

# **ACADEMIC LEADERS IN CONFLICT ZONE: A GROUNDED THEORY**

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**ABSTRACT:** Teachers in the field are expected to provide quality education but academic leaders in a conflict zone are expected to provide a safe and quality education. This study developed a theory on the academic leaders in conflict zone. It explored the different challenges encountered as well as their coping mechanism and the effect of their situation in their effectiveness as a school leader. The methodology is a qualitative approach which focuses on grounded theory. It made use of naturalistic paradigm with triangulation technique to facilitate the validation of data of the purposively chosen informants based on work location identified as conflict zone, with ethical consideration. It is an unstructured interview with demographic profile consists of the highest educational attainment, economic status, partner's occupation and family income. Academic leaders experienced different situation where their leadership were strengthened and it acquired them to make decisions to be able to secure everyone's safety. Travelling and deployment of their students was also a concern, knowing the unstable peace and order in the area. It also revealed that being employed in a conflict zone does not really affect their effectiveness as an academic leader hence, it even developed strong passion and persistency to do their task and responsibility. With cautiousness and with prayers, they will be able to serve the department of education for a safer and longer period of time. Providing quality education is every teacher's objective but in a conflict zone, providing safe and quality education is an academic leader's goal; securing himself, his teachers, his students and the school.

**KEYWORDS:** academic leaders, conflict zone, experience, safe and quality education

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Teachers are expected to provide quality education but in a conflict zone, they are more of an agent of peace building. They must first ensure and guarantee the school and students' security. Their function is not only to develop creative and responsive approaches to teaching and learning process which must be aligned to the schools' aims, objectives and implemented policies. But they are to provide safety and protections to its people yet, who would do this responsibilities when they, themselves are in danger?

Conflict zone is an area of extreme violence. It is a critical area that may be the site of a massacre, temporary refuge of a vulnerable population or the interface between violently opposed factions (Mackinlay, n). But in a Philippine scenario, it is also an area where a lot of working civilians are residing, living a normal life and functioning to their societal roles, such as teachers. Teaching in a conflict zone is a dangerous job. It made them questioned their security, stability and caused a lot of disruptions of instruction in education. Here, Teachers are not just provider of knowledge but also, as a warrior that ensures his/her students and the schools' safety. The goal now, is to provide safe, quality education. Teacher as agents of peace building are understood in relation to their capacity to influence their conflict-driven surroundings. It is their ability to think, feel and act in order to foster "values and attitudes that offer a basis for transforming conflict itself" (Novelli and Smith 2011). Hence, a role of academic leaders is very essential in conflict zone as front liners of peace building.

The researcher, as an educational management doctorand with a goal of becoming an academic leader in the future is worried and alarmed. She is aware of the fact that her own hometown is considered as a conflict zone. Just recent this year, a politician was ambushed and a weeks after, a murder of a police officer while heading home was also witnessed by passengers on the same bus. School incident, such as burning and stealing of school materials are also happening on some areas. School heads complained on missing items and some were even scared for their own selves while being deployed in the area.

Cano and Duarte (2016) says as cited in the report Education under attack of UNESCO (2010). Since 2007, there have been thousands of reported cases of students, teachers, professors, academics and other members of the educational community being taken prisoner, held in captivity, beaten, tortured, burnt alive, shot by rebels, armies and repressive regimes; imprisoned or raped by armed groups or forces in school or on their way to school. Due to their privileged position as conveyors of knowledge, their access to the most vulnerable members of the population and their embrace of political ideals that are respected by the community, those within the teaching profession are

a very tempting prey for armed groups and the military (UNESCO, 2010). Boyden and Rayder (1996) as cited by Graham-Brown (1994), Teachers are also prime targets, largely because they are regarded as important community members and are frequently more than usually politicized. This would only tell us that, Teachers are at risk, the moment they accepted their items on that particular location.

Education under Attack 2010 finds that systematic targeting of students, teachers, academics, education staff and institutions has been reported in a greater number of countries since then. Attacks intensified dramatically in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Thailand, according to reports: The number tripled in - Afghanistan from 2007 to 2008, up from 242 to 670; In Pakistan, 356 schools were destroyed or damaged in one small region at the centre of the battle between the Army and the Taliban; In India, nearly 300 schools were reportedly blown up by Maoist rebels between 2006 and 2009. While in Thailand the number of attacks on schools quadrupled between 2006 and 2007 to 164. In Georgia, 127 education institutions were destroyed or damaged in August 2008; In Gaza, more than 300 kindergarten, school and university buildings were damaged or severely damaged in three weeks during Israel's Operation Cast Lead at the turn of 2008-09. While in Iraq, 71 academics, two education officials and 37 students were killed in assassinations and targeted bombings between 2007 and 2009. In Colombia, 90 teachers were murdered from 2006 to 2008 (UNESCO, 2010, p. 21-22).

Teaching in conflict zone is risky and threatening. More especially, we are living in a country tag as a "war zone in disguise", as the Philippines was described on the report of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (2018). We ranked 4<sup>th</sup> with 933 recorded number of events with civilian targeting and ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the list of countries with the most civilian facilities in 2018. On the reports of UNESCO Education under attack 2010, it mentioned about 68 cases of extrajudicial killings and 259 cases of forced disappearance in 2007. A school principal suspected kidnapped by members of the Islamic separatist group, Abu Sayyaf 32 was found beheaded on 9 November 2009, He was the seventh state school teacher to be kidnapped in 2009. In March 2009, gunmen seized three teachers from an elementary school in the village of Bangkaw-Bangkaw, Naga. On 23 January 2009, three teachers from LandangGua Elementary School, Sacol Island, Zamboanga City, were kidnapped. They were returning from a work trip in a boat with seven other teachers when the vessel was intercepted by four men with assault rifles. The captors demanded a \$130,000 ransom and threatened to behead their prisoners. The teachers were held for four months, but were released on 26 May 2009. On 15 January 2008, gunmen, believed to be members of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), abducted a teacher in Tawi-tawi (UNESCO, 2010, p. 219-220).

These are just examples of hideous scenarios our Teachers are unfortunately into and we hope it won't add the numbers of violent cases involving teachers in the future considering our unstable political state. The numbers are just adding up and a lot of us, is still isn't aware of the life they had and once have.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study aimed to produce a theory on the Academic Leaders in conflict zone which will lead to understand the reason of staying in that situation despite the challenges encountered during the deployment. It also seeks to understand (1) the effect of these challenges to their effectively as school leaders; (2) their coping mechanism and; (3) how they were able to maintain/gauge personal (includes their family) and work's (teachers and student) security?

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is a qualitative research method using phenomenological grounded theory of Glasser (1978) that seeks to generate a theory on the experiences of academic leaders in the conflict zone. It is primarily through in-depth conversation and made use of naturalistic paradigm. It is an unstructured interview with demographic profile consists of the highest educational attainment, economic status, partner's occupation and family income.

The study was conducted in the selected municipalities of Zamboanga del Norte. It is found on the Southern part of Zamboanga Peninsula. Reportedly by Laput of Rappler (2017). Sirawai, one of the research locale, is a part of the Zamboanga del Norte's triple SB (towns of Sirawai, Sibuco, Siocon and Baliguian) area, where the MILF has maintained a camp with a Battalion-size fighters. Other bandit and kidnap-for-ransom groups also operate in "triple SB area." It is also a favourite escape location for lawless groups from Sulu and Basilan because of its dense forests and, authorities said, its largely sympathetic population making it a hazardous location.

Ten (10) purposively Academic Leaders were the key informants of this study with ethical considerations. They were academic leaders in different schools within the research locale with more than 15 years in service.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Informants	Age Bracket	Sex	Education	Current Position
1	31 y.o and above	M	M.A units	Head Teacher III
2	31 y.o and above	M	M.A graduate	Head Teacher III
3	31 y.o and above	M	M.A units	College Dean
4	31 y.o and above	M	M.A units	Head Teacher I
5	31 y.o and above	F	Ed. D graduate	Principal II
6	31 y.o and above	F	M.A graduate w/ Ed. D units	Principal II
7	31 y.o and above	M	Ed. D graduate	College Dean
8	31 y.o and above	M	M. A units	Head Teacher III
9	31 y.o and above	M	M.A graduate	Head Teacher III
10	31 y.o and above	M	M.A units	Principal II

Three (3) of the informants said that their monthly income ranges to 15,000 – 25,000. Four (4) said it ranges to 25,000-35,000 and three (3) of the informants has a monthly income above 35,000. One (1) is still single and the rest of the informants were married. Three (3) of the informants’ partners were Teachers with a monthly income ranges to 25,000-35,000, four (4) of the informant has a government employee partner with a monthly income ranges to 25,000- 35,000, one (1) informant’s partner only manages their farmer with above 35, 000 monthly income. Five (5) of the informants owned a business and a farm with total combined money of all the members of the family above 750,000 and five (5) of them, didn’t have a farm or business but earned a total combined money ranges to 250,000- 500,000 while one (1) of the five earned above 750,000 annually. These are factors identifying the demographic status of the informants in the conflict zone.

After the instruments were prepared, evaluated, validated and approved, the interview was administered on the informants’ availability of time and schedule, probably on their office, house or preferred place. Triangulation technique was also be used to facilitate validation of data through cross verification from informants’ colleague and family members. Further, a thematic analysis was also applied to gain deeper insights and knowledge from the data gathered.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Themes**

Five themes emerged from the academic leaders’ experience in the conflict zone, including (1) dodge a bullet, (2) off to never- never land, (3) ignorance is bliss, (4) call the shots and (5) on a wing and a prayer. (Table 2)

Table 2 Results: Themes, key concepts from the academic leaders and supporting quotes.

Themes	Key Concepts and Supporting Quotes
<b>Dodge a Bullet</b>	<b>Key concepts</b>
	Unstable peace and order situation of the area
	Academic Leaders were lampooned and threatened
	They have ways to avoid a serious problem and manage to escape difficulty
	<b>Supporting Quotes</b>
	<i>“Once, we were being lampooned/threatened. We received a mailing envelope with two (2) live cal. 45 pistol ammunition. A letter was also inserted saying “To (surname of the informants and his wife): Tig iisangbala 45 lang kayo.” (“Both of you are just a 45 bullet”). We surmised it came from a group of informal settlers who opposed and attempted to mar the perimeter survey on the whole school land reservation conducted but it developed and even intensified our persistency; we never retracted.” (informant 3)</i>

	<p><i>“Number 1 factor judsyanganoni retired ko kay mahadloknaman sad akong partner” (“It is the number 1 factor why I retired in the service, because my partner is already scared”).</i></p> <p><i>“...Nabalitanganaa daw mgaga motor duhasaekswelahannanaaysakay tig tulongagadala ug sakonanaaysulodbasurakuno, lagmit kay ila tong mgaarmas. Kidnappers man ilahinala. May gani kay sa central ko ga duty ato, mao to, gi report ramanpudsa police then kaloy-anwalarabiyapud.” (“ It was rumoured that there were 2 motorcycles roaming around the school, with 3 passengers on carrying sacks containing garbage, it was believed that they hid their armours on it and they were kidnappers, luckily, I was reporting in the Central school. It was reported to the police station and Thank God nothing really happened”).(informant 1)</i></p>
<b>Off to never-never land</b>	<b>Key concepts</b>
	Academic leaders usually travel a lot of hours to work
	Deployment of their students
	They have to travel through lumpy roads
	<b>Supporting Quotes</b>
	<i>“... Ako pa naman to tig dalaato ug kwartasaeskwelahan, human magmotorrabiya, diliramanpud ka unsaon kay ug naay mu atang, naa man kay ipakita ng letter nga nay signed saila commander nganakabayadnaka.” (“... I used to be the one, holding the money of the school and I travelled with my motorcycle, they won’t do anything to you if ever they will hold you back in the middle of the road, if you have the letter signed by their commander that you already paid”). (informant 2)</i>
	<i>“The deployment of our students who will undergo on-the-job-training (OJT) is a problem in which they will travel about six to seven hours by land. It is rugged, rocky, long and winding road, it is of course my look out for the travelling safety of the students.” (informant 7)</i>
<b>Ignorance is bliss or not</b>	<b>Key concepts</b>
	If they do not know anything, they do not worry about it.
	They have eyes on new unfamiliar faces
	Knowing what to do and keeping their selves and others safe at any cost
	<b>Supporting Quotes</b>
	<i>“Wala ko nahadlok kay wala ko nakabalo, Kita ko nga nay mgatawogatapokdidto, according saakongmga teachers kay bag.oradawnaayingkwentro, walarasadsaakoa kay wala man ko na aware”.</i>
	<i>(“ I wasn’t really afraid because I didn’t knew, I saw that there were a lot of people around that area and according to my teachers, there was a commotion between the military and civilian, who were involved in drug operation a minutes ago, I just passed by and I am not even aware of it”). (informant 2)</i>
	<i>“We discourse immediately to the community regarding the presence of the new faces in the area” (informant 6)</i>
<b>Call the shots</b>	<b>Key concepts</b>
	Make important decision
	Decisions must be from the consensus of everybody
	<b>Supporting Quotes</b>
	<i>““Naatu time nga,nay ambush saunahan, ang mgasamaran kay niagi man dapitsa</i>

	<i>school, symprelisdudnjud ma control ang mgabata kay patimgainahannila kay gipanguhanamansila, though wala to syanapunggan and paulionnimusilaperonasabtan man natonganagahadloksila, unahonjudnato ang safety saatongmgabata. Basigunsaon mag paka head jud ta,” (“there was a time when there was an ambush in the mountain, those who were wounded passed by and the students were alarmed, their parents even came and fetch their children. I couldn’t control them, but I need to send them home and I understand that they were also scared and I must really secure the safety of the students. Whatever happens, we must stand still and act as their head”).(informant 1)</i>
	<i>“I was in a situation that I have to think first and balance the positive and negative circumstances may arise before I took an action or had my decision together with my colleague. Even as a school head, the decisions must be from the consensus of everybody”</i>
<b>On a wing and a prayer</b>	<b>Key concepts</b>
	Rely on prayers
	<b>Supporting Quotes</b>
	<i>“We kept on praying” (informant 3)</i>
	<i>“Prayer is our weapon on our daily basis” (informant 1)</i>

**Theme 1 Dodge a Bullet**

Informants expressed that, in a conflict zone, they had to dodge a bullet or must manage to avoid a difficult situation. It is a challenge that the peace and order is unstable in their workplace. Informant 3 shared a time where they were threatened, he said

*“Once, we were being lampooned/threatened. We received a mailing envelope with two (2) live cal. 45 pistol ammunition. A letter was also inserted saying “To (surname of the informants and his wife): Tig iisangbala 45 lang kayo.” (“Both of you are just a 45 bullet”). We surmised it came from a group of informal settlers who opposed and attempted to mar the perimeter survey on the whole school land reservation conducted.”*

In a conflict zone, being threatened in the workplace is just typical. Other Informants felt vulnerable to risky circumstances such as kidnapping. This was testified by informant 1 when he said

*“...Nabalitanganaa daw mgaga motor duhasaekswelahannganaaysakay tig tulongagadala ug sakonanaaysulodbasurakuno, lagmit kay ila tong mgaarmas. Kidnappers man ilahinala. May gani kay sa central ko ga duty ato, mao to, gi report ramanpudsa police then kaloy-an walarabiyapud.” (“It was rumoured that there were 2 motorcycles roaming around the school, with 3 passengers on carrying sacks containing garbage, it was believed that they hid their armours on it and they were kidnappers, luckily, I was reporting in the Central school. It was reported to the police station and Thank God nothing really happened”).*

**Theme 2 Off to never-never land**

Never-never land is an imaginary place where everything is perfect and no-one has any problems, but ironically never means not at all. So, in reality, it was entirely opposite to what academic leaders seemed to experience when it comes to deployment. One thing about being an academic leader is that they are employed everywhere. It became more challenging when they were employed in a conflict zone or to an area, where extreme violence is visible. Most of informants had to travel lumpy roads or deploy their students for their school activities and looking out for their safety is also their responsibility.

Informant 2 had encountered a situation a couple of years back then. He said, “Nakaapiljud ko atong monthly maghatag kay kung dili ka maghatag, sunugon ang imong motor.” (“I was one of those who will give monthly payment because if you won’t give, they will burn your motorcycle”). He also added, “... Ako pa naman to tig dalaato ug kwartasaekswelahan, human magmotorrabiya, diliramanpud ka unsaon kay ug naay mu atang, naa man kay ipakitang letter nga nay signed saila commander nganakabayadnaka.” (“... I used to be the one, holding the money of the school and I travelled with my motorcycle, they won’t do anything to you if ever they will hold you back in the middle of the road, if you have the letter signed by their commander that you already paid”).

In his experienced, they had this association where they will give the money for the monthly payment, but he never attended one, he just religiously contributes the money to someone, just so they won't be involved and worst harmed. He doesn't know, if it is still functioning in the moment but he is certain that it is still experienced by some of the teachers in the near municipality but just too afraid to share or admit it. They have no choice but to involve on the process because they have to travel to work.

As an academic leader, deployment of their students is also their concern. Informant 7 stated that *"The deployment of our students who will undergo on-the-job-training (OJT) is a problem in which they will travel about six to seven hours by land. It is rugged, rocky, long and winding road, it is of course my look out for the travelling safety of the students."* He added *"...it makes me vigilant. I am so careful and watchful for the safety of the students who will undergo OJT, regarding the security of the students during travel time, they will be accompanied by the Dean and OJT coordinator to make sure of their safety and indorse to the different industry in charge."*

### **Theme 3 Ignorance is bliss or not**

Not knowing anything is actually a blessing for some of the informants, it will give them no worries and stress because they aren't aware at the first place. But for some, being cautious and alert is a must, especially if you are employed in a conflict zone.

Informant 2 stated that where there was a time when he was heading to the school and didn't even know something happened. *"Wala ko nahadlok kay wala ko nakabalo, Kita ko nga nay mgatawogatapokdidto, according saakong mga teachers kay bag.oradawnaayingkwentro, walarasadsaakoa kay wala man ko na aware".* (***"I wasn't really afraid because I didn't knew, I saw that there were a lot of people around that area and according to my teachers, there was a commotion between the military and civilian, who were involved in drug operation a minutes ago, I just passed by and I am not even aware of it"***).

*It is also important to be vigilant. Knowing what to do in a possible circumstances is much better than feeling sorry for being aware of it. Informant 6 shared that if there are unfamiliar faces around, he said, "We discourse immediately to the community regarding the presence of the new faces in the area".*

The same and true for Informant 5, when he testified that *"if there were information heard by us about the peace and order in the community, we need to seek first the assurance of the barangay officials/ barangay tanods because these people were the right person where to confirm the situation."*

Informant 4 shared that *"security is maintained as to our personal safety, ask assistance/request school security guard to be sensitive and kin observer as to the safety of the environment"*.

Having been threatened once, informant 3 shared how vigilant they become. He said that, *"We augmented the strength of our armed guards from Philippine army and Philippine national police."*

*As for Informant 1, he said, "Dili nalangjud scheduled ang paglakaw, if mubisita ko sa farm or sa resort kay mag dependerasakanus.a, dilina mag sige ug gawas2x. (***"My errands are not scheduled, if I want to visit the farm or the resort, it can be anytime, and I am not usually outside"***), the same with informant 3 when he said, "... We increased our vigilance and mitigated our exposure outside."*

### **Theme 4 Call the shots**

One of the responsibilities of an academic leader is to make decisions. You must have the initiative in deciding how something should be done. Decisions that may test ones' leadership skills. Decisions that are for the safety of his/her teachers and students and as an academic leader, they really had to stay on their posts despite uncontrollable circumstances.

Informant 1, also shared a situations where his leadership was tested had to make a decision, *"Naatu time nga,nay ambush saunahan, ang mgasamaran kay niagi man dapitsa school, symprelisudnajud ma control ang mgabata kay patimgainahannila kay gipanguhanamansila, though wala to syanapungganperonasabtan man natonganagahadloksila, unahonjudnato ang safety saatongmgabata. Basigunsaon mag paka headjud ta,"* (***"there was a time when there was an ambush in the mountain, those who were wounded passed by and the students were alarmed, their parents even came and fetch their children. I couldn't control them but I understand that they were also scared and I must really secure the safety of the students. Whatever happens, we must stand still and act as their head"***).

While as for Informant 2, *"...Dili ta magpaka hero".* (***"...Don't try be a hero"***). These are the words of informant 2, when he said about the things to do to secure the safety of his teachers, the school and himself. *"Coordinate with the brgy. Captain, if muingungani ang captain ngaayawsa ta adtodilha then dili, di ta magpaka hero, in that way*

*ma secure nimuimong safety patisaimong mga teacher*". (*"Coordinate with the brgy. Captain, if the Captain will advise you, not to go on that certain area then don't, in that way, you will be able to secure yourself and your teachers"*).

**Theme 5 On a wing and a prayer**

Informants are not just employed in the area, but most of them are already residing on these places. Possible violent can happened any time and they only have divine help and luck to rely on. They have been cautious on their daily activities and they all agreed on the best weapon to have, which is prayer, constant prayers on the things that they do and will do.

Informant 3 said that, "we kept on praying". While informant 1 shared, "Prayer is our weapon on our daily basis".

**Hypothesis and Propositions****Theme 1 Dodge a Bullet****Theme 2 Off to never-never land****Hypothesis 1** If being an Academic Leader means to be employed outside your comfort zone, particularly in a conflict area where informal settlers are around and that you have to dodge a bullet or must be able to manage a difficult situation then one must be holistically prepared in being employed in a conflict zone.**Proposition 1** Academic leaders in conflict zone are not just equipped with pedagogical knowledge but also with life skills required, in order to avoid difficult situations in a conflict zone.**Theme 3 Ignorance is bliss or not****Hypothesis 2** Being not aware of what's happening around or too much perception is both a setback then one must be cautious enough to survive in a conflict zone.**Proposition 2** Academic leaders in conflict zone are to calm and composed but at the same time; they are alert enough to know what is going on around.**Theme 4 Call the shots****Hypothesis 3** If being an Academic Leader in conflict zone means, you must have the initiative in deciding how something should be done then one must be responsible enough to be accountable for.**Proposition 3** Academic Leaders in conflict zone are decision makers that are always for the benefit of the many, most specially its' subordinate. And in a conflict zone, it is always for the safety of the teachers, students and the school in general.**Theme 5 On a wing and a prayer****Hypothesis 4** If being employed in a conflict zone means possible violent can happened any time then, they only have divine help and luck to rely on.**Proposition 4** In whatever circumstances, prayer is always the best weapon of Academic Leaders in conflict zone.**THEORY**

As to results of this study, **3C's + P Model of Academic Leaders in Conflict Zone** were formulated. Academic leader in conflict zone must not just someone who is competent but also cautious, courageous and pious. Because no one can really predict what will happen. Being competent as a leader, extra alert and brave, to exceed threats and violent contacts and of course, with prayers one will be saved. Being an academic leader means, a fighter to his teachers and students; and armour to his school.

*Indeed, Academic leader signifies the task of providing not just quality education but a safe, quality education. With the 3 C's and P model, safe and quality education can be achieved.*



**Figure 1. 3 C's and P Model of Academic Leader in Conflict Zone**

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