal memory in the form of self-reflections. These questions draw our narratives on how did we become school administrators; how did we experience the first few years (1 to 3 years) being young administrators; how did we experience learning the things we were supposed to learn; how did we experience that growth; how could we say that we have grown as administrators; how did we experience the challenges; and what do these challenges mean on my being administrator. Using Chang's "chronicling the past strategy", we prepared a data chart, which included information regarding the *data source, its mode, time, venue and stories gleaned*. This data chart is a self-generated document which facilitates us through the selection process of our personal memories in an organized way while writing the narratives. The next phase is the analytical phase in which we tried to establish a third narrative—one that created an amalgam of our stories and the context.

RESULTS

Phase 1: The experience of beginning in the new leadership role

Will is inherent and what enhances the will to accept the role is the explicit expression of trust leadership opportunities often arise unexpectedly, but they are essentially born out of necessity, for leadership is nothing else but a call to serve. This is definitely the experience of the researcher-participant, who found herself thrust into a role as a school administrator out of sheer need. She still recalls the moment she was summoned to meet with the university president. Unaware of the purpose behind the meeting, she could only speculate that it is related to the forthcoming implementation of the Senior High School curriculum under the K to 12 Basic

Education Program. Having served as a classroom teacher in the Junior High School department for a few years, she presumed her involvement in the curriculum implementation would extend to its completion to the Senior High School level. Thus, the possibility of being reassigned to another department as a classroom teacher crossed her mind. However, the invitation proved to be more than a mere reassignment; it presented a challenge to depart from the comfort of the classroom and assume the role of a school administrator for a new department.

The prospect of reassignment to the SHS department was exciting for me, as I viewed it as a valuable opportunity to both contribute meaningfully to the school and grow professionally. But the new post being offered filled me with apprehension. I felt uncertain and overwhelmed given my lack of prior school leadership experience, and this made me somewhat anxious.

The acceptance of the offer was not automatic. She requested the president to give her a day to reflect upon the offered position. Numerous thoughts flooded her mind upon receiving the offer. While grateful for being considered a candidate for the post, she could not ignore the knowledge that many had declined the offer due to the weight of the responsibility, including those senior to her in the workplace. However, her intuition tells her that this was an opportunity she cannot afford to let slip by, as she realizes that she has always been drawn to leadership. Throughout her academic years as a student, she had consistently assumed leadership responsibilities, a role she strongly identifies with. Moreover, she had a long-term plan of pursuing leadership roles at work. Yet, she had not anticipated that this future would arrive so soon, with such a magnitude of responsibility—being the coordinator of a newly established department devoid of shape or clear structure.
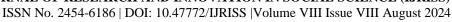
Two reasons made her solidify her decision to accept the leadership role. Firstly, the coming educational reform was a significant one. Becoming part of such a monumental change was something that she wanted, and assuming an administrative role meant she could make a substantial contribution. Secondly, the trust extended by the university president and the entire administration encouraged her. She wanted to value the trust and honor those who bestowed it upon her. Despite the doubts that made her ask questions like "Am I ready?" or "Do I have what it takes to execute this responsibility?", she accepted the offer to become a school administrator even if she lacked experience or prior training.

The decision was not an easy one, but my inherent desire to be involved and contribute ultimately overcame my apprehension. The expressed trust and confidence from the administration significantly bolstered my personal expectancy value, providing the encouragement I needed to embrace the new opportunity.

Upon expressing her readiness to assume the role, the researcher-participant vividly remembers the university president's visible relief. He expressed that he could finally find respite, knowing that the responsibility of leading the new department was in capable hands. Such an overwhelming display of trust left a lasting impression on the participant-researcher. And so, for the participant-researcher, though the call to serve is rooted in a need, it requires an open and welcoming trust to respond to such an invitation – trust in oneself and trust of the people.

On my end, I was hired by the university immediately as the activity coordinator of the basic education department. During the interview with the university president, I was informed to take over the position of a Marist Brother who was leaving for another assignment abroad. It was not a question whether I wanted the post or not. It was information that my entry to the university was through that office which I am going to handle. At first, I was quite hesitant and anxious about accepting the opportunity because I am new to the department and I am quite not familiar with the people and the school culture. To my mind, someone from among the current faculty members back then should have been given the opportunity to take the administrative post.

The president assured me that no one from among them was interested and was willing to accept the job. The next question I asked the president was 'Why me?'. He assured me by affirming *"Why not? You are not new to this university. You were our student leader, you can lead. I trust you can perform the work"*. To me, that was reassuring me that he will support me the way he had trusted me from the beginning. It's my job to keep that

trust. And so I accepted it and I took over the office which had been handled by Marist Brothers for a long time.

I served the basic education department as the student activity coordinator for four academic years only. Towards the end of the second year of my supposed second term in the office as coordinator, I was called again by the president to take over an office in the college department. Similar to what he told me during my entry to the university, he asked me if I can handle the office of student affairs and development in the college department as the current administrator at that time was leaving the post. Again, it was a deciding moment for me to accept or not. I knew it back then. There was a need for some to take that position. It was out of necessity. But the question to my mind *Why me again to fill in the necessity* was somehow encouraging yet challenging too.

The college department has a new environment. It means new and bigger responsibilities, new people to work with, new culture and new challenges. Honestly, it has always been my intention to be a faculty member of the college department. I have always wanted to teach at the tertiary level. In fact, that was initially my plan and what I have specified as my career choice in my application to the university. It was fate that brought me to IBED. If I may recall how I felt when the president started to talk about expectations from the student programs the moment I took over, I felt the pressure and the burden to prove the worth of considering me for the office. What I told myself was the work was just basically the same as what I do in basic education. The challenge was more of the level of the students to deal with and the scope of the work can be much wider. I knew in myself that the new position can be more challenging but I recognize that there's much more to learn from that. The support of the president and other administrators are vital on my decision to accept it. I was convinced by the university president that I can do the job again in the college department as the director of the student affairs and development.

Trust as the driving force to perform the roles

I was immediately assigned as administrator on my entry in the basic education department. Everything was new to me. New people and new administrators to deal with. I'm all aware of that kind of experience when transitioning to a new environment. It was challenging at first, but I knew in myself that I could handle it and indeed, I survived the first few months. How did I survive the first few months? Incidentally, the school head was newly transferred to the department too. Though, it was not his first administrative function in the department. I was new and I was just in my early twenty when I took over the position. When it comes to leadership, I can only rely on the richness of my experiences as a student leader way back in college. Technically, it was my first administrative role in a new environment.

In one of the assemblies with the university president, I was asked by him to stand up in the middle of the staff and properly introduce me to them. It was because again I am new and he had to justify his decision of designating me as administrator on my probationary period. As I recall what he said during the assembly *"I assigned him to be in the position as Activity Coordinator because of his good track record and rich background as a student leader when he was in college. I trust he can perform the job and let us support him".*

As I recall that moment, the expression of trust in the president was my important tool for why I need to perform my job well and why I have to deliver what is expected from me because of his trust in my capacity.

Similar explicit expressions of trust were a source of confidence for the other researcher-participant, crucial in her embracing her leadership role.

The first few months on the job were incredibly challenging for me. In retrospect, I realize that my initial struggles were due to a narrow focus on the managerial aspects of the role, rather than the leadership dimension. I was engrossed in the day-to-day operations but failed to prioritize building relationships with my colleagues. This oversight caused me significant difficulties. Working predominantly with senior teachers, my lack of understanding of our school culture, compounded by my being young and being inexperienced as an administrator, hindered my ability to perform effectively and make confident decisions. Reflecting on those experiences, I suspect that Br. Willy, the university president, recognized my struggles. His actions during that

period were clearly aimed at supporting me in my role. I recall a particular instance when he asked me to convene a meeting with all the teachers. As the meeting was about to start, he instructed me to preside over it. I was taken aback, having assumed he would lead the meeting himself. Nonetheless, I took on the task, with Br. Willy observing from the sidelines. His presence was intimidating, yet it facilitated a smooth meeting. The attendees were likely influenced by his presence, leading to their agreement with my proposals and met almost no resistance. It dawned on me that this was Br. Willy's way of demonstrating his support for me, signaling to the school community that I had his trust. From that moment, my confidence in my work and decision-making grew. This experience marked a turning point in my development as a school leader, and it was instrumental in fostering my growth in the role.

Insights:

From these encounters, it can be noted that among the deciding factors for one to accept leadership position and becoming administrator in school is the trust explicitly expressed by the head of the school, the personal will to prove that worth of the trust and the humility to recognize that there can be more things to learn along the way- humility to recognize that we have the capability to do.

An important observation shared by both researchers is the necessity of a realistic appraisal of one's limitations and strengths prior to making any decision. To question is to engage in self-examination, which requires both courage and humility. It involves recognizing one's weaknesses and embracing the fortitude to proceed despite them.

Phase 2: Enabling encounters on growth

There was enthusiasm yet feeling of being naïve at the start

The scope of the work started to become bigger and broader. The mind needs to learn how to think bigger and broader too. When I became the director, it took time for me to digest that I am already leading an office. During the first few months, I kept questioning myself, 'Am I ready?', 'Am I fit for the job?', 'Will I be able to handle the pressure and expectations?', and many other uncertainties. When I think of these questions, I understand that these are usual questions of anyone being given with new responsibilities in any organization. However, the element of being young when I was assigned by the directorship role play an important role on why in the first place I have accepted the position, and why I have also become naive after I have accepted it.

As a young administrator, it is commonly natural to become too ideal. Ideal in the sense that, we always think of how we can make a difference in every situation and how we can possibly improve the way things are. When I was assigned to become the director for student affairs of the college department, I was too excited for the new work environment, *too enthusiastic* to inject changes in the process and *too eager* to take the office. Ever since I was a college student, I already had such a fascinationwith becoming the director for student affairs due to the nature of the work in the office.

But to my surprise, when I already started taking the responsibility in the office as the new head, I suddenly felt that feeling of not being sufficient for the job for reasons I cannot explain. There are mixed feelings of *'not-knowing-what-to-do'* at first, the desire to accomplish the tasks but *not knowing what tasks are to be accomplished*. I suddenly realized that to accomplish a task depends on many factors that are beyond one's control and one doesn't have the full control of everything, and it taught me patience. The first few months of my being a director in the office certainly was *groping* not because I do not know the job, but the idea that I should have to do the job differently but not knowing how.

The feeling of not knowing what to do at times was also experienced by my co-participant when she started her post. Despite her lack of experience, the zeal she felt when she began her work as an administrator made her thrive in her day-to-day responsibilities.

I started with so much enthusiasm and dreams for the SHS department, and that passion still drives me today. However, I now approach my aspirations for the department with more realism. Looking back, I realize that as a newly appointed school administrator, I often focused solely on the positives without realistically assessing the department's limitations and my own. I had this urge to do things the way I saw fit, not necessarily how

they are usually done. This occasionally led to moments of hesitation, confusion and even frustration. At times, I struggle with knowing how to proceed with my work and how to work with people. I frequently feel overwhelmed, and it seems I'm not making significant progress. Reflecting on it now, I see that my initial naivety contributed to these challenges.

Learning, relearning and unlearning with people and circumstances

Pressure is normally felt by anyone who is new to any particular leadership position. Incidentally, the school principal of the department where I have joined was also newly-appointed. Basically, we were both new in the department and both administrators.

I knew he was a bit worried about me aside from being a new administrator, I was also new in the department since I actually came from a different school who just came as an administrator right away. For many, they thought of it as a privilege. However, it was already made clear in the previous sharing that it was just by chance since no one had been interested to accept the position. While he was a bit worried about my being new for the job, I felt the support and the intention to guide me with my work. I remember his words *"Wilter, medyo worried ako kay parehas baya kitanga bag-o. Tun-i gid ang imo trabahodirasa office ha. Mag-refer ka gid kung may ara ka gusto indibal-an".* My other interpretation of what the principal said was for me to be open and listen to others. That I actually did. I report everything I planned to propose, I report every progress, I refer when I am not certain on what to do, I ask when there's something I would like to clarify. I find that process so necessary until I master the routines of my work. To me, it was the open conversation with the other administrators that I not only learned about the work, but also with open conversations that I was able to gain their trust and was able to connect with them easily. The work relationship had been smooth. In conversation, I did not just learn administrative work, I also got to appreciate my value when being affirmed with the good work and get to measure my patience and optimism when the work is criticized.

Experience proved to be the most impactful teacher for her as she navigated her new role. Her transfer to the new department mere weeks before the opening of the school year left her with scant resources, relying primarily on a bound document utilized for the permit application process to understand the nature of the senior high school. Though the Department of Education has primers and DepEd Orders made available on its website, the complete understanding of the entire task came to her in a much later time. Surviving those initial weeks was largely attributed to the guidance of her superiors, keen observation of university procedures, and willingness to inquire and request for assistance.

When I started my job, I had to seek a lot of help from my superiors. I was a frequent visitor to the Office of the Executive Vice President. Lacking confidence in my abilities, I habitually consulted our EVP even for the most trivial things, but mostly if problems arise. I was worried that my reliance on his counsel might have become burdensome, as his response to me was consistently "Unsa man imong suggestion?" ('What is your suggestion?'). This question challenged me to formulate solutions to the issues I present to him. His typical inquiry prompted me to proffer answers or suggestions alongside my concerns. In hindsight, I gradually recognized this as his method of nurturing my capacity for decisive leadership. Fortunately, my initial apprehension and self-doubt did not impede my receptivity to his guidance. I am glad I was open to learning, acknowledging that the recurrent solicitation of my input was instrumental in shaping my confidence as a leader.

Another significant source of learning emerged from my interactions with the Grant-In-Aid (GIA) student assigned to assist me in the office. Having previously served under another administrator, the student assistant had an experience in office management, better than my limited knowledge. It was through her guidance that I acquired practical knowledge of day-to-day administrative tasks, ranging from budget and supplies requisitions to procurement procedures, and transportation arrangements.

Engage in dialogue and conversation

It has become part of my consciousness that every time I propose an activity or program under my office, I talk

with other administrators, ask opinions from the senior faculty or even proceed directly to the principal's office. I truly appreciate the openness of everyone to conversations and listening.

I realized back then, that making decisions can be smooth when you know how to dialogue. During my first year as the student activity coordinator, I looked into the practices on the conduct of student activities and the various programs that are already in place. Some of them are considered to be templated activities. Every year, it has been repetitively done in exact the same patterns or methods. Because I'm very much aware of how these practices and programs have become so familiar with the community including the personnel, I knew I have to be careful on how to deal with the changes that I wanted to introduce in the department as it might not be acceptable for them or I may not be able to get their support.

Once, we needed to decide whether the groupings of the students for the intramurals would be either by team color as per practice or by year level which has been the old practice before the by color scheme. So, basically some of them wanted it back that way. It was a long discussion before we made the decisions. The faculty are divided between two options. Each option with valid and acceptable contentions. Being in the middle, I have to ensure to facilitate the discussion well although, to me, my color scheme has more advantages. So, it was basically my own bias on the given options. While I lay down both options for the faculty to discuss, it was also quite a challenge for me to advance what I believe was more advantageous. It was a program under my supervision, so I thought I should also see it in a wider perspective and that I also need to have a stand on it. It went through a long discussion among the faculty and I thought of how I could be able to influence the others. I tried to talk to them outside the meeting and laid down my contentions. The informal conversations with them beyond formal meeting gradually helped to make the other faculty finally said to give it a chance with certain conditions and modification in the implementations. That's when I really appreciate the wonder of conversations for common understanding. From my experience as administrator, especially when I was just starting to lead, there's no complex issues in the school which cannot be resolved when everyone engages in a conversation. And since it's a two way-process, one has to initiate it. As a leader, we initiate. We engage in it. It's a way of leading. Now, why do I consider it as part of my growth experience in leading? As I reflect on this experience, I realized that conversation was not just a strategy or an approach in leadership, but a vehicle for learning the complexity and dynamics of leading. When I think of it, it is through conversation that I am able to develop negotiation which requires skills. In negotiation, you need to be selective with your language, you need to be convincing, you need to be present and most importantly you must be listening. When I think of it, the moment I started engaging myself and being open to dialogue, I developed confidence, improved my thinking, pay attention by listening, thus, improved my judgment in situations.

When I took over the office of Prefect of Discipline in the university, I was a bit scared at first. I have not imagined myself doing such a role mediating conflicts between and among learners and even among parents. Many times, I have been tested. My facilitating and mediating skill has been challenged by several circumstances or cases in school. When I look back to my journey, not a single case concerning students that I have not been able to facilitate properly. I knew my legal knowledge can be limited only to school policies and procedures. Thinking of it now, I realized how important the lesson on paying attention and conversation, dialogue on facilitating any conflicts no matter how complicated the situation can be.

Engaging in dialogue and conversation also enriched her leadership experiences by enhancing her communication skills and fostering relationships. More so, it proved invaluable in helping her manage conflicts and expand her perspectives.

When I started with the post, misunderstandings were quite common. I wasn't great at expressing myself clearly, given my limitations. Although I was leading a new department, the team I work with comprised members from an established one, making me essentially a newcomer. I was working with colleagues who were mostly much more senior than I was, and some were even my former teachers. Filled with enthusiasm and idealism but also insecurities, I found myself in a perfect setup for being misunderstood.

I recall an incident when some colleagues confronted me in the office about a decision that allegedly undermined their work. I was very scared, as I had never been comfortable with confrontations. Fortunately, we were able to clarify the situation, which made me appreciate the importance of conversations. Despite the

discomfort, clarifying misunderstandings through conversations can be truly liberating. This encounter left a lasting impression on me and taught me a valuable lesson about humility, the importance of listening and being clear in expressing one's intentions.

Insights:

In the dynamic of interacting and learning from people and circumstances, we have realized how our listening skill has facilitated our process of learning the rope of leading. We learned to listen and we have listened without hesitations and place our trust in the expertise of these people we come across with- be it superiors or subordinates recognizing their superior familiarity with office operations or their knowledge having been there in the operations before us. Having transitioned from the classroom to an administrative role, devoid prior experiences has instilled that sense of humility within. Looking back, we could say that we are deeply appreciative of the help provided by them for us to learn, relearn and unlearn the rope of leading.

Phase 3: The experience of growth

Blending

Trust and support of the heads are not enough for one to be able to do what isexpected to be delivered. One has to learn the job and learning the job was a challenge for a young administrator like me. Back then before entering the department, there was already an established culture among personnel. In some instances, this culture informs the way things are to be done. It's not necessarily a negative culture. The challenge lies in when new patterns of work are being introduced, varying reactions need to be dealt carefully. Not only because I am new to the department, but because I'm quite young at that time to actually absorb their reactions without getting affected emotionally. To me, it was not easy to manage that but, I have learned eventually. I realized that to learn the job well in the department is to learn the culture of the people and rest follows.

And one to be able to successfully learn the culture is to be open. From my experience, I openly talk with the heads, ask if I am not certain with the decision, refer with my co-administrators, engage with the faculty members especially the old ones, consult with the advisers about existing practices. I learned the culture of the department by connecting to my colleagues.

From this experience, I was able to reflect on the importance of embracing the culture of the school and blend especially if you are new. These are basically simple initiatives like learning about the tasks as a new administrator through making connections with other administrators even outside the university; attendance to every meeting and gathering be it formal or not-so-formal, refer to some administrators for them to feel that they are relevant to your work; studying available documents and learning the steps and processes. I also came to realize that there was no formal/explicit mentoring, there was no formal orientations to how to do or even how to learn things but by just simply embracing their culture and the rest follows. For her, when she thought about the time when she first stepped into her role as a SHS Coordinator, one of the biggest challenges she faced was her lack of general awareness. She remembers assuming that since the department was new, even though it was part of an established higher education unit with existing manpower, she could shape it into a distinct basic education unit. That's where she thought she made her mistake.

I struggled because I was trying to impose a vision of a basic education system onto a department fundamentally rooted in higher education. I didn't take the time to study and respect the existing culture of the team I was working with. This oversight led to a lot of frustration for me and presented a steep learning curve in my leadership journey.

Breaking through

To lead a school is an immense job as it involves the future of the school and the growth of the students and the future of people involved or part of the school community. When I became the director of student affairs and development and prefect of discipline, there are hindering factors that made me sometimes insufficient about the job. Such a feeling *of insufficiency* rooted from the idea that I am still in my late twenties when I

became the director of one department of the university. Being young has always been a variable especially when it comes to decision making.

Decision making is one among the important skills that every administrator should possess. We make decisions when confronted with circumstances. Our decisions most of the time are guided or informed by the schools manual, though there are times that our decisions are challenged by our own value judgment. That is where the skill of an administratorcomes into play. During the first few years being new to administrative positions, to make decisions under my office was quite a tough and complex task for a variety of reasons. Because I started as a mid-level administrator, every decision should be approved by my direct head. There are circumstances when my view on the matters differ from how older colleagues or other administrators view them. Despite the strong contentions and being persistent, in most instances I prefer to concede not because my ideas are wrong, but maybe because these people are the ones I look forward to in terms of leadership and management and I have faith in their words. So, many times, I just obey and work even harder to prove my worth in leading specifically when it comes to decision making. That time, I felt the desire to be given authority and autonomy when it comes to decision making. I learned the techniques, I learned the process, I engaged more in conversations, I asked a lot of questions and learned from others' thoughts. In my conversation with my co-participant, our experience seems similar.

Reflecting on the beginning of my leadership journey, there was nothing more fulfilling than surviving the "storming" stage and overcoming the struggles I faced. Initially, I found it difficult to be taken seriously by more experienced colleagues. My youth felt like a disadvantage, and some members of the school community lacked support for departmental programs and questioned processes or instructions from my office. As a young leader, this made me feel bad, prompting me to impose my authority and prove myself. Now, I see that this pressure was self-imposed, and my judgment was clouded by poor emotional intelligence. My feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness drove me to overwork and strive to prove my capability. The real challenge was understanding myself, my purpose, and my leadership philosophy. I realized I had to work on myself and my insecurities so that I could better relate to the community I work with and serve.

Insights:

The researcher-participants came to realize that developing general awareness is just as important as self-awareness. Even though we had a vision for the department/office, it was crucial to ensure that our colleagues shared this vision. But we needed to understand and acknowledge their existing culture first. It was through this struggle to blend in and respect the established ways that we experienced significant personal and professional growth. It took time, but we eventually learned to thrive by accepting and even embracing some aspects of the existing school culture. We did this by observing, trying to connect, and establishing relationships with people.

As we continue being administrators, we havereached a better understanding of ourselves as leaders and no longer feel the same pressure. We realized that we don't need to prove ourselvesto others or punish ourselves for perceived shortcomings. We have learned to acknowledge our weaknesses and appreciate our strengths. We no longer measure success solely by others' approval or acceptance. Instead, we have embraced our purpose in leadership, that is to serve- this too is learning.

CONCLUSIONS

In this journey of writing this autoethnography on the growth in leading experiences, we appreciate the value of reflection on experiences in order to make sense of our being and becoming young school leaders. The use of autoethnography as an approach in this study allows us to be reflective in the process of revisiting our experiences and making sense and meaning on them. In ensuring authenticity, we have described in details of encounters the *retrospective accounts, reflections-in-action*, and dialogues between us, researcher-participants. Unlike the usual intention of most qualitative studies to provide a new frame of thinking and understanding of phenomenon, here, we hope that through our self-revealing narratives which may not always be flattering, readers may be able to relate to the subject and develop appreciation on the journey we have taken that is

reflection. The themes revealed that growth in leading can be a rich yet complex journey of self-discovery, interconnectedness, and appreciating enabling encounters of growth.

Implications

With school leadership, the insights drawn from our experiences may have implications to the school's strategies on succession, training, capacitating and preparing new and future administrators. From the shared experiences, it is noted essentially that maturity results from learning from success and mistakes; in other words, learning from experience. Huge factors of maturing are the implicit and explicit expressions of mentoring, coaching, and feedback. These processes are necessary for developing leaders. Leadership preparation can be an institutional endeavor in helping prospective individuals become fully functional whenever they transition to new roles. Given that many relatively new, high-performing people are being promoted to positions or new higher roles, however, the challenge is that this maturity is not always fully developed. In effect, it becomes an issue on other aspects of leading- if not on technical dimensions but on the relational and emotional aspect of dealing with difficult situations.

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