

Experiences of First-Time School Directors of Diocesan Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Kabankalan: A Narrative Analysis

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Abstract	Article Info
<p>By drawing on a narrative analysis of the experiences of six (6) first-time school directors of diocesan Catholic schools in the diocese of Kabankalan, this study aims to examine the context of their dual roles as spiritual leaders and educational administrators. The narratives of first-time school directors were analyzed using Narrative Analysis: Personal Experience Narrative Approach. The study reveals the complexities of managing institutional demands while upholding the mission and values of Catholic education. There were four (4) common themes derived from the narrative of the participants – reasons for the acceptance of the role, preparation for school leadership, challenges in school leadership, and lessons in school leadership. Moreover, it highlights the necessity of giving professional support like formal studies related to school management and mentoring to be given by experts to priests before accepting school leadership. This study also contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of Catholic school leadership in the diocesan context, offering insights into how leadership training and support can be enhanced to better prepare future school directors.</p>	<p>Keywords: Narrative Analysis, First-time School Directors, Catholic Schools, Diocesan Leadership, Spiritual Leadership, Educational Administration, School Management</p>

INTRODUCTION

There is a good number of Catholic religious institutes whose particular charism is education. Many of them are in the Philippines. Noteworthy to mention are the brothers of the Christian Schools or popularly known as De La Salle Brothers who established the De La Salle University as well as other La Salle Schools nationwide, the Society of Jesus or “Jesuits” who founded and manages the Ateneo University and other Ateneo schools and the Order of Augustinian Recollects who are responsible in putting up schools in three major islands of the country (Torres, 2015). Since they are well aware of the nature of their apostolate, their seminary formation and postgraduate degrees are consistent with the demands of their charism. However, in the context of diocesan priesthood, seminary training is directed toward preparing candidates for ministerial duties as dictated by the varied apostolates of the diocese. In this case, one of the apostolates could be school administration where priests are assigned as school directors. After only one or two years as an associate, the bishop assigns them to a parish as the pastor and frequently this assignment includes multiple parishes and possibly with schools (Schuth, 2016).

In this regard, the Diocese of Kabankalan has 18 diocesan Catholic schools, and most of them are managed by school directors who are diocesan priests. Majority of the diocesan priest-school directors have no academic qualification and training in school management. A diocesan bishop is entrusted with the pastoral care of the diocese. He is responsible for teaching, governing, and sanctifying the faithful of his diocese, sharing these duties vicariously with the diocesan priests who serve under him.

The present study focuses on first-time school directors. This study is of interest to the researcher because he is currently a first-time school director. This study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of first-time school directors of diocesan Catholic schools in the Diocese of Kabankalan. The results of this study could have implications in developing a seminary and diocesan program in preparation for educational leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature underscores the significant influence of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) on priestly formation and the preparation of clergy for leadership roles within the Church. Schuth (2016) highlights that Vatican II marked a pivotal shift in the Church’s understanding of priesthood, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive formation, including theological, pastoral, and practical training. Key documents such as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam Totius* laid the foundation for improved seminary curricula, advocating for experiential pastoral training, ongoing education, and accountability among clergy. These reforms aimed to produce priests equipped not only with theological knowledge but also with practical skills to address contemporary pastoral and administrative challenges. However, subsequent studies reveal that the actual preparation of priests, especially for leadership in Catholic schools, remains insufficient. Simonds (2021) and others point out that many newly ordained priests are thrust into leadership roles without adequate training, often due to declining priest numbers and changes in seminary programs, which have historically included limited focus on school governance.

Further research emphasizes the need for specialized leadership training for priests involved in Catholic education. Studies in the United States and the Philippines demonstrate a gap between seminary education and the practical demands of school leadership, with many priests lacking the motivation or preparation to lead Catholic schools effectively (Calkins & Convey, 2019; Andal, 2020). Religious orders such as the Jesuits and the Sisters of St. Joseph exemplify comprehensive formation processes that include spiritual growth, pedagogical skills, and practical teaching experience, which significantly impact educational leadership. In the Philippine context, efforts have been made to integrate educational subjects into seminary curricula, and some diocesan priests have developed coping strategies and leadership frameworks to manage the complexities of Catholic school administration (Duroy, 2022). Overall, while Vatican II set the stage for reform and renewal in priestly formation, current literature indicates a pressing need to enhance leadership preparation and continuous professional development for priests to meet the evolving demands of Catholic education effectively.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative research approach to explore the lived experiences of first-time school directors in diocesan Catholic schools. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for capturing detailed, in-depth insights into participants' personal perspectives, emphasizing rich descriptions of processes and interactions (Sailor, 2013). By utilizing narrative analysis, the study allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing an authentic account of their journeys, challenges, and reflections. This approach not only facilitated an understanding of how participants made sense of their roles but also revealed how storytelling influences their perceptions and actions (Geiger & Sorber, 2013). Data collection involved in-depth interviews and written narratives, enabling the researcher to analyze both the content and structure of participants' stories—such as characters, events, and emotional evaluations—thus organizing their experiences into meaningful themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 2020). This comprehensive approach ensures a nuanced understanding of the complex processes involved in assuming school leadership for first-time directors.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected to ensure they possessed direct, relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is common in narrative research, as it aims to select individuals who can provide rich, detailed narratives (Sailor, 2013; Subedi, 2021). The study involved six (6) first-time diocesan Catholic school directors in the Diocese of Kabankalan, chosen because they had fully experienced the transition into school leadership and could provide comprehensive insights. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must be diocesan priests with at least one year of service as a school director in either parochial or diocesan colleges, and they must be willing to participate in in-depth interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time to uphold ethical standards. The relatively small, focused sample aligns with qualitative research conventions, prioritizing depth over breadth to capture the complexity of individual experiences.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data were gathered using two primary tools: the Individual Written Narrative Story Form and a semi-structured Phenomenological In-Depth Interview Guide. The narrative story form enabled participants to document their experiences in written form, capturing detailed personal stories that reflect their perceptions, emotions, and reflections. This method allows for rich textual data that can be analyzed for thematic content and narrative structure (Simon & Goes, 2013). The interview guide facilitated verbal data collection through open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive descriptions of participants' preparation, challenges, and successes in their leadership roles (Lucerna, 2017). The structured interview format ensured consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts freely, fostering a conversational atmosphere that encourages authentic responses. Questions were developed based on the study's objectives, previous literature, and contextual relevance, ensuring the data collected would be pertinent and comprehensive.

Data Gathering Procedures

Following ethical approval from the Central Philippine State University, the researcher initiated contact with potential participants via email, providing detailed information about the study and securing informed consent. Participants received the narrative story form electronically and completed it at their convenience—either through written responses or oral narration recorded via online or face-to-face interviews. The researcher maintained flexibility to accommodate participants' schedules and preferences. Collected narratives and interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, with confidentiality maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants had the opportunity to review and validate their transcripts (member checking), enhancing the credibility of the findings. The researcher also engaged in ongoing data analysis concurrently with data collection, applying rigorous procedures to ensure trustworthiness—such as audit trails, triangulation through participant verification, and peer debriefing with an independent expert to validate interpretations.

Data Analysis

The core analytical method was narrative analysis, adapted from Akinsanya and Bash (2014), focusing on deconstructing stories into their constituent elements—such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, and coda—to understand how participants construct and convey their experiences (Ozyildirim, 2006). This method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of not only what participants experienced but also how they interpreted and emotionally processed these events. Additionally, the analysis involved identifying the metaphorical essence of each narrative, capturing the emotional and interpretative depths of their stories (Cheuk-Ho Au, 2022). The researcher systematically coded and organized the narratives, identifying recurring themes and unique insights, which were verified through member checking and peer review. This rigorous approach ensured the findings accurately reflected participants' lived realities and provided meaningful insights into their leadership journeys.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards, including obtaining approval from the university's ethics review board and securing informed consent from all participants. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality through pseudonyms and secure data handling. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Digital and physical data were securely stored and destroyed after five years, ensuring data security and privacy throughout the research process. These measures collectively upheld the integrity and ethical responsibility of the study, safeguarding the rights and well-being of all participants.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Experiences of First-time School Directors of Diocesan Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Kabankalan

In this study, the narrative inquiry approach unveiled the experiences of first-time school directors of diocesan Catholic schools in the diocese of Kabankalan. These six (6) first-time school directors' narratives offered insights into their experiences as school administrators. Participants provided their personal experiences in the reasons for acceptance of the role, preparation for school leadership, challenges in school leadership and lessons in school leadership. The stories were gathered through written narratives and follow-up interviews to check for accuracy of the transcribed narratives.

Participant 1: Father L

Father L has been in the ministry of priesthood for 16 years. He is 44 years old and currently assigned in a diocesan Catholic school which offers basic and tertiary education. He has a postgraduate degree in psychology and not in education though he is assigned in school. He came from a family of educators.

Father L's the Acceptance of the Role

A school director embraces his role as a leader with a deep commitment to service. The position of school director is not just a mere job, it is a way of giving back to the institution that once shaped a person. As Father E stated.

"I am fully aware that as a priest I am going to embrace duties and responsibilities in the name of service no matter how challenging they may be... Secondly, I am an alumnus of the school where I am currently assigned. In my heart, my being school director is not just an "assignment", but my way of giving back to the educative institution that formed and educated me to the person I am today."

Father L expressed his deep commitment to his role as a priest and school director. He acknowledged the challenges that come with the responsibilities of service. He emphasized his personal connection to the school, viewing his position not just as a job, but as a meaningful opportunity to give back to the institution that shaped his principles and values. As mentioned by Father E, he served the school which formed him as an individual and to what he is now at present.

Father L's Preparations for School Leadership

In context of the preparation of school leaders, a person develops his leadership skills by attending seminars and collaborating with other institutions. This gives him a valuable insights on operation and relationship. As Father E recounted:

"Honestly, I have no prior formal preparation, academic or otherwise. However, before my appointment as school director, I was already assigned in the same school holding various duties and responsibilities. First, I was guidance associate for three years and Vice President for Student Ministry for two years. More or less, I have practical knowledge gained from intently observing and learning on how the school's system works as well as on how to deal with the school's stakeholders. Later on, I gradually improved my leadership skills by attending worthwhile seminars and trainings and benchmarked with local and international colleges and universities."

Father E acknowledged his lack of formal preparation for the role of school director. According to Simonds et al.,(2021), priests have a woeful lack of any meaningful school leadership preparation. On this note, it was not a surprise that Father E received no formal preparation before he was assigned as school director. Furthermore, Father E highlighted his extensive experience within the same school with his duties as a guidance associate and Vice President for Student Ministry. He emphasized the knowledge gained from these roles through experiences and alongside leadership development through seminars and trainings from other institutions.

Father L's Challenges in School Leadership

Challenges are venues of growth with it comes to adapting in a situation and developing resiliency despite the difficult circumstances. Father E revealed:

"The challenges I encountered as first-time school director can be categorized into two: internal and external. Internally, I considered myself "too young" and experienced to be school president and the daunting duties and responsibilities attached to the office. With these apprehensions, I was afraid that I still do not have the essential components in my arsenal to be a performing and for that matter an effective and efficient school director. Secondly, I felt the pressure coming from the fact that I am an alumnus of the school where I am serving as school director. I was anxious to be school director of the school where some of my high school teachers are still in service. I was also anxious because some of my high school classmates, batchmates, and contemporaries are now parents or guardians of the students. Externally, I do not have the prior "formal" preparation as school director. My post graduate degrees are in the areas of Counseling and Psychology. While most of the priest-school directors I knew have vertical qualification, a post graduate degree in Educational Management to start with. Secondly, I was already school director when the Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc. It was a moment of uncertainty."

Father L outlined two main categories of challenges faced as a first-time school director: internal and external. Internally, he struggled with feelings of inadequacy due to his young age and saw his lack of experience. This was confirmed by the study of Andal (2020) which says that ordained ministers or priests lacked experiences in school ministry. Added to the internal challenge was the pressure of serving at his alma mater, where former teachers and classmates are involved. Externally, he acknowledged a lack of formal preparation in educational management, having degrees in Counseling and Psychology, and the added stress of leading during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Father L's Lessons in School Leadership

School leadership is a difficult task that requires faith and courage. It encompasses more than just administrative tasks. Father E said:

"First, I am nothing if not for God's ever-abiding presence and grace. Therefore, it is God that must be made known and not I. Second, I may not be an expert in everything pertaining to school management nonetheless my presence in almost all in and out campus activities, stakeholder engagements, relating to my co-employees and being the point of unity of the educative community immensely contributed to my personal and vocational growth, and hopefully made an impact to the stakeholders. Lastly, being a school director is not about the position, but the disposition to constantly give one hundred percent of my best. Less than that, it is just a misconception of what the position truly is."

Father L emphasized that his effectiveness as a school director stemmed from God's love and grace, rather than personal expertise. He acknowledged his active involvement in different school activities and

stakeholder engagements as the key to his own growth as a school leader and impact on the community where he is in. Ultimately, he believed that true leadership is defined not by the position itself but by the commitment to give yourself for the service of others.

Participant 2: Father E

For 19 years, Father E has served the diocese with great ardor and joy. He is 47 years old now and currently assigned in a parish with a diocesan Catholic school. He has been assigned in the seminary for a long time and now he is taking a new role as school director. He is the oldest among all the participants.

Father E's the Acceptance of the Role

Education is essential to preaching, making the role of a priest as an administrator in an educational institution a noble extension of his pastoral duties. The acceptance of the role as school director has transformative mission. Father E recounted:

"Obedience is the initial factor. Another key aspect lies in my personal conviction regarding the transformative mission of my vocation as clergy. I firmly believe that, as an ordained pastor of the church, education through teaching is essential and non-negotiable within the preaching ministry. Hence, serving as an administrator in an educational institution represents a noble task inherent in the teaching ministry stemming from my role as a priest."

Father E highlighted that obedience and personal conviction as fundamental to their role as a priest. He believed that education is an important aspect of priestly ministry, viewing his position as an administrator in an educational institution as a noble extension of their teaching responsibilities within the church.

Father E's Preparations for School Leadership

Formal program for school administration is a big need among school directors. However, despite the absence of formal preparation, there is a providential aspect guiding their journey. Father E said:

"I do not have a specific or formal program in place for preparing for school administration. However, upon deeper reflection, I recognize that my past ministry in the seminary, an academic community itself, has equipped me with the confidence and a vision for academic excellence. While I have not actively pursued formal preparation in this area, I believe there is a providential factor at play that must also be taken into consideration."

Father E acknowledged the lack of formal preparation for school administration. According to Andal (2020), there were priests who lacked leadership training and experiences. On this note, there was really no preparation and training received by Father E before he assumed the office as school director. However, he added that his past experience in seminary as a valuable foundation helped him in carrying out his duty as school director. He recognized that this experience has provided him with confidence and a vision for academic excellence. In addition, he suggested that a sense of providence is influencing his journey in this endeavor.

Father E's Challenges on School Leadership

School leadership faces an array of challenges that can significantly impact the educational situation. School directors learn how to navigate issues. Father P shared:

"The primary challenge in my situation seems rather insignificant. This is attributed to the fact that the school I am tasked to oversee is currently under construction following a devastating fire that destroyed the entire complex. Additionally, the school is facing severe financial constraints stemming from insufficient funds for rebuilding and a substantial amount of debt incurred. Beyond the physical reconstruction, internal restructuring is imperative to meet the minimum requirements set by the Department of Education. Another significant challenge lies in obtaining PEAC re-certification starting essentially from minimal evidence."

In particular, Father E affirmed the experience of Father L that the COVID 19 pandemic has also brought havoc to the school environment. One particular challenge brought by the pandemic was the decrease of enrollment that even added to the present problems of the school. Father P recounted:

"Maintaining the student enrollment numbers poses yet another obstacle. The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic further compound these challenges."

Father E enumerated several significant challenges in overseeing a school currently under reconstruction after a devastating fire. He said further that other issues include financial constraints due to limited rebuilding funds and existing debt, the need for internal restructuring to meet Department of Education requirements, and obtaining PEAC re-certification with minimal evidence. Additionally, maintaining student enrollment and addressing the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are also part of his big challenges in the school.

Father E's Lessons in School Leadership

Lessons in life are crucial for personal and professional growth, as they provide valuable insights from experiences and challenges. Focus and attention to success is important. Father E said:

"Any job or ministry requires focus and attention for success. While beautiful dreams or concepts are admirable, their true value lies in their manifestation in the tangible reality."

Father E added that he also learned the sense of foresight and anticipation. The collaborative effort of all became effective for Church evangelization. Father E recounted:

"Foresight and anticipation play pivotal roles in bringing these ideals to fruition. Functioning as a parish priest and a school director may be demanding, yet concurrently holding these two vital roles proves essential and beneficial in achieving overarching objectives for both the parish and the school. Therefore, collaborative utilization of resources from both entities is crucial for implementing the Church's evangelizing ministry effectively. Support system among parochial school is so important and impactful."

Father E recognized that success in any job requires focus and the ability to turn ideas into reality through foresight and anticipation. It highlighted the dual role of a parish priest and school director as crucial yet essential for achieving the broader goals of both the parish and the school. Collaboration and resource sharing between the two entities are important for effectively implementing the Church's evangelizing mission, highlighting the importance of a support of other schools.

Participant 3: Father P

Father P is already 8 years in the ministry as priest. He is the youngest among all the first-time school directors in this study. He is also the youngest when it comes to age since he is only 37 years old. He is currently assigned in a barangay parish with a diocesan Catholic school. He is also presently taking up a postgraduate degree in education.

Father P's Acceptance of the Role

The school is a venue for growth and learnings. The priest's role is to provide the faithful with their spiritual needs. This is the reason why Father P accepted the role. According to Father P:

"Being a priest is well-rounded vocation or calling. Even the main meat of priesthood is for sanctification, we cannot deny the fact that we need to teach and to preach and put it into practice. In our diocesan setting that almost each parish has its own private school as an evangelizing arm. I consider this as a venue for growth, learnings and experiences, and at the same time to widen my horizon as an individual who has will and intellect."

Notably, Father P agreed to Father E in his statement that one reason of his acceptance of the role is the belief that teaching is implicit in the vocation of a priest. In fact, Simonds et al (2021) revealed that priest is really the chief educational leader of the parish school.

Father P reflected on the multifaceted nature of being a priest, emphasizing that while the core of priesthood is sanctification, teaching and preaching are essential components. In the diocesan context, where most parishes have their own private schools, he saw this as an opportunity for personal growth, learning, and expanding his perspective as a person with will and intellect.

Father P's Preparations for School leadership

Father P shared that his pervious assignment and also his deep connection with God through prayer were part of his preparation in school leadership. Father P said:

"I was a school chaplain and a classroom teacher in my previous assignment. Somehow, the experience I had at St. Michael Academy helped me prepared for the assignment as a school director. The great thing that helped me a lot in preparing is "Prayer". I was praying so that I could do and fulfill the duty as a parish priest and at the same time as school director. The trust in the Lord that he will aid me handling the school.

Father P also said the a big contribution to his preparation was the help offered by his fellow priests and other school directors. According to Father P:

"The trust that my fellow priests helped me in doing my job as a school director. Asking the experiences of the school directors also made me strong to accept the said duties and responsibilities."

Father P realized on his previous experience as a school chaplain and classroom teacher prepared him for his present role as school director. He emphasized the importance of prayer in fulfilling his dual responsibilities as a parish priest and school director, expressing trust in the Lord for guidance and support. Additionally, he understood the value of collaborating with fellow priests which according to Kime (2020), collaboration with others was part of priests' pastoral training. Thus, seeking advice from experienced school directors to strengthen his ability to manage his duties responsibly was a good practice.

Father P's Challenges in School Leadership

According to Kivunja (2020), school leaders also faced numerous challenges in administering the entire school. A big challenge for leaders is management and followed by building relationship to people. Father P explained:

"The challenges that I have as school director are: First, management. How to run smoothly the school needs a lot of adjustments; adjustments to your faculty and staff, adjustments to financial management, adjustments to the students and parents. Second, relationship. Establishing rapport is a great part of success. Being a young priest, you have a lot of ideals. Ideals that you want to live by the school community but then you need to be flexible because you are in the midst of a different upbringing, context, culture and etc. Some ideals must be set aside in order to cater the common good."

For Father P, there were two key factors for successfully running a school: management and relationship building. Effective management means making various adjustments related to faculty, staff, finances, and the needs of students and parents. This was affirmed in the study of Kivunja (2020) which says school leaders are really responsible for supporting their teachers and staff and ensuring that students receive quality education. Establishing strong relationships is crucial, especially for a young priest who may have many ideals. Flexibility is necessary to go through the diverse backgrounds and contexts within the school community, and sometimes certain ideals may need to be set aside to prioritize the common good.

Father P's Lessons in School Leadership

Experience is the best teacher. It teaches a lot of lessons which are very useful in life. Father P shared how prayer and simplicity became his lessons in school leadership. Father P recounted:

"Prayer is the greatest armor and weapon. I am always relying on the grace and help of God why I survived. Well of course I need to do my part even God is there helping me. Flexibility and simplicity are also the factors that helped me survived."

Father P shared that prayer is his strongest source of strength and support, attributing his survival to God's grace. He acknowledged the importance of personal effort alongside divine assistance. His flexibility and simplicity also played key roles in his resilience.

Participant 4: Father T

Father T is currently assigned as a school director of a kindergarten at the same time a parish priest. He serves as a priest for 16 years now. He is 44 years old. He took up a postgraduate degree in education after he was asked to become a school director. He is assigned in a small parish near the city.

Father T's Acceptance of the Role

Father T's acceptance of the role comes from conscious awareness of the need of the diocese. Additionally, it is the contribution of the school to his seminary formation that made him accept the role. Father T said:

"Many of our Parishes have schools to manage. Some have elementary and high school education, others have independent kindergarten education. My parish belong to the latter. I accepted the assignment wholeheartedly. School apostolate have a significant contribution in my seminary formation during the time of my personal regency. I experienced the joy of a teacher's life. Accepting the responsibility as a first-time school director is an opportunity to express my gratitude to the school for shaping me who I am today."

Father T reflected on his huge role in managing a parish school, just like an independent kindergarten. He expressed his gratitude for the school's impact on his seminary formation and personal growth because it brought a big help to his formation as a priest. He viewed his new position as a school director as an opportunity to give back to the school once he was a member of and embrace the joy of teaching.

Father T's Preparations for School leadership

Father T shares the sentiments of other first-time school directors. He did not also have any formal preparation. He would only ask help from the people around him. Father T recounted:

"There was no formal prior preparations because I did not know then that I will be assigned as parish priest and school director as well. But informal talks and exchange of ideas and experiences with the former school director helped a lot. Informal sharing of ideas with former and present Commission on education director priests were also opportunities of learnings."

However, Father T pursued a Master's degree as part of his formal preparation during his term as school director. Father T said:

"Formal preparation happened during my term as school director. I enrolled and finished my Master's degree while serving as parish priest and school director."

Father T discussed his unexpected assignment as parish priest and school director of a diocesan Catholic schools, noting the lack of formal preparation beforehand. This is in contrast with the case of religious orders where they received a sufficient preparation for their school leadership (Conolly, 2020). Father T used to have the valuable informal discussions with the former school director and current diocesan commission on education director that aided his learning. Additionally, he mentioned completing a Master's degree during his tenure as school director which provided him with formal training and preparation on his role. According to Philippine Catholic Schools Standards (2016), school leaders were expected to undergo further studies and attend conferences. Thus For Father T, he was able to achieve it.

Father T's Challenges on School Leadership

Life is full of challenges that test our resilience and adaptability. Here, Father T mentioned that his challenges are the administrative work and lack of knowledge on school matters. According to Father T:

"Administrative work in school apostolate were not part of our seminary curriculum. It's the first hurdle encountered by every priest-director. Another difficulty I experienced was the lack of knowledge on matters regarding our school's working relationship with the Government agencies particularly the Department of Education."

Father T also shared the lack of financial support is also one of the biggest challenges since the tuition that they get from pupils are not enough for school's survival. He recounted:

"As independent kindergarten school, we have no financial support from the Commission on Education. The school itself cannot survive financially. This is the reason why the parish subsidized the school particularly the salary and benefits of our teachers. The tuition fees of the pupils are not enough for the operation of an independent kindergarten school."

Father T outlined challenges faced as a school director, noting that administrative tasks in school management were not covered in their seminary training as priests. This was confirmed by the study of Simonds et al (2021), which says that seminaries do not prepare seminarians for work in or leadership of Catholic school. Father T also encountered difficulties related to the school's relationship with government agencies, particularly the Department of Education. As an independent kindergarten, the school lacked financial support from the Commission on Education and struggled to cover its operating costs, relying on parish subsidies to pay teachers' salaries and benefits, as tuition fees alone are insufficient and difficult.

Father T's Lessons in School Leadership

It said that embracing our lessons in life equips us with the tools to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world. Father T realized that decision making is crucial in running a school. According to him:

"Decision making is very crucial in running a school. So it's always good to ask the guidance from the authority and experts."

Father T also learned the humility and patience are important virtues to practice in building relationship *"As to the working relationship with DepEd, humility and patience are two most important Christian traits. Our kindergarten school building is not according to the standard of DepEd's classroom classification. Last warning to build or renovate our classroom was issued last school year. But I made an appeal to extend another year for us to build the new DepEd standard 1 story classroom. I hope we can comply with their recommendation."*

Father T emphasized the importance of consulting others especially those in the authority for guidance in administrative work and decision-making. He highlighted that humility and patience are essential traits in his working relationship with the Department of Education. Facing a warning to upgrade his kindergarten building to meet DepEd standards, Father T made an appeal for an extension to comply with the requirements and hopes to meet the recommendations within the new timeframe.

Participant 5: Father C

Father C is a school director of basic education. He is 42 years old and 9 years in the ministry as priest. He has a double function in his assignment, a parish priest and a school director at the same time. He is assigned in a school located in the mountainous area. He has a postgraduate degree in education which he got when he was already a school director.

Father C's Acceptance of the Role

Acceptance of a new role often marks a pivotal moment in personal and professional journeys. The acceptance of Father C of his role as school director comes from his desire of evangelizing the young. Father C recounted:

"I accepted the responsibility as first-time school director due to the opportunity to evangelize the young mind though catholic education."

Father C's decision to accept the role of school director reflected a deep commitment to shaping young minds through Catholic education. By viewing this responsibility as an opportunity for evangelization especially to the young, he highlighted the importance of integrating faith with learning, fostering not just academic growth but also spiritual development.

Father C's Preparations for School Leadership

Preparation for school leadership is a vital journey that combines formal education, practical experience, and personal development. Father C explained that he has no formal preparation thus he studied a postgraduate degree in education to at least help in his work. According to Father C:

"The assignment of being a school director came to me in a surprise, as such, no preparations were made. I studied educational management to equip myself the necessary knowledge needed for the job."

Father C expressed that his unexpected assignment as school director came without prior preparation. In response, he proactively pursued studies in educational management to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for the role, demonstrating a commitment to effective leadership and a willingness to adapt to new challenges. According to Philippine Catholic School Standards (2016), school leaders who fully understood the primary purpose of Catholic Education exercised servant leadership and extensively undergone formation programs. Thus, Father C really answered the call of PCSS.

Father C's Account on Challenges in School Leadership

Challenges in school leadership are multifaceted and can significantly impact both the educational environment and student outcomes. Father C recognizes his challenges as school director which are personnel management and finances. Father C recounted:

"The most challenging I guess is finances that is how to manage the budget from operations to remittance. Another thing is the acceptance of the employees, the risk in every decision and criticism in the outcome of the events."

Father C identified financial management as the most significant challenge in school leadership, specifically in handling the budget for operations and remittances. He also highlighted the importance of gaining employee acceptance, as well as the risks involved in decision-making and the potential for criticism regarding outcomes.

Father C's Lessons in School Leadership

Lessons emphasizes the value of building strong relationships within the community, as well as the need for continuous professional development. Father C realizes that teamwork is a must and the help to the experts can be of great help. According to Father C:

"I did not do it alone, resolving challenges as school director is also challenging, so to speak. I seek the help of people who are knowledgeable in the field of education. Tapping friends who can assist for the improvement of the school. The guidance of the Board of Trustees is also of great help. Moreover, the teamwork of my people makes us overcome most of the challenges in school."

Father C realized the challenges are steps to success. He sought assistance from knowledgeable individuals in education, engaged friends for support, and benefited from the guidance of the Board of Trustees. Additionally, he highlighted the importance of teamwork among his staff, which has been crucial in overcoming challenges faced at the school.

Participant 6: Father A

Father A has been in the priesthood for 19 years. He is currently assigned in the farthest south parish of the diocese as a parish priest and as a school director of a diocesan Catholic school under his parish. He is 48 years old and finds joy in serving the young. He is currently taking up a postgraduate degree in education.

Father A's the Acceptance of the Role

Acceptance of a leadership role, especially in education, signifies a commitment to growth and service. Father A articulated that as a spiritual leader the youth should be given a great emphasis. Thus, he accepted the role. Father A recounted:

"Accepting my assignment as School director is both a challenge and opportunity. It creates fresh initiatives in dealing with the young and becomes an easy access for me to 'capture' the youth in the parish. A school director can create a program suitable to their needs as youth with the help of teachers especially the guidance office. Accepting my assignment as school director, therefore, is my own way of leading and forming the hearts and minds the youngsters to learn more about God, to be closer to God and experience God in the school. And so, to become a school director is to become a School evangelizer."

Father A viewed his role as school director as both a challenge and an opportunity to engage with youth in the parish. He emphasized the ability to develop programs that meet the needs of students, particularly with

the support of teachers and the guidance office. By accepting this role, Father A aimed to lead and nurture young hearts and minds in their spiritual journey, fostering a deeper connection with God. Ultimately, he saw the role of school director as a form of school evangelization.

Father A's Preparations for School Leadership

Preparing for school leadership involves developing a blend of skills, knowledge, and experiences. The preparation of Father A involves spiritual and intellectual preparation. Father A recounted:

"For me everything starts with a prayer. It is in my deep communication with God in prayer that I become more convinced to become an administrator of our school, thus it propels me to such role. Prayer gives me confidence to accept the challenges ahead of me. Personal and intimate time in prayer gives me a deep sense of purpose as a first-time director. I also took up Masters of Education, major in Educational Management. Taking up Educational management in graduate school enhances my professional and personal development. It will give me skills, which include critical decision making, skill in analyzing problems, teachers' management, time management, presentation abilities and administration skill."

Father A emphasized that prayer is the foundation of his motivation to become a school administrator, providing confidence and a sense of purpose. He also highlighted his pursuit of a Master's in Educational Management, which enhances his professional and personal development by equipping himself with essential skills such as decision-making, problem analysis, teacher management, time management, presentation, and administration. This was in conformity with the document Optatam Totius which highlights the importance of continuing education for priest after his priestly ordination.

Father A's Challenges in School Leadership

In the role of a school director, particularly as a priest, faces significant responsibilities that present unique challenges. Traditionally trained to guide congregations, priests may find the transition to school administration demanding. Father A shared:

"As School director, I have been given with enormous responsibilities. It is a very challenging role for a priest to be assigned to educational institution. Priests are generally trained to "shepherd God's people", not to become a school administrator. The challenges that I encountered along the way are: first is decision making. School directors always encounter complicated and complex decision makings related to school management, curriculum, students and staff problems, finances, and faculty's individual differences. Second is time management. School directors often have hectic and demanding schedules. They has to ensure that everything is in place and the school is running smoothly."

Father A reflected on the significant responsibilities and challenges faced as a school director, particularly as a priest transitioning into an administrative role. He highlighted two main challenges: decision-making, which involves navigating complex issues related to management, curriculum, and staff, and time management, as school directors must balance demanding schedules to ensure the school operates smoothly.

Father A's Lessons in School Leadership

As a first-time school director, understanding the school's culture was crucial, as being present and involved in daily activities allowed him to navigate challenges effectively. addressing issues with wisdom and kindness proved essential in fostering a positive school atmosphere. As Father A recounted:

"These are the important lessons I gained as a first-time school director: first, understanding the culture of the school is very important for a school leader. To be in the school always and involve myself in the administration helped me to understand the daily life of the school and how the world of the school revolves. I was able to know how to deal with different school problems. Second, school leadership is not just about generic kind leadership. It requires specific skills and knowledge specific to educational environment. Lastly, school directors should deal with different school problems with wisdom and kindness."

As first-time school director, Father A learned three key lessons: First, understanding the school's culture is essential, as being actively involved helps navigate daily challenges. Second, effective school leadership requires specific skills and knowledge tailored to the educational context. Lastly, addressing school problems with wisdom and kindness is vital for fostering a positive environment.

Essence of the Experience



Image: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/sun-rise-rays>

Being a first-time school director is like a sun rising in the morning, illuminating the surroundings with warmth and light. Although first-time school directors often find themselves inadequately prepared for the different challenges of their role, they courageously accept the task of running an educational institution entrusted to them by God through their bishop. They recognize that they are into a new and sometimes daunting position, but, much like the sun, they believe in their ability to bring brightness and hope to their community. They are committed to fostering a nurturing environment for students and teachers, striving to inspire growth and learning despite their limitations and imperfections.

These first-time school directors know that their journey will be filled with trials, yet they embrace each obstacle as an opportunity for growth both personal and professional. With a vision anchored in faith and a desire to serve, they want to build strong relationships within the school community, encouraging collaboration and open communication. First-time school directors do not only shine as leaders but also empower others to seek their own light, in order to have a shared sense of purpose and mission within the school.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher conclude that the roles of first-time school directors are complex and difficult. They have experienced many adjustments and challenges as they assume a different kind of leadership position, from being a church leader to a school leader. Their experiences contain mostly of their administrative roles and spiritual responsibilities integral in their identity as priests. They also were unprepared when they accepted the position and that is why they found it more challenging and difficult the administrative work, financial management and personnel management. However, despite these gargantuan challenges, there is a significant growth in their leadership skills and a deeper understanding of their role as school directors. The experiences of first-time school directors highlight the necessity of giving professional support like formal studies related to school management and mentoring to be given by the experts. If these needs will be addressed, the diocese of Kabankalan can be assured that its school directors will become more effective and efficient in their role of leading all diocesan Catholic schools in the diocese of Kabankalan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reflecting and analyzing the data of this study, the following recommendations were made to improve the leadership, administration, and management of future school directors of diocesan Catholic schools in the Diocese of Kabankalan.

1. The bishop being the head of the diocese and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of diocesan Catholic schools should consider sending priests for further studies related to school management in preparation

- for school leadership. If possible, he should select priests according to the criteria on the selection of priest school directors.
2. The Chairman of the Diocesan Commission on Education as the chief implementor of school programs and the in-charge of the monitoring of schools should consider making sure that priests who are about to assume the school leadership should undergo trainings and seminars and design a mentoring program for newly ordained priests who are to be assigned to schools.
 3. Priests as leaders of the Church should be encouraged to submit themselves for further studies especially in line with school leadership if they were to be assigned to diocesan Catholic schools as part of their evangelical mission.
 4. It necessary for the school directors as school leaders of diocesan Catholic schools to be well prepared in accepting the office of school administration. They should equip themselves with proper academic and non-academic trainings and continuing professional development to be efficient and effective in their ministry as school leaders.

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To God be the Highest Glory!

Raffy S. Carnal