

Engaging the Self for Others: Life Stories of Retired School Managers and Their Leadership Development Journeys

Eliza E. Redondo

College of Education, Mindanao State University- Sultan Naga Dimaporo,
Ramin, Sultan Naga Dimaporo, Lanao del Norte, Philippines

Author Email: elizaprof65@gmail.com

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Abstract. Leadership development among school managers is a complex and evolving process influenced not only by professional responsibilities but also by deeply personal life experiences. While numerous studies have examined leadership competencies and administrative effectiveness, limited research has focused on how retired school managers interpret and assign meaning to the critical life events that shaped their leadership journey. The lived experiences of these seasoned leaders—particularly in the context of their emotional, moral, and spiritual development—remain largely unexplored in educational leadership literature. This study addresses that gap by exploring the highest and lowest points in the careers of 15 retired public elementary and secondary school principals and examining how these pivotal moments shaped their leadership beliefs and practices. Using a constructivist grounded theory design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed via constant comparative analysis, memoing, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. A core category emerged: “Engaging Self for Others,” reflecting the essence of selfless and relational leadership. Five supporting categories were identified: (1) coping with challenges, (2) strengthening engagement with teachers, students/pupils, and parents, (3) anchoring oneself on values and virtues, (4) believing in God, and (5) achieving success. Participants metaphorically described their leadership journey as a spider's web, symbolizing the complexity and resilience that form through years of dedicated service. The findings reveal that effective school leadership extends beyond administrative functions, deeply rooted in self-awareness, relational commitment, spiritual grounding, and moral integrity. The study concludes that significant life events and core values play a crucial role in the development of authentic and transformative school leadership. The emergent theory offers practical implications for leadership preparation programs, emphasizing the importance of nurturing personal growth, faith, and service in cultivating educational leaders who lead with purpose, resilience, and compassion.

Keywords: Life stories; Retired school managers; Leadership; Grounded theory.

1.0 Introduction

Every nation, society, and organization has leaders who influence people across different levels, purposes, and activities. While their contexts and methods may differ, leaders share a common trait: the ability to influence others and inspire them to move collectively toward a goal. In the context of education, school leaders play pivotal roles in shaping institutional culture, improving performance, and implementing change. According to Danbaba (2021), school leaders are individuals who influence others' objectives, motivations, and behaviors, often driving

change to achieve both new and existing goals. One of the hallmarks of effective school leadership is the capacity to align a shared vision among educators and promote teamwork toward institutional objectives.

Hallinger (2021) asserts that school principals act not only as instructional leaders but also as organizational managers, ensuring operational efficiency within systemic and policy frameworks. Similarly, the OECD (2020) notes that school leaders, particularly principals, combine managerial and leadership responsibilities tailored to the specific demands of their education systems. Reflecting this duality, the term "school leaders" has gained broader acceptance to describe those who perform both management and leadership functions. Bush and Glover (2021) further emphasize that school leadership encompasses people management, instructional guidance, and strategic visioning—responsibilities typically assumed by school principals. In this study, the term "school managers" is used synonymously with school principals and supervisors, aligning with literature that recognizes their multifaceted administrative and instructional leadership roles (Hallinger, 2021; OECD, 2020; Bush & Glover, 2021).

In the context of higher education, Kamala and Kamalakkar (2023) define leadership roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as positions that involve the management and guidance of academic staff, emphasizing the importance of leadership in navigating institutional challenges and ensuring institutional success. Effective leadership is integral to the fulfillment of an organization's mission and vision. It entails the ability to motivate and influence stakeholders—faculty, staff, and students—toward common goals. Such leadership is grounded in emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and professional expertise, enabling leaders to mediate conflicts, embrace diverse perspectives, and build cohesive academic communities. Latta and Clotey (2020) further suggest that leadership preparation should also foster ethical reasoning, emphasizing that ethical leadership development is a lifelong endeavor rather than a set of static rules.

Research shows that life experiences significantly shape a leader's development. However, few studies have examined how leaders interpret and derive meaning from these experiences. In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the emotional dimensions of school leadership, including how school leaders regulate their emotions and maintain their well-being in demanding roles (Chen & Guo, 2020; Chen & Walker, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Several studies have also begun to explore the lived experiences of retired school principals, shedding light on the culmination of their leadership journeys and the meaning they attribute to their careers post-retirement. For instance, Smith and Riley (2022) examined the reflective narratives of retired Australian principals, revealing how their identities as leaders continued to evolve and influence their community engagement after leaving formal roles. Nguyen and Slater (2023) studied the personal accounts of retired principals in Southeast Asia, highlighting themes of resilience, legacy-building, and the emotional complexity of transition. Similarly, Jones and Oliva (2021) found that retired school leaders in the United States often experienced a period of identity renegotiation, with many continuing to mentor younger educators or contribute to policy advocacy, indicating that leadership influence does not cease with retirement.

Drawing from this literature and her personal experience as a school leader, the researcher observed that some school leaders chose early retirement due to illness or professional burnout. Others, however, completed their service with vitality and continued to be active contributors after retirement. Inspired by these contrasting trajectories, the researcher selected retired principals and school supervisors, collectively referred to as school managers, as the study's participants. These individuals exemplify professional resilience, and their narratives offer valuable insights into leadership endurance and personal meaning-making.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative study employed the constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the challenging workplace experiences of retired school managers and how they navigated these situations while fulfilling their roles. Through in-depth interviews, the study captured personal narratives of success, failure, and resilience, providing insights into how these leaders sustained their commitment throughout their careers, ultimately until retirement. The research followed key characteristics of qualitative inquiry (Nowell et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021). It was conducted in natural settings to understand how participants made sense of their experiences. The study prioritized the voices and perspectives of the retired school managers, highlighting how their emotional strength and coping mechanisms shaped their leadership. The researcher served as the primary data-gathering instrument, conducting interviews personally in the participants' homes to build trust and context.

Data were analyzed inductively through coding, memoing, and constant comparison to generate emerging themes. The study did not begin with a theoretical framework, but instead allowed a theory to emerge from the data, consistent with the grounded theory methodology. The complex experiences were understood as holistic and context-bound rather than reduced to variables. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, with the researcher acknowledging her positionality and its influence on the study.

2.2 Research Locale

This study was conducted in the province of Lanao del Norte, where the fifteen retired school managers are residing. While still in active service, they served as principals and supervisors in various public elementary and secondary schools in the Lanao del Norte Division under the Department of Education (DepEd).

2.3 Research Participants

The participants of this study were fifteen (15) retired school managers who had previously served as either public-school principals or education program supervisors in a specific region of the Philippines. Of the 15 participants, 7 were retired school supervisors, four were retired elementary school principals, and four were retired secondary school principals. These participants were selected from various divisions within the region to ensure a broad representation of leadership experiences across school levels and administrative functions.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify individuals who met specific criteria relevant to the study's focus — namely, their length of service as school managers and the number of years since retirement. All participants had served in school leadership roles for a substantial period before retirement, with years of service ranging from 20 to 39 years. This ensured the richness and relevance of their narratives about leadership development and professional resilience. Additionally, criterion sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling, was used to ensure that all selected participants shared key characteristics necessary for generating meaningful insights into the lived experiences of retired school managers (Patton, 2020). These included (1) having completed their service in a formal school leadership role, and (2) having retired from government service within the last ten years.

In terms of retirement age, the distribution among participants was as follows:

- 1 participant retired at age 60
- 1 participant retired at age 61
- 2 participants retired at age 62
- 8 participants retired at age 63
- 3 participants reached the compulsory retirement age of 65

This age distribution reflects a variety of retirement decisions, including early and compulsory retirement, which further enriches the study by providing insights into different career endpoints and motivations for retirement. The diversity in leadership roles, levels served, and retirement timing contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the participants' career trajectories, leadership philosophies, and post-retirement reflections.

2.4 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data, allowing flexibility in probing participants' experiences—an approach well-suited for grounded theory research (Al-Yateem et al., 2021). Two grand tour questions and ten follow-up prompts guided the interviews. The researcher conducted the interviews personally to ensure accuracy, with all questions reviewed and approved by the research panel prior to the interviews.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting this study, the researcher visited the Division Office in Tubod, Lanao del Norte, to obtain the list of retired school principals and supervisors. The researcher ensured that the address of each participant was the place where they currently reside. As soon as the potential participants were identified, an informed consent letter was provided to each participant, and a tentative interview schedule was established. In the letter, the purpose of the study was stated. In addition, their willingness to share their past leadership experiences as school leaders was sought to gather the expected data. They were informed that they were most welcome to share their emotions, roadblocks, and successes they experienced, which contributed to their leadership development.

After the permission was granted, the researcher explained the interview process to the participant and requested that they fill out and answer the questionnaire before the interview. They were informed that the interview would be recorded and transcribed verbatim for research purposes, including continuity and accuracy. In addition, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their answers and could access their responses in a format that would not easily identify them. The memo writing followed immediately on the same day.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study, particularly during data collection and reporting. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could decline to share any experiences that made them uncomfortable. The researcher ensured a respectful, non-judgmental atmosphere to maintain trust and confidence. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their identities and shared experiences would remain confidential. As Tracy (2020) emphasizes, ethical qualitative research requires transparency, care, and respect for participants' autonomy and privacy.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of the Research Participants

Table 1 presents the profile of the 15 research participants. Most were female (66.67%), and 53.33% retired at age 63, followed by 20% who retired at 65. In terms of years since retirement, 40% had been retired for two years and 33.33% for three years. Regarding leadership trajectory, 4 participants (26.67%) served as principals before becoming supervisors, 9 (60%) retired solely as principals, and 2 (13.33%) were supervisors without prior principalship.

Table 1. *Profile of the Research Participants*

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	5	33.33
Female	10	66.67
Total	15	100.00
Age upon retirement		
60	1	6.67
61	1	6.67
62	2	13.33
63	8	53.33
65	3	20.00
Total	15	100.00
Number of years after retirement		
2	6	40.00
3	5	33.33
4	2	13.33
5	2	13.33
Total	15	100.00
Length of service as principal/supervisor		
6-10	7	46.67
11-15	3	20.00
16-20	4	26.67
21-25	1	6.67
Total	15	100.00
Salary Grade as principal/supervisor		
Salary Grade 22	7	46.67
Salary Grade 19	4	26.67
Salary Grade 20	4	26.67
Total	15	100.00

On salary grade, 46.67% retired at SG 22, 26.67% at SG 20, and another 26.67% at SG 19. Retirement rank can significantly impact financial security, as higher ranks often lead to more favorable pensions and benefits (Adams & Rau, 2022; Villafuerte & Javier, 2020). However, participants emphasized that their fulfillment stemmed not from position or compensation but from serving others—a principle aligned with servant leadership. As articulated by Spears (2020) and Eva et al. (2019), servant leaders prioritize empathy, service, and moral purpose, which are the qualities echoed in the study's core theme: "Engaging Self for Others."

3.2 Focused Selective Coding Results

Focused coding involves selecting the most significant or frequent initial codes to organize and analyze large

volumes of qualitative data. This process requires identifying which codes best capture recurring patterns and offer the most analytical insight (Charmaz, 2021). From the forty-one properties identified during initial coding, the researcher applied constant comparative analysis and began grouping similar conceptual properties based on shared attributes or dimensions.

Table 2 presents the conceptual categories developed through focused coding. Each code was reanalyzed to examine its relationships with other codes. With the support of analytic tools and memo writing, five major conceptual themes emerged: “manifesting strong trust in God,” “actualizing the values and virtues learned from experiences,” “engaging with others,” “finding tactics/strategies in coping with challenges,” and “attaining success.” These five themes were developed from the highest and lowest points of the school managers’ life experiences in the workplace. As gleaned from Table 2, each theme has corresponding dimensions.

Table 2. *Conceptual Categories of Related Properties*

Phenomenon: Discovering the highest and lowest points of the retired school managers’ careers		
Attributes/ Dimensions		Major Conceptual Themes
1	Entrusting everything to God	Manifesting strong trust in God
2	Believing that God will never put one in a situation that she/he cannot handle	
3	Realizing a need to forgive	
4	Believing through prayer	
5	Keeping faith in God	
6	Performing many responsibilities without expecting something in return	
7	Rating teachers honestly	Actualizing the values and virtues learned from experiences
8	Accepting weaknesses and limitations	
9	Leading by example	
10	Being conversant with the law	
11	Enforcing policies that promote fairness and equality to all	Engaging with others
12	Building and maintaining good relationship with stakeholders	
13	Recognizing achievement and good work of teachers	
14	Clarifying roles and functions	
15	Never giving up on students with negative attitude	Finding tactics/ strategies in coping with challenges
16	Making parents understand the policies of the school	
17	Experiencing career-related challenges	
18	Accepting peer relationship challenges	
19	Gaining personal accomplishments	Attaining Success
20	Improving the school	
21	Being part of alumni’s bright future	
22	Assisting pupils to succeed	
23	Leading teachers’ development	

The second stage, focused coding, enabled the researcher to construct a matrix of deep thoughts. Table 3 presents the conceptual guide toward identifying the core category, developed through coding and memoing to advance the emerging conceptual direction (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2021). The researcher remained theoretically sensitive and open to analytical possibilities that surfaced from the data. Through this iterative process, decisions were made to define and refine the core conceptual category.

Table 3. *The Matrix of Deep Thoughts*

Category	Theory Bits	Indicators/Actions	Consequences
Trusting in God	Overcoming challenges become easier with God’s guidance	Entrusting everything to God	Strengthening relationship with God
Anchoring on values and virtues	Leading by example	Coming to school first and leaving the school last	Doing the right thing encourages others to follow
Strengthening engagement	Building and maintaining good relationship with stakeholders yield support and cooperation	Keeping pupils/students, teachers and parents involved in school activities and projects	Engaging self for others results to stronger connections and deeper relationship with stakeholders
Coping with Challenges	Confronting challenges is basic in managing and leading people	Keeping communication line open Overcoming career-related and peer relationship challenges in the workplace	Strengthening relationship with stakeholders
Attaining success	Finding meaning in success when shared with others	Attaining personal success while others experience success too	Being a man for others

The matrix illustrates the relationships among open coding, focused coding, and the emerging core category,

showing how each layer informed and was linked to the next. Glaser (1978) emphasized that theoretical codes help specify possible relationships between categories, guiding the integration of data into theory. The initial coding phase produced a set of categories and properties that were meaningful, relevant, and analytically powerful. These relationships were synthesized to define the central phenomenon, connecting properties, categories, and the core category into a coherent framework for theory development.

The interconnection of initial, focused, and theoretical codes reflects the researcher's inductive analytic process, enabling the construction of a coherent analytic narrative (Charmaz, 2021).

Table 4 illustrates the process of deriving the core category from the initial and focused codes. According to Charmaz (2021), focused and theoretical codes not only help conceptualize relationships among substantive codes but also guide the researcher toward a more abstract and theoretical understanding of the data. In this study, 41 initial codes were distilled into 10 focused codes, which collectively led to the development of the core category: "Engaging Self for Others."

Table 4. *Interrelatedness among the Open Coding, Focused Coding, and Theoretical Coding*

	Initial Open Coding	Focused Coding	Theoretical Code
1	Receiving an unexpected order to supervise a district	Attaining Personal Fulfillment	
2	Being awarded as the most outstanding principal		
3	Managing a school in a remote area		
4	Remaining firm in the decision made even if questioned by a supervisor		
5	Improving the academic achievement of pupils as shown in their NAT results and grades	Assisting Learners' Improvement	
6	Enabling non-readers to read		
7	Motivating students to love the learning process		
8	Being instrumental in the promotion of teachers	Leading Teachers' Development	
9	Providing instructional assistance to make teachers and principals embrace paradigm shift		
10	Seeing alumni working and successful in life	Being part of Alumni's Better Future	
11	Having alumni doing well in their profession		
12	Improving the school infrastructure	Improving the school	
13	Increasing in quality the school facilities		
14	Becoming a model school		
15	Having achieved more than 2% Target in School Improvement Plan (SIP)		
16	Transferring of assignment with unfinished project	Experiencing career-related challenges	
17	Experiencing unfulfilled promise of promotion		
18	Being reprimanded for not submitting reports on time		
19	Feeling dissatisfied due to inadequacy of school facilities and instructional materials		
20	Feeling broken-hearted seeing teachers deprived of the promotion they deserved		Engaging Self for Others
21	Being hated for imposing strict compliance of school policies		
22	Receiving insult from a superior in front of colleagues		
23	Feeling betrayed by friends	Encountering stakeholders' relationship challenges	
24	Receiving life threats from a parent		
25	Encountering indifferent teachers and Supervisor		
26	Managing teachers with attitude problem		
27	Entrusting everything to God	Trusting in God	
28	Realizing a need to forgive		
29	Making prayer as the most important weapon		
30	Accepting weaknesses and limitations	Anchoring oneself with values and virtues	
31	Rating teachers honestly		
32	Enforcing policies that promote fairness and equality to all		
33	Being conversant with laws/ implementing laws fairly		
34	Leading by example		
35	Performing many responsibilities without expecting something in return		
36	Never giving up on students with negative attitude towards learning	Strengthening engagement with students, teachers, and parents	
37	Making parents understand the policies of the school		
38	Involving teachers and other stakeholders in school activities		
39	Building and maintaining good relationship with stakeholders		
40	Clarifying roles and functions		
41	Recognizing achievement and good work		

3.3 Theory Development: Theoretical Sampling/ Refinement and Weaving the Storyline

This stage focuses on theory development and refinement through theoretical sampling, integrating the emerging storyline into a cohesive theoretical framework. According to Bryant and Charmaz (2022), theoretical coding enables researchers to connect categories at a conceptual level, guiding the formation of an integrated theory. These codes offer a broader analytical lens and help maintain a high level of abstraction when writing about concepts and their interrelationships.

To illustrate the relationships among the focused categories and the core category, the researcher applied elements of the six C's model and strategic coding approaches as discussed by Thornberg and Charmaz (2021), as shown in Figure 1.

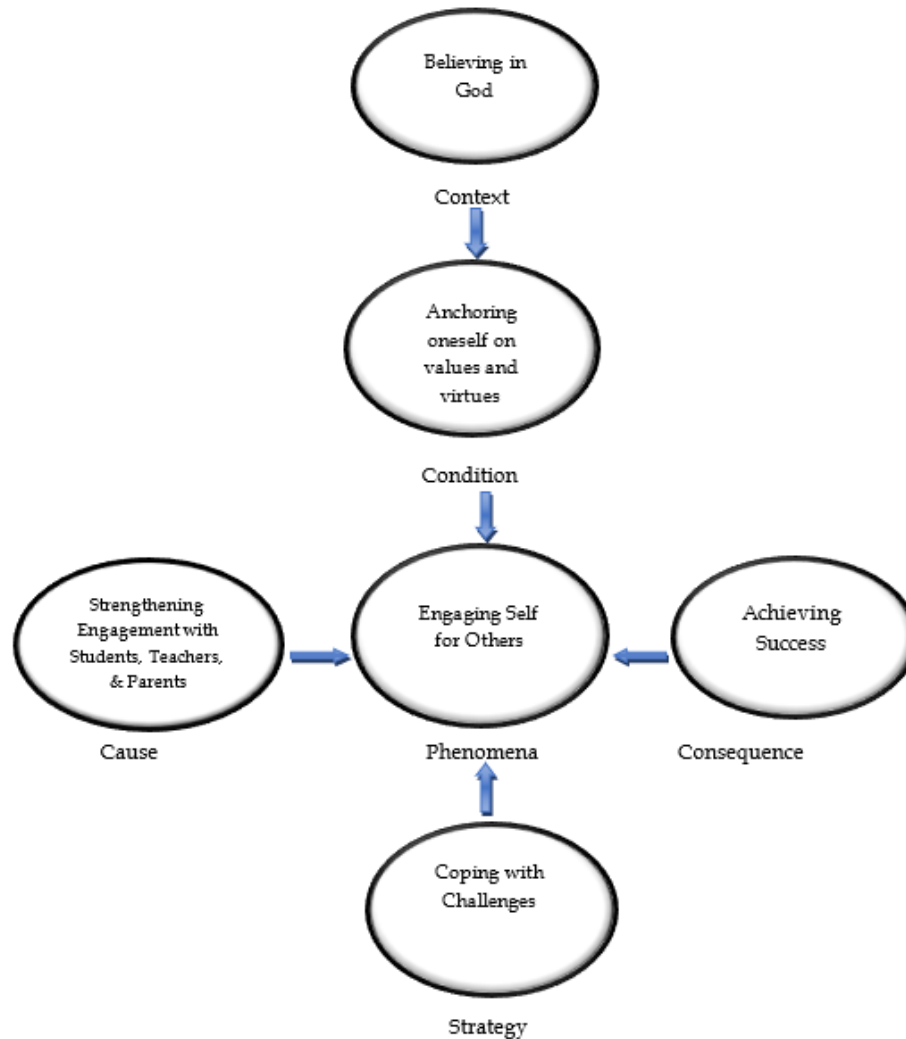


Figure 1. Framework of the Relationships of the Sub-categories with the Core Category

The Cs – context, condition, cause, consequence, and strategy helped the researcher identify the interrelatedness among properties, categories, and the core category. Figure 1 illustrates how these elements are linked to the core category. In this study, sub-categories such as believing in God, anchoring oneself in values and virtues, strengthening engagement with stakeholders, achieving success, and coping with challenges are all connected to the core category: *Engaging Self for Others*.

This framework reflects what Strauss and Corbin described as a theory – an integrated set of concepts linked by relationships to explain or predict phenomena (Thornberg, 2021). The core category emerged when theoretical saturation was achieved, as additional data no longer contributed new insights due to the richness of the

interviews and theoretical codes (Charmaz, 2022). *Belief in God* served as the participants' foundation for resilience during both challenges and triumphs. Their values, rooted in spirituality, guided their interactions with students, teachers, and parents. As they overcame stakeholder-related and professional obstacles, their commitment deepened, ultimately driving them to success. Even after achieving their goals, they continued engaging themselves for others, influencing their communities. The researcher analogized the theory to a spider web—a metaphor that provides a powerful and creative way to understand complex experiences (Lewis, 2021).

Weaving the Fractured Story and the Emerging Theory of Engaging Self for Others

Spider webs are renowned for their architectural complexity, strength, and flexibility. Studies using computer modeling of *Araneus diadematus*, a common European garden spider, show that its web softens under tension and regains firmness, demonstrating its adaptability (Yahya, 2012). Similarly, personal and professional challenges affected the school managers in this study. However, their unwavering belief in God and grounding in values and virtues helped them regain strength.

Each strand of the web symbolizes the relationships school managers built with internal and external stakeholders—including teachers, parents, and community members—all for the benefit of learners, who remain at the center of education. Their collaborative efforts reflect the African proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Like spider webs, these professional networks became intricate and resilient through ongoing interactions and mutual support.

Despite the pressures, school managers remained steadfast, drawing spiritual strength to withstand adversity. Much like a spider that consistently rebuilds its web when damaged (Devalia, 2010), these leaders showed tenacity. They balanced firmness and flexibility in decision-making, adapting their leadership styles to context and personality. One participant shared, “*I became flexible. I learned to consider the uniqueness of each person... I made sure they understood why they were corrected.*” Their ultimate goal was to leave a lasting legacy—transforming schools, empowering learners, and fostering a sense of community. Whether in calm or crisis, they engaged themselves for others, consistently weaving their web of influence and support. This metaphor encapsulates the essence of their leadership experiences in the Lanao del Norte Division.

3.4 The Meaning of “Engaging Self for Others” Among the School Managers

The conceptual sketch in Figure 2 illustrates the interrelatedness of the sub-categories, reinforcing the emergence of the core category. This reflects that throughout their careers, school managers faced both personal and professional challenges. In responding to these, they actively engaged with the people involved, participating in the resolution of issues and navigating complexities. Their strong faith in God provided the emotional and spiritual strength to persevere, trusting that with divine guidance, nothing is impossible. Through these experiences, they developed and internalized core values and virtues, which shaped their leadership approach. Their deep spirituality, combined with lessons drawn from adversity, propelled them toward success. As depicted in Figure 2, their engagement manifested in leading teacher development, supporting pupil growth, enhancing school performance, and contributing to the alums's success, ultimately resulting in personal fulfillment.

In grounded theory methodology, it is essential to avoid premature conceptualization by refraining from extensive literature review before data analysis. Early immersion in existing theories may impose external frameworks, thereby compromising the emergence of grounded concepts (Bryant & Charmaz, 2022). A literature review is more appropriately conducted after the development of categories and the establishment of their analytical relationships (Thornberg, 2021). Aligned with this principle, the conceptual sketch (Figure 2) serves as a guide in identifying relevant literature that resonates with the emerging categories of this study.

3.5 Weaving the Theory of Engaging Self for Others into Its Place in the Literature

Engaging and connecting with others is a vital component of effective leadership. Leaders cannot achieve meaningful outcomes without the commitment and active participation of energized and engaged followers. Leadership involves the ability to influence others through personal credibility, effective communication, collaboration, and aligning performance expectations (Northouse, 2021). Moreover, effective leaders focus not only on individuals but also on the broader organizational context by articulating a compelling vision and fostering a healthy, supportive environment that sustains long-term engagement and performance (Iqbal et al., 2020).

Engaging leaders proactively take responsibility, especially in complex situations where others may hesitate. They inspire and sustain focus by promoting a clear sense of purpose and vision, often through a contagious sense of optimism. Such leaders foster group cohesion by actively listening, maintaining composure, and promoting unity among their team members. Moreover, they empower and develop others, emphasizing service-oriented leadership. Their authenticity, humility, openness, and transparent communication contribute to building trust and stability within teams. These leadership behaviors are consistently reinforced and exemplified in leadership development programs, where leaders are observed translating these values into action (Cameron & Lavertu, 2021; Grant, 2023).

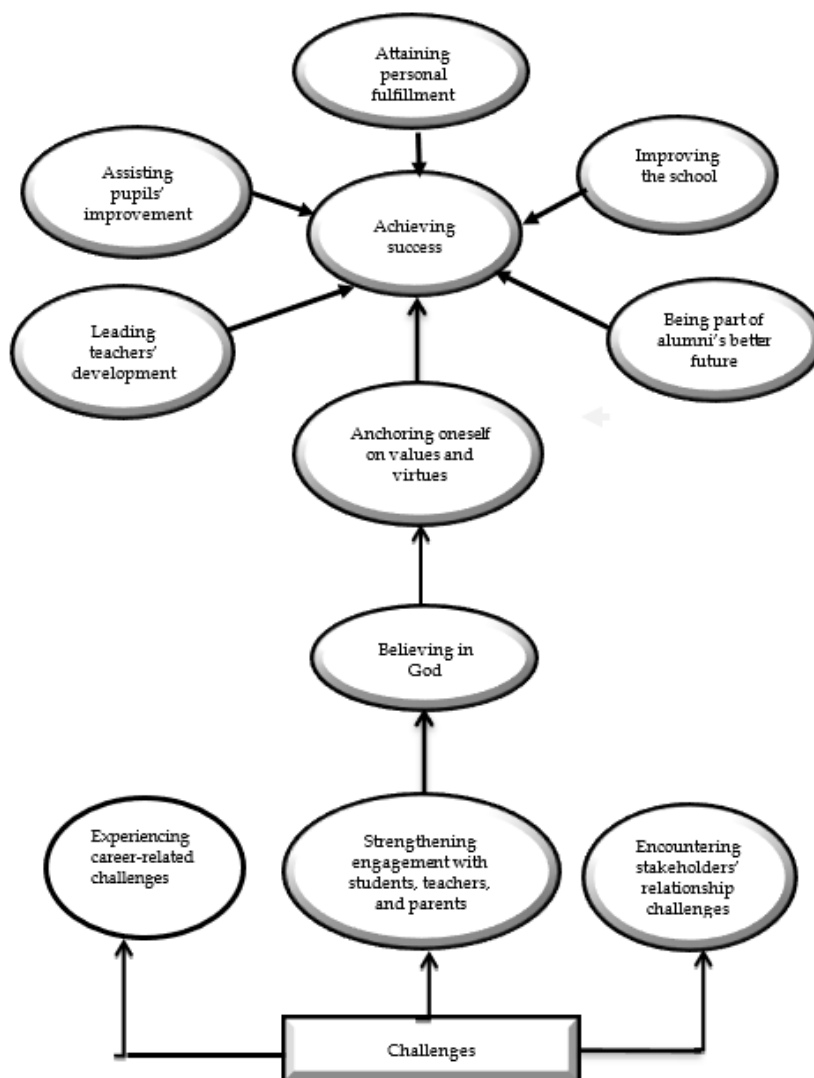


Figure 2. A Sketchy Outline of the Theory of Engaging Self for Others

The present study demonstrates the level of engagement school managers exhibited in their careers. They established a relationship with their stakeholders to achieve their goals. The core categories are well-connected, supporting the emerging theory, “Engaging Self for Others.” These school managers engaged themselves in both overcoming challenges and achieving success. Their fulfillment stemmed from the success of their pupils/students, the development of their teachers, and the transformation of their school environment into a better place for learning.

The sub-categories, such as anchoring themselves in values and virtues and believing in God, are indicators that

they were not just managers in their school but also great motivators. With God as the source of their strength, they inspired others to cooperate, thereby enabling them to become engaging teachers and staff members as well. This was manifested when one of the participants shared:

"No matter how difficult the situation was, it became easier and lighter when you involved the people around you. My teachers became cooperative and supportive of our school's mission and the children's needs, as I solicited their ideas, suggestions, and involved them in planning and implementing our programs and projects. Our stakeholders felt they were an important part of the school."

Research on global employee engagement underscores the crucial role of leadership behaviors in cultivating a committed and productive workforce. According to recent studies, the most influential leadership drivers of engagement include establishing a clear direction and shared purpose, demonstrating integrity, nurturing talent, applying sound judgment, and fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships (Gallup, 2021; CIPD, 2022). Consistent with these findings, the present study revealed that school managers enhanced engagement with both teachers and students by prioritizing teacher development and supporting pupil improvement – key actions that reflect purposeful, people-centered leadership.

Research indicates that engaging leaders are "nearby leaders" – they remain accessible, show genuine concern, and actively support their team members (CIPD, 2021). This study confirms that self-engagement is crucial to promoting stakeholder success. Consistent with previous findings, the data revealed the deep interconnectedness between school managers and their stakeholders. Leadership, at its core, involves building and sustaining high-performing teams, and engagement serves as the critical link binding leaders to their teams (Gallup, 2021). In this study, the emerging theory of *engaging self for others* reflected how school managers supported instructional improvement among teachers, inspired students, and monitored the success of alums.

A frontline manager once described an engaging leader as someone approachable, fosters open communication, and avoids hierarchical barriers – creating a space where team members feel heard and supported. Similarly, research by Ibarra and Scoular (2020) highlights that modern engaging leaders focus on building authentic connections, encourage open dialogue, and empower employees through relational transparency. Reflecting this, the school managers in this study remained consistently available to stakeholders, built strong relationships, recognized teacher achievements, and respected individual differences. Their accessibility strengthened trust and stakeholder engagement.

Engaging leadership is inherently adaptive and forward-looking, enabling organizations not only to respond to change but also to shape their future actively. Crucially, such leadership is rooted in ethical behavior and values (CIPD, 2022). In alignment with this, the present study found that school managers grounded their engagement in deeply held values and virtues. They led by example, fulfilled their responsibilities with sincerity, and acted without expectation of personal gain.

Figure 3 illustrates how the theory of *Engaging Self for Others* is integrated into and positioned within the existing body of literature.

Coping with Challenges

The school managers experienced career-related and stakeholder relationship challenges. Specifically, career-related challenges include being transferred to another assignment with a still-unfinished project from the previous work assignment, experiencing insults from a superior in front of colleagues, being reprimanded for not submitting reports on time, and being dissatisfied due to the inadequacy of school facilities and instructional materials. Moreover, school managers encountered relationship challenges like dealing with teachers with attitude problems, being betrayed by friends, and receiving life threats from a parent. These experiences reflect the complex demands of school leadership, requiring emotional resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Gallagher et al., 2021).

School managers are responsible for setting the school's goals and objectives and for sharing expertise and leadership with teachers and staff to achieve institutional success. However, they often face competing priorities that require immediate attention. One principal reflected, *"I was sometimes confused as to which should be given priority... all of them needed immediate attention or the teaching-learning process would be affected."* This highlights the

critical need for strategic prioritization and time management in school leadership (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the two sub-categories under "coping with challenges" reveal that school managers encountered both work-related and stakeholder relationship issues throughout their careers. These challenges can be attributed to the diverse personalities they manage and interact with daily. In navigating such difficulties, one principal shared, *"Sometimes, I wanted to quit, but God gave me this job, so I am sure He would help me overcome this problem."* His strong faith enabled him to face the situation with resilience.

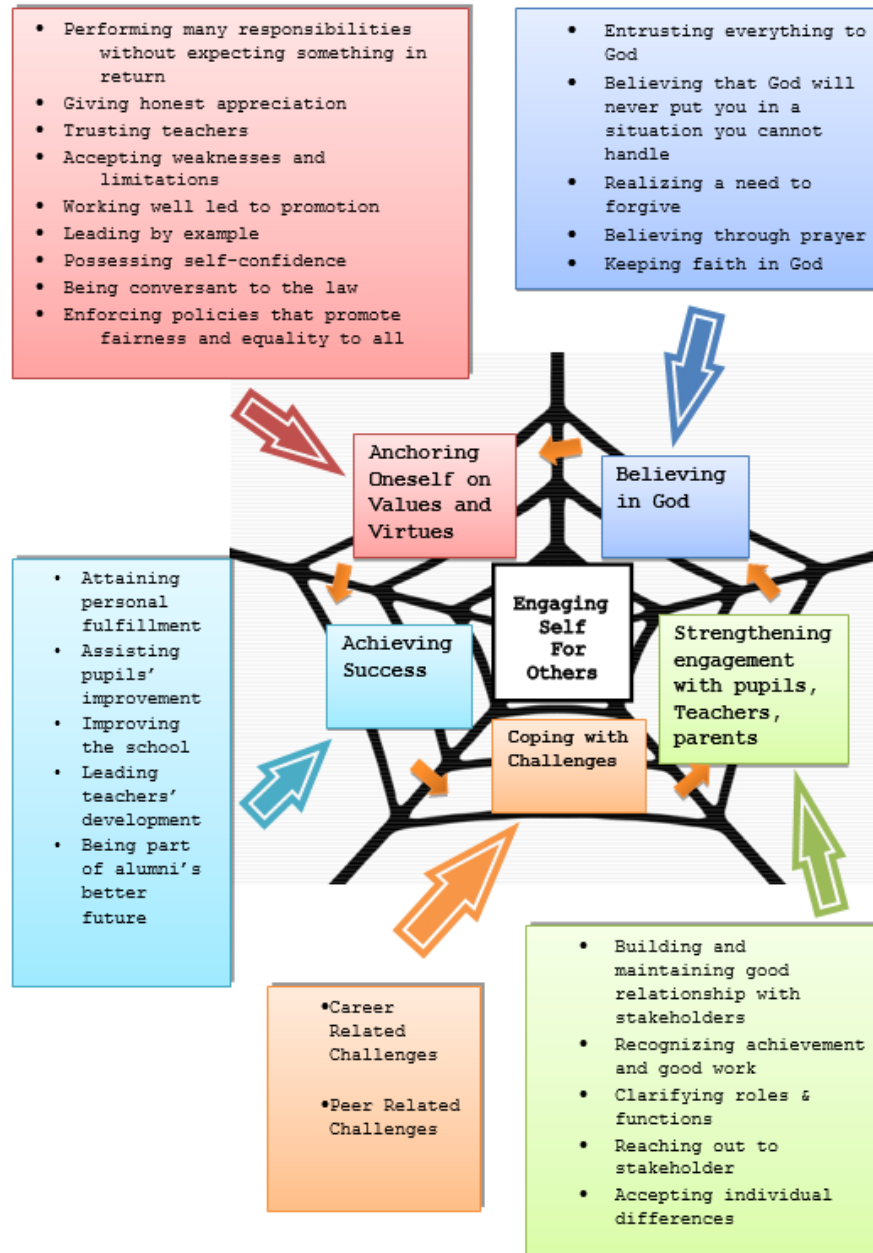


Figure 3. Weaving the Theory "Engaging self for others" into its place in Literature

Another principal shared that, to address the lack of instructional materials and the need for repairs to dilapidated school buildings, she reached out to parents and the local government for support. She explained:

"As head of the school, it is important to build strong connections with the community. The local government, through the mayor or even the barangay captain, can assist us in meeting our school's needs. They can help repair classrooms or donate necessary materials. I was truly grateful when our mayor responded to our request and helped us acquire additional buildings to accommodate our growing student population. There were times when classes had to be held under the shade of trees. We had no choice but to carry on with our responsibilities. We could not just send our students home due to the lack of classrooms. It was a sacrifice not only for the teachers but also for the students."

Strengthening Engagement

Recent studies affirm the critical role of relationships in educational leadership, highlighting that effective school leadership is rooted in strong social connections that foster learning (Richardson & Khawaja, 2025; McKay & Macomber, 2023). These findings align with the results of the present study, in which school managers implemented relationship-based initiatives to enhance student learning. As one principal, who later served as a district supervisor, proudly shared:

"I encouraged our teachers and parents to conduct remedial classes for our non-readers. I also initiated the 'No Read, No Move' policy to motivate our non-readers to read before the school year ended. I also involved the parents to make them aware of its objectives, and they would assist their children at home. The program was effective since our non-readers were able to read before they were promoted to the next level."

This practice of mobilizing both teachers and parents reflects the broader trend identified by the Learning Policy Institute (2023), which emphasizes that distributed leadership and community collaboration are key strategies for improving learning outcomes and building inclusive school environments.

The school managers believed that improving the academic performance of learners is achievable through the active cooperation and support of both teachers and parents. To foster this collaboration, they built strong relationships with parents and emphasized their shared responsibility in the educational process. One principal recounted her experience, stating:

"I had a problem with those parents who seemed indifferent at the beginning and showed no interest in knowing the school performance of their children. However, I reached out to them and let them feel they were important partners in providing quality education to their children. It took time, but slowly they understood that the school needed them."

This effort to involve parents aligns with recent findings by McKay and Macomber (2023), who noted that trust-based relationships between school leaders and families contribute significantly to student engagement and achievement. Similarly, Richardson and Khawaja (2025) emphasized that inclusive, relationship-centered leadership enhances community involvement and reinforces a shared commitment to student success.

Since learning is inherently a social activity, both teachers and school leaders play a crucial role in creating an environment that fosters learning. In this study, school managers enhanced engagement among teachers, students, and parents by involving stakeholders in school activities, helping parents understand school policies, and continuously supporting students who had negative attitudes toward learning. Once this engagement was established, the school climate became more conducive to student success. This aligns with the findings of Ortega and Ramada (2024), who emphasized that a favorable classroom climate has a significant influence on student behavior and academic engagement. Similarly, Froiland (2021) emphasizes that school climate—characterized by collaboration, clear communication, and mutual respect—is essential for maintaining a supportive learning environment. One principal described how a minor conflict among her teachers impacted their teaching performance: *"I called their attention and realized that there was an overlap of assignments and responsibilities. I pointed out that it is important to clarify the roles and functions of each teacher to avoid conflict and to facilitate a smooth working relationship."* She emphasized the importance of addressing misunderstandings promptly, warning that unresolved issues could hurt students. This observation is supported by Perumal and Rath Eeswari (2024), who found that a clear delineation of roles and consistent teacher collaboration significantly improve the learning environment. Thus, school managers must be proactive in fostering professional harmony to ensure student learning is not compromised.

A principal does not work in isolation; rather, meaningful school leadership requires engagement with the broader community and active collaboration with all stakeholders. In this study, school managers recognized the

importance of working closely with both parents and students. While such interactions sometimes led to tensions, they were ultimately seen as opportunities for learning, empowerment, and mutual growth. Recent studies have affirmed that collaboration among families, schools, and communities fosters a shared responsibility and leads to more effective educational outcomes (Frontiers Editorial Team, 2025; Sanders & Nguyen, 2023). One significant practice shared by the school managers was the recognition of teachers' good performance. They observed that acknowledging and appreciating teachers served as a strong motivational tool that fostered both commitment and morale. Equally important was the connection between the school and the broader community. As one principal explained, *"I was very grateful to our municipal mayor for generously supporting my administration. He was there to provide us with financial or material support whenever we needed it. I realized how important it was for a school manager to reach out to the people in the community to lessen the burdens we faced in school."* This reflects the idea that schools and communities function best through reciprocal support, where the school uplifts the community, and the community, in turn, strengthens the school.

Believing in God

The school managers in this study demonstrated a deep spiritual conviction, often drawing strength from their faith in God. Their constant prayer life and belief that God would never allow them to face challenges beyond their capacity gave them the courage to entrust all workplace struggles to Him. This faith-based perspective provided a significant source of resilience, enabling them to persevere amid pressures and uncertainties. One principal expressed that during her most difficult moments, she relied on God's guidance to carry on, believing that He would never abandon her in her mission. Recent findings support this, showing that spiritual leadership contributes to emotional well-being, moral grounding, and decision-making in the education sector (Hernandez & Villaruel, 2023). As Hernandez and Villaruel (2023) affirm, spiritual belief can serve as a "steady anchor" that guides educational leaders through ambiguity, supports ethical leadership, and inspires hope in times of difficulty.

Indeed, many school managers in this study found strength and direction in their faith, particularly in times of uncertainty. They believed that God never abandons His people and remains present, especially in moments of need. One principal shared a deeply personal account of how her leadership journey unfolded unexpectedly. She never aspired to become a principal and initially wanted to refuse the position, not out of fear of responsibility, but because she believed she was more suited to being a follower. She reflected: *"I felt I could not manage that school. I was aloof and content to be an ordinary teacher. I prayed a lot. I had to conquer my fears and uncertainties. I asked for God's guidance and entrusted Him with everything. Indeed, God is good all the time. When I was a principal for twelve years, my most valuable asset every day was prayer, faith, and a commitment to serving. I retired from the service with a fulfilled heart."* Her story exemplifies how spiritual resilience can empower leaders to rise beyond self-doubt and serve with purpose. As confirmed by Hernandez and Villaruel (2023), school leaders who root their leadership in spiritual values often exhibit greater emotional strength, moral clarity, and a more profound sense of fulfillment in their professional roles.

The researcher observed that the school managers deeply anchored their daily work in faith, consistently making God the center of their decisions and actions. Their narratives revealed how they leaned on Him, especially during their most challenging moments, when the burdens of leadership felt overwhelming. One supervisor shared a painful experience that tested both her emotional resilience and spiritual conviction. She recounted being publicly reprimanded by her superior during a meeting, a moment that left her deeply wounded and humiliated. She shared:

"I was hurt. I was angry. I wanted to take revenge. It took me a long time to recover. I was afraid to retire and leave my work carrying the baggage of hatred toward her. My faith in God, along with the comfort of my peers and family, slowly healed the wound. I realized I needed to forgive her and renew our friendship."

This story illustrates how faith and the support of a caring community played a critical role in her healing and personal growth. Belief in God was not only expressed in words but also manifested through the school managers' consistent reliance on prayer, which they considered their most effective tool in fulfilling their responsibilities and maintaining positive relationships. Recent studies affirm that spiritual resilience, often grounded in practices such as prayer and forgiveness, can strengthen leadership capacity by fostering emotional healing, humility, and relational harmony (Hernandez & Villaruel, 2023).

Anchoring on Values and Virtues

Virtues serve as the heartbeat of effective school leadership. They empower school leaders to confront challenges with integrity, build collaborative cultures, and promote continuous professional growth. According to recent research, virtue-based leadership—characterized by trust, hope, humility, and resilience enhances school communities by fostering collective responsibility and emotional well-being (Lopez & Fernandez, 2022). In this study, school managers demonstrated these virtues as they navigated complex challenges in their roles. They embodied the virtue of trust by empowering their teachers and believing in their professional commitment. One participant shared her experience, stating: *"I just trusted my teachers that even if I were not around, they would still do their job. I observed that the teachers felt it, and they did their work even if their principal was not around."* Her story exemplifies the importance of trust in fostering a culture of accountability and mutual respect. The school leaders' reliance on virtues such as trust and hope not only helped them overcome difficulties but also inspired resilience and loyalty among their staff.

Positive modeling in leadership refers to leading by example—demonstrating behaviors and values that align with the expectations set for others. When leaders exhibit transparency, resilience, optimism, consistency between their words and actions, and a commitment to ethical behavior, they earn the respect and trust of their followers. Recent studies affirm that positive role modeling enhances school culture and motivates both teachers and students by fostering credibility and mutual respect (Nguyen & Torres, 2023). In this study, the principle of positive modeling was evident in the experiences of several school managers. One school leader shared how he modeled discipline, punctuality, and dedication to his role:

"I practiced what I preached. I was the first person to arrive at school and the last to leave. I demanded punctuality from both my teachers and students, so I came to school on time and worked for more than eight hours a day. I knew we had different cultures, and I did not forget that. There were times when I had to be lenient, but I made sure that the policies of the school were followed."

His example demonstrates how positive modeling can positively influence school culture, encourage professional behavior, and strike a balance between cultural sensitivity and institutional consistency. Such leadership fosters accountability, inspires performance, and reinforces the school's shared values.

Every day, school managers work with people who have diverse aspirations, values, and desires. One principal acknowledged this challenge, stating: *"It was never easy to handle people with aspirations, desires, and values. I let them feel that I was also like them, with needs to be fulfilled. I encouraged them to make these our motivation to work hard, even if sometimes we felt our efforts were not appreciated and recognized."* This empathetic approach reflects a leadership style grounded in emotional intelligence and shared humanity. Another principal recounted a problematic situation where her integrity was questioned after assigning honest performance ratings to her teachers. Despite the pressure, she remained committed to her developmental approach:

"It was difficult at the start and seemed impossible, but I was positive that I could help them. Slowly and patiently, I mentored them and helped them understand my honest intention. Miraculously, my labor bore fruit. Before I was promoted as a supervisor, four of my teachers got 'very satisfactory' ratings while the other three were rated 'satisfactory' only."

The sincerity in her mentoring reflected a deep sense of purpose and trust. These experiences reveal how school managers used their values and virtues—such as honesty, patience, and compassion—to navigate challenges and lead effectively. Recent studies suggest that authentic leadership, which emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, and moral perspective, contributes significantly to building trust, empowering teams, and fostering long-term school improvement (Hammond & Stewart, 2022).

Achieving Success

Success was viewed not only in terms of school performance but also in empowering others—teachers, learners, and alums—to grow and excel. Leadership was defined by shared achievement and legacy building (Ibrahim et al., 2022). A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing available resources to support student learning. Effective school leadership ensures that all stakeholders are engaged in the educational process and that students' developmental needs are met holistically.

Academic achievement remains a crucial foundation for the successful development of young people, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to transition into adulthood and achieve economic and occupational success. According to Lee and Thompson (2023), students who excel academically are more likely to experience long-term personal and professional fulfillment, underscoring the vital role of schools and their leaders in shaping future societal contributors.

Achieving success is a central goal for school managers. For them, success is not only defined by their administrative accomplishments but more meaningfully by the academic progress of their learners. They worked diligently, viewing each student's graduation and integration into the community as a personal and professional triumph. Many believed that improved student performance would enhance the school's reputation and reflect positively on their leadership. One principal proudly shared that their school had exceeded its target academic performance by more than 2%, as outlined in their School Improvement Plan (SIP) – a milestone directly linked to student outcomes and the school's overall standing.

School managers also viewed the achievements of their alums as a testament to the long-term impact of their leadership. They felt fulfilled when former students succeeded in their professions and acknowledged their teachers and principals as contributors to their journey. One supervisor captured this sentiment by stating:

"My greatest joy was to observe teachers and principals adopt the paradigm shift, implement the new trends in teaching, and update themselves with the knowledge they need to improve the teaching and learning process."

For her, these efforts represented a collective achievement, not just for herself, but also for her team and learners. As emphasized by Martinez and Alston (2022), school leaders who celebrate student and teacher growth foster a culture of excellence and resilience that sustains long-term educational improvement.

What was admirable about the school managers in this study was their view of success, not as a personal accomplishment alone, but as something to be shared with their stakeholders. One principal, for instance, encouraged her teachers to take the principalship examination. Despite knowing she might lose some of her best teachers, she supported their professional growth and took pride in seeing them rise to leadership positions like hers. For her, success became more meaningful when shared with others. This sense of collective achievement was evident throughout the school managers' leadership journey, particularly in how they coped with challenges related to career demands and peer relationships.

As noted by Adams and Riley (2021), effective school leaders model collaboration, risk-taking, and continuous learning by aligning their actions with their words, embracing challenges, learning from failures, and encouraging others to grow alongside them. The school managers in this study did just that—they modeled resilience, empowered others, and turned adversity into an opportunity for shared success.

Figure 4 encapsulates the emergent understanding of *Engaging Self for Others* as experienced by the school managers in this study. It highlights the dynamic interplay between personal values, faith, resilience, and stakeholder collaboration, all of which are directed toward a shared vision of educational leadership and service.

The framework of *Engaging Self for Others* represents the emergent theory developed from the present study. It captures the essence of how retired school managers, both personally and professionally, committed themselves to their roles, forming meaningful and lasting relationships with students, teachers, and alums. In this study, engagement is defined as the dynamic connection between the inner strengths of the school managers—such as faith, values, and virtues—and their active involvement with key stakeholders. Both personal and career-related challenges marked their leadership journeys. Much like the interwoven strands of a spider web, these challenges were not seen as setbacks but as transformative experiences that strengthened their resilience and sense of purpose. Their capacity to overcome adversity enabled them to extend their leadership beyond administrative functions and into the lives and successes of those they served.

The Engaging Self for Others framework was developed through a rigorous process of grounded theory analysis. The researcher conducted a constant comparative analysis, moving systematically from properties to subcategories, and ultimately identified a core category. This emergent theory offers a holistic understanding of leadership as a deeply relational and value-driven process, where personal conviction fuels professional impact.

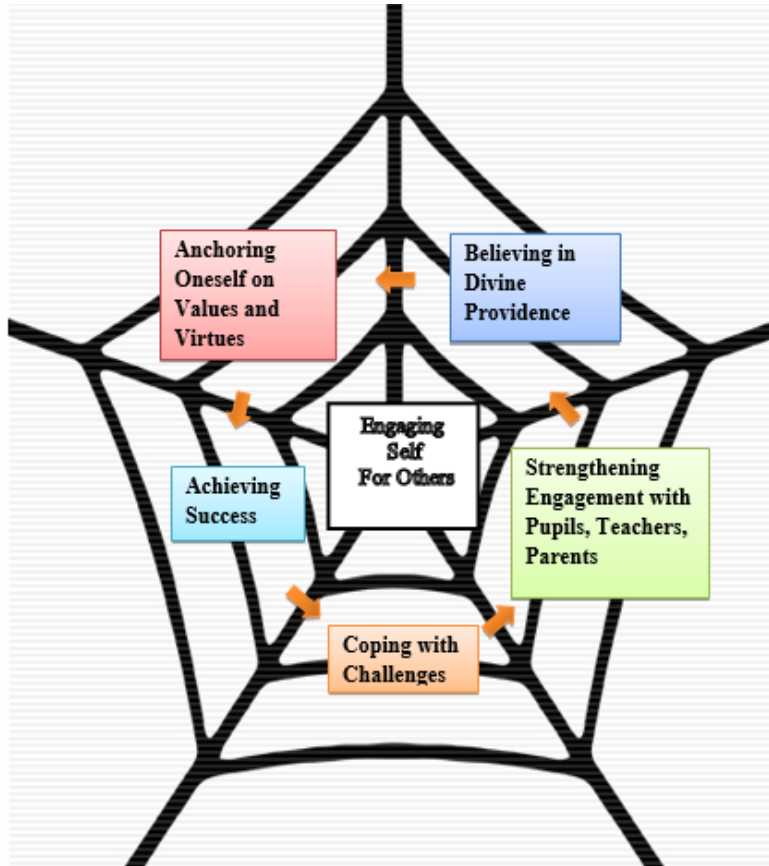


Figure 4. Emerged Conceptual Framework on "Engaging Self for Others"

4.0 Conclusion

The theory developed in this study, Engaging Self for Others, emphasizes that meaningful school management is anchored in personal values, deep faith, and strong relationships with stakeholders. Retired school managers demonstrated that managing a school is not merely about performing administrative duties, but about being personally invested in the success of others, like teachers, students, parents, and the wider community. Their stories revealed how they managed with compassion, commitment, and moral conviction, using challenges as opportunities for growth. This theory illustrates that authentic school management is a relational and purpose-driven process. By engaging themselves for the benefit of others, school managers fostered collaboration, trust, and a shared vision. Their ability to inspire, guide, and walk with others on the path to success defined their legacy. Engaging Self for Others is therefore a model of school management rooted in service, sustained by values, and strengthened by faith.

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice and policy. Programs designed to prepare future school managers should go beyond technical and policy competencies by including components on values formation, reflective practice, and emotional intelligence. These elements are essential in developing school managers who lead with empathy, integrity, and moral clarity. Furthermore, promotion frameworks and evaluation systems should be recalibrated to recognize not only performance outcomes but also relational skills, ethical leadership, and a commitment to community-building, which are crucial for effective school management.

This study also highlights the importance of the well-being of school managers. The fact that several participants retired early due to stress or health issues underscores the need to provide institutional support for mental health and wellness throughout their careers. Additionally, the continued capacity and willingness of retired school managers to serve suggest the need for structured post-retirement engagement programs. These programs could enable them to mentor aspiring school managers, contribute to community education initiatives, or support policy implementation efforts.

Ultimately, this research calls for a review of how school management is practiced and understood. A shift from purely task-oriented management to one that embodies service, values, and relational purpose can lead to more resilient and compassionate school communities. Engaging Self for Others is not only a theory—it is a transformative framework that can inform the development, recognition, and sustained impact of school managers in the field of education.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

Eliza E. Redondo- The author was solely responsible for the study's conception, design, data collection, analysis, manuscript writing, and final revisions.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, financial or non-financial, related to this study. This research was conducted solely for academic and professional growth.

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