

The Serendipity of Principalship: Meaning-Making of a Filipino Secondary School Principal

Allan B. de Guzman Sr. Maria Lirio Tan Lagrimas Guillermo, A.R.
University of Santo Tomas
Philippines

Meaning-making is vital in the realm of principalship. It serves as the fulcrum of one's practice which eventually leads to seeing the light and appreciating the serendipity of principalship. While explicit knowledge abounds in the literature and is communicated in professional development programs, the role of the principals' tacit knowledge derived from their experiences, day-to-day dealings with the school's stakeholders, observations, insights, and reflections are vital inputs in understanding the dynamics of school principalship. This narrative inquiry is an attempt to capture the tacit knowledge of a Filipino secondary school principal whose experiences were limited by the absence of a formal academic preparation in school management but illuminated by her *leadership reflective space (LRS)* which enabled her to surface the serendipitous language of principalship.

Keywords: tacit knowledge, meaning-making, serendipity, leadership reflective space (LRS), Filipino principal

Introduction

While previous studies have explained the pivotal role of principals in ensuring school effectiveness (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000; Su, Adams, & Mininberg; 2000; Hallinger, 1992; Kruger, 1996), success (Portin, 2000) and superior operations (McGough, 2003), the road to principalship remains an interesting, dynamic and serendipitous area for empirical investigation. Considering the impact of global forces on education vis-à-vis the changing landscape of education across the globe, Pounder and Merrill (2001) aver

that the role of principals particularly in the secondary level has become increasingly complex and demanding, thus making the position an enduring feature of schools (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006).

Through the years, the role of a principal has evolved from managerial to leadership functions. Today, the principal is viewed as a leader charged with the function of initiating change by raising the level of expectations for both teachers and students (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004); developing a caring community in the school (Sergiovanni, 1999); exercising effective instructional leadership (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Schutte & Hackmann, 2006), site based-decision-making (Whitaker, 2003); and spending more time with parents and community (Kochan, Spencer, Matthews, 2000), among others. These roles have situated the principal in a context where his capability and cope-ability skills are tested. These skills are assumed to be contributory to what Dinham (2005) calls as the *upward cycle* of success. The extent to which these two skills are evidenced in the day-to-day functioning of the principal, depends in great measure, on a certain number of factors, which, according to a grounded

Allan B. de Guzman, UST Center for Educational Research and Development, Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines; Sr. Ma. Lirio Tan Lagrimas Guillermo, A.R., Sacred Theology, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Allan B. de Guzman, UST Center for Educational Research and Development Room 201 Thomas Aquinas Research Complex, España, Manila, Philippines (1008). e-mail: abdeguzman@mnl.ust.edu.ph

study by Dinham in 2005, include the following: external awareness and engagement, bias toward innovation and action, personal qualities and relationships, vision, expectations and a culture of success, teacher learning, responsibility and trust, student support, common purpose and collaboration and focus on students, learning and teaching. The way these variables are observed is said to be context-specific. Additionally, Law, Walker, and Dimmock (2003) in another grounded study which derived the theory of value-based congruence, confirmed that values play a crucial role in principals' problem solving in an Asian setting. It is interesting to note, however, that cultural contexts help shape the principals' sets of attitudes, values and norms which may vary in countries across the globe (Heck, 1996; Dimmock & Walker, 1998 as cited by Oplatka, 2004).

In an ever-changing educational landscape, where tensions, contradictions and discontinuity continue to challenge schools' image, survival and stability indices, principals need not only be competent in the performance of their multitude tasks, but above all, they are bound to show a certain degree of reflectivity. This reflectivity calls for the principal to revisit, re-examine and reconsider various inputs, processes and products in the school environment which are not only measurable but valuable as well. In so doing, principals are able to understand the dynamics of their school environment while maintaining a high degree of openness to possibilities and serendipity. Competent and reflective principals are not born overnight. The principals' day-to-day undertakings are said to be knowledge-driven. The dynamic interplay between theory and practice cannot be underestimated. While explicit knowledge abounds in the literature and is communicated in professional development programs, the role of the principals' tacit knowledge derived from their experiences, day-to-day dealings with the school's stakeholders, observations, insights, and reflections are vital inputs to understanding the dynamics of school principalship. On one hand, explicit or codified knowledge fuels the practice of principalship. On the other hand, tacit knowledge illumines the life of principalship. The dictum "see the forest, not just the trees" supports the need for an administrative practice that is driven by explicit knowledge but illumined by one's experiences and personal reflections. It is interesting to note that a number of the principal's managerial know-how and leadership skills are born out of unplanned and unexpected school situations. These situations give the principal a kind of educational discovery which is coupled with fascination, excitement and new learning. Meaning-making is vital in the

realm of principalship. It serves as the fulcrum of one's practice which eventually leads to seeing the light and appreciating the serendipity of principalship.

Across the globe, public and private schools vary in the way principals are recruited, chosen, inducted, developed, and evaluated. By and large, the conceptualization of principalship as educational leadership is ideally constructed by Anglo-American scholars as embedded with moral, interpersonal, instructional and administrative dimensions (Murphy, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1991; Greenfield, 1995, Law & Glover, 2000, as cited by Oplatka, 2004). For instance, in a systematic review of papers on school principalship in developing countries, Oplatka (2004) reported that in some African countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Botswana), principals are not even appointed according to criteria of quality regarding their own performance in teaching. Many of them have never been in a classroom, and their appointment is the result of political intervention.

In the Philippines, schools are either state-run or privately owned stock or non-stock institutions. In the case of public elementary and secondary schools, the following provisions govern the selection of a school principal, to wit:

The school shall be the focal point and center of formal education. The class is where the teaching-learning process shall take place and should be managed efficiently and effectively. For the purpose, the schools division superintendent shall appoint a school principal for every complete public elementary and public high school or a cluster thereof, in accordance with existing Civil Service rules and regulations. The school principal shall function both as an instructional leader and administrative manager to ensure that goals for quality education are met and shall be assisted by an office staff for administrative and fiscal services. (RA 9155)

Private schools, for their part, are governed by corporation laws and have their own Board of Trustees. They are either sectarian or non-sectarian institutions owned by individuals, corporations or foundations. Sectarian schools or those run by religious congregations recruit principals from the pool of their members. These religious principals are appointed for a period of three years in a school run by the congregation, depending on the needs of the community. Many if not all of these religious sisters/priests come from different academic backgrounds (for example, Accounting, Pharmacy, Business Administration, Chemistry prior to their entry as nuns/priests) are given the appointment to run

congregational schools without a solid background in school management. In some cases, these religious principals run the school while they are enrolled in some graduate programs related to educational administration, management and leadership.

It is against this backdrop that this paper was conceived. Specifically, this narrative inquiry purports to capture the *tacit knowledge* of a secondary school principal in the Philippines without making any attempt of generalizing the collective views of religious principals, but simply to understand how meaning-making renders principalship a serendipitous experience.

Research Simulacrum

The claim of Argyris (1999 cited by Baker and Hoy, 2001) that tacit knowledge is the primary basis for effective management underpinned the impetus for this case study. Today, more than ever, the role of tacit knowledge as “educated common sense” (Baker & Hoy, 2001) in the management of dynamic systems such as schools, colleges and universities cannot be under-estimated. It is vital in the development of an illumined managerial know-how and experience-driven leadership. While tacit knowledge has been studied systematically in various fields such as information systems (MacDaniel & Pollard, 2003), nursing (Herbig, Bussing, & Ewert, 2001), military (Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995), among others, Baker and Hoy (2001) were one in claiming that its place in understanding how educational administrators operate has been constantly ignored. Tacit knowledge has been regarded by scholars like Herbig, Bussing, and Ewert (2001) as something that is acquired through an individual’s direct experience of whatever their tacit knowledge concerns. Sternberg (1985) and Wagner and Sternberg (1985) as cited in Baker and Hoy (2001) identified four kinds of tacit knowledge that were particularly important for managerial success. These include *managing people* (knowing how to work with and direct the work of others; *managing tasks* (knowing how to manage and prioritize day-to-day tasks; *managing self* (knowing how to maximize one’s performance and productivity; and *managing career* (knowing how to establish and enhance one’s reputation). These typologies of tacit knowledge serve as guideposts in probing how the subject of this paper observes meaning-making in her administrative journey as a school principal.

Method

Considering that not all phenomena in the study of school leadership can be captured and described in a positivist way, the present study relied on the use of narrative inquiry. This method provides a useful new avenue for understanding how leadership unfolds (Heck, 1998) and how it is shaped and illumined by personal and professional experiences. The phenomenological description contained in this study involved a secondary school principal who had been running a school for about ten years but never had the chance to undergo formal training in school administration except for her theological preparation. At the time of the study, the subject was enrolled in a doctoral program in educational management in one of the biggest comprehensive universities in the capital of the Philippines.

To capture the essence of the subject’s principalship journey, an in-depth interview (van Maanen, 1992) was used as the data gathering technique. Specifically, the following key questions were asked during the interview. (a) How would you describe your life as a principal? (b) In what way has the tasks of principalship challenged you as a person? What made you survive the challenges of principalship? (c) What insights and learning did you get from your experiences as a principal? (d) In what way has your principalship experiences made you a better persona in the school?

The interview was conducted in the subject’s own school in the belief that it would create a more inviting atmosphere as she recalled her experiences in both time and space. Interview proceedings were transcribed. In writing the phenomenological description of the subject’s experiences, the 3-step procedure outlined by Spiegelberg (1965) was employed. This procedure involves intuiting, analyzing and describing. In intuiting, the subject was asked to recall her experiences as a principal. Analyzing was carried out by looking for the following: the pieces, parts, in the spatial sense; the episodes and sequences, in the temporal sense; the qualities and dimensions of the phenomenon; settings, environments, surroundings; the prerequisites and consequences in time; the perspectives or approaches one can take; cores or foci and fringes or horizons; the appearing and disappearing of the phenomena; and the clarity of the phenomenon. Finally, a written description of the subject’s experiences called a *protocol* was prepared.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the written protocols, correspondence was observed by the researchers. Correspondence as a validation approach denotes that the researcher can take the results back to those studied. Lincoln

and Guba (1985) described procedures for the member check, whereby data, categories and interpretations are presented to the participants from whom the data were originally collected. The use of cool and warm analyses facilitated the process in bringing forth the essence or the *lebenswelt* of the phenomenon under investigation.

Findings

In this study, five interesting themes emerged from the subjective experiences of the interviewee. Specifically, the language of principalship as incarnated in the subject's verbalizations and musings was noted and identified. These are: (a) rigidity is the language of fear, (b) trust and respect is the language of empowerment, (c) transparency and openness is the language of communication, (d) listening and being listened to is the language of caring, and (e) interaction with parents and students is the language of partnership.

Rigidity is the language of fear

This is my tenth year as principal and somehow I have learned to sail in rough waters. I learned from my mistakes. I have learned various experiences from different individuals. God has His own time which may not be my time. I have realized, that as I serve God's people through the years, He has gifted me with superabundant grace-filled instances in my life, coupled with insurmountable trials.

I remember my first two years as a High School Principal when I would wake up with fear in my heart. I feared that I would not be able to perform my duties and responsibilities. I feared that I may not meet the expectations of the teachers, students, parents and even my very own religious community. I feared their complaints, which I would not be able to respond to. I feared that there would be problems which I may not be able to resolve. I feared that I might not be able to implement the curriculum or meet the standards of academic excellence of the school. So many were my fears! Because of my fears I became rigid. I always referred to the handbooks and never deviated from what were required. The contents of these Handbooks are almost sacred and must be followed religiously. When one violated rules and regulations, what followed were sanctions to prevent precedence. Rules were exacting and must always be observed. Whenever violated, I asked the Committee on Discipline for a hearing and ended up with a recommended sanction for my approval as high school principal, in

consultation with the School Directress or Administrative Board.

Fear controlled my handling of my duties and responsibilities. There were times when my patience was tested to the nth degree. I gave way to my anger and fear, and I became rigid. There was compliance in the context of fear and rigidity. There was almost no flexibility. I was so structured in my day's work. I was afraid to fail. I never forgot the fear of failure and always asked the Lord to take over as I stand along the way. I was afraid to let loose, forgetting that if I fell He would be there to catch me.

Trust and confidence is the language of empowerment

However, in time, I learned the art of total trust and surrender and started letting go of my fears and rigidity to some degree. It was on and off. At first I let go, then, I tried to hold back. When I came to understand that every individual is accountable for his performance of duties and responsibilities, I started feeling lighter. Total trust became the foundation of my dealings with others and in the delegation of duties and responsibilities. I started delegating major responsibilities to school personnel, teachers and students, but I took care of major responsibilities which could not be delegated. When I learned the task of delegation, I was almost accused of passing on my duties and responsibilities to my subordinates. My natural tendency was to react. However, I learned to let go of unfriendly comments likely to affect my performance of tasks entrusted to me. I am just a stewardess of His goods on earth or merely a shepherdess of His flock in this part of His vineyard. However, I was consoled by those concerned with my experiences. It was only God in my heart as my very reason for doing all my tasks. It was not easy to believe them at first, but as I went on with my tasks, I realized that more and more graces kept on pouring. Going against the odds is difficult. However, it has made me tougher in every struggle I make, every battle fought and every victory won. It was only my surrender to Him in every event of my life that has paved the way to indescribable silent joy. It was difficult to contain it, but I have to be careful in sharing with my joys and pains. He was my constant listener. He caused everything in my life. I surrendered because I trusted.

Transparency and openness is the language of communication

When one is transparent or open, one gains the trust of many. I said, many, not all. There are those who have experienced my transparency and openness. On the other

hand, there are those who mistook my transparency and openness as something else. Explanations would sometimes suffice, but there were also times when no extent of explanation could help me get through to them and gain their trust. There was simply refusal. There was nothing I could do except entrust them to God for Him to take over and possess the persons who have never come to trust me. It was frustrating but the very thought that even Jesus experienced rejection, somehow eased my tension.

Transparency and openness paved the way to open lines of communication, with the teachers, students and parents. The school conducts orientation seminars relative to the Handbook contents on the first day of classes. Everything concerning school policies is explained. In the past nine years, for example, I conducted the deliberation for honors at the end of each school year; I never experienced any complaint or case filed by parents questioning the deliberation results. Students' grades are flashed on the overhead projector which showed every detail, and results are transparent up to the last decimal place. Clarificatory questions are always entertained in that they would not leave the school with items unclarified. As to any disciplinary case, parents were made to understand the policies, rules and regulations of the school and the inculcation of values that goes with these. When there is transparency and openness, the school can operate smoothly. Problems are reduced to the least degree. Teachers can now maximize their classroom performances. Understandably, petty events are likely to occur since everybody has been directed to attainment of a single goal-- a stronger united force arises for the good of the school.

Listening and being listened to is the language of caring

In the first few months of my service, I felt resistance. However, as teachers sensed that they had a place in my heart, I felt them warming up. From the very start, I asked for the gift of a listening heart. I admit that I sometimes failed in this aspect, but I also acknowledge the fact that I need to listen. I often experienced that even advice to anyone who comes to me, but just because I listened to him/her, a thank you is always said when he/she leaves. I have also experienced this. Workloads do not matter even if they require so much time and effort. What matters most or what one needs most is a listening and understanding heart.

Interaction with parents and students is the language of partnership

When I arrived in this school, I thought I could not make it. I was informed that teachers, parents and students are problems. Knowing what had transpired before I became the principal of the institution, I felt very sad. I could not speak. I asked myself how I would handle them. As the years go by, disciplinary cases and problems have gone down. During my first two years in this school, we had many cases, including vandalism inside the building, but now, no more. There were also times when I had to ask students to transfer, as recommended by the Discipline Committee but now, no more. I would first exhaust all efforts to help erring students regain themselves. If the student keeps his/her promise, he goes without being punished, but if the opposite happens, the student finds no room to blame others, neither the parents nor the school.

In my experience as a secondary school principal, I learned that parental support is the most vital factor in a student's life. Students strongly supported by parents can easily rise in the ranks, develop their talents and God-given gifts, can join school activities without any trouble and relate with their classmates/schoolmates. Students with highly supportive parents are good performers in and outside the school. They build strong convictions and form positive values in life. If they are well-founded on positive attitudes, they tend to have a positive outlook in life. When they meet challenges on the way, they can face these squarely because their foundation is strong. These positive situations are evident in families that are nurturing and open. When a student comes from a vital and nurturing family he/she has high self-worth, his/her communication is direct, clear, specific, and honest, rules are flexible, human, appropriate, and subject to change and the link to society is open and hopeful, and is based on choice. In an open family system, self-worth is primary, while power and performance is only secondary. One's actions represent one's beliefs. Change is welcome and considered normal and desirable, while communion, the system and the rules relate to one another. Generally, students from nurturing families are expectedly creative. They have brighter hopes, visions and a good chance to live a good life in the future.

Discussion

As shown in the findings of this study, the development of the necessary organizational and leadership skills among principals, be they beginning or seasoned ones, is said to be contextual in nature. Understanding the dynamics of

principalship, though fuelled by literature, which in the context of Asian countries, is anchored on Anglo-American perspective, entails for the provision of a *leadership reflective space (LRS)*. This space is created when principals start working with people and working for people. This kind of space does not exist in a vacuum nor does it exist in isolation. Principals get to know their job well through constant encounter and dialogue with the school's constituents. In so doing, the reflective space in the life of the principal starts to develop and expand. As the principal dwells and communes with this reflective space, a certain kind of serendipity takes place where she begins to witness the language of her tasks as a school leader. In this study, it is interesting to note how a beginning principal, who despite her managerial inadequacies, saw the multiple layers of meanings in her experiences, which in the realm of her leadership reflective space expresses the language of principalship.

The general feeling of fear among school principals develops in them a kind of rigidity. This rigidity is manifested by strict compliance with existing policies of the institution and agreed upon standards of performance and behavior. This tendency of the school leader is explained by the thinking that principals' perceptions shape their realities and that their perceptions are sometimes based on minimal information (Dimmock & Walker, 1997). Fear and rigidity become more evident when the principal's behavior is a product of mere compliance and not reflective observance which is illumined by conceptual understanding.

Interestingly, the principal in this study started to recognize the value of people in her environment and how to work with people. Trust and confidence in the principal's leadership reflective space made empowerment as the language of her management which is inspired by power and authority. The practice of empowering people through participation and involvement characterizes principalship in developed countries while autocratic leadership is highly evidenced by most of the developing countries (Oplatka, 2004). Fennel (2002) in her phenomenological investigation of women principals' lived experiences with power found that by giving up key leadership tasks and roles, the principal is able to promote leadership within the group and at the same time enhanced her leadership position by fostering an environment of mutual respect and trust. Trust and confidence once exercised judiciously by the school leader can develop an educational atmosphere where leadership activities of the principal are strengthened by the kind of leadership exercised by the teachers. Indeed, the participative decision-making dimension of leadership determines who

should be involved, what should be their optimum level of involvement, what will be decided, how it will be decided, and communicating to participants the design of the participative decision-making process (Glasman & Glassman, 1997). Additionally, the same trust and confidence can serve as a valuable tool in building self-esteem and restoring self confidence (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001).

As seen in this study, the establishment of a communication system in the principals' administrative platform is a by-product of transparency and openness. This dual characteristic of communication enables the principal to see the other side of the coin and enable the school constituents to address problems and concerns in a more meaningful and tension-free way. Moreover, transparency and openness facilitates the creation of a dialogue in the context of mutuality. Fennel (2001) found in her research that dialogue as a communication system enables the principal to learn about the knowledge and talents of teachers and encourage the development of these toward school improvement.

Since organizations exist to serve human needs and not humans serving organizational needs, (Glasman & Glassman, 1997), it is worth discussing how the principal in this study realized the place and the value of listening in managing people better. Listening as disclosed in the study of Celikten (2005) is considered as an essential leadership quality. As a quality, it serves as a means in encouraging others to find their voices and grow (Helgeson, 1990 as cited by Celikten, 2005). Listening is a skill that principals need to nurture. This skill makes the principal's decisions needs-based. As a skill to be practiced by principals, listening is a two-way endeavor that makes a school a caring community. In a work by Lyman (2000) it was mentioned that a caring principal begets a caring school, and that a caring school is a good school. Noddings (2006), for her part, averred that caring leaders invite participation and responsible experimentation; avoid coercion; and offer support to a promising idea. Though not generalizable, it is worth mentioning that the principal's caring behavior as seen in the subject's leadership reflective space is part of the Filipino psyche as a relational genius (Viernes & de Guzman, 2005) and the Asian culture having a vibrant nucleus of caring people (Gudalefsky & Madduma, 1992 as cited by de Guzman & Fernandez, 2005).

The principal works neither in a vacuum nor in isolation. To find meaning in one's leadership work is to recognize the presence of the outside world. In the case of the subject of this study, the principal recognizes the value of working and collaborating with parents and students. Though interaction

creates tension at times, it is considered as a force for learning and empowerment (Walker & Quong, 1998). The principal or the headteacher develops a sense of awareness of what is going on in her school's internal and external environments through his interactions and involvement (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2000). This awareness enables the principal to evidence a high degree of sensitivity to and sensibility of the needs, problems and concerns of both students and parents. Today, more than ever, the boundary-spanning functions of the principal cannot be overlooked (Whitaker, 2003). As the school becomes more and more permeable, there is a need for school principals to see parents and students as effective conduits of needs-based planning and as responsive partners in participative decision-making. Parents and students as principal's co-creators make the school vision a shared vision. In today's era where school proliferation and competition exist, parents and students are the most potent communicators of the school's vision and philosophy.

Conclusion

Understanding the pathways that school leaders take is a serendipitous task. Capturing individual know-how of better school management entails meaning-making. The multiple layers of meaning in the principal's day-to-day experiences, exposures, observations, and learnings are embedded in the so-called leadership reflective space. As indicated by the findings of the study particularly in the themes emerged from the subject principal's journey, the role of one's tacit knowledge is clearly understood in the context of a reflective space. This space is a means by which school leaders may understand the language of principalship. Once identified, entertained and nurtured, this space can reveal the apodictic nature of principalship. While exposure to graduate studies and other forms of professional development brings the concepts and axioms of school leadership, the experiential dimension of every school principal is the balancing feature of any theoretical learning. The language of principalship varies across individual tacit knowledge. The truism of this language is context-specific and culture-based. The nexus between tacit knowledge and reflective space is a valuable means in understanding the dynamics of principalship.

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