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Research Article

School Leaders' Ethnographic Reflections: Lessons for Bridging Through the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the evolving educational landscape, school leaders hold a pivotal position in ensuring quality education in the post-pandemic. To explore this phenomenon, the researcher employed ethnographic method and thematic analysis to interpret the reflections of secondary school leaders in Masbate province. Key themes and cultural patterns emerged from the data analysis. Along with curriculum and learning, the key theme is the implementation of diverse learning modalities and strategies to address the challenges brought by the pandemic. Health protocols and guidelines were observed. Adaptability within the education sector aligns with the values of Filipino. Further, leadership and governance, such as leadership practices that encompass modeling behavior, investing in teacher potential, and supporting teachers' initiatives and collaboration, are the cultural patterns. Moreover, continuous improvement highlights the significance of ongoing projects, particularly those who struggle with literacy and numeracy. Passion for crafting projects, data analysis, and technology in forming project designs and enhancing students' performance is also needed. The strong commitment came out as a cultural pattern. Lastly, with managing resources, prioritize resources for the teaching and learning process, provide opportunities for professional development, allocate financial resources to priority areas, and manage human resources equitably. Flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances while emphasizing accountability and transparency.

Hence, a resilient-collaborative leadership model was crafted to support the existing situation of education in the post-pandemic. However, further studies are encouraged about this phenomenon.

Keywords: *Cultural patterns, Ethnographic reflections, Post-pandemic, Resilient-collaborative*

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Introduction

While making decisions in the post-pandemic era, every educational leader faces significant challenges (UNESCO, 2020). To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce infection rates for more than two years, countries across the globe have suspended schooling (UNESCO, 2020). More than 1.2 billion pupils globally, including more than 28 million students in the Philippines, have been affected by this shutdown (UNESCO, 2020). In response to the changes brought about by the global health crises, the Department of Education decided to accept a new normal in education, including the implementation of new policies and initiatives (UNESCO, 2020).

As stated by Karalis (2020), what is worth studying after returning to normality, are the implications that have arisen for the day after, that is, what adjustments need to be made, the extent of the situation and to define the basic dimensions of education and learning in formal education systems and organizations amid educational disruptions. For today we live in a strange world where these deviations from the norm suggest that there have been and will continue to be significant shifts in the way we comprehend and interpret various aspects of life, including education, which has undergone and will continue to undergo changes in the way we lead and instruct.

With the cessation of educational institutions at all levels, most of the countries around the world shifted to online emergency remote education (ERE) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Hodges, et al., 2020). This situation paved the way for new discoveries, initiatives, and innovations to meet the new demands of the new normal environment and to future-proof the educational system. The suspension of regular teaching-learning activities has necessitated a rethinking of teaching approaches and a redefinition of the methodologies of teaching-learning via an online platform. As a result, the limitations on the student's participation in a fundamental socio-educational context (i.e., the school day) posed a significant problem for the socialization processes required for each student's development trajectory. In addition, new terms have been introduced into the language, including lockdown.

The imposition of lockdown on a global scale signified the closing of the home, the distance from the fondest affections (grandparents, uncles, cousins), and the beginning of a communication process characterized by the exclusive use of modern technologies. In terms of leading and managing all administrative and non-administrative duties, the new normal environment posed a challenge not only to instructors but also to school administrators. As has been observed, school administrators may have permitted adversity to overcome them. They must adapt to the environment's ever-changing conditions. Effective school leadership is believed to be essential for enhancing the quality and equity of education. During and after the pandemic, school leaders must have resolute leadership styles and practices to meet the complex challenges of the new normal for educational systems.

Methods

This study employs an ethnographic research design, which entails the description and comprehension of situations and phenomena from the participants' perspective. The purpose of ethnographic research is to develop an interpretation that integrates theoretical knowledge, the researchers' own perspectives, and those of the researched individuals. Typically, ethnographic studies rely on participant interviews to develop a comprehensive description of the investigated phenomenon or culture. Consequently, the basis of an ethnographic study is a comprehensive examination of the nature of a particular phenomenon. Observation and interviews are the most prevalent techniques for gathering ethnographic data. Interviews are an important data collection method in ethnography because they allow researchers to gather in-depth information about participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. However, in order to conduct interviews successfully, the researcher must establish rapport with the participants, demonstrate respect for their culture, and be aware of his or her own biases. The researcher conducted in-person and online interviews with the respondents without deviating from the responses of the study's participants. The respondents were the Mega School Principals from the three (3)

Congressional Districts in Masbate province. Each district has colossal schools, which are larger than average schools in terms of student enrolment, frequently with thousands of students. They offer a variety of curricula to accommodate the diverse learning requirements and abilities of their students. These institutions are administered by School Principals I through IV. There are a total of ten respondents from the three (3) districts in this investigation. School Leaders' Ethnographic Reflections in the Post-Pandemic Era: Analysis and Interpretation This study was analyzed and interpreted using a structured questionnaire that was based on the research focus, which was the School Leaders' Ethnographic Reflections.

Result and Discussion

Curriculum and Learning

The curriculum is seen as the foundation of education, determining what students will learn, how they will learn it, and how their knowledge and skills will be assessed. The Philippine curriculum is designed to align with the country's educational goals, such as improving literacy and numeracy skills, promoting critical thinking and creativity, and preparing students for the global workforce. In the post-pandemic era, schools transitioned from blended learning to full face-to-face classes. This transition was based on the availability of vaccines for teachers and students, as well as compliance with health protocols set by the government. The importance of adhering to health protocols in schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is supported by a study conducted by Shehzad et al. (2021).

It indicates that schools in Masbate Province have implemented various learning modalities and strategies to provide quality education amidst the pandemic. The adaptability and resilience of the education sector are evident, as schools have embraced innovative approaches, complied with health protocols, and ensured the safety of teachers and students. This demonstrates a cultural pattern of **adaptability** in following the rules and regulations for the common good as well as to the changing circumstances.

Leadership and Governance

The key themes highlighted flexibility in dealing with teachers and other departments in school, the significance of modeling behavior and setting an example, the value placed on investing in teachers' potential and growth, and the emphasis on accountability and transparency in the use of government funds.

- **Flexibility** as emphasized in the responses, is the importance of understanding and empathizing with individuals during challenging times. Leaders need to be flexible in their approach towards people, taking into account their unique circumstances and challenges. This allows leaders to adapt their policies and actions to support and accommodate the needs of their team members, it also brought unexpected changes and disruptions, requiring leaders to be flexible and adaptable. The ability to find innovative solutions to emerging challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, balance policies with human considerations, support and capacitate teachers, handle transitions effectively, delegate tasks, and address mental health issues.
- **Modeling behavior and setting an example** is another prominent cultural pattern among school leaders in Masbate. Leaders recognize the importance of leading by example and upholding rules and expectations. Ethical leadership is emphasized, and leaders understand that their actions have a significant impact on the behavior of their subordinates.
- **Investing in teachers' potential and growth** is highly valued in Masbate schools. School leaders believe in their teachers and support their endeavors. Professional development opportunities are provided to enhance teachers' skills and knowledge, ultimately improving student outcomes. This emphasis on teacher empowerment aligns with research findings that highlight the positive impact of supportive leadership on school success.
- **Accountability and transparency** in the use of government funds are cultural patterns observed in Masbate schools. School leaders prioritize responsible stewardship

and emphasize the importance of implementing transparency measures in financial management. Timely and updated reports are seen as crucial for ensuring accountability and maintaining public trust.

Thus, the cultural pattern of Masbate school leaders as reflected in their responses suggests a strong emphasis on **flexibility** which reflects the values of Filipino culture and aligns with global trends that emphasize collaborative leadership in education.

Continuous Improvement

The implementation of continuous improvement (CI) projects in the education sector, specifically in the Province of Masbate in the Philippines highlights the importance of CI in addressing the learning needs of students, particularly non-readers and non-numerates, and emphasize the role of collaboration, commitment, and passion from teachers and school leaders in crafting effective CI projects.

The data also suggest that CI projects are designed to address the most pressing problems of learners, and in the context of the pandemic, the issue of non-readers and non-numerates has become more apparent. The use of data analysis and technology is highlighted as key components of CI projects to provide insights into students' performance and inform project design.

Furthermore, the importance of collaboration among school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders in implementing School-Based Management (SBM) principles effectively play a vital role. Several studies mentioned in the research design, such as Bernardo et al. (2021), Hidayati et al. (2020), and Gamage and Disanayake (2020), support the positive impact of SBM practices, including CI, on student learning outcomes.

The cultural patterns observed among school leaders in the Province of Masbate include a **strong commitment** to improving education and student learning outcomes through hard work, collaboration, responsibility, innovation, and modernization. This aligns with the broader educational reforms implemented in the Philippines, such as the K-12 program and

the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, which aim to enhance learning outcomes.

Globally, there is a growing trend in the use of data analysis and technology in education to improve teaching and learning practices. The research design references studies conducted by UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that highlight the importance of adopting a continuous improvement approach and embracing innovation and modernization in education systems to enhance learning outcomes. The data emphasize the significance of continuous improvement projects in addressing the learning needs of students in the education sector, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Collaboration, commitment, and the use of data analysis and technology are key factors in crafting effective CI projects. The study also highlights the main cultural pattern which is a **strong commitment** as observed among school leaders in Masbate Province, which align with broader educational reforms and global trends in education.

Managing Resources

The ethnographic reflections of Masbate School Leaders in the post-pandemic provide valuable insights into the challenges and strategies of resource management in schools.

- **Effective resource management is crucial** for improving school performance. Transparency, efficient use of resources, equitable access, and stakeholder participation are essential factors identified by previous studies and reiterated by the respondents. School leaders are responsible for equipping their teachers with the necessary skills to adapt to changing times. Being adaptive, flexible, and efficient in time management is crucial for managing schools during crises.
- **Prioritize essential expenses and seek external support.** Anticipating and preparing for changes is important, highlighting the need for proactive school leaders.
- **The scale of the organization affects management complexity**, and good leadership can mitigate challenges. Seventhly, experience helps school leaders cope better with stressful situations, and managing operations during the pandemic becomes less daunting with familiarity.

- **Prioritization, planning, transparency, and collaboration** with finance personnel are emphasized for effective resource management.
- **Building partnerships with stakeholders is essential.**
- **Managing human resources** involves assigning teachers based on their majors and providing opportunities for professional growth.

The findings align with previous studies that highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, strategic resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and professional development in effective resource management. School leaders in Masbate demonstrated adaptability, flexibility, accountability, transparency, resourcefulness, and ingenuity, reflecting cultural values ingrained in Filipino culture. The impact of the pandemic on resource management was recognized, and school leaders adjusted their strategies accordingly. These traits of adaptability and resourcefulness have been identified as key attributes of effective school leaders in the Philippines.

Education authorities in the country have emphasized the importance of flexibility and adaptability during the pandemic, encouraging school leaders to find creative solutions to deliver education. Also, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) has emphasized the importance of flexibility and adaptability in the education sector during the pandemic, as reflected in its guidelines for the implementation of alternative learning modalities (DepEd, 2020). The ethnographic reflections of Masbate School Leaders shed light on the challenges faced and strategies employed in resource management, demonstrating the resilience and commitment of school leaders to provide quality education despite difficult circumstances. The insights gained from this analysis, along with existing studies, can inform school leaders in improving resource management practices and enhancing the quality of education in their schools.

Leadership Model based on the ethnographic reflections of school leaders in the post-pandemic

This model focuses on resilience and collaboration, which are essential qualities for educational leaders in Masbate Province and beyond as reflected in the responses of the respondents of this study. The term "resilient" emphasizes the model's emphasis on adaptability, flexibility, and resourcefulness in the face of changing circumstances, particularly those brought about by the pandemic.

- The term "collaborative" highlights the importance of unity, teamwork, and cooperation among teachers, staff, students, and other stakeholders. This component is particularly relevant to Masbate Province, where a strong emphasis on respect and collaboration was observed in the responses of school leaders.

This **Resilient Collaborative Leadership Model** is a new and unique approach to educational leadership that considers the specific cultural patterns and needs of school leaders in Masbate Province. It emphasizes the importance of adaptability, collaboration, innovation, accountability, and resourcefulness in creating a positive learning environment that supports student success and prepares them for the challenges of the modern world which emphasizes these elements:

- Adaptability which is essential for leaders to adjust their strategies based on the changing needs of their institution. As noted by Ylimaki and Jacobson (2021), "Leadership is no longer about sticking to traditional models and structures. Instead, it's about being flexible, nimble and agile to address the needs of the moment." This means that leaders must be willing to pivot quickly and make changes when necessary, even if it means deviating from established norms and practices most especially along Curriculum and Learning Principles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the education sector, forcing schools to transition to remote or hybrid

learning modalities. As schools resume in-person learning, they must adapt to the new reality and address the challenges posed by the pandemic. School leaders must be adaptable and flexible in adjusting their curriculum and learning strategies to meet the changing needs of their students and staff.

- Strong commitment is also critical for effective leadership in the post-pandemic era. As noted by Greany and Higham (2021), "leaders must demonstrate a strong commitment to their school's mission and vision, as well as to their staff and students." This requires leaders to be passionate about their work and dedicated to achieving their goals, even in the face of significant challenges.

In the post-pandemic era, strong commitment is crucial for effective leadership in implementing continuous improvement among schools for enhancing education in this new landscape, most especially that it is done by secondary schools to address the issues and learning gaps among students which is why there are CI projects. School leaders must be willing to engage in self-reflection and examine the practices and policies that were disrupted during the pandemic.

They need to be open to feedback from various stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and community members, in order to understand the diverse needs and perspectives within their school community. It presents unique challenges for school leaders, as they navigate the aftermath of remote learning, disrupted routines, and potential learning gaps. It requires them to be adaptable and innovative, seeking creative solutions to address the evolving needs of students and teachers. School leaders must demonstrate resilience, remaining steadfast in their commitment to providing quality education while being responsive to changing circumstances.

- Collaboration is another key element of the Resilient Collaborative leadership model along effective Management of School Resources. As noted by Ayers and Rubel (2021), "School leaders must work closely

with other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and community members, to address complex challenges." This means that leaders must be able to build effective teams, foster a culture of collaboration and teamwork, and leverage the expertise and resources of others to achieve their goals.

As reflected in the responses in the analysis of data, collaboration plays a crucial role in the effective management of resources in the post-pandemic education system. The pandemic has highlighted the need for a collaborative approach among various stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and students, to address the challenges and ensure efficient resource allocation. By working together, these stakeholders can pool their knowledge, expertise, and resources to find innovative solutions and make the best use of limited resources, can foster effective management of financial resources. Thus, environment, budgets may be tighter, and schools and educational institutions need to make efficient use of the available funds. By collaborating with local businesses, community organizations, and government agencies, schools can secure additional funding or sponsorships for educational initiatives. Pooling financial resources can help address resource gaps and ensure that critical needs, such as access to devices or internet connectivity, are met for all students.

- Flexibility is essential for leaders to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic era. As noted by Riggan and Lipnevich (2021), "Leaders must be willing to embrace new ideas and approaches, and be open to feedback and constructive criticism." This means that leaders must be willing to challenge established practices and be willing to experiment with new ideas and approaches.

Respondents emphasized the importance of understanding and empathizing with individuals during challenging times. Leaders need to be flexible in their approach towards people, considering their unique circumstances and challenges.



Resilient Collaborative Leadership Model

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the researcher concluded that (1) the school leaders in the Province of Masbate are actively seeking solutions and implementing measures to ensure the continuity of quality education despite challenging circumstances. Their emphasis on flexibility, innovation, and adherence to health protocols demonstrates their commitment to overcoming obstacles and providing effective education (2) their adoption of collaborative leadership aligns with global trends in education, indicating their willingness to learn from successful practices worldwide (3) their commitment to continuous improvement in education and student learning outcomes reflects their focus on creating an environment that supports ongoing growth and development (4) , their priorities and actions, such as prioritizing the teaching and learning process, providing professional development opportunities for teachers, and strategically managing resources, indicate their understanding of the key factors that contribute to effective educational practices and positive student outcomes.

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