Political Journey of School Heads: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract—the purpose of this undertaking was to discover the untold political experiences of school heads. Employing phenomenological approach with 18 school heads, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion, results revealed that participants divulged that their political experiences in public elementary schools in Region. Consequently, the participants mobilized their resources based on school priorities and offered their insights on what they can offer to academic community. With due consideration with the narratives of the participants, politics in education is the rallying call of school leaders in lobbying school improvements to external political structures.

Index Terms— Political Journey, School Head, Davao City, Philippines

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent time, political leadership was noticeably absent from most major school reform agendas, and even the people who saw politics as important to turning around failing schools expressed uncertainty about how to proceed. Politics is the key to school improvement. School principals are the front-line managers, the small business executives, the battlefield commanders charged with leading their team to new levels of effectiveness. In this new era of accountability, where school leaders are expected to demonstrate bottom-line results and use data to drive decisions, the skill and knowledge of principals matter more than ever (Murphy, 2008).

Every public school displays its own life, social climate, organizational culture, and subsystems (Iannaccone, 2006). First or second year middle school principals often find themselves contributing to and navigating through one element of these social systems known as the politics of education. Consequently, school principals face the challenge of identifying key political structures and landscapes within their public schools, and have the daunting task of navigating internal political structures and interactions in relationship to external political structures, while negotiating educational change (Bacharach, 2008; Mundell, 2005; Hargreaves, 2006; and Willower, 2007).

The one year-long qualitative study of Ort (2006) detailed the lived experiences of ten rural school principals and documented their attempts to identify their political landscapes through seemingly open approaches, and lead within their environments to negotiate holistic educational change. However, most of the school principals were unprepared to manage a period of decline in public education (Boyd, 2008). The principals relied on closed and conflictive leadership approaches, as typically peripheral political elements became central actors in their political landscapes (Marshall, 2006). During periods of political ambiguity and uncertainty, each principal relied on coercive tactics to limit and control teachers‟ social interactions during grade-level team meetings, and access to political structures, which decided who got what, when and how (Glasser, 2008).

On the other hand, the research project of Hoyt (2007) revealed that during budgetary and economic decline, school principals need to understand how their decisions impact the existing political social structures. As suggested by Fullan (2007), principals must be much more attuned to political policies and mandates, and be more sophisticated at conceptual thinking, and transforming the organization through people and teams.

The field of educational leadership has suffered from a general dearth of systematic scholarly inquiry. Leading authorities have pointedly observed that the overall landscape of educational politics research is "considerably bleaker than most would prefer" (Vriesenga, 2009). In particular, political scholars have termed the body of research on administrator political landscape "scant" (Lashway, 2010).

My quest for a comprehensive understanding of the political perspective of school heads leads me to the thought that politics in school setting is in crisis. The scant research that is available offers limited insights while there is an intensified demand for improvements of the political undertakings of school heads to reach the success story for every school. In my own point of view, if school leaders cannot clearly define their political role then their ability to effectively meet societal expectations to improve student success becomes very ambiguous. Hence, my examination along with the political journey of school heads and my ensuing reflection will hopefully result to a doable implication for practice intended for professional learning community leadership.
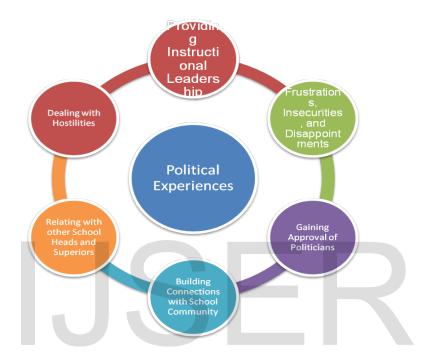
My readings crafted from previous researchers lead me with a high momentum to conduct a qualitative study with pure intentions to frame up my study which results in the formulation of the research questions to answer hereunder.

1. What are the political experiences of school heads in public elementary schools in Region XI?

2. How do school heads fare in resource mobilization?
3. What political insights can the school heads offer to their academic community?

2 POLITICAL EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL HEADS IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN REGION XI

Figure 1. Major Themes on Political Experiences of School
Heads in Public Elementary Schools in Region XI

As shown in Figure 1, school heads **provide instructional leadership** for pupils and teachers need so with the improvement of school plant and facilities, set goals with stakeholders in the conduct of the DepEd implementation and routenary activities.

As they they come across with their journey, they have to **gain approval of Politicians** through socialization, appearance on their sessions, with that they can establish rapport and relations with them. And for sure, when they are involved and engaged in the school activities especially if they are recognized in the public with their assistance.

On the other hand, **frustrations, insecurities, and disappointments** hamper their determination in pursuing their goals. They were insulted, reprimanded by the powerful politicians. Especially so in the promotion where it is given not by merit but on connections, sometimes, threatened by their bodyguards, if displeased, they will uproot school heads anytime they want.

Certainly, school heads are reminded to **build connections with school community** despite adversities, they should lead by example and be a role model and deal with them notwithstanding diversity.

Relating with other school heads and superiors disembarked them where conflict is inevitable because of jealousy, intrigue and competition for higher positions and deal with inconsiderate superior.

Indeed, along their journey they **deal with hostilities**. They use their charm to silence or quell hostilities, they don't mind negative feedback instead they should be firm and assertive with accusing teachers and put them in their proper place to those who have attitudinal problems.

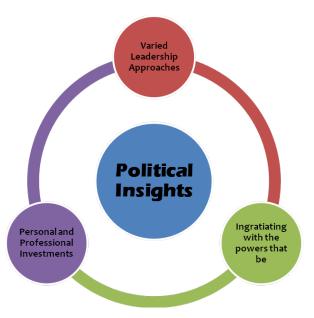**3   SCHOOL HEADS FARE IN RESOURCE MOBILIZATION**

Figure 2 relates how school heads fare in resource mobilization. They **prioritize** the needs of the school above all. Allocate budget to the needs of school and especially curriculum and to the services offered.

School heads put **stakeholders' participation** in the realization of school goals especially in managing funds and allocating budget. They always **adhere to budget** on the specified budget allocation on the school improvement plan and division format.

In the light of the **resource maximization**, school heads align budget with the School Improvement Plan and engage staff in the planning and even montoring performance of tasks. Invest on in-service tranings and utilize trained teachers to echo seminars and trainings attended.

Undeniably, they **utilize other sources of income** from canteen proceeds, school site income, sales in copra, funds from special science program and conduct fund raising if insufficient.

4   POLITICAL INSIGHTS CAN THE SCHOOL HEADS OFFER TO THEIR ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

.Figure 3 deals with political insights of school head on what they can offer to their academic community.

School heads should be attuned in using **varied leadership approaches** along with the stakeholders. As desired, they should

be reachable by anyone, lead by example. A leader who can touch lives, a collaborator, supportive and ready to defend subordinates always. Though, sometimes democratic but autocratic when neccasary.

Noticeably, they **ingratiate with the powers of connections** when dealing with the politicians even if uncomfortable. Just go with the flow, always acknowledge their aid and assistance and really have to be with their good graces for the sake of the school.

In the course of their journey, there is really a call for **personal and professional investment** above all. It makes a difference if they get to talk to the teachers on a personal level and exude their aura that will radiate and inspire them. They believed that they will grow if they love their work, know their wok and work it well. They should be intellectually ready for the position, leveled up commitment and deemed to be a public servant.

5 CONCLUSION

The participants of the study divulged that their political experiences in public elementary schools in Region XI provided with instructional leadership, gaining with approval of politicians, frustrations, insecurities and disappointments, building connections with school community, relating with other school heads and superiors, and dealing with hostilities. Consequently, the participants mobilized their resources based on prioritizing the need of the school with the participation of the stakeholders, adhering to budget allocation, resource maximization, and utilization of other sources of income. Conversely, the participants offered their insights to their academic community by means of employing varied leadership approaches, ingratiating with the power of connection, and personal and professional investment.

With due consideration with the narratives of the participants, politics in education is the rallying call of school leaders in lobbying school improvements to external political structures. The game of politicking is a "hard play" that the school heads will play on because according to Bjork (2005), actions emerge neither as the calculated choice of a unified group nor as a formal summary of a leader's preferences in school leadership. Rather the context of shared power but separate judgement concerning important choices determines that politics is the mechanism of choice. He noted that the environment in which the game is played: inordinate uncertainty about what must be done, the necessity that something be done and crucial consequences of whatever is done. These features force responsible school leaders to become active players. The pace of the game consists hundreds of issues, numerous games, and multiple channels compels school leaders to fight to get others' attention, to make them see the facts, to assure that they take the time to think seriously about the broader issue. The structure of the game is power shared by individuals with separate responsibilities validates each player's feeling that others don't see the problem, and others must be persuaded to look at the issue from a less parochial perspective. The rule of the game is that he who hesitates loses his chance to play at that point, and he who is uncertain about his recommendation is overpowered by others who are sure, pressures players to come down on the side of an issue and play. The reward of the political game in public education is the effectiveness on impact of outcomes, as the immediate measure of performance that encourages school leaders to understand the political "hard play" within the political landscape of public governance.

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