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FEATURE

**Give Hope and Transform Lives: A
Narrative Inquiry of a Janitor-
Turned-Teacher**

Renato C. Sagayno

Abstract. *Education is an essential factor that can help improve one's quality of life. This study explored the experiences of a widow who used to work as a school janitor but eventually became a classroom teacher. This janitor-turned-teacher exemplified the vision of a university in Cebu City, Philippines in providing affordable quality education, giving hope, and transforming lives. In spite of the aggressive comments of the people around her, she never gave up her dream of finding a better place in the society. Alderfer's (1969) growth needs, relatedness, and existence theory; Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory; and McClelland's (1961) acquired needs theory are instrumental in analyzing the experiences of the participant leading to her transformation. Based on Polkinghorne's paradigmatic mode of analysis, themes were extracted from the participant's written essay, personal interview, and field notes. Since the participant of this study has become a paragon of social mobility, her story may inspire others in society to live a life with a purpose.*

Keywords: Vision statement, giving hope, transforming lives, teacher education, Central Visayas, Philippines, Southeast Asia, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Higher education institutions around the world play vital functions in educating the students, promoting research activities, and extending services to various communities. These functions reflect the institutional identity and future desires of any university around the world under tough competition with other universities in attracting students to enroll (Gözükara, 2015). In the aspect of

teaching, the focus of every higher education institution is on the delivery of quality education (Ellis & Miller, 2014). The most common objective among universities is giving opportunities to students to hone their capabilities and become highly employable (Ozdem, 2011) that will suit the historical, cultural, political, and economic backgrounds of the country or locality where they are located (Efe & Ozer, 2015).

Meanwhile, the vision, mission, goals, and objectives of universities are considered as hallmark variables that serve as their guide in all their activities (Murphy & Torre, 2015). The vision, mission, goals, and objectives have a significant effect on the organizational performance of any university (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Moreover, the vision statement of a university is a public declaration of its founding purpose and commitment to fulfill among its students (Great Schools Partnership, 2015).

A university in Cebu City, Philippines has been serving the populace of the entire province of Cebu including the neighboring provinces for more than 50 years. The vision statement of this particular university has three phrases. First, “democratize quality education,” which refers to the provision of equal access to affordable quality education regardless of race and ethnicity; sexual, religious, and political orientation; and economic status. Second, “be the visionary and industry leaders,” which refers to the effort of developing leaders in their respective fields of endeavor. Third, “give hope and transform lives,” which refers to the provision of opportunities that lead to personal and professional upliftment of its students. The vision statement of this particular university serves as the guiding words of the school administrators, faculty members, and non-teaching staff in their day-to-day activities. The third phrase (give hope and transform lives) serves as the central idea of this narrative inquiry.

Over the years, there are success stories, which were given overwhelming attention by the school administration and media outlets. Awards and recognition were handed over to individuals who achieved excellent success such as a brand new car or cash rewards for board toppers. There was an instance when one of the graduates was featured in a national television for his success despite the hardships of selling bottled water along the streets during his free time to augment his finances and pay for his school expenses. Eventually, he was rewarded with a considerable amount of money by the manufacturer of the bottled water he used to sell. However, there are success stories that are unknown to many that need to be told and retold to inspire others. These success stories may be small as compared to the popular ones, but they are still worthy of being told as a means to inspire other students and even school dropouts to view education as a powerful means to fight poverty and gain respect in society. One of these success stories is the transformation of a janitor-turned-teacher in a university who is a widow at a young age and has two children.

Hence, this study explored the experiences of a janitor-turned-teacher who exemplifies the vision of the university in giving hope and transforming lives. My main objective in conducting this study was to narrate the transformation of this particular janitor-turned-teacher in her persona as a mother, school janitor, and aspiring teacher in order to extract themes that would characterize her struggle and perseverance to success. Her story may serve as concrete evidence that education can indeed change one's quality of life for the better.

Review of the Literature

This narrative inquiry provides a voice to a janitor-turned-teacher who became a widow at a young age and with two children. Specifically, the study focused on the transformation of a janitor-turned-teacher in her persona as a lone parent, school janitor, and aspiring teacher. Specifically, the literature review includes earlier studies on education as a means to reduce poverty, education in women's perspective, and the life of a lone parent.

Education and Poverty

Education is an essential factor which can help improve the lives of people around the world (Mundy & Verger, 2015). Education is a significant factor of poverty and vulnerability of a person. Parents or any individuals who attained higher education have higher chances of having more stable and better-paying jobs. Furthermore, they are more likely to adapt to varied conditions and have higher coping means (Mina & Imai, 2017). The chances that a child completes all the stages of education depend on the educational attainment and employment status of the parents. As a result, the children are at risk of sustained poverty when they become adults. The educational attainment of the parents is a significant factor that may spare their children from poverty (Duarte, Ferrando-Latorre, & Molina, 2018). As posited by Kaushal (2014), educated parents are expected to have children who are college degree holders, in good health condition, and have the capacity to acquire material things to live comfortably as compared to children of less educated parents.

College education is significant in advancing economic affluence. Possessing a college education allows a person to utilize one's resources effectively that leads to sustainable growth (Wood & Breyer, 2017). In the Philippine setting, poverty reduction is one of the concerns of the government. The college education of a person is a variable that has the most impact on the reduction of poverty (Bayudan-Dacuycuy & Baje, 2017). Olfindo (2018) studied a sample of wage workers in the Philippines and showed that there were variations in the age-earning profiles between college and high-school graduates. His findings indicate that there is productive value in possessing a college education. Hence, having a college education entails great advantage in finding a high-paying job.

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Education for Women

Well-educated women contribute significantly to the social upliftment and economic development of a nation (Shaukat & Pell, 2017). In Pakistan, female education posed a significant increase in the female labor force that dramatically caused economic growth (Syeda & Nazish, 2017). In India, more education, aside from higher dowry, is considered by parents as an alternative way to compensate for their daughters' uncertainty of inheriting property in the future despite the presence of the gender-progressive reforms to the inheritance law (Roy, 2015). For young women in Vietnam, college education is highly sought to gain respect for themselves and pride for their parents rather than economic benefits. By having a college degree, they ultimately achieve independence from their husbands, attain self-fulfillment, and fulfill cultural expectations (Ho, 2017).

Life of a Lone Parent

In the face of unstable employment and gendered wage inequality, lone-parent families would likely experience poverty even when they are working (Lohmann, Nieuwenhuis, & Elgar, 2017). The role of a single mother is very challenging for she is susceptible to various threats (economically, emotionally, psychologically, etc.) that may lead her children to maladjustment (Taylor & Conger, 2017). As stipulated by Provencher and Carlton (2018), lone mothers are more concerned in seeking ways to ensure the economic condition of their children as compared to lone fathers. Moreover, working mothers are less compensated and highly vulnerable to extreme poverty.

The review of the literature shows the power of education in alleviating poverty, the role of education in empowering women, and the vulnerabilities of single parents. The review of literature further looked into the positive effect of having an educated parent on the well-being of children. Moreover, the reviewed literature revealed that education uplifts the social status of women and the economic challenges and struggle of lone parents to trade-off their precious time for their children to earn a living. However, there seems to be no study that describes the experiences of a lone mother who worked as a school janitor, believed in the power of education to uplift social and economic condition, and eventually became a paragon of social mobility in her role as a classroom teacher. By giving people a chance to hear her voice, the world may know about her story and inspire other individuals, specifically those who are about to give up their hope of living a better life.

To explore the experiences of the participant, the following research questions were used to collect data on the topic:

1. What are the experiences of the participant in relation to her transformation?
2. How did the transformation of the participant affect the people around her?

Methodology

This section presents the research design and the setting of the study. It also shows the sampling used, the data collection procedure, and how the data was analyzed. Furthermore, it presents the ethical considerations and researcher's reflexivity.

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized the narrative inquiry design to delve into the experiences of a janitor-turned-teacher. The study focused on the transformation of one widow school janitor who embodies the vision statement of a university which aims to provide quality education to the populace and to instill hopes of transforming lives for the better. Qualitative research allows the participant to be heard as she expresses her thoughts and feelings while narrating her experiences. Furthermore, a narrative inquiry is appropriate for this study considering my desire to present the participant's experiences as orderly as possible (Franzosi, 2010) before, during, and after her transformation in her persona as a mother, janitor, and aspiring teacher. I borrowed the strategy of Richmond (2002) of designing a story map in analyzing the stories of children in his study. Meanwhile, Creswell (2007) explained that the implementation of narrative inquiry involves studying one or two individuals in which the collection of stories as data are rigorously employed for analysis, individual reporting, and chronological ordering of those experiences. He explained further that using narrative inquiry as a design allows the researcher to act as a discreet facilitator for the participant to speak of her experiences freely without interruptions.

Research Setting

The setting of the study was within the confines of a university located in the Central Philippines. The university is one of the prestigious higher education institutions in the Visayas region which was founded in the 1960s. This university commits itself to offering quality education to students from the locality and neighboring provinces. At present, it has branches in strategic locations in the cities of Cebu and Mandaue. The university envisions to provide quality education that is accessible to all, inspire its students to become leaders in their respective endeavors

in the future, and instill in their minds that there is hope to transform lives for the better.

Sampling

Since this study explored the life experiences of one person, the participant herself is the only person considered as the source of information. However, three teachers and three school janitors who had direct contact with the participant when she was still working as a janitor in the university were also interviewed to verify facts and gather more insights. As posited by Wa-Mbaleka, (2017), interviewing these persons were a way of ensuring triangulation to develop comprehensive understanding of the participant's experiences. As explained by Patton (1999), triangulation is a strategy of using multiple methods or data sources to understand better the phenomenon.

Data Collection

This study made use of the participant's interview and a written essay of her experiences before, during, and after her transformation from a school janitor into a classroom teacher. I requested the participant to write an essay about her life experiences until she became a classroom teacher a month before the one-on-one interview. The one-on-one interview and the written essay were done in Cebuano, the spoken language of the entire Cebu Province and neighboring islands in the Visayas region of the Philippines. To note, the participant of this study and the teachers and janitors who were also interviewed are all native speakers of the Cebuano language.

The schedule of the interview was pre-arranged and conducted on a Sunday afternoon at the research office of the university. When the participant arrived for the one-on-one interview, she handed me an envelope containing the written essay of her life. I kept it unread for several weeks until I finished the transcription of the one-on-one interview to avoid preconceived ideas. A semi-structured interview was employed using an interview guide which was peer-reviewed and validated by two qualitative researchers in the university who are both college deans with PhD degrees and have published qualitative research studies in their respective fields. I read several times the written essay of the participant and the transcript of the one-on-one interview to become familiar with the salient events of the participant's life. Later on, I conducted interviews with selected teachers and school janitors who had direct contact with the participant when she was still working as one of the school janitors in the university to verify facts and gather additional insights related to the study.

The transcripts of the interviews and the written essay, which were all in the Cebuano language, were used directly in the coding process and analysis of data that led to the development of the themes. However, those texts that were included

in reconstructing the participant's experiences as a mother, school janitor, and aspiring teacher were translated into the English language. Since the participant is a graduate of Bachelor in Secondary Education major in English, I felt it unnecessary to do a back translation. I asked the participant if she wanted me to translate the narration of her story back to the Cebuano language, but she preferred the English version.

Data Analysis

This study employed Polkinghorne's paradigmatic mode of analysis. Description of categories were carefully done by looking closely at the relationships of several categories to reveal common ideas found in various sources of data. As such, general knowledge was generated from the set of data extracted from the collection of stories (Kim, 2015). Since I only had one participant, I separated the narratives into three personas: as a mother, as a school janitor, and as an aspiring teacher. Furthermore, I divided the timeline into three: pre-transformation period, transformation period, and post-transformation period. To organize the data, I adapted the strategy of Richmond (2002) of employing a story map with three categories in three time zones. This strategy helped me analyze the data horizontally and vertically. Subsequently, common themes or salient constructs were extracted. Table 1 is the story map I used in the study.

Table 1

Story Map of the Participant's Experiences

Timeline	As a mother	As a janitor	As an aspiring teacher
Pre-transformation period	Her experiences as a mother before her transformation	Her experiences as a school janitor before her transformation	Her experiences as an aspiring teacher before her transformation
Transformation period	Her experiences as a mother during her transformation	Her experiences as a school janitor during her transformation	Her experiences as an aspiring teacher during her transformation
Post-transformation period	Her experiences as a mother after her transformation	Her experiences as a school janitor after her transformation	Her experiences as an aspiring teacher after her transformation

Ethical Considerations

Although the participant was open-minded in sharing her story, I still formally asked her permission, and she consented to be a part of the study. Furthermore, I asked her to write a detailed essay of her life and undergo a one-on-one interview in the course of the study. I told her also that I would be conducting interviews with some teachers and school janitors to verify facts found in the written essay and the one-on-one interview with her. The participant was also aware that there would be no monetary or material benefits that she would receive for allowing me to conduct this study. To manifest her willingness to be the participant of this study, she voluntarily signed the prepared consent form.

Furthermore, the teachers and school janitors whom I interviewed to verify facts and gather more insights related to the study were also informed about the purpose of the inquiry and the need for them to sign a consent form before an audio-recorded interview. These group of participants was informed that their participation in the study was purely voluntary. Hence, they are aware that they would not receive any benefit or compensation. They were also aware that they could terminate their involvement in my inquiry at any time without any question. Lastly, the identities of the participant, including the names of the teachers and janitors whom I interviewed in this narrative inquiry, were held confidential.

Researcher's Reflexivity

As a neophyte qualitative researcher, who used to do quantitative research, my skill and background in conducting this kind of study may have lessened the quality of the analysis of the facts elicited from the participant. Meanwhile, my personal experiences as a working student way back in college and a teacher for 14 years in the same university have caused me an overwhelming empathy toward the participant. Hence, the aforementioned personal background may have influenced my interpretation of the salient facts of her story.

Results

The participant's narrative presented several themes that characterized her struggle to attain transformation. Table 2 shows the categories, sub-themes, and final themes which were extracted from the participant's narrative. Subsequently, each theme is discussed and supported occasionally with direct quotes from the participant. The final five themes include never losing hope but being inspired, acceptance of the encouragement and support of others, being focused and creative to reach a goal, being a role model and inspiration for others, and looking back to the past and gratefulness.

Table 2

Categories, Sub-Themes and Final Themes Extracted from the Narratives

Timeline	As a mother	As a school janitor	As an aspiring teacher	Sub-themes	Final themes
Pre-transformation period	Determination, resilience, and initiative are factors to keep one's hope burning.	Humility, resilience, patience, and acceptance are factors that will allow a person to be inspired to attain a goal.	Self-determination, friendliness, and trustworthiness combined with encouragement from persons in authority are factors that pave one's way to success.	Hope & inspiration Encouragement	Never lose hope but be inspired Acceptance of the encouragement and support of others Be focused and creative to reach a goal
Transformation period	Never ruined by tragedies but instead used them to be determined, patient, and focused on finding better opportunities	Support from other persons, self-determination, and setting aside negative opinions are factors needed to face hardships and challenges.	Positivity, perseverance, and creativity are factors to the road of success. Support and affirmation are manifestations of one's potential Hardships, challenges, and success are blessings in varied forms that one should be grateful for	Focus Creativity Support & affirmation Blessings in disguise	Be focused and creative to reach a goal Acceptance of the encouragement and support of others Looking back to the past and gratefulness Looking back to the past and gratefulness
Post-transformation period	A good mother should be the role model and pride of her children to gain love and respect.	Looking back to the people behind will inspire them to follow their footsteps but, it must be coupled with constant encouragement.	Hardships and challenges are parts of every achievement. Sharing one's story of success will definitely inspire others.	Looking back Role modeling Inspiring others	Be a role model and inspiration to others Be a role model and inspiration to others

The next section presents the final themes of the study. These themes were extracted from the in-depth analysis of the narratives. These themes were the results of merging two or three sub-themes to form a major theme. In the process of merging the sub-themes, five major themes were developed. These themes are discussed in the succeeding sections.

Never Lose Hope but be Inspired

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Rosemarie grew up literally from a low-income family in a remote place. She knew that her parents could not afford to send her to college, but her desire and determination to have a college degree brought her to the capital city of the province, which is about 100 kilometers away, to seek better opportunities. As the years passed by, she got married and raised her own family. However, she never lost the hope of attaining a college education as she said, *“I focused my attention on my children and as a wife. However, I kept in mind my desire to enroll in college and earn a college degree in the future.”*

Rosemarie’s desire to enroll in college was ignited when she worked as a school janitor in a university. She felt inspired upon seeing the students, and she realized that the opportunity for her to earn a college degree was just around the corner. She revealed, *“I was very happy seeing students roaming around the corridors. I saw some light in pursuing my dream of going back to school.”*

Furthermore, Rosemarie’s economic condition and her role as a working mother naturally compelled her to set aside her dreamed college degree. However, she never gave up her childhood dream of becoming a classroom teacher as she recalled, *“Since I was young, I never lost hope of becoming a teacher. . . . Though uncertain when will it happen, I was determined that I will become a teacher in the future.”*

Acceptance of the Encouragement and Support of Others

Rosemarie is a friendly person. Naturally, she is humble and abiding to persons in authority around her. These qualities of her caught the attention of the teachers in the university who knew her very well. Such attention she got her paved her way to finally enroll in college. The constant encouragement of teachers and promises to support her were her driving force to start her journey to transformation. She revealed,

As my closeness to the teachers developed to a certain level, I received constant encouragement from them to pursue a college education. In fact, some teachers promised to support me once I decide to enroll. These experiences gave me hope that I can transform my life for the better.

To come up with a decision was not an easy thing, and it was hard on the part of Rosemarie to keep it to herself. Since she was aware of the possible consequences, she confided to her close friend about her decision to study and asked for the latter’s support. She said, *“When I had the right opportunity to enroll in college, I informed only my close friend/co-worker. I asked her a favor to check my assigned area periodically whenever I am not around.”* Since Rosemarie’s work is up to 11:00 o’clock in the evening and her class would start at 7:30 in the morning, there were times when she was late and never allowed to enter the classroom as a punishment from her teacher. As a result, she missed the lessons.

However, she was so determined to catch up and find ways to learn the lessons by asking the assistance of her classmates. She said, “*When I failed to catch up with the lesson of the day, I asked the help of my classmates to explain it to me.*”

Be Focused and Creative to Reach a Goal

Focusing on one’s goal is somewhat attainable but the way to transformation entails hardships as in the case of Rosemarie. She experienced tragedy and suffering that almost prevented her from pursuing her studies. However, her strong determination prevailed and led to her transformation. She narrated,

At first, it was smooth sailing, but a tragedy came into my life. A group of heartless elements had killed my husband due to mistaken identity. As a widow with two children, I had to strive hard to earn a living. However, I never gave up my studies. I went to school early in the morning and went home very late.

For a determined person like Rosemarie, creativity is an essential factor that led her to success. As a strategy to study, she used her mobile phone to record her lessons for the day and discretely study using her headphones while doing her janitorial job. She revealed,

Since I had to work as a school janitor after my class, I did not have enough time to study. As a strategy, I used my short breaks from my job to record on my mobile phone the lesson of the day with my own voice. So while I was cleaning or mopping the floor, I kept on listening to my recorded voice again and again. I used that strategy until I completed my academic requirements.

Be a Role Model and Inspiration for Others

A mother is considered a role model to her children especially in the case of a lone parent like Rosemarie. Her children looked up to her achievement and became proud of her. Furthermore, she became a role model in the community where gossiping is unavoidable. Although she was a victim of gossiping and bullying of her neighbors, she became a role model not only to her children but to the entire neighborhood. She confided,

Now that I already achieved my dream, I can say that I am very proud of my transformation to my children. Likewise, my children, who are grown-ups already, are also proud of my transformation. I became a role model and inspiration for my children and in my neighborhood. The bullying that I encountered before is gone and what I have today are the respect and admiration of my neighbors.

Being a mere school janitor, as in the case of Rosemarie, who faced all the hardships of schooling while working at the same time is worth emulating for those who are in the same situation. Because of her transformation, her former co-workers were so proud of her. They appreciated her determination to achieve her goal. She said, “*Now that I have achieved my dream, I became an inspiration to my former co-workers. Whenever we met, I received appreciation for my success in life.*”

A teacher is deemed as a person in authority. Rosemarie was so open to sharing her story to her students and other people from whom she gained respect and admiration. Her story would really instill in the minds of her students that education is very important and they should study hard. She narrated,

My relationship with my students is excellent. In fact, some of my students would call me “mama” instead of the usual “ma’am” or teacher. I am not ashamed of telling my story to them for I want them to be inspired and to study hard. I even shared my story with the school’s janitors to show to them that they still have the chance to seek a better job.

Looking Back to the Past and Gratefulness

Although Rosemarie is already working as a classroom teacher in a different environment, she finds time to visit her former co-workers. In those meetings, Rosemarie unceasingly encourages her former co-workers to find time to study too. Although she finds it difficult to convince them, she maintains her hopes that one of them will follow what she did. She narrated,

Whenever we met, I received appreciation for my success in life. I encouraged them to study too, but they were reluctant to do so for they had witnessed my struggles in achieving my college degree. However, I never fail to encourage them, specifically those who are still young, to pursue a college education. I hope that someday, one of my former co-workers will also march with a college degree.

The prayers of Rosemarie to the Almighty were heard through the goodness of the people around her, specifically the teachers who encouraged her to study and supported her with some of her needs. For sure, her transformation cannot be felt without the hardships that she faced along the way. Her gratefulness for all the experiences will inevitably lead her to more victories in life. She shared,

Graduation time has come, and I was still in disbelief that I finally achieved my goal. During the graduation rehearsals and in the actual graduation event, I was teary-eyed every time I marched up on the stage. My feeling was overwhelming as if I was hallucinating. My teachers congratulated me for my

achievement, and I thanked them for being so supportive to me. . . . I took up the licensure examination, but I failed. A teacher encouraged me to review more and take the next licensure exam. Finally, I passed the examination. I cried so much but thankful to the Almighty for the blessings.

Conclusion

Giving hope to less fortunate individuals coupled with providing moral and material support can transform their lives. Rosemarie's transformation is indeed a manifestation of the university's vision to give hope and transform the lives of its students. However, Rosemarie would not have achieved her transformation without her initiative. Her transformation was not an easy one, but she maintained her desire through hard work, humility, and perseverance. What Rosemarie did was explicitly explained by Alderfer (1969) that the development of one's competence and the realization of one's capability are essential for a person to grow, the person's satisfactory relations with others will build connections, and the person's physical well-being will lead to a better life.

Rosemarie's transformation cannot be achieved without her strong personality to face the challenges in her path to transformation. Rosemarie's experiences fit Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory. As explained by them, competence, autonomy, relatedness are innate needs of a person. Furthermore, Rosemarie's experiences made her a strong person. Her transformation validates McClelland's (1961) claim that the need to attain success is honed over time by a person's experiences. As explained further, an achiever would seek to stand out and value the recurrent appreciation of how well he or she is doing.

Rosemarie's experiences in achieving transformation in her persona as a mother of two children and a widow at a young age, as a school janitor in a university, and as an aspiring teacher at the same time were indeed full of challenges. Although her story cannot represent all the success stories in the world, in one way or another it can inspire others to find their niche of living a life with a purpose, whether as a giver or a receiver of any form of help that may lead to transformation.

Future studies may delve into the transformation of a larger sample of former working students of the university who are now faculty members, department heads, or college deans in the same university. Such kind of study can be conducted to find out if there are resemblances in the collective experiences of this particular group of former working students in the context of the university's vision statement of giving hope and transforming lives. Similar studies can also be conducted in other colleges or universities to ascertain whether there are manifestations which can be attributed to the institutions' respective vision statements.

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Renato C. Sagayno, DevEdD
Research Director
University of Cebu – Main Campus
Cebu City, Philippines
renatosagayno@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2333-7269>