

A Phenomenological Study of Faculty Character Development in Implementing the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga

Rahima T. Yusop¹, Aries Jay B. Reyes¹

¹Universidad de Zamboanga, Zamboanga City, Philippines

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Email of Corresponding Author: rahima.yusop@uz.edu.ph

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of faculty members in relation to character development during the implementation of the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga. Anchored on character-based leadership, the Seven Habits framework, and adult development perspectives on reflective practice and meaning-making, the study examined how faculty members internalized leadership principles and translated them into their teaching, personal values, and professional identity. The study involved seven faculty members who had direct experience teaching the course. Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, supported by an interview guide with open-ended questions, and were analyzed using thematic, narrative, and phenomenological procedures. Findings revealed that faculty members experienced pedagogical transformation as they shifted from teacher-centered instruction to reflective, facilitative, and student-centered teaching. They also reported personal growth, improved patience, discipline, responsibility, accountability, empathy, emotional intelligence, and stronger awareness of their role as educators and leaders. The Seven Habits were internalized and applied in decision-making, relationships, time management, and daily responsibilities. However, faculty members encountered challenges related to workload, limited time, student engagement, fatigue, burnout, and competing responsibilities. The study concluded that the Innovative Leader U Course contributed to faculty character development, values formation, reflective teaching, and professional identity transformation. It recommended sustained faculty training, institutional support, mentoring, curriculum integration, program evaluation, and adequate instructional resources. The study aligns with SDG 4 on Quality Education, SDG 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening educational, institutional, socio-cultural, and governance sustainability through values-based leadership and character education.

Keywords: Character Development, Faculty Development, Innovative Leader U Course, Leadership Education, Phenomenology, Reflective Teaching, Seven Habits, Values Formation

1. Introduction

Leadership education has become an important component of higher education because leadership is no longer limited to authority, managerial competence, or technical expertise. In contemporary educational contexts, leadership is increasingly understood as a values-based and character-centered practice that emphasizes ethics, integrity, responsibility, reflection, and positive social influence. This study focuses on the lived experiences of faculty members at Universidad de Zamboanga who implement the Innovative Leader U Course, particularly in relation to their character development, professional identity, and internalization of leadership principles through the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.

Leadership profoundly influences individuals, organizations, and society. As educational institutions prepare learners for personal, professional, and civic responsibilities, leadership education has become an essential part of higher education. The concept of character-based leadership gained prominence through Stephen R. Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. As Covey put it (1989, p. 291), "The effectiveness one develops, both personally and professionally, isn't dependent on having a specific tool or a method for success directed at the outside, it depends on developing habits that are principles-based on character and personal values, integrity, accountability and renewal." According to Covey (1989), effectiveness is not merely achieved through external skills or techniques but through principles-centered habits grounded in character, integrity, responsibility, and self-renewal. The Seven Habits—being proactive, beginning with the end in mind, putting first things first, thinking win-win, seeking first to understand then to be understood, synergizing, and sharpening the saw—provide a framework for personal leadership and character formation. In educational settings, these habits support the formation of responsible, ethical, socially conscious, and self-directed individuals capable of leading themselves and influencing others positively.

The literature suggests that leadership development has shifted from a focus on skills and technical expertise toward character formation, ethical commitment, relational integrity, and culturally responsive practice. In higher education,

faculty members are expected not only to teach leadership concepts but also to embody the values and dispositions they seek to develop among students. Thus, character development becomes central to educational leadership because faculty serve as models of ethical practice, responsible action, and socially responsive leadership. According to proponents of adult development and leadership scholarship (e.g., Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2014), professional practice is a context where identity is constructed and meaning is developed. In leadership education, this development occurs through reflective practice and the interpretation of lived experience. Therefore, implementing leadership-focused curricula is not merely an instructional duty; it can also shape educators' professional identities, ethical understanding, and personal dispositions. Through reflection, ethical decision-making, and authentic relationships with students and colleagues, educators may strengthen self-discipline, proactivity, collaboration, and integrity in practice.

In the global context, transformative and culturally sustaining leadership emphasizes that institutional change depends on leaders' ethical commitments and their ability to translate values into daily professional practice. However, limited attention has been given to how faculty members who implement leadership curricula make meaning of their roles and apply leadership principles such as the Seven Habits in their teaching and personal lives. While existing studies recognize the importance of culturally grounded leadership approaches in educational practice (Coates et al., 2020; Gunstone, 2013; Trudgett et al., 2021), there remains a need to examine how educators experience character development while integrating leadership principles into classroom instruction and personal conduct. In Philippine higher education, curriculum innovation increasingly includes leadership development as part of institutional strategies to produce socially responsible and morally grounded professionals. However, faculty members who implement leadership formation programs remain underexplored in terms of how they understand their own character development, how they translate leadership principles into practice, and how these experiences influence their teaching and professional lives. At Universidad de Zamboanga, the Innovative Leader U Course was developed to embed transformative and culturally relevant leadership education into institutional programming, including the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Faculty members implementing the course function not only as instructors but also as facilitators of reflection, role models of leadership, and interpreters of leadership habits within diverse educational contexts.

This study is anchored on character-based leadership and the Seven Habits framework of Stephen R. Covey. According to Covey (1989), effective leadership begins with the development of habits grounded in principles, character, integrity, responsibility, and renewal. These concepts provide the basis for understanding how faculty members internalize leadership habits and translate them into their teaching practices, relationships, and professional identities. The study also draws from adult development and leadership scholarship, which views professional practice as a site for identity construction and meaning-making (e.g., Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2014). In this context, the implementation of the Innovative Leader U Course becomes a reflective and developmental experience through which faculty members may examine their values, ethical commitments, and leadership dispositions.

Although leadership education and curriculum innovation have been widely discussed, limited research has examined the lived experiences of faculty members who implement leadership curricula and how they make meaning of their own character development in the process. Existing literature has focused more on curriculum reform, leadership appointments, and systemic program integration than on the personal and professional transformation of faculty who teach leadership principles. This gap is significant because faculty members are not merely implementers of leadership programs. They are also role models, facilitators of meaning-making, and exemplars of the leadership values embedded in the curriculum. At Universidad de Zamboanga, there is limited empirical documentation on how faculty members understand their character development, internalize the Seven Habits, and apply these principles in their professional and personal lives while implementing the Innovative Leader U Course. A phenomenological approach is therefore appropriate because it allows an in-depth exploration of how faculty members interpret their experiences, negotiate values, and develop character through the practice of leadership education.

This study aligns primarily with SDG 4 – Quality Education because it examines how leadership education, reflective teaching, and faculty character development contribute to the improvement of higher education practice. By focusing on the implementation of the Innovative Leader U Course, the study supports the development of values-based, student-centered, and socially responsible education. The study also relates to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it emphasizes ethical leadership, integrity, accountability, responsibility, and institutional character formation. These qualities are relevant to building educational institutions that are values-driven, principled, and capable of nurturing socially responsible leaders. The study may also support SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals through its emphasis on institutional programming, curriculum integration, and the collective role of faculty, students, and the university in sustaining leadership and character education.

The study contributes to educational sustainability by examining how faculty development and leadership education can strengthen teaching practices, values formation, and institutional learning. By exploring the experiences of faculty members, the study highlights the importance of reflective teaching, ethical leadership, and continuous professional growth

in sustaining quality higher education. It also contributes to institutional sustainability by emphasizing that leadership programs require committed faculty members who can model the principles they teach. Since the Innovative Leader U Course depends on faculty members' ability to internalize and authentically apply leadership habits, understanding their lived experiences can inform faculty development programs, character education initiatives, and course improvement efforts. In terms of socio-cultural and governance sustainability, the study underscores the role of character-based leadership in forming ethical, responsible, and socially conscious individuals. By focusing on integrity, accountability, collaboration, and reflective practice, the study supports the development of academic communities that can promote responsible leadership, institutional improvement, and values-based transformation.

This phenomenological study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of faculty members in relation to their character development during the implementation of the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga. Specifically, it seeks to understand faculty members' experiences in implementing the course, describe their character development while teaching it, examine how they make meaning of the Seven Habits or leadership principles in their personal and professional lives, identify the challenges they encounter in practicing and modeling leadership habits, determine how the course influences their values, attitudes, and professional identity, identify essential themes regarding character development, and analyze implications for character education, faculty development, and continuous improvement of the Innovative Leader U Course.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological research design, which was appropriate because it allowed an in-depth investigation of the lived experiences of faculty members in delivering the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga. This design enabled the researchers to understand individual perspectives and the meanings participants attached to their experiences through detailed descriptions and subjective interpretation (Creswell, 2005). The phenomenological approach was also suitable because it examined how faculty members experienced character formation, professional identity, and leadership practice while implementing the course (Creswell, 2013).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Universidad de Zamboanga, a higher education institution established in 1948 and located in Tetuan, Zamboanga City. The university served as the research locale because it implements the Innovative Leader U Course, which provided the context for examining faculty experiences related to leadership education and character development.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The participants of the study consisted of seven to nine faculty members of Universidad de Zamboanga who had taught and were presently teaching the Innovative Leader U Course. These participants were selected because of their direct experience in implementing the course and their ability to describe their personal and professional experiences related to character development and leadership practice.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. This sampling procedure was appropriate because phenomenological research is concerned not with sample size but with the quality of participants and the richness of their experiences (Ariola, 2013). The participants were chosen based on the criteria that they had taught the course for at least one semester, had a track record in practicing leadership, and were willing to share their experiences.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were gathered using a one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interview method, which allowed the participants to narrate their lived experiences comprehensively (Patton, 2015). An interview guide containing open-ended questions was used to collect data, while the researcher served as the main instrument in conducting the interviews and keeping the discussion aligned with the objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The interviews were conducted individually in a private place to allow participants to share their experiences openly and comfortably. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. After obtaining the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate documentation of their responses. The data gathering process focused on eliciting meaningful narratives about faculty members' experiences in implementing the Innovative Leader U Course and their character development in relation to leadership practice.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using thematic and narrative analyses to identify significant themes and meanings from the participants' narratives. Phenomenological procedures such as horizontalization, grouping of themes, and the development of textual and structural descriptions were applied to identify the essential structure of the participants' experiences (van Manen, 1990). To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study, triangulation, member checking, reflexive journal entries, and bracketing were used to promote credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Moustakas, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the research process. The researchers obtained informed consent from the participants, maintained confidentiality and anonymity, ensured voluntary participation, and stored the data securely. The welfare of the participants was also protected during the conduct of the study. These ethical procedures helped ensure the rigor, credibility, and ethical integrity of the research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Faculty Experiences in Implementing the Innovative Leader U Course

3.1.1 Pedagogical Transformation through Reflective and Student-Centered Teaching

The findings revealed that all seven faculty members experienced a shift in their teaching practices while implementing the Innovative Leader U Course. The participants described moving from traditional lecture-based instruction to more reflective, interactive, and student-centered approaches. Six participants specifically noted a transition from being lecturers to becoming facilitators of learning. They also emphasized the need for creativity, reflective activities, and interactive teaching strategies to make leadership concepts more meaningful and engaging for students. This finding indicates that the Innovative Leader U Course encouraged faculty members to rethink their instructional roles and adopt more facilitative teaching practices. The result is consistent with literature emphasizing that effective leadership education requires critical reflection, collaboration, experiential learning, and active student engagement rather than teacher-centered instruction (Kolb, 1984; Prince, 2004). It also supports the idea that leadership education is both pedagogical and transformational, as changes in teaching practice may also influence the teacher's professional growth and instructional confidence.

3.1.2 Personal Growth and Character Development among Faculty

The data showed that all seven participants experienced personal growth and value formation while teaching the course. Six participants reported improved emotional intelligence, empathy, discipline, responsibility, accountability, and patience. The faculty members shared that teaching leadership principles encouraged them to reflect on their own values and actions, making the course not only a subject they taught but also a process of self-development. This finding suggests that faculty character development emerged through reflective teaching and repeated engagement with leadership concepts. It aligns with studies indicating that personal growth, self-awareness, and emotional development occur through reflective learning and leadership experiences (Schon, 1983; Goleman, 1995). The experience of teaching the course appeared to strengthen both the personal and professional character of faculty members, showing that leadership education can also transform educators who implement it.

3.1.3 Internalization of the Seven Habits in Personal and Professional Life

All seven participants reported that the Seven Habits became useful guiding principles in their personal and professional lives. Six participants stated that these habits improved their decision-making, intentionality, self-management, and prioritization. The faculty members applied the leadership principles not only in teaching but also in family life, interpersonal relationships, time management, problem-solving, and daily responsibilities. This finding shows that the Seven Habits were not treated merely as abstract course content but were internalized and practiced in real-life situations. This supports literature emphasizing that leadership development becomes meaningful when principles are consistently applied in everyday decisions and actions (Covey, 1989; Northouse, 2019). The result reinforces the view that leadership identity develops through continuous practice and personal application.

3.1.4 Challenges in Practicing and Modeling Leadership Habits

The findings revealed that all seven participants experienced workload and time management challenges while implementing and modeling the leadership habits. Six participants identified student engagement and participation as major concerns, particularly when teaching required interactive and reflective activities. Five participants also reported fatigue, burnout, and competing responsibilities, which affected their ability to consistently model leadership behaviors. These challenges suggest that the successful implementation of leadership education depends not only on faculty commitment but also on supportive institutional conditions. The findings are consistent with studies showing that workload, time pressure, and teacher stress can limit the integration of reflective and innovative pedagogy into teaching (Kyriacou, 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The results also indicate that faculty members need adequate support to sustain both instructional effectiveness and personal leadership practice.

3.1.5 Transformation of Faculty Values, Attitudes, and Professional Identity

All seven participants reported that teaching the Innovative Leader U Course changed how they viewed themselves as educators and leaders. Six participants became more aware of their responsibility as role models and expressed stronger commitment to holistic student development. The faculty members described teaching as having a deeper purpose beyond completing instructional duties, emphasizing leadership, mentoring, values formation, and intentional teaching practice. This finding indicates that the course contributed to the transformation of faculty members' professional identity. It supports literature emphasizing that reflection and personal interaction influence how teachers understand their professional roles and responsibilities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day & Gu, 2010). The result also shows that leadership education programs may help faculty members view teaching as a value-driven responsibility connected to student formation and institutional mission.

3.1.6 Character Development as a Continuous Reflective Process

The data showed that all seven participants viewed character development as an ongoing and lifelong process. Six participants emphasized that reflection is essential in sustaining growth, while five participants noted that supportive environments, peer interaction, and institutional support strengthen character formation. Faculty members recognized that leadership habits require continuous practice, reflection, and reinforcement. This finding is consistent with literature describing character development as a continuing process shaped by reflective practice, interaction, and supportive learning environments (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The result suggests that faculty character development is not achieved through one-time exposure to leadership principles but through sustained practice, institutional support, and regular opportunities for reflection.

3.1.7 Implications for Faculty Development and Course Improvement

The findings revealed that all seven participants recommended continuous faculty training and stronger institutional support for the Innovative Leader U Course. Six participants recommended integrating leadership principles across other courses and activities, while all participants emphasized the importance of regular program evaluation and administrative support. These recommendations point to the need for a more systematic approach to sustaining the course and strengthening its implementation. This finding supports studies showing that professional learning communities, continuous faculty development, and supportive institutional structures contribute to the long-term sustainability of educational programs and improve teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fullan, 2007). The result suggests that the Innovative Leader U Course can be sustained more effectively through regular training, curriculum integration, monitoring, evaluation, and institutional commitment.

3.2 Integrated Discussion of Major Themes

Overall, the findings showed that the Innovative Leader U Course influenced faculty members at both instructional and personal levels. Faculty members experienced pedagogical transformation, strengthened personal values, internalized the Seven Habits, and developed a deeper sense of professional identity. However, the findings also showed that workload, limited time, student engagement difficulties, burnout, and competing responsibilities affected the consistent practice and modeling of leadership habits. These results support the view that leadership education is not only a curriculum-based initiative but also a transformative professional experience for faculty. Similar to studies on transformational learning and reflective practice, the participants experienced changes in perspective and practice through sustained exposure to leadership concepts and reflective engagement (Mezirow, 1997; Creswell, 2013). The findings imply that leadership education requires both individual commitment and institutional support to become sustainable and meaningful.

3.3 Scope of Findings and Directions for Future Research

The findings of the study should be interpreted within its specific research context. Since the participants were limited to seven faculty members from one institution, the applicability of the results to broader educational settings may be limited. The study also relied on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by recall, personal interpretation, and social desirability. As a qualitative phenomenological inquiry, the study did not aim for statistical generalization but for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of faculty members who implemented the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga. Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insights into how leadership education may influence faculty teaching practices, character development, values, and professional identity. Future studies may include a larger group of participants, involve other institutions, or use qualitative and mixed-method approaches to further examine leadership education, character formation, faculty support systems, and institutional development.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that the implementation of the Innovative Leader U Course at Universidad de Zamboanga positively influenced faculty members' teaching practices, personal development, values, and professional identity. Faculty shifted from teacher-centered instruction to reflective, facilitative, and student-centered teaching approaches that emphasized

leadership, character formation, and experiential learning. The course also encouraged self-reflection and strengthened key personal traits such as patience, discipline, accountability, responsibility, awareness, and proactivity, which extended beyond professional practice into personal life. Faculty members internalized the Seven Habits and applied them in decision-making, relationships, and leadership behavior. However, they also experienced challenges in sustaining these practices due to limited time, workload, student engagement concerns, multiple responsibilities, and emotional exhaustion. Overall, the course helped faculty view teaching not merely as knowledge delivery but as a value-driven responsibility involving leadership, mentoring, and character formation.

The study recommended that the administration and top management of Universidad de Zamboanga continue strengthening its character education and leadership development programs by sustaining the Innovative Leader U Course through regular program evaluation, adequate instructional materials, and alignment with the university's mission, vision, and core values. Academic officials, including deans and coordinators, should provide stronger support mechanisms for faculty through mentoring, reflective practice, professional learning communities, and continuous monitoring to ensure effective course implementation. Faculty members should continue applying the Seven Habits and leadership principles in their teaching and personal lives, while students should practice these principles to develop leadership skills, responsibility, integrity, and ethical values. Parents, alumni, partner institutions, and stakeholders should also support leadership and character-building initiatives. Future studies may involve broader participants, other institutions or colleges, qualitative or mixed-method approaches, and further investigation of leadership education, student outcomes, character formation, faculty support systems, and institutional roles in sustaining leadership programs.

The study was limited by its small number of participants, as it involved only seven faculty members from one institution, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to broader contexts. It also relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be affected by recall, personal interpretation, and social desirability. Since the study used a qualitative phenomenological design, its purpose was not statistical generalization but the development of an in-depth understanding of faculty members' lived experiences in implementing the Innovative Leader U Course and experiencing character development.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards in research. The faculty participants voluntarily joined the study after being informed of its purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and confidentiality, anonymity, and secure handling of data were observed throughout the research process. The necessary institutional permission and ethical approval requirements were complied with before data gathering. The authors declare no conflict of interest, acknowledge all contributions relevant to the completion of the study, and affirm that copyright ownership and authorship responsibilities were properly observed.

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