

FROM PUBLIC-SCHOOL TEACHING TO DIVISION-OFFICE EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: A LONGITUDINAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Moving from classroom teaching to system-level educational administration requires both technical role learning and reconstruction of professional identity. This longitudinal analytic autoethnography examined my transition from nine years of public-school teaching to a division-office education specialist role during the first 16 months of appointment, from August 2024 to November 2025. The study asked how I experienced and interpreted changes in role expectations, professional identity, and engagement with system-level educational constraints. Data were generated through contemporaneous experiential journals, bi-weekly artifact-based reflections, and monthly retrospective entries linking the new role with prior teaching experience. A six-phase reflexive thematic analysis was conducted, followed by interpretation through role identity theory and complexity leadership theory. Three interrelated themes were developed: navigating ambiguous and expanding role expectations, negotiating continuity between pedagogical and administrative identities, and translating classroom experience into context-sensitive responses to system-level constraints. The analysis shows that the transition involved neither abandonment of the teacher identity nor a simple acquisition of administrative procedures. Instead, pedagogical commitments became resources for interpreting policy, coordination, and organizational responsibility. The study contributes a role-specific account of division-office administration and proposes that induction and mentoring should address identity negotiation alongside technical competence. The findings are analytically transferable but remain bounded to one participant and one organizational setting.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Career transition, Educational administration, Professional identity, Role ambiguity

INTRODUCTION

Moving from classroom teaching to educational administration is a work-role transition that changes the scale of responsibility, the range of stakeholders, the temporal organization of work, and the criteria by which competence is judged. Work-transition theory explains such movement as a process of personal adaptation and role innovation rather than a single occupational event (Nicholson, 1984). Professionals entering unfamiliar roles often test provisional ways of presenting themselves, interpreting expectations, and integrating prior expertise with new organizational demands (Ibarra, 1999). These processes are particularly consequential in education because a teacher's established sense of professional purpose is closely connected to learners, classroom practice, and immediate evidence of educational impact.

Research on novice educational leaders consistently identifies uncertainty, role socialization, emotional strain, and identity transformation during entry into administration. Studies of aspiring and beginning principals show that formal preparation does not eliminate the practical and symbolic difficulty of becoming an administrator (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). New leaders must interpret ambiguous expectations, establish legitimacy, and learn how authority operates through relationships rather than only through position (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Similar tensions have been documented when teachers move into vice-principal and assistant-principal roles, where personal change interacts with organizational passage and emotional adjustment (Armstrong, 2012; Cohen & Schechter, 2019). Recent research further shows that the transition from teacher to school principal is a

longitudinal identity process involving discontinuity, experimentation, and reconstruction of professional meaning (Mollá & Castelló, 2024).

The literature on teacher identity helps explain why these transitions can be destabilizing. Teacher identity is not a fixed personal attribute; it is negotiated through biography, institutional expectations, professional relationships, and changing policy conditions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teachers may sustain relatively stable commitments while experiencing periods of vulnerability when organizational conditions challenge their sense of efficacy and moral purpose (Day et al., 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009). Competing discourses of professionalism can also position educators simultaneously as autonomous experts, accountable employees, collaborative practitioners, and agents of reform (Sachs, 2001). A move into administration therefore creates more than a skills gap: it may alter which professional identity is recognized, how success is experienced, and whether prior pedagogical values remain visible in system-level work.

Leadership identity research similarly emphasizes that becoming a leader depends on relational processes of claiming, granting, and negotiating identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Leadership expertise develops as individuals construct deeper and more differentiated self-understandings of responsibility, influence, and collective work (Lord & Hall, 2005). In educational settings, perceived role expectations can shape whether teachers engage in leadership behavior and whether they understand leadership as compatible with, or separate from, their teacher identity (Chen, 2025). These perspectives suggest that the central question is not simply whether a former teacher can perform administrative tasks, but how the individual interprets the relationship between pedagogical identity and an emerging administrative identity.

Context is equally important. Educational leadership is embedded in organizational scale, policy environment, culture, hierarchy, and the distribution of resources; leadership theories lose explanatory power when context is treated as background rather than as a constitutive condition (Hallinger, 2018). Research in Asian and developing education systems highlights the influence of institutional relationships, policy implementation demands, and local variation on administrative practice (Hallinger & Walker, 2017; Oplatka, 2004). Policy environments can also reshape leaders' autonomy by expanding accountability while limiting the conditions under which decisions are made (Thompson et al., 2021). A division-office education specialist occupies a particularly complex position between central policy and school-level practice, coordinating across schools without the same direct authority or learner contact associated with classroom teaching or school principalship.

Existing studies have primarily examined principal preparation, entry into formal school leadership, or transitions to assistant and vice-principal roles. Less attention has been given to the longitudinal first-person experience of moving from public-school teaching into a division-office specialist position. This role involves policy interpretation, professional support, coordination, reporting, and influence across organizational boundaries. It is neither a continuation of classroom teaching nor equivalent to principalship. The empirical and conceptual gap therefore concerns how a former teacher makes sense of an expanded but less directly observable form of educational impact, and how classroom-based knowledge is retained, revised, or constrained in system-level administration.

Role Identity and Complexity Leadership

Role identity theory provides the primary interpretive lens. The theory proposes that people organize self-meaning around socially recognized roles and the expectations, relationships, and standards attached to those roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). A transition may produce role ambiguity when established expectations no longer fit the new setting, identity conflict when

two salient roles appear incompatible, and identity continuity when prior commitments are reinterpreted as resources for the new role. In this study, the framework directs attention to the movement from a teacher identity centered on learners, instruction, and classroom judgment toward an education-specialist identity centered on coordination, policy implementation, institutional indicators, and accountability to multiple stakeholders.

Complexity leadership theory is used as a complementary contextual lens. It distinguishes administrative functions that provide formal structure, adaptive processes through which people respond to emerging problems, and enabling functions that connect formal organization with locally generated knowledge (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The theory helps explain why division-office work involved incomplete information, interdependence, competing priorities, and the need to connect policy requirements with diverse school conditions. The relationship between the frameworks is sequential: role identity theory explains how the transition was experienced at the level of self-conception, while complexity leadership theory explains the organizational conditions under which identity negotiation and adaptive judgment occurred.

The study contributes by focusing on a role that remains conceptually underrepresented in transition research, by following the first 16 months of appointment rather than relying on a single retrospective interview, and by showing how a hybrid pedagogical-administrative identity may connect classroom realities with system-level responsibility. The objective was to provide a temporally situated account of the transition and to develop context-sensitive propositions for induction, mentoring, and leadership development. The guiding research question was: How did I experience and interpret changes in role expectations, professional identity, and responses to system-level challenges during the transition from public-school teaching to a division-office education specialist role?

METHOD

Research Design and Participant

The study used a longitudinal analytic autoethnographic case-study design. Analytic autoethnography combines systematic self-observation with explicit engagement in theoretical analysis and the organizational world in which experience occurs (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnographic inquiry treats personal experience as culturally and institutionally situated rather than as an isolated autobiography (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2006). The bounded case was my transition from public-school teacher in basic education to education specialist in a division office. I served as both participant and analyst. The design was interpretive rather than evaluative: it sought to understand how the transition was experienced and made meaningful, not to measure the effectiveness of the division office or establish causal effects. As a single case, the study aimed for depth, resonance, and naturalistic transferability rather than statistical generalization (Stake, 1995).

The professional trajectory relevant to the case comprised nine years and one month as a public-school teacher in basic education, from June 2, 2015 to July 2024, followed by appointment as an education specialist in a division office from August 2024. The focal observation period covered the first 16 months of the administrative appointment, from August 2024 through November 2025. A preparatory reflection was recorded in July 2024, and a post-transition synthesis was initiated in December 2025. Reflections on the earlier teaching period were included only when they helped interpret events and identity tensions in the new role.

Reflective Instrument and Data Collection

The reflective instrument consisted of three complementary journal formats rather than a standardized scale. Real-time experiential entries documented consequential events, immediate reactions, role uncertainty, decisions, relationships, and emerging learning either daily or when

a notable event occurred. Bi-weekly artifact-based reflections considered work products and administrative materials to trace changes in professional approach. Monthly retrospective entries connected prior teaching experience with current administrative challenges. The records were created digitally, dated, and organized chronologically so that changes in interpretation could be examined across the transition period. The design intentionally combined contemporaneous and retrospective reflection: contemporaneous entries reduced exclusive dependence on later recall, whereas retrospective entries made longer-term identity change more visible.

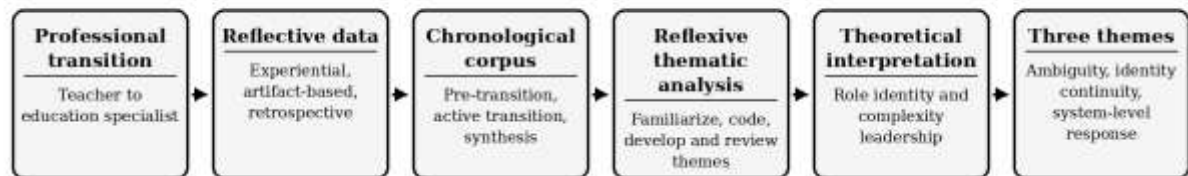


Figure 1. Data Generation and Reflexive Thematic Analysis Workflow

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The material was analyzed by one participant-analyst using the six-phase reflexive thematic-analysis process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Analysis involved repeated familiarization with journals and reflective memos, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes, iterative review against the chronological corpus, definition and naming of themes, and production of an interpretive account. Initial coding attended to the explicit meanings of events, emotions, role demands, decisions, and perceived changes. Theoretical concepts were introduced after candidate themes had been developed, allowing role identity theory and complexity leadership theory to deepen interpretation rather than predetermine coding. Qualitative data-management software was used only to store, retrieve, and group coded segments; interpretive decisions remained the responsibility of the researcher. Candidate themes were revised when they lacked internal coherence, overlapped substantially, or could not be supported across more than one part of the transition record. An analytic log documented coding decisions, changes in theme boundaries, and links between reflective evidence and theoretical interpretation. The final themes were treated as interpretive constructions rather than as objective discoveries. This position is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which quality depends on theoretical coherence, reflexive accountability, and a transparent relationship between data, analysis, and claims rather than on inter-rater agreement.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Trustworthiness was approached through sustained engagement with the longitudinal record, comparison across the three reflective data-source categories, attention to discrepant experiences, periodic consultation with trusted colleagues, and thick description of the role context. Because all primary records were generated by the same researcher, comparison across journals and artifacts is described as data-source comparison rather than independent triangulation. The quality criteria emphasized credibility, sincerity, resonance, meaningful coherence, and transparent limitations (Tracy, 2010). My dual position as participant and analyst provided direct access to subtle changes in judgment and identity, but also created risks of selective attention, self-presentation, confirmation bias, and retrospective ordering. Reflexive notes and experiences that challenged the preferred narrative were therefore retained as analytically important.

A relational-ethics orientation was necessary because autoethnographic writing may indirectly represent colleagues, administrators, teachers, students, and identifiable workplace events (Ellis, 2007; Tolich, 2010; Tullis, 2021). Names and nonessential identifying details were withheld or generalized, and work artifacts were considered only when their use did not create an unreasonable risk of deductive disclosure. Ethical reflexivity was treated as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time procedural decision, consistent with the need to recognize ethically important moments during qualitative inquiry (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Self-disclosure was limited to material with a clear analytical purpose, and the possible effects of publication on continuing organizational relationships were considered throughout the writing process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis developed three interrelated themes that form a transition trajectory rather than a universal sequence. First, ambiguity emerged as the scale and structure of work changed. Second, this ambiguity generated tension between pedagogical and administrative identities. Third, the emerging administrative identity drew selectively on classroom experience when interpreting system-level constraints. The tables present analytical summaries of the reflective material; they should be read as organized representations of one longitudinal case, not as independently observed measures or evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Navigating Ambiguous and Expanding Role Expectations

The earliest and most persistent tension concerned the loss of a familiar structure for work. Teaching had organized time around class schedules, lesson preparation, assessment, and direct interaction with learners. The division-office role widened the field of responsibility to include meetings, reporting, policy interpretation, coordination, and decisions with consequences beyond one classroom. Reflective summaries repeatedly described difficulty prioritizing tasks without clear guidelines, learning the boundaries of responsibility, and feeling the increased weight of decisions affecting multiple stakeholders.

This theme was not reducible to workload. It concerned uncertainty about which demands defined competent performance, how competing tasks should be ordered, and how educational impact could be recognized when outcomes were indirect. Nicholson's (1984) work-role transition model helps explain the need to adjust both the self and the role environment. Similar studies show that new administrators must negotiate organizational passages, emotional disruption, and expectations that are often tacit rather than formally specified (Armstrong, 2012; Cohen & Schechter, 2019). Beginning leaders also report that the apparent authority of the new position coexists with uncertainty about legitimacy and responsibility (Cowie & Crawford, 2008).

Role identity theory interprets this pattern as a mismatch between a well-developed teacher identity and a new role whose expectations had not yet become stable or personally integrated. The specialist's influence was broader than classroom authority but less immediately visible. This resembles the challenge novice principals face when external stakeholders expect them to satisfy multiple and sometimes incompatible demands (Prado Tuma & Spillane, 2019), although the division-office role differs in authority and organizational scale. Hallinger's (2018) contextual perspective further suggests that ambiguity was produced not only by inexperience but by interdependence across policy, schools, actors, and local conditions.

Table 1. Analytical Summary of Changes in Role Expectations

Aspect	Teaching role	Division-office role	Interpretive significance
Primary focus	Student learning and classroom management	Policy implementation, coordination, and division-level management	Adjustment to a wider scope of responsibility
Daily work	Lesson planning, teaching, and assessment	Meetings, report writing, coordination, and decision-making	Difficulty prioritizing tasks when expectations were not yet clear
Relationships	Direct interaction with students and fellow teachers	Interaction with school heads, administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders	Loss of close student contact alongside expansion of professional networks
Decision-making	Primarily classroom-level judgment	Decisions and recommendations with consequences across schools or units	Greater perceived weight of responsibility
Time structure	Relatively stable schedule organized around classes	Fluid schedule with competing and sometimes unplanned priorities	Need to develop new routines for attention and task sequencing

Table 1 shows that ambiguity arose from simultaneous changes in focus, daily routines, relationships, decision scale, and time structure. These dimensions are analytically connected: a wider stakeholder network increased coordination demands, while the absence of a classroom timetable made priorities less predictable. The theme therefore marks a movement from bounded expertise toward distributed responsibility. It also establishes the conditions under which identity conflict became visible, because familiar cues of teacher competence could no longer fully organize the new work.

Negotiating Continuity Between Pedagogical and Administrative Identities

The transition required more than learning procedures; it required renegotiating the meaning of being an educator. In teaching, professional purpose had been experienced through student-centered practice, subject expertise, classroom interaction, and visible learner progress. In the administrative role, performance was increasingly interpreted through policy implementation, coordination, leadership, communication, and institutional indicators. The reflective summaries described a sense of loss associated with reduced daily teaching, periods of doubt about the career change, and tension between developing administrative competence and maintaining pedagogical expertise.

The identity literature suggests that these tensions are neither unusual nor merely personal. Teacher identity is constructed through interaction between biography and institutional conditions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), and it may become vulnerable when new expectations disrupt established sources of efficacy and moral purpose (Day et al., 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009). Administrative expectations also introduce competing discourses of professionalism, including compliance, coordination, accountability, and organizational improvement (Sachs, 2001). The central identity task was therefore not to replace “teacher” with “administrator,” but to construct a workable relationship between two salient professional identities.

The analysis indicates continuity as well as conflict. Pedagogical values did not disappear; they became a standard against which administrative requirements were judged. This resembles the use of provisional selves in professional adaptation, where individuals experiment with new role performances without fully abandoning prior identities (Ibarra, 1999). Leadership identity can emerge when claims to responsibility are recognized and integrated through social interaction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), while deeper leadership skill requires increasingly complex conceptions of self and collective work (Lord & Hall, 2005). In the present case, a more integrated position emerged when administrative work was interpreted as educationally meaningful because it could influence conditions across multiple schools.

This hybrid identity is consistent with research showing that principals adapt by reworking rather than erasing their professional selves (Notman, 2017) and that the teacher-to-principal transition involves continuing identity negotiation rather than a single conversion (Mollá & Castelló, 2024). It also extends research on role expectations and teacher leadership by illustrating how a former teacher may recognize system-level coordination as a form of educational leadership while continuing to evaluate it through pedagogical commitments (Chen, 2025).

Table 2. Pedagogical-Administrative Identity Negotiation

Identity dimension	Pedagogical identity	Administrative identity	Integration tension
Core values	Student-centered learning and direct educational impact	Policy implementation, coordination, efficiency, and institutional improvement	Maintaining attention to learner needs within administrative constraints
Primary skills	Pedagogy, content knowledge, assessment, and classroom management	Leadership, communication, organization, analysis, and coordination	Developing new capabilities while experiencing reduced daily teaching practice
Professional growth	Improving teaching and learner engagement	Developing leadership and management judgment	Balancing administrative development with continued pedagogical credibility
Evidence of success	Student learning, engagement, and growth	Quality of implementation, coordination, and institutional performance	Redefining success when outcomes are indirect and distributed
Job satisfaction	Immediate contact with learners and visible progress	Contribution to broader organizational improvement	Periods of doubt followed by a more integrated account of educational impact

Table 2 indicates that identity negotiation occurred across values, skills, professional growth, evidence of success, and job satisfaction. The administrative identity initially appeared to displace the teacher identity because student contact and visible learning outcomes were reduced. Over time, however, the two identities became more compatible when classroom knowledge was reframed as a basis for judging the feasibility and educational meaning of division-level decisions. The contribution is therefore not the observation that teaching and administration differ, but the explanation of how continuity was constructed across that difference.

Translating Classroom Experience into Responses to System-Level Constraints

The third theme concerned how prior teaching experience shaped the interpretation of system-level problems. Resource constraints, curriculum change, urban-rural variation, workload, teacher retention, and professional support were no longer encountered only as classroom conditions; they became matters requiring coordination, prioritization, and policy implementation. The reflective material suggested that firsthand teaching experience increased sensitivity to school-level consequences and encouraged attention to feasibility, inclusion, communication, and the practical burden placed on teachers.

Complexity leadership theory is useful because it distinguishes formal administrative requirements from adaptive knowledge generated through interaction with schools (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The division-office role required administrative functions such as reporting, monitoring, and procedural coordination, but it also required enabling connections between policy and local experience. Prior classroom knowledge did not automatically produce correct solutions; rather, it provided questions about implementation, unintended consequences, and the conditions under which policy could become meaningful in diverse school settings.

Table 3. System-Level Challenges and Context-Sensitive Interpretations

Challenge	Teaching-position perspective	Division-office perspective	Context-sensitive proposition
Resource constraints	Limited materials and technology affected classroom options	Budget prioritization and uneven needs across schools became visible	Prioritize transparently and assess consequences for teaching and learning
Curriculum and policy change	Teaching methods had to respond to new curriculum requirements	Implementation required coordination, communication, and monitoring	Link policy guidance with school-level feedback and professional learning
Urban-rural differences	Teaching conditions varied by location and access to resources	Division-level work exposed diverse implementation needs	Avoid uniform assumptions and use flexible, context-responsive support
Teacher workload and retention	Non-teaching tasks affected instructional attention and well-being	Workload became a system-design and coordination concern	Examine administrative processes and invite teacher feedback before proposing changes
Professional support	Teachers required practical and relevant development opportunities	The specialist role involved planning or supporting professional learning	Use classroom experience to improve relevance while evaluating implementation evidence

This context-sensitive interpretation is consistent with evidence that educational leadership varies across cultural and institutional environments (Hallinger & Walker, 2017; Oplatka, 2004). It also reflects the broader principle that leaders must connect policy expectations with organizational learning rather than assume that formal change will translate directly into practice (Fullan, 2015). Policy systems can expand responsibility while constraining local autonomy (Thompson et al., 2021), making communication with teachers and school heads

essential for identifying implementation problems that may not be visible from the division level.

Table 3 shows how the same educational problems acquired a different scale and form in the new role. Resource constraints became prioritization questions; curriculum change became a coordination process; geographic variation became a challenge of differentiated support; and teacher workload became a system-design concern. The table does not establish that particular programs or recommendations were successful. It identifies an emerging orientation toward using classroom knowledge as a bridge between formal administration and adaptive local understanding.

Cross-Theme Interpretation and Scholarly Contribution

Across the themes, the transition can be understood as movement from bounded expertise toward distributed responsibility. Ambiguity became visible when classroom routines no longer organized the work; identity tension intensified when administrative criteria of success appeared to compete with student-centered commitments; and adaptation became possible when pedagogical experience was reframed as a resource for interpreting rather than bypassing system-level requirements. The themes are therefore analytically related: ambiguity disturbed identity, identity negotiation shaped learning, and the emerging hybrid identity influenced how systemic constraints were understood.

The case confirms established findings that entry into educational administration involves socialization and identity transformation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991). It extends that discussion by focusing on a division-office specialist rather than a principal or generic manager. The role expanded the geographical and organizational reach of influence while reducing direct authority over instruction and immediate evidence of impact. The case also complicates a simple teacher-to-administrator binary: pedagogical identity remained active and could function as a bridge between policy and practice. This is an interpretive contribution from one longitudinal self-study and requires comparison with other specialists, divisions, and appointment pathways.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings support several context-sensitive propositions. Division leaders and human-resource units could provide structured induction that clarifies role boundaries, decision authority, priority setting, reporting expectations, and the relationship between division-office work and school-level outcomes. Mentoring could combine technical guidance with discussion of identity loss, ethical dilemmas, reduced classroom contact, and the redefinition of educational impact; mentoring should be evaluated rather than assumed to be effective (Daresh & Playko, 1994). New specialists could also receive regular opportunities to consult teachers and school heads when interpreting implementation problems. Leadership development could use realistic scenarios involving resource allocation, competing stakeholder demands, rural-urban variation, and policy adaptation. Any transition program should be piloted and evaluated with multiple specialists and school-level stakeholders before adoption at scale.

Contextual Transferability and International Dialogue

The case resonates with studies of novice leaders in several settings, but the international literature is used as a selective scholarly dialogue rather than as a systematic cross-national comparison. Role conception and identity transformation have been reported across principal, assistant-principal, and vice-principal transitions, yet position, authority, appointment pathway, organizational scale, and policy context limit direct equivalence. Transferability depends on whether readers recognize similar conditions: movement from direct teaching to system-level

coordination, uncertain role boundaries, reduced learner contact, broader stakeholder responsibility, and the need to connect formal policy with local knowledge. The study therefore offers concepts and questions that may travel, while its empirical claims remain bounded to the reported division-office experience (Stake, 1995).

Limitations

Several limitations shape the interpretation. The account concerns one participant and one organizational setting; it cannot establish the prevalence of the themes or represent all education specialists. The dual role of participant and analyst creates risks of selective attention, self-presentation, confirmation bias, and construction of a more coherent narrative than the experience originally possessed. Retrospective entries may be affected by reconstructive memory, particularly when earlier teaching experience is interpreted through the perspective of the new role (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Contemporaneous journaling reduces but does not remove this risk. The three primary data-source categories were generated by the same researcher and are therefore not independent participant or observational evidence. Finally, colleagues and workplace events may remain indirectly identifiable even when names are removed, which makes relational ethics and deductive-disclosure safeguards essential. Future studies should compare multiple specialists across divisions and incorporate interviews, observation, or documentary analysis where ethically appropriate.

CONCLUSION

This longitudinal analytic autoethnography examined one transition from public-school teaching to division-office educational administration. The analysis developed three connected themes: ambiguous and expanding role expectations, negotiation between pedagogical and administrative identities, and use of classroom experience to interpret system-level constraints. Within this bounded case, the transition involved both discontinuity and continuity. Work became less structured around direct learner contact and more dependent on coordination, policy implementation, and distributed responsibility, yet pedagogical values remained an important basis for judging administrative action. The study contributes a role-specific account that differs from principalship and shows how a hybrid professional identity may connect formal policy with classroom realities. The findings suggest that induction should clarify role boundaries and priorities, while mentoring should address identity reconstruction as well as technical procedures. These implications are propositions derived from one context, not evidence of system-wide effectiveness. The study's value lies in analytical depth, reflexive transparency, and the questions it raises for comparative research on education specialists, organizational socialization, and leadership development.

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