

## Reconstructing the Educator Self: Identity Reconstruction and Leadership Transition Among School Leaders

Alna G. Losa

St. Paul University Surigao, Surigao City, Philippines

Email: [alnalosa321@gmail.com](mailto:alnalosa321@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0009- 0008-8141-9212

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explored how educators reconstruct their professional identity as they transition from classroom teaching to school leadership in the Schools Division of Dinagat Islands. Anchored in constructivist ontology and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the study examined the meanings, tensions, adaptations, and realizations that shaped leadership identity among nine school leaders, including those assigned in multigrade and clustered school contexts. Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and supported by field notes and reflexive documentation. Findings revealed six interrelated themes: reconstructing the self beyond the classroom; leadership competence and resilience; identity challenged toward reshaping oneself; building collaboration of school and communities; identity reconstruction and realization of educators; and multigrade struggle and support. The central essence was a transformational journey of educators where leadership is anchored in resilience, collaboration, and professional redefinition. The study concludes that leadership transition is not a single career event but an ongoing identity process shaped by institutional expectations, emotional labor, role expansion, community engagement, and reflective practice. The study recommends identity-centered leadership preparation, mentoring for newly appointed school heads, support for clustered and multigrade school leaders, and career progression policies that address both technical competence and the human process of becoming a leader.

Keywords: Identity Reconstruction, Leadership Transition, School Leaders, Professional Identity, Multigrade Leadership, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

### 1. Introduction

Educational leadership has increasingly become a complex professional transition rather than a simple promotion from teaching to administration. Teachers who assume school leadership roles move from direct classroom instruction to broader responsibilities involving instructional supervision, policy implementation, resource management, stakeholder engagement, school improvement, and organizational accountability. This transition requires educators to revise how they understand themselves as professionals. In this sense, leadership transition involves both role change and identity reconstruction, because the educator must negotiate continuity with the former teacher self while developing a wider leadership identity (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003).

The need to understand this transition is particularly relevant in Philippine public education, where career progression reforms, leadership shortages, and the expanding demands of school administration require educators to assume roles that are more strategic, relational, and policy-driven. The expanded career progression system for public school teachers formalizes classroom teaching and school administration career lines, thereby creating more visible pathways for teacher advancement but also intensifying the need for leadership readiness and identity support (Republic of the Philippines et al., 2024). In geographically distinct divisions such as Dinagat

Islands, school leaders may also supervise multigrade, mixed, monograde, and clustered school contexts, where limited resources, distance, and community dependence shape leadership work.

The rationale of this study lies in the recognition that leadership preparation often emphasizes administrative competence, supervision, and school management while giving less attention to the personal and professional reconstruction that educators undergo as they become leaders. Contemporary career literature shows that professional transitions are increasingly nonlinear, identity-laden, and emotionally demanding (Akkermans et al., 2024; Barley et al., 2017). Educational leadership literature likewise stresses that effective school leadership depends not only on technical capacity but also on moral purpose, adaptive judgment, and the ability to mobilize people toward shared educational improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Mincu, 2022).

The research gap addressed in this study concerns the limited qualitative understanding of how educators in localized and geographically complex school settings reconstruct their professional identity during leadership transition. Existing research has examined leadership competencies, promotion systems, teacher leadership, and administrative roles, but fewer studies have examined the meanings, tensions, and identity negotiations that school leaders personally experience as they shift from teacher to leader, especially in multigrade and clustered school environments in the Philippine context.

This study is philosophically grounded in constructivist ontology, which views reality as socially constructed through interaction, context, and personal meaning-making (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From this perspective, the professional identity of school leaders is not fixed; it is continuously negotiated through lived experience, institutional expectations, and relational encounters. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which provides a flexible and theoretically coherent approach for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data while recognizing the active interpretive role of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021).

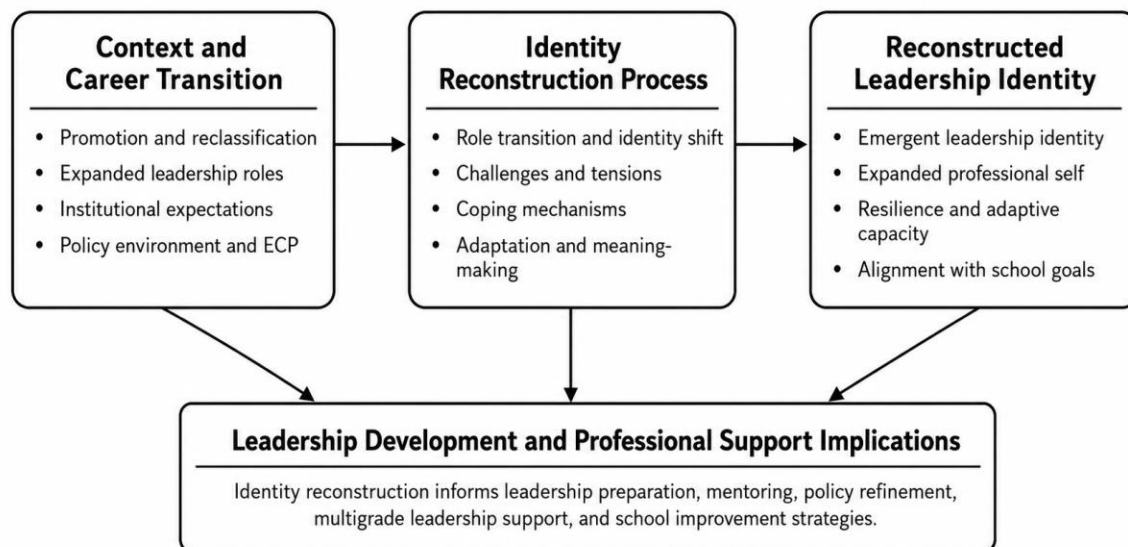


*Figure note.* Constructivist ontology and Reflexive Thematic Analysis frame identity reconstruction as a transition from role disruption to integrated leadership identity.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Identity Reconstruction and Leadership Transition**

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. It shows that career transition begins from contextual and institutional conditions, moves through identity reconstruction, and results in a reconstructed professional

identity that informs leadership development and support implications. The figure positions leadership identity as an emergent outcome of role transition, coping, adaptation, and meaning-making.

### Aim and Domains of Inquiry

The study aimed to explore how educators reconstruct their professional identity as they transition into leadership roles in the Schools Division of Dinagat Islands. Specifically, it sought to:

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1. describe educators' experience of role transition from classroom teaching to school leadership;
2. explain how educators reconstruct their professional identity during leadership transition;
3. identify the challenges and tensions encountered during identity reconstruction;
4. examine how educators adapt to emerging leadership expectations during professional transition; and
5. interpret how school leaders negotiate their evolving professional identity during leadership transition.

No statistical hypotheses were tested because the study was qualitative in design and was concerned with meanings, experiences, and thematic patterns rather than numerical relationships or group differences.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on professional identity suggests that career transitions are not merely movements between positions but processes in which individuals renegotiate who they are in relation to new expectations, responsibilities, and social recognition. Ibarra (2003) described professional identity as something developed through experimentation, role enactment, and reinterpretation of experience. More recent career-transition scholarship similarly argues that transitions across the lifespan involve shifting work roles, identity work, and meaning-making, especially in contexts where career paths are increasingly flexible and less predictable (Akkermans et al., 2024; Tomlinson et al., 2018). These ideas support the present study by framing school leadership transition as an identity process rather than a purely administrative appointment.

Educational leadership research emphasizes that school leadership has become distributed, instructional, relational, and improvement-oriented. Successful school leadership is associated with setting direction, developing people, redesigning organizations, and improving teaching and learning conditions (Leithwood et al., 2020). At the same time, leadership is contextually situated; leaders operate within policy, culture, resource limitations, and community expectations. Mincu (2022) argued that school leadership is central to educational transformation because leaders mediate structural reforms and cultural assumptions within school practice. This connects directly to the present study, where school leaders in Dinagat Islands reconstructed their identities while responding to institutional demands and localized school realities.

Teacher leadership and leadership transition studies show that educators often carry their teacher identity into formal leadership roles. Teacher leadership is not limited to positional authority but involves professional influence, collaboration, and shared responsibility for school improvement (Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). When teachers become school heads or supervisors, their prior classroom identity becomes both a resource and a source of tension. It supports empathy, instructional credibility, and teacher mentoring, yet the demands of administration require wider accountability, financial literacy, stakeholder management, and decision-making beyond the classroom.

The multigrade and clustered school literature further strengthens the relevance of this inquiry. Multigrade schools are common in remote and rural areas and are often shaped by teacher shortages, geographic isolation, and limited facilities. Research on rural and multigrade school contexts shows that leaders must balance instructional supervision, community engagement, and resource mobilization while working within constraints (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Taole et al., 2024). In the Philippines, SEAMEO INNOTECH (2020) has recognized multigrade education as an important strategy for maintaining access to basic education in dispersed communities.



For clustered school heads, identity reconstruction may be more demanding because leadership is enacted across multiple schools, communities, and logistical conditions.

Methodologically, Reflexive Thematic Analysis is appropriate for studies that seek patterned meaning across participant narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced thematic analysis as a systematic process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Later work clarified that reflexive thematic analysis does not treat themes as hidden objects waiting to be discovered; rather, themes are developed through rigorous, theoretically informed researcher engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). This approach is aligned with the present study because educators' leadership identities are understood as socially constructed meanings expressed through narrative accounts.

Synthesizing these bodies of literature, leadership transition appears as a multidimensional process shaped by identity, institutional policy, emotional adaptation, leadership competence, and contextual demands. However, a gap remains in understanding how school leaders in localized Philippine contexts personally describe and negotiate this transition. The present study contributes to that gap by foregrounding the voices of educators who reconstructed their professional identities while assuming leadership responsibilities in the Schools Division of Dinagat Islands.

### 3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm. The design was appropriate because the purpose was to understand how educators interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct professional identity during leadership transition. Rather than measuring predefined variables, the study generated a rich account of the meanings educators attached to their movement from classroom teaching to school leadership.

The informants were nine school leaders from the Division of Dinagat Islands. They were selected through purposive and criterion-based sampling because they had direct experience of transitioning from classroom teaching to leadership roles. Inclusion criteria required that informants were currently serving as school leaders, had previously held classroom teaching positions, had undergone role transition within approximately five to twenty years, possessed or were pursuing advanced professional qualifications, and were willing to provide informed consent. The source dissertation identified the informants by pseudonyms, including Aletheia, Arete, Eirene, Eunomia, Euproxia, Hedone, Hygieia, Kratos, and Plutos.

The research locale was the Division of Dinagat Islands, Philippines. This setting was significant because it includes monograde, multigrade, mixed, and clustered school arrangements. The source study noted that the division has 109 elementary schools, including 43 multigrade schools and 9 mixed multigrade schools. These features made the locale suitable for examining leadership transition in complex, geographically distinctive, and resource-sensitive educational environments.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The grand tour question asked informants to describe their experiences with identity reconstruction during role transition. Follow-up questions explored shifts in professional role, changes in responsibilities, influence of classroom teaching on leadership development, challenging moments, doubts or turning points, and the personal meaning of becoming a leader. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and supported by field notes documenting context and relevant nonverbal cues.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The researcher followed the six phases of familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role in theme development. Trustworthiness was supported through purposive selection of information-rich informants, careful transcription, field notes, systematic coding, reflexive documentation, and

transparent presentation of themes. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, pseudonym use, and secure handling of recordings and transcripts.

**Table 1. Profile Criteria of Informants**

| Participant feature               | Description                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Number of informants              | Nine school leaders                                                                                                                          |
| Selection method                  | Purposive, criterion-based sampling                                                                                                          |
| Leadership transition             | From classroom teaching to formal leadership roles such as school head, head teacher, principal, supervisor, or related leadership positions |
| Years in transition/service range | Approximately 5 to 20 years as indicated in the source criteria                                                                              |
| Professional qualification        | Master's degree or doctoral degree / doctoral studies                                                                                        |
| Research setting                  | Schools Division of Dinagat Islands, including monograde, multigrade, mixed, and clustered school contexts                                   |

Table 1 shows that the informants were selected for their direct experience of leadership transition. This purposive profile strengthened the relevance of the narratives because each informant had experienced the professional shift under study.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed one central theme and six interrelated themes. The central theme was a transformational journey of educators where leadership is anchored in resilience, collaboration, and professional redefinition. The themes show that leadership transition reshapes how educators understand responsibility, competence, relationships, and professional purpose.

**Table 2. Emergent Themes on Identity Reconstruction and Leadership Transition**

| Major theme                                          | Pattern                                                                                        | Meaning for leadership transition                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reconstructing the self beyond the classroom         | Broader sense of responsibility; transition of roles and responsibilities                      | Educators moved from classroom-focused identity to school-wide accountability and systems thinking.                                      |
| Leadership competence and resilience                 | Professional advancement and career choice; emotional strength and persistence                 | Leadership competence developed through experience, challenge, persistence, and reflective maturity.                                     |
| Identity challenged toward reshaping oneself         | Managerial and instructional supervision; classroom leadership strengthening school leadership | Former teacher identity became a foundation for instructional leadership, but administrative tasks created tension and adaptation needs. |
| Building collaboration of school and communities     | Leadership initiatives; school-community partnership                                           | Leaders learned to mobilize teachers, parents, LGUs, and external partners to sustain school improvement.                                |
| Identity reconstruction and realization of educators | Challenges and coping mechanisms; awareness in creating a new self                             | Identity was reconstructed through coping, self-awareness, faith, humility, reflection, and acceptance of broader responsibilities.      |
| Multigrade struggle and support                      | Multigrade flexibility and accessibility; clustered school head management efficacy            | Leadership in multigrade and clustered settings required flexibility, mobility, resourcefulness, and adaptive management.                |

Table 2 summarizes the thematic findings. The first theme shows that transition from teacher to leader expanded the educators' sphere of responsibility. Informants described moving from direct accountability for learners in one

classroom to responsibility for teachers, learners, school facilities, assessment outcomes, resource use, and community relationships. This finding supports identity-transition literature which explains that role change often destabilizes prior self-concepts and requires professional redefinition (Ashforth, 2001; Akkermans et al., 2024).

The second and third themes demonstrate that competence and identity reshaping emerged through practice. Leadership was learned through supervision, managing people, understanding DepEd policies, making decisions, and drawing from previous classroom experience. This suggests that teacher identity was not discarded; instead, it became the moral and instructional base of the leadership identity. This supports the view that professional identity is reconstructed through the integration of past and emerging roles (Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

The fourth theme highlights collaboration as a central leadership practice. School leaders learned that leadership required active community engagement, school-community partnership, and external linkages. In resource-constrained contexts, collaboration became a survival and improvement strategy. This aligns with educational leadership research emphasizing distributed leadership and stakeholder partnership in school improvement (Nguyen et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The fifth and sixth themes show that identity reconstruction was intensified by emotional strain and multigrade or clustered school leadership demands. Informants encountered expanded accountability, peer tensions, workload, limited resources, and geographic distance. Yet these struggles also became sources of growth, leading to resilience, humility, patience, and adaptive competence. These findings connect with rural and multigrade leadership literature that identifies resource scarcity, dispersed communities, and instructional complexity as defining features of leadership in small and remote schools (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Taole et al., 2024).

**Table 3. Process of Identity Reconstruction from Role Transition to Leadership Realization**

| Process stage           | Description from findings                                                                                                        | Identity outcome                                                                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Role disruption         | Movement from classroom teaching to school leadership created uncertainty, expanded accountability, and emotional pressure.      | Recognition that former teacher identity was insufficient for the wider role.         |
| Negotiation and tension | Leaders balanced instructional supervision, administration, resource management, and relationships with former peers.            | Awareness of identity conflict between being a colleague-teacher and being a leader.  |
| Adaptation and coping   | Informants used mentoring, policy guidance, family support, prayer, reflective practice, collaboration, and continuous learning. | Development of resilience, patience, strategic thinking, and leadership confidence.   |
| Identity integration    | Teaching experience was carried into school leadership through empathy, instructional credibility, and teacher support.          | Emergence of a hybrid educator-leader identity.                                       |
| Leadership realization  | Leaders reframed leadership as service, accountability, community engagement, and school improvement.                            | Stabilized professional identity aligned with organizational goals and moral purpose. |

Table 3 interprets identity reconstruction as a process. The findings indicate that leadership transition begins with disruption but progresses through negotiation, coping, adaptation, and integration. The outcome is a reconstructed identity in which the educator does not cease to be a teacher but expands into a leader who supervises instruction, guides people, mobilizes resources, and builds community relationships.

Taken together, the results suggest that leadership transition in the Dinagat Islands context is a deeply human process. The findings go beyond a technical view of school leadership by showing the emotional, relational, and identity-based labor required of educators who assume leadership roles. This is particularly important for clustered and multigrade school leadership, where the leader's work is stretched across multiple classrooms, schools, and communities.

## 5. Summary, Transferability, Implications, and Reflection

### Summary of Findings

The study found that educators reconstructed their professional identity through a dynamic and nonlinear process. Their transition from classroom teacher to school leader involved role expansion, identity tension, professional adaptation, emotional resilience, and meaning-making. Six themes captured the process: reconstructing the self beyond the classroom; leadership competence and resilience; identity challenged toward reshaping oneself; building collaboration of school and communities; identity reconstruction and realization of educators; and multigrade struggle and support. These themes converged into the essence of a transformational journey of educators where leadership is anchored in resilience, collaboration, and professional redefinition.

### Transferability

The findings may be transferable to other geographically isolated, resource-constrained, multigrade, and clustered school settings where educators experience similar transitions from classroom teaching to school leadership. The study may also be useful to leadership preparation programs, DepEd divisions, higher education institutions, and policymakers concerned with career progression, leadership mentoring, and school improvement in localized contexts. While the findings are not statistically generalizable, the detailed description of context and themes allows readers to determine relevance to comparable educational settings.

### Implications

For teacher development, the findings imply that leadership preparation should include identity-focused training, reflective practice, mentoring, emotional resilience, and transition coaching. For school leadership, institutions should recognize that newly promoted leaders need support in managing expanded accountability, peer relationships, financial literacy, stakeholder communication, and instructional supervision. For policy, career progression systems should address both qualifications and transition support. In multigrade and clustered contexts, the findings imply the need for specialized leadership development, mobility support, resource assistance, and inter-school collaboration mechanisms.

### Reflection

The study affirms that becoming a school leader involves a reconstruction of the educator self. Leadership is not merely a title or a promotion but a transformation in responsibility, perspective, and professional identity. The experiences of the informants show that effective leadership grows through reflection, patience, humility, resilience, and sustained commitment to learners, teachers, and communities. Their stories reveal that the teacher self remains central to leadership, but it must be expanded to meet the wider demands of school improvement and public service.

### Declarations

### Ethics Approval

The study observed ethical protocols through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from participation without penalty.

### Informed Consent

Informed consent was secured from all informants before the conduct of interviews.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Funding

This study received no specific grant from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency.

### Data Availability

The qualitative data are not publicly available to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the informants.

### Artificial Intelligence Use

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to assist in language refinement, organization, and manuscript formatting. The analysis, interpretation, and responsibility for the scholarly content remain with the author.

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