

School Heads Beyond their Comfort Zones: Notions on Reassignment

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ABSTRACT

Reassigning school heads goes beyond being just another policy; it is a significant shift in leadership that pushes them out of their comfort zones. It calls for adaptability, trust, and personal growth. This study examines into the real-life experiences of school heads who were reassigned in the 1st District of Capiz, Philippines, focusing on the emotional, professional, and personal adjustments they had to make. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, six school leaders were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, allowing thematic analysis to uncover key insights. The findings highlight professional growth, adaptive leadership, and policy implementation, with sub-themes such as career advancement, stakeholder engagement, instructional leadership, and coping strategies illustrating the complexities of reassignment. While school heads generally view reassignment as an opportunity for development, ethical leadership, and professional refinement, challenges such as leaving familiar environments, facing resistance, and adjusting to new school cultures remain. Although the process aligns with DepEd's strategic goals, concerns over favoritism and the absence of a formal evaluation system persist, particularly at the secondary level. Leadership styles among reassigned school heads were largely adaptive and collaborative, integrating transformational, democratic, and situational approaches tailored to their new school settings. This study found that although reassignment can be a difficult experience for school heads, often bringing emotional strain and professional uncertainty, it also opens doors to unexpected growth. Many of the participants shared how the transition pushed them to adapt quickly, build new relationships, and find rediscover purpose in their leadership. These narratives show that, beyond the initial discomfort, reassignment can actually spark resilience, creativity, and professional development. In light of these insights, the study introduces an action plan called Reassignment and Readiness. Its goal is to better support school leaders during transitions by offering practical steps such as structured orientation, mentorship, stakeholder collaboration, and strategies for emotional well-being. The aim is to help leaders not only adjust, but also thrive in their new environments.

Keywords: Professional and personal growth, leadership transitions, management strategies, policy implementation, school principals

INTRODUCTION

Education is a powerful tool for shaping a nation's future, fostering individuals who are globally competitive, responsible citizens, and capable of making sustainable decisions. Central to this mission are school leaders, whose leadership significantly impacts both the operational efficiency of schools and the quality of students' learning experiences (California Department of Education, n.d.).

In the Philippine education system, the reassignment of school heads as mandated in DepEd Order No. 7, s. 1999 and DECS Orders Nos. 8 and 34, s. 1993 is not merely a bureaucratic requirement. Rather, it is a deliberate leadership strategy aimed at rejuvenating school administration, fostering professional growth, and promoting equitable distribution of effective leaders across schools.

Reassignment, while strategic in intent, introduces significant challenges for school heads. It displaces them from familiar environments, often placing them in new school contexts that require not only technical competence but also emotional resilience, adaptability, and renewed leadership vision. According to (Nalla and

Camaya, 2023), school leaders undergoing reassignment must rapidly develop trust with new stakeholders, adapt to varied school cultures, and address inherited concerns all while maintaining school stability and performance. This reality highlights the profound impact that reassignments can have on a leader's professional journey, underscoring the need to view such transitions as transformative, rather than routine.

Despite existing policies like DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2016, which typically sets school head assignments to three years with provisions for extension in hardship posts, there remains limited scholarly focus on how reassigned school heads manage the complexities of such transitions. The research gap lies not in the absence of policy but in the lack of understanding regarding how school leaders experience, cope with, and grow from these reassignments. Existing studies on reassignment challenge often focus on isolated contexts, leaving a need for more comprehensive insights that connect emotional resilience, strategic leadership, and professional development in a cohesive framework (Postrero and Chieng, 2024).

This study addresses a significant gap in educational leadership literature by exploring how school heads navigate the unfamiliar territory of reassignment, examining their adaptation, decision-making, and personal and professional growth beyond their comfort zones. At its core, the research delves into the internal and external forces that shape a leader's adjustment and resilience during these transitions, revealing insights from those who have undergone reassignment. By amplifying their voices, this study provides guidance for current and future school leaders, encouraging them to approach change not with hesitation, but with strength, clarity, and purpose. For aspiring educational leaders, this study goes beyond theory. It serves as a form of preparation, offering an honest look at the realities of leadership in motion. By understanding how experienced school heads respond to reassignment, future leaders can begin to cultivate a mindset that views challenges as opportunities for growth, and discomfort as a necessary path toward transformation.

While reassignment policies are often implemented to distribute leadership talent more equitably, the deeper impact on the individuals involved - their identity, motivation, and development - remains underexplored. This study aims to bring those dimensions to light, offering not only insights for better policy but also contributing to the development of more resilient, adaptive, and forward-thinking educational leaders who do not just endure change but grow through it.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of school heads who had been reassigned to new and unfamiliar environments within the 1st District of Capiz. Descriptive qualitative research is a methodological approach that aims to present a comprehensive summary of specific events or experiences in the everyday terms of those events (Sandelowski, 2010). It is particularly useful for studies seeking straightforward answers to questions of experience, using low-inference interpretation and staying close to the participants' own words and perspectives. This approach is especially suited for studies that seek to understand participants' perspectives without imposing a theoretical framework, allowing the data to speak for itself. As Creswell (2013) emphasizes, qualitative research is instrumental in uncovering the depth and complexity of human experiences by examining the meanings individuals assign to their roles, behaviors, and social contexts. This study focused on the emotions, adjustments, and leadership behaviors of school heads during reassignment, using semi-structured interviews to gather rich, detailed narratives. The approach was appropriate for capturing both the personal reflections and social realities faced by the participants as they adapted to new roles and environments. By employing descriptive qualitative methods, the study was able to document not just the procedural aspects of reassignment, but also its emotional and psychological impacts, offering insights that are both practically relevant and deeply human.

This study was conducted in selected secondary schools within the 1st District of Capiz, focusing on six public school heads who had experienced reassignment to leadership roles beyond their previous postings. These reassignments placed them in unfamiliar settings ranging from rural to urban environments each with its own unique demands and challenges. Conducted during the academic year 2024–2025, the research aimed to understand how these leaders navigated the emotional, professional, and strategic adjustments required in their new roles. By narrowing the scope to large and very large schools, the study captured insights from settings that inherently demand more complex leadership managing larger student populations, coordinating diverse

personnel, and engaging a broader network of stakeholders. These dynamic environments offered a deeper lens into how reassigned school heads adapt, make decisions, and grow under pressure. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study relied on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to uncover the lived realities of these leaders highlighting not only the challenges they faced, but also the resilience, adaptability, and leadership transformation that emerged through the experience of stepping beyond their comfort zones.

The study included six school heads from the 1st District of Capiz, representing large school and very large school who had been reassigned to leadership positions outside their previous comfort zones. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with rich and relevant experiences that aligned with the study's objectives. As Patton (2002) explains, purposive sampling is ideal for qualitative studies where the researcher seeks specific participants who can provide detailed insights into the research topic. The selection criteria for participants were based on the following: (1) the participant had to be a current school head of large or very large secondary schools in the 1st District of Capiz; (2) the participant should have been reassigned to a new school location or leadership role within the last three years; (3) the participant had to have at least 5 years of experience as a school head, and (4) the participant must be willing to engage in an in-depth interview regarding their leadership challenges and strategies during reassignment.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for this study. The researcher-made interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' personal experiences, challenges encountered during reassignment, leadership adaptation strategies, and emotional responses to being placed in new school environments. The research instrument was validated by the advisory committee for reliability. The interview schedule was flexible, allowing the interviewer to probe deeper into participants' responses and adapt to the direction of the conversation. Part I of the questionnaire gathers basic demographic information to provide context for the respondents' perspectives on reassignment. It included details such as sex, age, civil status, years in service, educational background, position, designations, length of stay in previous and current schools, and relevant trainings attended. Although not the main focus of the study, this information helps situate the respondents' perspectives within their professional experiences and backgrounds. Part II of the study features a researcher-made interview guide designed to explore the real and lived experiences of school heads regarding reassignment. It consisted of three major open-ended questions, each with carefully crafted subtopics aimed at eliciting in-depth responses. These questions focus on school heads' personal views and experiences with reassignment, the actual implementation of reassignment practices in secondary schools, and the various management styles they adopted in response to these transitions. This section was central to the study, as it captured the authentic voices and insights of school leaders, providing rich qualitative data on how reassignment is understood, managed, and experienced on the ground.

The data collection process was designed to capture the authentic experiences of reassigned school heads while maintaining ethical integrity and participant confidentiality. It began with careful formulation of questions intended to uncover participants' perspectives, challenges, and adaptive strategies in leadership transitions. Before proceeding, the researcher secured ethical clearance to ensure the study complied with research standards and protected participants' rights. Upon receiving approval, participants were contacted and informed of the study's purpose, allowing them to provide informed consent. Interviews were then scheduled at mutually convenient time, to ensure comfort and privacy to foster open and honest discussions. During the interviews, responses were recorded with participants' permission to preserve transcription accuracy. Each conversation was documented verbatim to maintain the authenticity of their insights. To protect confidentiality, all data were securely stored using password-protected devices and encrypted backups to prevent unauthorized access. Upon completion of transcriptions and analyses, audio recordings were permanently deleted to reinforce data security and ethical handling. This structured approach ensured that school heads felt heard, respected, and safeguarded, allowing their experiences to contribute meaningfully to the study while preserving their privacy and dignity.

The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with the verbatim transcription of all interview recordings to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the participants' responses. The researcher then engaged in a thorough familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the content. Next, significant statements relevant to the research questions were identified and systematically coded. These codes were organized into meaningful categories, which served as the basis for developing broader themes

that reflected common patterns and key insights across the participants' responses. Each theme was carefully reviewed to ensure it authentically represented the school heads' lived experiences and aligned with the study's objectives. To enhance the credibility of the findings, direct quotations from the participants were incorporated to illustrate and substantiate each identified theme.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher applied the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was established through member checking, prolonged engagement during interviews, and the use of verbatim transcriptions and direct quotations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining systematic documentation of the research procedures, coding process, and thematic analysis through an audit trail and adviser consultation. Confirmability was achieved through flexibility by keeping a reflective journal to minimize researcher bias and ensure that findings were grounded on the participants' actual responses. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, research setting, and lived experiences enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

The researcher's background and personal experiences may have influence the interpretation of data, therefore, the researcher remained conscious of potential biases throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity was maintained through a journal of thoughts and reflections throughout the research process, which helped minimize bias and uphold the integrity of the findings. Driven by a strong personal aspiration to become a school head, the researcher approached this study with genuine interest in the field of educational leadership. This motivation stemmed from a desire to better understand the complexities and challenges faced by school leaders, particularly in relation to reassignment and leadership transitions. Recognizing that these experiences are essential to effective school management, the researcher viewed this study as an opportunity to gain firsthand insights and deepen her understanding of leadership practices within the educational setting. Thus, this research was therefore not only an academic pursuit but as also a meaningful step toward preparing for the responsibilities and demands of a future leadership role. Throughout the research process, the researcher remained mindful of how personal background and aspirations could influence data interpretation. Reflexivity was practiced by balancing personal interests with a commitment to accurately and respectfully represent the participants' experiences. This approach ensured the integrity of the study while also contributing to the researcher's professional growth as an aspiring educational leader.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of secondary school heads regarding reassignment in the First District of Capiz using a descriptive qualitative approach. Findings revealed that reassignment is more than an administrative transfer; rather, it is a transformative experience that strengthens professional growth, personal resilience, adaptive leadership, and institutional development. Although reassignment places school heads beyond their comfort zones, most participants perceived it as meaningful, growth-oriented, and essential to leadership development.

Three major themes emerged from the study: *Professional Growth*, *Personal Growth*, and *Political Clout*, together with insights on policy compliance, leadership practices, and stakeholder involvement. Across these themes, participants emphasized becoming more adaptive, collaborative, and resilient leaders.

Professional growth emerged as a major theme, particularly in terms of promotion and leadership advancement. Most participants associated reassignment with career progression. Informant 1 stated, "*I have been reassigned five times, each due to a promotion,*" while Informant 4 shared that reassignment happened "*consecutively*" because of promotion opportunities. These findings suggest that reassignment serves as a pathway for leadership mobility and professional development.

Participants also viewed reassignment as an opportunity to enhance leadership competencies and interpersonal skills. Informant 3 explained that reassignment enabled them to "*work with new people, expand learning, and strengthen social, interpersonal, and spiritual connections.*" Similarly, Informant 6 emphasized understanding teachers' "*strengths and weaknesses*" to improve delegation and productivity. These responses indicate that reassignment develops adaptive leadership, collaboration, and strategic management skills.

School heads generally expressed trust in DepEd's reassignment framework and perceived it as aligned with institutional goals. Informant 1 highlighted the presence of a "*structured system and thorough ranking procedure*," while Informant 5 noted that reassignment depends on where the Schools Division Superintendent determines that a leader's expertise is most needed. These findings support the work of Kenneth Leithwood, who emphasized that leadership mobility contributes to organizational improvement and adaptability.

The findings revealed that reassigned school heads employed blended and eclectic leadership styles rather than relying on a single approach. Informants integrated transformational, democratic, situational, and collaborative leadership styles depending on school contexts and personnel needs.

Informant 3 shared, "*I strive to embody a powerful blend of leadership and management skills that inspire and empower my team.*" Likewise, Informant 1 described using "*a blended management style, primarily democratic*," while remaining flexible through situational leadership. Informant 2 also emphasized "*a dynamic combination of democratic and situational leadership*" to strengthen collaboration among personnel and students.

Participants highlighted that effective leadership requires balancing firmness with compassion, flexibility, and emotional support. Informant 4 stressed the importance of implementing policies with "*fairness and respect*," while Informant 5 emphasized teachers' emotional well-being and maintaining "*a positive and collaborative atmosphere*." These responses demonstrate that reassigned school heads adopt adaptive and people-centered leadership approaches to address varying school cultures and organizational demands.

The findings support the work of Michael Fullan (2014), who emphasized that effective school leadership is grounded in collaboration, trust, and stakeholder engagement.

School heads also tailored their instructional leadership practices according to the context and needs of each school. Informant 2 explained, "*In smaller schools, I take on multiple responsibilities, while in larger institutions, I delegate tasks effectively.*" Similarly, Informant 5 stated that instructional leadership must align with the "*specific needs*" of the school while adhering to DepEd directives.

Participants emphasized visibility, collaboration, classroom engagement, and teacher support as central to instructional leadership. Informant 6 highlighted classroom observations, technical assistance, and teacher training to promote continuous learning and improvement.

The study further revealed the importance of feedback-driven and community-centered leadership. Informant 1 shared, "*I integrate stakeholders' feedback into my management strategy through regular school governance meetings.*" Likewise, Informant 3 emphasized community feedback to improve programs and address concerns effectively. These findings indicate that reassigned school heads value stakeholder participation and collaborative decision-making as a means of strengthening school governance and school-community relationships.

These findings align with the work of Philip Hallinger and Kenneth Leithwood, who emphasized that collaborative leadership and stakeholder engagement are essential for sustainable school improvement.

Another significant theme that emerged was Personal Growth. Participants described reassignment as emotionally challenging yet personally enriching. Informant 1 described reassignment as "*challenging and overwhelming*," particularly when transitioning from a medium-sized school to a mega school. Informant 5 similarly shared that reassignment "*tested leadership and resilience.*"

Despite these challenges, participants viewed reassignment as an opportunity for personal-growth and fulfillment. Informant 4 described reassignment as "*a great fulfillment*" because it allowed greater engagement with new communities and cultures. Informant 6 relied on faith and personal values to remain grounded during transitions.

Participants coped through communication, emotional resilience, faith, and support systems. These experiences suggest that reassignment strengthens emotional maturity, adaptability, confidence, and resilience – qualities that are essential for effective educational leadership.

The study also highlighted concerns regarding political influence and institutional independence. Although participants generally believed that DepEd remains neutral, some acknowledged that political dynamics may occasionally affect reassignment processes.

Informant 1 emphasized that DepEd should remain “*independent from political influence,*” while Informant 2 recognized that local government units may support schools but should refrain from interfering with management decisions. Informant 6 further stressed that school heads must remain non-partisan and prioritize educational goals.

Most participants viewed reassignment policies as fair and aligned with DepEd’s strategic objectives. However, some participants also raised concerns regarding favoritism. Informant 3 noted that “*some individuals are not reassigned, while others receive favorable treatment,*” which suggest inconsistencies in policy implementation. These findings indicate the need for greater transparency, accountability, and consistency in reassignment practices.

Participants emphasized the importance of stakeholder involvement, monitoring, and evaluation in ensuring successful leadership transitions. However, most respondents noted the absence of formal district-level evaluation systems to assess reassignment effectiveness, making it difficult to determine its long-term impacts on school improvement and leadership performance.

The study also identified critical readiness domains necessary for successful reassignment, including leadership preparedness, change management, conflict resolution, stakeholder engagement, emotional resilience, and instructional adaptability. Informants stressed that many school heads remain insufficiently prepared for the emotional, professional, and operational demands of reassignment.

To address these concerns, the study proposed a *Holistic Reassignment Readiness Action Plan* focused on leadership training, orientation programs, wellness support, conflict management, stakeholder engagement, and transparent evaluation systems. The plan aims to transform reassignment into a developmental opportunity instead of a source of instability.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that reassignment is a multifaceted and transformative experience that shapes school heads both professionally and personally. It promotes leadership mobility, instructional adaptability, collaboration, resilience, and continuous growth, while also revealing challenges related to fairness, political influence, and evaluation systems.

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that reassignment is not merely a workplace transfer but a leadership transition that demands adaptability, emotional resilience, and community-centered leadership. Effective reassignment policies, therefore, require not only procedural compliance but also continuous leadership support, transparent implementation, and strong emotional and professional preparation to foster meaningful and sustainable educational leadership.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately, the evidence presented demonstrates that reassignment is no longer merely a matter of theory, but a pressing reality that demands attention.

Reassignment is more than a policy; it is a pivotal phase in a school head’s career that fosters both professional growth and personal fulfillment. While career advancement often motivates these transitions, school heads also acknowledge the importance of adapting to new environments, engaging with diverse communities, and refining leadership strategies. Although stepping out of familiar settings presents challenges, reassignment offers an invaluable opportunity to strengthen resilience, embrace innovation, and develop ethical leadership. By viewing reassignment as a pathway for growth rather than a mere obligation, school heads can navigate transitions with confidence, ensuring that their leadership remains adaptive, impactful, and aligned with the evolving needs of educational institutions.

The implementation of reassignment is largely perceived as fair and aligned with DepEd's objectives, fostering leadership growth and strengthening school management through stakeholder involvement. However, concerns about favoritism and inconsistencies highlight the need for clearer guidelines and improved execution. While the process benefits from leadership discretion, its long-term success depends on effective monitoring and evaluation. Addressing gaps in assessment, particularly at the secondary level, is crucial to ensuring accountability, transparency, and meaningful leadership transitions that support both institutional stability and professional development.

Reassigned school heads adopt a dynamic mix of leadership styles, including transformational, democratic, and situational approaches, to effectively meet the distinct needs of each school. Their approach is deeply adaptive and collaborative, shaped by feedback from stakeholders and a strong commitment to community engagement. By tailoring their instructional leadership to fit each school's unique context, they balance tradition with innovation. Through trust-building, shared accountability, and continuous reflection, these leaders not only manage transitions smoothly but also transform them into powerful opportunities for meaningful and lasting educational transformation.

Reassignment of school heads presents both challenges and opportunities, requiring more than just leadership vision, it demands preparedness, adaptability, and resilience. While reassigned leaders often experience uncertainty, stress, and policy inconsistencies, they also develop new perspectives and skills that contribute to their growth. This study underscores the need for a structured reassignment readiness framework that equips school heads with leadership training, emotional support, and strategic guidance to navigate transitions effectively. By addressing existing gaps and fostering a system that prioritizes clear policies, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable leadership development, reassignment can evolve from a disruptive process into a transformative experience, thereby empowering school heads to lead with confidence in any environment.

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations are proposed. The Department of Education may enhance its reassignment policies by recognizing that reassignment is more than an administrative procedure; it is a pivotal phase in a school head's personal and professional journey. It should be framed as a strategic opportunity for leadership growth, resilience, and ethical development. To support this, the Department should provide thoughtful preparation, continuous support, and structured opportunities for reflection. This approach will empower school heads to confidently adapt to new environments, engage with diverse communities, and refine their leadership strategies ensuring that their transitions are meaningful, impactful, and aligned with the evolving needs of educational institutions.

The Department of Education may strengthen the implementation of school head reassignments by institutionalizing transparent, equitable, and well-monitored processes, particularly at the secondary level. While current practices support leadership development and stakeholder engagement, addressing concerns about favoritism and inconsistencies is essential. Clearer guidelines, formal evaluation mechanisms, and accountability structures will help ensure fairness, build trust, and enhance the effectiveness of leadership transitions, ultimately supporting both school stability and the professional growth of school heads.

The Department of Education may implement targeted leadership development programs that equip school heads with adaptive, collaborative, and context-sensitive leadership skills essential for successful reassignments. These programs should focus on blended leadership approaches, integrating transformational, democratic, and situational styles along with effective stakeholder engagement and instructional strategies tailored to diverse school environments. By fostering trust, encouraging innovation, and promoting reflective practice, such training will empower school heads to navigate transitions confidently and lead transformative, inclusive, and sustainable change in any educational setting.

A holistic reassignment readiness framework is recommended to address the gaps in the reassignment process. This would equip leaders with essential skills in change management, conflict resolution, stakeholder engagement, emotional resilience, and policy alignment. By prioritizing pre-deployment orientation, leadership training, and mentorship, this plan ensures that school heads are not merely reassigned but are also fully prepared to lead effectively in new environments. Establishing clear, consistent, and transparent reassignment processes

will enhance institutional stability, minimize disruptions, and foster trust among educators, students, and communities thereby making reassignment a catalyst for growth rather than uncertainty.

Future research may explore the long-term impact of school head reassignment through the lens of leadership development, focusing on how transformational leadership, resilience, and role adaptation evolve over time. In particular, longitudinal studies could examine how school heads internalize reassignment as a leadership growth experience rather than merely an administrative shift. Researchers may investigate how structured reassignment readiness frameworks, which encompass pre-deployment training, mentorship, and reflective practices contribute to the development of self-efficacy and adaptive leadership skills. Additionally, comparative studies across regions or school levels (e.g., elementary vs. secondary) could shed light on variations in the effectiveness and perceived fairness of reassignment processes. Examining the intersection of reassignment practices with ethical leadership and emotional intelligence may also yield insights into how school heads manage identity shifts, stakeholder relationships, and role expectations in unfamiliar environments. Ultimately, these inquiries will inform evidence-based policies that position reassignment not as a disruption but rather as a catalyst for inclusive, ethical, and resilient educational leadership.

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