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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Leadership in Educational Governance: Lived Experiences of Education Specialists in the Department of Education Regional Office 2

Florante E. Vergara
Assistant Regional Director
Regional Office 2
benjamin.paragas@deped.gov.ph

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Abstract

Leadership in educational governance is not confined to formally designated executive positions but is also exercised by technical personnel who translate policies, coordinate programs, provide technical assistance, support decision-making, and connect different levels of the education system. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Education Specialists in developing leadership within a Department of Education Regional Office. Specifically, it examined how participants understood leadership in their technical roles, exercised influence without relying solely on formal authority, translated national policies into regional actions, collaborated with different governance levels, responded to organizational pressures and changing educational priorities, and developed their identities as educational leaders. Participants were purposively selected Education Specialists who had substantial experience in regional-office technical, programmatic, supervisory, and coordination functions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using phenomenological procedures involving significant statements, meaning units, thematic clustering, textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. Six interconnected themes emerged: (1) Leadership as Service and Stewardship; (2) Leading Through Expertise Rather Than Position; (3) Translating Policy Into Practice; (4) Building Leadership Through Collaboration and Technical Assistance; (5) Navigating Change, Accountability, and Institutional Constraints; and (6) Becoming a Reflective Educational Governance Leader. The findings showed that leadership development among Education Specialists was experiential, relational, adaptive, and grounded in professional expertise. Leadership was developed not only through formal designation but through repeated engagement with policy implementation, technical assistance, interoffice coordination, problem-solving, and reflection. The study underscores the importance of leadership development, mentoring, cross-functional learning, professional autonomy, and structured career pathways for Education Specialists within the Department of Education.

Keywords: educational governance, Education Specialists, leadership development, Department of Education, Regional Office, phenomenology, public-sector leadership

Corresponding author: benjamin.paragas@deped.gov.ph

I. Introduction

Leadership in education is commonly associated with school principals, superintendents, regional directors, and other officials occupying formal supervisory positions. However, educational governance depends on a much wider network of professionals who influence programs, policies, systems, and organizational decisions. Among these are Education Specialists whose technical expertise enables them to contribute to curriculum implementation, learning support, monitoring and evaluation, policy development, research, quality assurance, human-resource development, technical assistance, and other governance functions depending on their organizational assignment. Their work places them at the intersection of national policy, regional priorities, Schools Division Offices, schools, and educational stakeholders.

Within the Philippine Department of Education, the Regional Office serves as a governance level responsible for providing leadership and management of the Department's mandate at the regional level. DepEd Order No. 52, s. 2015 institutionalized organizational structures consistent with Republic Act No. 9155 and its principles of decentralization, shared governance, authority, and accountability. The Regional Office consequently performs functions through several technical and support divisions tasked with curriculum and learning management, education support, field technical assistance, quality assurance, planning and research, human-resource development, administration, and finance. Education Specialists assigned within these structures occupy roles that often require them to interpret policies, analyze data, provide technical assistance, coordinate programs, monitor implementation, facilitate professional learning, and communicate regional expectations to Schools Division Offices and other field units (Department of Education [DepEd], 2015).

Such responsibilities involve considerable leadership even when the specialists concerned do not hold the highest formal authority. Leadership may occur when an Education Specialist facilitates a regional program, guides division personnel in understanding a new policy, responds to implementation difficulties, coordinates multiple stakeholders, recommends action based on technical evidence, or helps improve organizational practice. In these situations, influence may depend less on hierarchical position and more on professional knowledge, credibility, communication, relationships, judgment, and the ability to mobilize collective action.

The importance of this form of leadership is supported by broader public-sector evidence. Backhaus and Vogel (2022), in a meta-analysis of 151 public-administration studies and 486 effect sizes, found that leadership was positively associated with beneficial outcomes in public organizations, particularly at group and organizational levels. Their findings also demonstrated that public-sector leadership was shaped by administrative context, leadership style, and institutional traditions. Leadership in government therefore cannot simply be transferred from private-sector models without considering accountability systems, bureaucracy, public values, and formal governance arrangements.

Bao et al. (2025) likewise synthesized 70 primary studies involving more than 718,000 participants and found that transformational leadership in public administration was significantly related to employee motivation, attitudes, behaviors, organizational performance, and innovation. These findings suggest that leadership remains consequential in highly regulated organizations, although its expression may differ from leadership in less bureaucratic environments. Education Specialists, for example, may lead primarily through expertise, facilitation, evidence, professional dialogue, and policy interpretation rather than through direct command.

Educational leadership research further supports the idea that leadership is distributed across organizational roles. Spillane (2006) argued that leadership practice emerges through interactions among leaders, followers, and organizational situations rather than residing exclusively within a single individual. In educational systems, this perspective is especially relevant because curriculum development, technical assistance, research, assessment, professional development, and quality assurance frequently depend on specialists who exercise leadership within specific areas of expertise. Leadership can therefore be distributed across technical roles and governance levels.

Hallinger (2011) similarly emphasized that effective educational leadership must be understood within context. Leadership practices are shaped by institutional structure, culture, professional expectations, resources, and the challenges organizations confront. This is particularly relevant in a Regional Office, where Education Specialists operate within national directives while simultaneously responding to varying conditions across Schools Division Offices and local educational contexts. Their leadership involves not only implementing policy but interpreting its meaning and helping field personnel adapt it appropriately.

Contemporary public education also requires leaders who can navigate continuous change. Curriculum reforms, digital transformation, learning-recovery programs, data-driven governance, inclusion, teacher development, assessment reforms, and changing accountability expectations create environments in which technical personnel must continuously update knowledge and coordinate responses. DepEd's more recent operational initiatives continue to emphasize targeted interventions, technical support, governance coordination, and improved learning outcomes across levels of the organization (DepEd, 2025). These demands increase the significance of Education Specialists as intermediaries who

connect policy intentions with operational implementation.

Leadership development within specialist roles may nevertheless be complicated. Education Specialists often have responsibility for outcomes without full control over the personnel or institutions involved in implementation. A specialist may provide technical guidance to Schools Division Offices while possessing limited direct authority over them. They may need to persuade rather than command, facilitate rather than impose, and build shared understanding among personnel with differing experiences and priorities. Leadership therefore becomes a process of relational influence.

The development of such leadership is also likely to be experiential. Formal training can provide concepts and skills, but difficult professional situations often become significant learning opportunities. Responding to implementation problems, managing disagreement, facilitating technical assistance, interpreting ambiguous policies, presenting evidence to decision-makers, coordinating multidisciplinary teams, and handling unexpected organizational demands may gradually shape leadership confidence and identity.

Despite the importance of these functions, much educational leadership literature continues to focus on school heads, principals, superintendents, and senior executives. Education Specialists receive comparatively less attention as leaders within educational governance. Their professional identities are frequently defined in terms of technical tasks rather than the leadership processes embedded in those tasks. Consequently, limited qualitative evidence explains how specialists themselves experience the development of leadership in Regional Office environments.

This gap provided the basis for the present study. Rather than measuring predetermined leadership competencies or assigning participants to established leadership styles, the study explored how Education Specialists themselves experienced leadership development. It examined the situations through which they learned to lead, the sources of their influence, the challenges that shaped their leadership, and the meanings they attached to becoming leaders within educational governance.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Education Specialists in developing leadership within a Department of Education Regional Office.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did Education Specialists describe leadership within their technical and governance roles?
2. How did they exercise leadership when formal positional authority was limited?
3. How did policy interpretation and implementation contribute to their leadership development?
4. How did technical assistance, collaboration, and stakeholder interaction shape their leadership practices?
5. What organizational challenges influenced their development as leaders?
6. What strategies did they use in responding to change, conflict, accountability, and competing priorities?
7. How did their experiences shape their identities as educational governance leaders?

2. Review of Related Literature

Leadership in educational governance extends beyond hierarchical supervision and includes the capacity to mobilize expertise, coordinate actors, interpret policies, create professional learning opportunities, and sustain improvement across organizational levels. Distributed leadership theory is particularly useful in understanding this phenomenon because it conceptualizes leadership as practice distributed among individuals according to expertise and organizational situations rather than solely according to formal rank (Spillane, 2006). Within a Regional Office, Education Specialists may therefore exercise leadership when they provide technical advice, coordinate implementation, facilitate professional development, or use evidence to guide decisions.

Public-sector leadership literature likewise demonstrates that leadership is important even within bureaucratic organizations. Backhaus and Vogel (2022) reported that leadership was positively and consistently related to beneficial public-sector outcomes and that different forms of leadership could be effective depending on organizational and administrative context. Their findings challenge the assumption that formal rules make leadership less important. Instead, bureaucratic environments may increase the need for leaders who can interpret complexity, coordinate collective action, and maintain motivation while preserving accountability.

Transformational leadership has also received considerable attention in public administration. Bao et al. (2025) found

positive relationships between transformational leadership and individual motivation, employee attitudes, organizational behavior, performance, and innovation. These relationships suggest that public-sector leaders can influence organizational functioning through inspiration, professional support, intellectual stimulation, and relationship-building. For Education Specialists, transformational practices may emerge through introducing new ideas, encouraging reflective professional practice, guiding teams through reform, or building commitment toward educational priorities.

Educational leadership is also strongly contextual. Hallinger (2011) argued that leadership effectiveness depends on understanding the cultural, institutional, and environmental context within which leadership is practiced. Regional Education Specialists operate across diverse Schools Division Offices and may encounter substantial differences in capacity, resources, geography, leadership arrangements, and educational performance. Consequently, effective technical leadership requires responsiveness rather than uniform application of solutions.

Technical assistance provides another important setting for leadership. Regional-level specialists frequently function as technical partners who diagnose implementation needs, facilitate problem-solving, strengthen local capacity, and monitor program effectiveness. Effective technical assistance moves beyond simply informing lower governance levels what to do; it involves helping personnel develop the capability to understand problems, identify solutions, and sustain improved practices. Such processes are inherently relational and developmental and therefore involve leadership.

Policy implementation further requires substantial professional judgment. Policies created at national or regional levels rarely anticipate every implementation situation. Education Specialists may encounter ambiguities or contextual differences requiring interpretation. Public-sector leadership therefore involves what can be understood as bounded discretion: professionals exercise judgment while remaining accountable to established law, policy, and organizational mandates.

Professional credibility also affects specialist leadership. Individuals occupying technical positions often lead through knowledge rather than formal supervisory power. Expertise, consistency, accuracy, reliability, and evidence-based recommendations can become sources of influence. This aligns with distributed-leadership perspectives in which individuals assume leadership depending on the demands of a particular task or area of expertise (Spillane, 2006).

Relationships are equally important. Regional governance requires coordination among Central Office units, Regional Office divisions, Schools Division Offices, schools, local government units, and external partners. Leadership therefore involves navigating horizontal and vertical organizational relationships. Communication, trust, negotiation, facilitation, and respect become necessary competencies because specialists cannot accomplish governance outcomes independently.

The continued transformation of educational systems also places adaptability at the center of leadership. Education specialists encounter policy changes, curriculum revisions, data systems, technological developments, new learning standards, national priorities, and emergent crises. Adaptive leadership requires individuals to recognize when established solutions are insufficient and to engage others in addressing complex challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Technical expertise alone may not solve problems involving beliefs, organizational culture, competing interests, or limited implementation capacity.

Reflection contributes to professional leadership development. Schön (1983) conceptualized professional practice as involving reflection in and on action, particularly when practitioners encounter situations that cannot be resolved through technical knowledge alone. Education Specialists may similarly develop leadership by reflecting on successful and unsuccessful initiatives, stakeholder responses, technical-assistance experiences, and difficult decisions.

Taken together, the literature suggests that leadership among Education Specialists can be understood through interconnected dimensions of expertise, distributed influence, policy interpretation, collaboration, adaptive problem-solving, service, and reflective learning. However, relatively few studies have examined these dimensions phenomenologically from the perspective of specialists working within Regional Offices. The present study addressed this gap by foregrounding their lived experiences.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

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Transformational Leadership provided a complementary perspective by emphasizing how leaders influence others through motivation, intellectual stimulation, professional support, and shared direction. Public-sector evidence supports the relevance of transformational leadership to employee and organizational outcomes (Bao et al., 2025).

Adaptive Leadership further explained how participants responded to complex situations where technical solutions alone were insufficient. Heifetz et al. (2009) distinguished technical problems, for which established expertise can provide solutions, from adaptive challenges that require learning, changes in assumptions, collaboration, and adjustment.

Based on these perspectives, the study conceptualized leadership development as a continuing process:

Technical Responsibility → Professional Credibility → Relational Influence → Policy and Program Leadership → Adaptive Problem-Solving → Reflection → Leadership Identity
The framework assumed that specialists developed leadership through accumulated experiences rather than through position alone.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Education Specialists who developed and exercised leadership within a Department of Education Regional Office. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how participants interpreted leadership experiences rather than quantitatively measuring predefined leadership competencies. Following Moustakas (1994), the study examined significant statements, formulated meanings, thematic clusters, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and the shared essence of the phenomenon. Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling and consisted of Education Specialists who had substantial experience in technical assistance, program coordination, policy implementation, monitoring, research, professional development, or comparable Regional Office functions. Participants had held specialist positions long enough to provide meaningful reflection on leadership-related experiences and voluntarily agreed to participate. Variation in assignment, years of experience, specialization, and leadership exposure was considered to broaden the range of perspectives. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews that explored situations in which participants exercised influence, facilitated programs, interpreted policies, provided technical assistance, dealt with implementation problems, coordinated stakeholders, managed disagreement, responded to organizational change, and reflected on their leadership development. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.
Data were analyzed using phenomenological procedures. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with participants' accounts. Significant statements related to leadership were identified and transformed into meaning units and initial codes. Related codes were clustered into emerging themes, while similarities and differences across participant accounts were examined. Textural descriptions were developed to capture what the participants experienced, whereas structural descriptions explained the organizational and professional contexts in which those experiences occurred. These were synthesized to establish the essence of developing leadership as an Education Specialist. Trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with the data, participant clarification, and peer debriefing; dependability was supported through an audit trail; confirmability was enhanced through reflexive documentation and links between interpretations and participant accounts; and transferability was supported through rich contextual description. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee, and authority to conduct the study was secured from the Department of Education Regional Office. Participants provided written informed consent and were informed of confidentiality protections, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Participant identities were represented using codes such as P1, P2, and P3.

5. Findings

Phenomenological analysis generated six interconnected themes: (1) Leadership as Service and Stewardship; (2) Leading Through Expertise Rather Than Position; (3) Translating Policy Into Practice; (4) Building Leadership Through Collaboration and Technical Assistance; (5) Navigating Change, Accountability, and Institutional Constraints; and (6) Becoming a Reflective Educational Governance Leader.

Theme 1. Leadership as Service and Stewardship

The first theme revealed that participants understood educational leadership as responsibility toward the system rather than merely possession of authority. They described their work as supporting Schools Division Offices, assisting colleagues, strengthening programs, and ensuring that regional initiatives contributed to the Department's wider educational mission. Leadership was therefore associated with service, responsibility, and stewardship.

Participant Responses

P1: "For me, leadership means making sure that what we do at the Regional Office really helps the divisions and eventually the schools. It is not only about completing our own targets."
P4: "As a specialist, I learned that our role is to serve. Sometimes people expect answers from us, so we need to make sure that what we provide is useful and correct."

P7: "I do not see leadership only as directing people. Sometimes you lead when you help another office solve a problem and they are able to move forward because of that support."
The findings suggested that participants practiced service-oriented leadership grounded in organizational stewardship. Their leadership legitimacy emerged from enabling others to accomplish educational objectives. This interpretation complements transformational approaches emphasizing support and collective purpose (Bao et al., 2025) and distributed-leadership perspectives that locate leadership practice across professional roles (Spillane, 2006).
Backhaus and Vogel (2022) similarly found that leadership in public organizations was positively related to beneficial organizational outcomes, particularly when leadership supported group and organizational functioning. In the present study, service therefore appeared not as a peripheral leadership value but as a central mechanism through which specialists influenced governance.

Theme 2. Leading Through Expertise Rather Than Position

The second theme showed that participants often exercised influence through technical knowledge, professional credibility, and accumulated experience. Although they were not always the formal decision-makers, they were frequently consulted regarding policies, programs, data, technical concerns, and implementation strategies.
Their leadership therefore depended on whether others trusted their expertise.

Participant Responses

P2: "Sometimes you are not the one who makes the final decision, but before that decision is made, they ask for your technical recommendation."
P5: "You have to establish credibility. If you give information that is inaccurate, people will hesitate to approach you again. Your expertise becomes part of your leadership."
P8: "I realized that influence does not always come from the position. There were times when I was asked to lead discussions because the concern was within my specialization."
This theme illustrated expertise-based distributed leadership. Spillane (2006) argues that leadership practice depends partly on the distribution of expertise according to organizational situations. Education Specialists embodied this principle when they exercised leadership because particular concerns required their specialized knowledge.
The finding was also consistent with Hallinger's (2011) contextual approach to educational leadership. The effectiveness of specialist leadership depended on their capacity to apply expertise appropriately to varying situations rather than merely possess technical knowledge. Credibility therefore functioned as a form of professional authority.

Theme 3. Translating Policy Into Practice

The third theme captured one of the most important leadership experiences reported by participants: interpreting policies and translating them into practical regional and field-level action. Participants encountered national memoranda, guidelines, programs, and reforms that required contextual interpretation before implementation.
They described leadership as helping stakeholders understand not only what a policy required but how it could be implemented appropriately.

Participant Responses
P3: "A policy may be very clear when you read it, but when you go to the field, there are situations that were not exactly described in the document."
P6: "Our responsibility was not just to repeat the memorandum. We had to understand it deeply so we could explain how it applied to the divisions."
P9: "Sometimes we received questions from the field that required us to look at the intent of the policy, not only the exact wording."
The theme demonstrated that Education Specialists functioned as **policy intermediaries** between higher-level directives and field implementation. DepEd's governance framework places Regional Offices within a decentralized system responsible for leadership, management, and support of the Department's regional mandate (DepEd, 2015).
The finding also reflected adaptive leadership. Heifetz et al. (2009) argue that complex organizational problems cannot always be solved by applying existing technical answers. Participants frequently encountered implementation situations requiring consultation, interpretation, and learning. Their leadership therefore involved responsible discretion while

maintaining policy accountability.

Theme 4. Building Leadership Through Collaboration and Technical Assistance

The fourth theme revealed that participants developed leadership through continuous interaction with colleagues, divisions, schools, and other stakeholders. Technical assistance emerged as a particularly important context for leadership because participants were expected to diagnose concerns, facilitate discussion, recommend strategies, and strengthen local capacity.

Participants recognized that technical assistance became less effective when delivered as command and more effective when approached as partnership.

Participant Responses

P1: "When we provided technical assistance, I learned that you cannot simply tell them what to do. You first need to understand what is happening in their division."

P5: "The solutions are better when they are developed together. They know their local situation better than we do."

P10: "Leadership taught me to listen more. Sometimes we already have an idea of the solution, but after listening to the field, you realize that another approach is more appropriate."

The participants' experiences reflected collaborative and distributed leadership. Leadership developed through interaction and joint problem-solving rather than unilateral direction. Spillane (2006) emphasizes that leadership is constituted through interactions among individuals and situations, while Hallinger (2011) stresses responsiveness to context.

The findings also align with public-sector evidence showing that relational leadership can contribute to organizational outcomes. Bao et al. (2025) found that transformational leadership was positively related to leader-member exchange and organizational outcomes. In the present study, technical assistance functioned not only as a support mechanism but also as a leadership-learning environment in which participants strengthened listening, facilitation, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving.

Theme 5. Navigating Change, Accountability, and Institutional Constraints

The fifth theme described leadership as a continuing effort to respond to changing priorities while remaining accountable to organizational procedures. Participants encountered new programs, deadlines, resource limitations, simultaneous assignments, technological changes, data requirements, and differing implementation capacities among field offices.

They learned to prioritize responsibilities, communicate expectations, adjust strategies, and make decisions despite constraints.

Participant Responses

P2: "There were times when several urgent programs were happening simultaneously. You have to decide what needs attention first while making sure that nothing important is neglected."

P6: "Change is constant in the Department. Just when you become familiar with one process, there may be a new guideline or system that you have to learn."

P8: "The challenge is responding quickly without sacrificing quality. Whatever recommendation we make can affect many people in the field."

The theme illustrated the adaptive dimension of governance leadership. Heifetz et al. (2009) explain that adaptive leadership becomes necessary when organizations face complex problems requiring learning, experimentation, and adjustment rather than predetermined technical solutions.

Backhaus and Vogel (2022) also found that leadership effectiveness in the public sector depends on administrative context. Participants' leadership practices were shaped by institutional rules, accountability expectations, resource constraints, and multiple stakeholders. Their experiences demonstrated that adaptability did not mean ignoring procedures; instead, they learned to innovate and adjust within public-sector accountability structures.

Theme 6. Becoming a Reflective Educational Governance Leader

The final theme showed that participants' leadership identities developed progressively through professional experience. Several participants initially understood themselves mainly as technical specialists. Repeated exposure to policy work, facilitation, decision-making, technical assistance, coordination, and difficult organizational situations gradually changed

how they perceived their roles.
Reflection on both successful and difficult experiences contributed to greater confidence, humility, and awareness of continuing learning needs.

Participant Responses

P3: "At first, I thought being a specialist meant knowing your technical area. Later, I realized that you also have to know how to lead people and manage relationships."
P7: "There were mistakes and difficult experiences that taught me more than some of the formal trainings I attended."
P10: "I became more confident, but at the same time I became more aware that leadership means you cannot stop learning."
The theme demonstrated that leadership identity was developed through experience and reflective practice. Schön (1983) explains that professionals develop expertise by reflecting on situations that cannot be resolved simply through predetermined technical knowledge. Participants similarly learned by reconsidering decisions, examining stakeholder responses, and adjusting subsequent actions.
The theme also reflected Hallinger's (2011) argument that educational leadership develops within specific contexts and cannot be separated from organizational realities. Leadership therefore became part of the participants' professional identities as they moved beyond seeing themselves exclusively as technical specialists.
Bao et al. (2025) further demonstrate that transformational leadership is associated with positive organizational and individual outcomes, reinforcing the value of systematically developing leadership among public-sector professionals. The present findings indicate that Education Specialists may become important leadership resources within the Department when their technical development is accompanied by opportunities for reflection, mentoring, and progressively complex responsibilities.
Participants entered or performed specialist roles with particular areas of professional expertise. Through repeated interaction with governance challenges, they learned that expertise alone was insufficient. Effective leadership required them to communicate, listen, facilitate, interpret policies, manage relationships, understand context, respond to uncertainty, and accept accountability for recommendations.
Leadership therefore emerged not from abandoning their specialist identity but from expanding what it meant to be a specialist. Technical competence became the foundation upon which relational, adaptive, ethical, and strategic leadership developed.
The essence of the experience lay in becoming professionals who could connect policy with practice, expertise with relationships, and organizational authority with service. Their leadership frequently operated outside the visibility associated with executive positions, yet it influenced how policies and programs were understood and implemented across governance levels.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrated that Education Specialists experienced leadership as multidimensional and embedded in everyday governance work. Leadership was not limited to directing people but involved service, technical influence, policy mediation, collaboration, adaptation, and reflective learning.

Leadership as Service and Stewardship showed that specialists associated leadership with enabling organizational and field-level success. This finding aligns with broader public-sector evidence indicating that leadership contributes significantly to group and organizational outcomes (Backhaus & Vogel, 2022).
Leading Through Expertise Rather Than Position demonstrated that professional credibility enabled participants to influence decisions even when final authority remained with senior officials. This closely reflects distributed leadership, wherein leadership practices move toward individuals possessing relevant expertise (Spillane, 2006).
Translating Policy Into Practice highlighted the intermediary role of Regional Office specialists. Participants did not simply transmit national policies; they interpreted and contextualized them. This role is significant within a decentralized education system because implementation conditions differ across field offices.
Building Leadership Through Collaboration and Technical Assistance emphasized that effective governance depended on dialogue rather than command. Participants became more effective when they approached technical assistance as collaborative problem-solving.
Navigating Change, Accountability, and Institutional Constraints revealed the adaptive character of their roles. Leadership involved responding to uncertainty while respecting public accountability. This supports Heifetz et al.'s (2009) distinction between technical and adaptive challenges.

Finally, **Becoming a Reflective Educational Governance Leader** showed that leadership identity developed gradually. Participants' experiences suggest that formal leadership training alone cannot fully prepare Education Specialists for complex governance environments. Experiential learning, mentoring, cross-functional exposure, reflection, and opportunities to lead substantive work are equally important.

8. Implications for Educational Governance

The findings have important implications for the Department of Education. First, leadership development should not be limited to formal executives and supervisors. Education Specialists already exercise leadership through policy implementation, technical assistance, program coordination, research, and professional development; therefore, leadership competencies should be intentionally developed within specialist career pathways.

Second, professional-development programs should combine technical competence with facilitation, communication, negotiation, conflict management, policy analysis, data-informed decision-making, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking.

Third, mentoring arrangements may connect experienced Education Specialists with newer personnel to strengthen both technical and leadership capability. Mentoring may be particularly useful for developing judgment that cannot be easily taught through formal seminars.

Fourth, specialists should receive opportunities for cross-divisional collaboration. Exposure to planning, quality assurance, curriculum, field assistance, research, and human-resource functions can broaden understanding of educational governance as an interconnected system.

Fifth, technical-assistance systems should emphasize partnership and capacity-building rather than compliance monitoring alone.

Finally, career-progression frameworks should recognize leadership displayed through technical expertise, governance contribution, mentoring, innovation, and successful coordination across organizational levels.

8. Conclusion

The study found that leadership development among Education Specialists in the Department of Education Regional Office was an experiential, relational, and adaptive process grounded in professional expertise. Participants did not develop leadership simply because they occupied specialist positions. Leadership emerged through repeated engagement with service responsibilities, policy interpretation, technical assistance, stakeholder coordination, organizational change, difficult decisions, and reflective learning.

The themes Leadership as Service and Stewardship; Leading Through Expertise Rather Than Position; Translating Policy Into Practice; Building Leadership Through Collaboration and Technical Assistance; Navigating Change, Accountability, and Institutional Constraints; and Becoming a Reflective Educational Governance Leader revealed that effective specialist leadership extended considerably beyond technical competence.

Participants gradually learned to use expertise not merely to provide answers but to influence organizational learning, facilitate collective problem-solving, strengthen field capacity, and connect policies with local implementation realities. Their experiences also demonstrated that credibility, relationships, judgment, adaptability, and reflection were essential to leadership in decentralized educational governance.

The essence of the phenomenon was therefore the transformation from technical specialist to educational governance leader. Technical expertise provided the foundation, but leadership developed when participants learned how to mobilize that expertise in the service of people, programs, and institutional goals.

Recognizing Education Specialists as leadership actors has important implications for DepEd. Strengthening their leadership capacity can improve not only individual professional development but also policy implementation, technical assistance, organizational learning, interoffice coordination, and ultimately the effectiveness of educational governance.

9. Recommendations

The Department of Education may strengthen leadership-development programs specifically designed for Education Specialists, integrating technical expertise with adaptive leadership, communication, facilitation, systems thinking, policy analysis, and strategic decision-making.

Regional Offices may establish structured mentoring and coaching systems that allow experienced specialists to support newer personnel.

Education Specialists may also be provided opportunities to lead cross-divisional projects, technical working groups, research initiatives, program evaluations, and policy-development activities.

Leadership-development plans should incorporate reflective practice through learning journals, after-action reviews, peer consultation, and facilitated reflection after major programs.
Technical-assistance frameworks should encourage collaborative diagnosis and capacity-building rather than one-directional transmission of instructions.
Future research may compare leadership experiences of Education Specialists across regions, technical divisions, or governance levels. Longitudinal studies may also examine how specialist leadership identity develops across different stages of professional advancement.

10. Limitations

The study was phenomenological and therefore emphasized depth of lived experience rather than statistical generalizability. The findings reflected the organizational context and experiences of Education Specialists within a particular Department of Education Regional Office.
The investigation relied primarily on self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by participants' recollections, interpretations, and willingness to discuss organizational challenges.
Differences in specialist assignment, years of experience, technical domain, previous leadership roles, and professional preparation may also have shaped individual experiences.
Future research may triangulate participant interviews with observations, program documentation, supervisor perspectives, and feedback from Schools Division Offices receiving technical assistance.

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