

CARRYING THE TORCH OF LIFELONG LEARNING: A GROUNDED THEORY ON THE SIGNIFICANT PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF LIFELONG LEARNING ADVOCATES

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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory study endeavored to generate a framework for lifelong learning among educational leaders. It explores the perspectives and lived experiences of thirteen purposefully selected educational leaders, interviewed face-to-face as key informants, to understand their roles as advocates of lifelong learning. Findings reveal that lifelong learning is perceived as a powerful tool for promoting mental acuity, fostering meaningful relationships, enhancing personal skills, and driving transformative changes. Lifelong learners were described as analytical, emotionally mature, and skillful. Data analysis indicates that educational leaders engage in lifelong learning through ongoing experiences and activities by participating in diverse learning opportunities, reinforcing values formation, and committing to continuous personal and professional development. This study holds significant implications for policy formulation, educational leadership practices, professional growth, and community engagement. It advocates for inclusive policies that ensure equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities across K–12, higher education, and adult education. Government agencies may leverage the findings to integrate lifelong learning into national educational policies, prioritize funding for employee education, and promote partnerships between educational institutions and community organizations. Furthermore, the study encourages a culture of continuous improvement, where leaders explore innovative learning avenues, pursue self-directed learning, invest in time and resources in professional development. It also aims to increase public awareness, expand access to educational resources and mentorship, and promote community involvement. Finally, it calls for the recognition of lifelong learning advocates through certification and awards to inspire participation and commitment.

KEYWORDS: *lifelong learning, educational management, grounded theory, experiences*

INTRODUCTION

“You have a lifetime to learn to live. We learn not for school, but for life.” – Seneca

Man’s quest for learning does not stop at school when one has been donned with the tassel and gown; neither does it end when an individual has reached the highest peak of academic success. Continuous learning is a process of life; it is as vital as the air humans constantly breathe. From the moment a person is born until he dies, it remains to be one of the fundamental mechanisms for his survival.

Friesson and Anderson (2004) define the term “lifelong learning”, as learning that takes place at all stages in one’s life cycle. It requires that learning outcomes emanate from different settings and situations.

Ahmed (2009) outlines that lifelong learning embraces all forms of learning experiences that help individuals engage in meaningful interactions with surroundings through the enhancement of one’s knowledge, competence and critical thinking abilities.

Additionally, Nissen and Jivanjee (2014) share their standpoint on the concept of lifelong learning as a set of values and principles regarding the role of continuing acquisition, integration, and application of new knowledge throughout one’s life.

Lifelong learning has a long history. A previous conception of lifelong learning states that it was termed as lifelong education instead of learning, “recurrent education”, “education permanente” or “the learning society” (Merrill & Hyland, 2003).

Laal (2004) further states the core concepts of the different forms of learning which include formal, informal, and non-formal learning. Formal learning consists of learning that occurs within a planned and structured context that leads to formal recognition such as being given a certificate or diploma. Informal learning is learning resulting from daily life activities related to family, work, or leisure or otherwise known as experiential learning. While non-formal learning consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which can contain important learning elements such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace.

Lifelong learning involves vocational and technical education, the wide ranges of including, during, and excluding the learning process. It is a beneficial opportunity that provides equality for individuals and a process where there is no existence of time, place, age, socio-economic, or even education level (Gunuc, 2012).

Lifelong learning provides learners with the tools that will aid them in their learning. The European Commission’s definition of lifelong learning is “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the endeavor of advancing the knowledge, skills, and competencies within a personal, civic, social or employment-related perspective” (Longworth, 2003).

Lifelong learning and achievement motivation are two important concepts that play a significant role in not only school life but also the acquisition of required survival skills throughout one’s life. If an individual is equipped with lifelong learning skills and achievement motivation, he or she will probably succeed in life as the need to learn and succeed will never end. “The motivated person is a lifelong learner and a lifelong learner is a motivated person” (McCombs, 1991).

To further crystallize the significance of lifelong learning, a body of literature in the local setting is presented.

Macaranas (2017), in his study “Lifelong Learning in the Philippines”, succinctly stated that the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted a new instrument on human resource development which highlighted education, training, and lifelong learning as a key to economic and

employment development. The ILO described lifelong learning as all learning activities leading to the enhancement of competencies and qualifications. In this sense, competence was defined by ILO as something that covers the knowledge applied and mastered in a precise context, while qualifications as a formal expression of the vocational or professional abilities duly recognized by either worldwide or sectoral levels. Meanwhile, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) articulates that lifelong learning is all learning occurring between cradle and grave, from early childhood to training of people beyond their retirement to provide opportunities to create not just any job, but jobs of quality. He further added that the foundations for lifelong learning policy in the Philippines are the requirements of the 1987 Constitution. Lifelong learning is also stipulated in the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) for 2005-2010 where MTPDP recognizes the significance of lifelong learning. MTPDP mentions this statement on lifelong learning, “In a world where knowledge has been a crucial element for nations to prosper and compete, primacy is placed on quality and accessible lifelong learning, from early childhood development to primary, secondary, and tertiary learning”.

In like manner, the Philippine Plan of Action (PPA) for Education for All or EFA of 1991 to 2000, was cited at the EFA World Conference. The “new revolution” in education in terms of a lifelong learning policy under the 2005-2010 MTPDP was highlighted outlining that the government will refrain from offering programs also being offered by the private sector to channel government resources to areas where efficiency and effectiveness are greater, to create a learning society where people continue to learn on their own, improving the quality of life, and contributing to national development. The EFA Plan was the government’s commitment to providing all Filipinos with at least basic education by the year 2000. However, this target was not accomplished. Hence, the country recommitted similar goals for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education. But some challenges hinder meeting the said goals which include the bureaucratic capacity to respond to domestic and international challenges and the national budget as well.

After a thorough reading of the body of literature, it was realized that there is a limited number of studies on lifelong learning in the local context. Hence, the said gap was considered in the conceptualization of the study.

This study primarily aimed to develop a model-framework that would theorize the promotion of lifelong learning among educational leaders. Specifically, this qualitative type of research was guided by the following essential objectives: (1) describe the *advocates’ perspectives on lifelong learning*, (2) describe the advocates’ *significant experiences on lifelong learning*; and (3) describe the *general structures and characteristics of lifelong learning programs/culture* in the advocates’ respective organization or workplace.

It is hoped that the results of this study will provide the following benefits:
As part of an educational leaders’ role in creating an impact in society, it is hoped that the findings of this study would develop a framework on lifelong learning for educational leaders. The output of this research may serve as a proposed paradigm for educational leaders that may fit the local context in adapting lifelong learning.

The findings of the study may foster a love for continuous learning and ignite passion among educators to create meaningful contributions in the workplace.

The study may serve as a source of inspiration to those who are not in the educational or academic sector. Moreover, it may serve as a guide to researchers who are doing the grounded theory method in qualitative research. Finally, this study may serve as an enriching contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of research and educational management.

METHODS

This qualitative research employed a grounded theory method. Grounded theory was initiated by Glaser and Strauss (2017) and is a method founded on the premise that the generation of theory or framework is essential for a deep understanding of social phenomena.

The participants of the study were purposely selected based on their relevance to the research topic. The participants were thirteen (13) educational leaders: two (2) schools division superintendents, two (2) assistant schools division superintendents, one (1) public schools division supervisor, three (3) education program supervisors, two (2) elementary school heads and three (3) secondary school heads.

The following criteria were the basis for choosing the participants: (1) participants are educational leaders who are all advocates of lifelong learning; (2) participants are excelling well in the field of educational management whose ages range from 45-65 years old; (3) most of them have already finished their graduate studies and the others are currently pursuing graduate school; (4) the elementary and secondary school head participants were nominated as Most Outstanding Principals in the region.

The criterion-referenced sampling strategy was utilized in qualifying these participants. Creswell et al. (2009) defined the strategy as considering all cases that meet the criteria set as regards the nature and requirements of the study which is useful for quality assurance. In-depth interviews and observations are two sources of data usually employed in a grounded theory study. The source of data that was used is from the in-depth interview of lifelong learning advocates. The content of the open-ended interview guide was validated by experts in the field of educational leadership, qualitative research, and lifelong learning.

The following steps were undertaken in gathering the data for the study: The researcher sought permission from the right person in authority through a formal letter. Approved letter of request from the Dean of the Graduate School as well as the Division Superintendent's Office was sought. Upon approval, the researcher sent a letter of request and letter of consent to the participants as a part of the protocol or ethical consideration when interviewing participants in a study. Validation and approval of the research instrument from experts were considered before the scheduled interview was conducted. After the participants accepted the invitation, both the participant and researcher agreed to a convenient time for the interview.

An interview guide was also sent to the participants to prepare them for the actual interview. An orientation about the objectives of the study was also given beforehand. Permission to use an audio recorder was made. Moreover, informed consent was signed by each participant to assure the key

informants that the data gathered will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only.

The data gathered from the interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Treatment of data was made by employing the three levels in analyzing data in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The researcher compared and checked the relationship among responses to extract the similar concepts interrelated to one another to come up with a code to represent the extracted idea.

Allan (2003) describes the data analysis in the grounded theory as a process that involves searching for concepts by looking for codes, then concepts, and finally categories. According to Allan, “coding” as a form of content analysis, is used to discover the fundamental issues in data. In the data analysis, the interviewee uses phrases that pertain to the issue in the research. These issues are going to be mentioned and noted again, this is the process called coding and the short descriptor phrases are called “codes”.

The data were analyzed after the coding of the key points from the transcriptions. The study made use of “key point coding”. Merriam SB and Associates (2002) discuss that coding has three levels in analyzing the data: open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding, the data were broken down to allow the beginning of the process of categorization. Axial coding takes initial categories and makes further comparisons that describe relationships between categories. Using selective coding, saturation of categories is examined, which means that further analysis produces no new information or need for additional categories. In short, all the data were captured and described by key categories and a core category emerged that tells the central story of all participants as a group. This core category afterward was used to develop an emerging theory and conceptual framework that is considered grounded in the data and reflective of the lived experiences of all participants.

The study also made use of the key point coding where points regarded were identified in the transcript and were given an identifier. Identifiers were marked EL to signify “Educational Leader” with the corresponding number, i.e. EL1 which refers to an educational leader or participant number 1. After assigning codes to the key point, these “codes” were scrutinized and were categorized in a table. From the said codes, or known as concepts, surfaced other common concepts, or called “categories” which led eventually to “emerging themes”.

Coding, as a form of heuristics, is an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas to follow. It is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation. It is not just labeling, it is linking. It leads researchers from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data of that idea (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

After the codes have reached saturation and had been categorized according to their commonalities, an external validator’s expertise was sought to check the produced categories. These categories underwent constant review and scrutiny before they led to the emergence of the themes.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. The general objective of the study is to develop a model framework that emerges from lifelong learning advocates' significant views and experiences. Specifically, it seeks to describe: 1) the participants' perspectives on lifelong learning, (2) the characteristics of lifelong learning advocates, (3) the significant experiences and activities of educational leaders on how to become lifelong learners, (4) factors that influence educational leaders to become lifelong learners and; (5) initiatives to promote lifelong learning and ways to strengthen lifelong learning skills and attitudes.

DISCUSSION

As derived from the findings of the study, the participants' perspectives on lifelong learning are lifelong learning fosters a love for learning, cultivates valuable relationships, scaffolds one's aptitude and dexterities; and creates transformation. Common themes conveyed in the literature on lifelong learning articulate characteristics which describe the perspectives of the participants on the concept of 'lifelong learning'.

The findings of the study revealed that lifelong learning fosters a love for learning. Fostering love for learning means having a nurturing passion and desire to learn. Accounts from the educational leaders' responses stated they have developed a high desire to learn and continuously learn on a deliberate basis and in greater depth. These findings were supported by the following body of literature. As a result of lifelong learning, people improve in their cognitive functioning.

Analysis of the study indicates that lifelong learners are characterized as analytical and perceptive. Being analytical is having the ability to critically examine situations. Being perceptive is about being a keen observant or being discerning. These two traits are essentially needed by an educational leader as this will help in making important decisions and solving critical situations that confront him/her as a leader of the organization. As a learner himself, being an analytical educational leader also means choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and reflecting on and evaluating one's learning.

CONCLUSION

After a thorough analysis of the study, the following conclusions were established: Lifelong learning is viewed by educational leaders as a vehicle in promoting mental sharpness, cultivating valuable relationships, scaffolding one's dexterities, and creating transformation. Lifelong learners are described as analytical, emotionally mature, and skillful. They are generally described as resilient, flexible, determined, humble, passionate and highly motivated, empathetic, optimistic, well-rounded, productive, competent, and socially involved.

Educational leaders learn throughout their life through the experiences and activities that they continually undertake by engaging in various learning opportunities to acquire and advance one's knowledge, by strengthening values formation, and by continuous learning for personal and professional development. By pursuing further studies, attending capability training and seminars,

putting a premium on research, learning through daily experiences are seen as opportunities for the educational leaders' personal growth and development.

The meaningful learning experience is the most important factor that shaped the educational leaders in becoming lifelong learners. Educational leaders, who played a pivotal role in affecting the climate, attitude, and reputation of their schools, make use of their meaningful learning experiences as a great way to make them metamorphoses as effective leaders. Moreover, through these learning experiences, educational leaders become the cornerstone on which learning communities' function and grow. Thus, schools become effective incubators of learning where students, teachers, and staff as well as community people are not only educated but also nurtured and empowered. To promote and strengthen lifelong learning skills and attitudes of educational leaders, they may facilitate reflective and practice-based learning, promote love for learning, strive in pursuit of holistic education and develop people for lifelong learning.

The Emerging Framework

The findings and the conclusions arrived at led to the emergence of a framework of lifelong learning. Figure 1 schematically presents the main themes formed based on the findings. Appropriate visual symbols are added to the illustration to enrich the total meaning of the framework (*please see next page*).

Figure 1
Miranda's Framework on Lifelong Learning for Educational Leaders



Figure 1: Miranda's Framework on Lifelong Learning for Educational Leaders

The torch, which is an emblem of both enlightenment and hope, symbolizes lifelong learners who would eventually reconstruct and revolutionize society.

Discussing the framework from the bottom, the handle of the torch embodies the significant experiences and activities to become lifelong learners which include engaging in various learning

opportunities, strengthening values formation, continuous learning for personal and professional development. The handle is gold colored to signify courage and compassion.

In the figure, the torch is being held by a hand that denotes the initiatives to promote lifelong learning and ways to strengthen lifelong learning skills and attitudes. These initiatives include facilitating reflective and practice-based learning, promoting love for learning, and striving in pursuit of holistic education. Brown is used to symbolize strength and dependability.

The fingers holding the torch stand for the characteristics or attributes of the educational leaders: analytical, skillful/competent, and emotionally mature. This means that they must possess these qualities so they can confidently embrace the experiences and activities needed to become a lifelong learner.

Moreover, a circle with the words *meaningful learning experience* is used to signify that meaningful learning experience is a major factor that shapes an educational leader to be a lifelong learner. It is colored green to signify life and regeneration.

Lastly, at the apex of the figure, is the burning flame from the torch that symbolizes the impact that lifelong learners can create after undertaking all the activities and experiences. It has three combinations of colors red, yellow, and orange. All these colors combined would mean power, passion, and wisdom to mean that lifelong learners are eventually able to produce a huge impact in the world.

The torch also symbolizes “the light” that lifelong learning advocates can create in the world. *Lifelong learning advocates may serve as “light” that guides humanity leading to self-actualization and personal mastery.* Lifelong learning, from the overall figure which is in color green (signifies regrowth and continuous learning), is now described to rediscover the meaning of our experiences by continuously undergoing the process of learning.

Abbreviations

LL - Lifelong Learning

MDG - Millennium Development Goals

ILO - International Labour Organization

GT - Grounded Theory

OECD - Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

MTPDP - Medium Term Philippine Development Plan EFA - Education for All

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