

An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of a Transformational Leader

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John Quincy Adams once said, as cited in Mluttrell, (2011), “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.”

This quote encapsulates a fundamental truth that resonates deeply with my life journey. remarkably simple yet true and pertinent to my life. Born in 1973 in Pune, India in a family of a businessperson comprising my parents and two brothers, I experienced childhood like any other girl in town - unique and blessed, with occasional glimpses of my talents. It was through the vision of my mother and the influence of my younger brother that these talents flourished, leading me to pursue education and a career in teaching. Deciding to step away from my family business, I embarked on my path to fulfill my aspirations.

Graduating with a degree in commerce in 1994 marked the beginning of my journey into the field of education. From 1994-1997 I volunteered to teach subjects like accounts, economics, and management to the *backward class* candidates.⁴ This experience not only enriched my self-awareness but also laid the foundation for my development as a leader.

Toegel and Barsoux (2012), stress the significance of self-awareness in effective leadership, emphasizing the need for leaders to recognize and leverage their innate tendencies for optimal performance. This sentiment is echoed by Bradberry who underscores the pivotal role of self-awareness in emotional intelligence, advocating for the understanding and adept management of emotions to navigate interpersonal relationships and actions effectively (Ellevate, 2023).

I concur with Bradberry’s viewpoint, as it stresses the importance of introspection and emotional regulation in leadership. Embracing this perspective not only fosters personal growth but also opens new avenues for professional development by transcending conventional stereotypes (Ellevate, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs an autobiographical narrative inquiry methodology to introspect, comprehend, and derive meaning from the experiences encountered throughout my leadership journey. Narrative inquiry serves as a means of respecting lived experiences as a valuable source of knowledge and insight, as asserted by Clandinin (2013). This methodology is inherently autobiographical, fostering a continuous, reflexive, and contemplative approach that empowers narrative researchers to constantly explore their own experiences, as articulated by Clandinin and Caine (2012).

In this study, I aim to recount and revisit the stories of my life journey chronologically, commencing with my upbringing in my home country, India, followed by my experiences in the United Arab Emirates, and ultimately, my current residence and studies in Canada as an international student at the University of Windsor. The research delves into events that offer

⁴ Backward class people is a collective term used by the government of India, for castes which are economically and socially disadvantaged and face or may have faced discrimination on account of the birth.

valuable insights to emerging young leaders, helping them navigate challenges, discover solutions by embodying essential leadership qualities, and recognize the potency of leadership as a catalyst for social change.

This paper has two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to encourage self-reflection and personal discovery. Secondly, it aspires to motivate and inspire future educators and leaders, urging them to effect meaningful change in society and develop global citizens.

Leadership and Challenges in India and Hong Kong.

My mother played a significant role in inspiring and motivating me to pursue education and become self-reliant. In 1997, during my time in Hong Kong, I worked as a preschool support teacher for three months, marking my first temporary job. Inclined toward altruism and possessing a genuine passion for education from a young age, I committed myself to service beyond financial remuneration demonstrating qualities of perseverance and selflessness. This experience, coupled with the recognition of my contributions, instilled in me leadership qualities. This reminds me of a famous quote by Maxwell, J.C.: “A good leader is a person who takes a little more than the share of his blame and a little less than his share of credit” (as cited in McLachlan 2020).

This experience elevated my morale and propelled me with enhanced dignity along my professional trajectory. After returning from Hong Kong, I pursued certification as a Montessori Teacher, and worked in a Nursery and a preschool for almost three years. A medical crisis, coupled with the manager’s unavailability, thrust me into a prominent position where I found myself compelled to undertake the supplementary responsibilities of an interim administrator. This role required me to address a spectrum of challenges, encompassing interactions with irate parents, financial resource allocation, and the formulation of annual reports. In no time, I overcame these hardships by dedicating myself wholeheartedly, which, as pointed out by Ferguson’s article on leadership lessons from Michael Jordan (2005), embodies the idea of earning leadership every day. The commendation of my diligence and commitment by the proprietors was indicative of the adept management of responsibilities, despite the absence of prior formal administrative training, demonstrating finesse in navigating the autonomy inherent in the position.

This made me ponder whether leaders are born or made. Contemporary research indicates that leadership abilities are determined to a significant extent by genetics, accounting for approximately 30%, while the remaining 70% is attributed to learned behaviors. These studies suggest that effective leadership is a combination of innate traits and acquired skills, challenging the notion of being solely “born” or “made” as a leader. Consequently, individuals possess the capacity to develop leadership proficiency through learning and skill acquisition, irrespective of their inherent leadership predispositions (Leach, 2021).

This remained true for me as I transitioned from my time in Nursery and began my tenure at an IB (International Baccalaureate) school in India. At this institution, my mentor was a distinguished individual with a background as a fighter combat pilot and instructor pilot currently holding the position of President at one of the most esteemed IB schools in India and Southeast Asia. The experience at the IB school was grandiose due to the exceptional training methodologies employed by my mentor. He utilized various strategies and provided access to exceptional resources that enriched our learning experiences. This approach not only enhanced our skills as teachers but also broadened our perspectives on teaching and learning. Despite the challenges encountered, the guidance and support from my mentor and encouragement from my

younger brother were instrumental in navigating and thriving in this dynamic educational environment.

As the preschool head and a senior advisor on a panel of senior advisors at the school, I took on significant responsibilities, striving to lead effectively and contribute meaningfully to the school's success. Working closely with a versatile leader, I witnessed firsthand their ability to adapt to diverse challenges and inspire others through their innovative approaches to problem-solving and leadership. While their background as a pilot certainly contributed to their versatility, it was their multifaceted skills and dynamic leadership style that truly set them apart.

Through this experience, I learned to recognize and leverage my strengths, fostering a sense of confidence and determination to overcome obstacles. The mentorship I received encouraged me to embrace new opportunities and persevere in the face of adversity, instilling in me the belief to 'keep the fire burning' and to never cease in the pursuit of personal and professional growth.

During this period, I acquired the attribute of adaptability, which, in simpler terms, refers to the capability to discern a course of action when faced with uncertainty. I underwent training to excel in uncharted scenarios through dedication, practice, and diligence. This transformation cultivated qualities of magnificence and fortitude, which are pivotal attributes of effective leadership. Consequently, my latent potential was unleashed, and a refined facet of my personality came to the fore, inspiring me to organize diverse teacher-training workshops under his guidance.

Leadership and Challenges in Dubai (UAE)

Post-marriage I relocated to Dubai with my husband to enjoy new beginnings in 2007. Despite having over 12 years of teaching-learning experience, the job market in Dubai emphasized the importance of international experience.

I restarted my career as a Nursery Teacher. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to collaborate with a diverse group of teachers from various cultural backgrounds. While working together, I facilitated training sessions aimed at fostering respect, reducing tensions, and building trust among the team, ultimately enhancing our overall effectiveness.

During these workshops, I introduced a variety of strategies to help teachers efficiently complete their work tasks and maintain a healthy work-life balance. These strategies included time management techniques, organizational tools, and productivity tips. Additionally, I encouraged teachers to explore innovative approaches to classroom management, such as incorporating new teaching methods, utilizing technology, and implementing creative strategies. The feedback I received from these initiatives was overwhelmingly positive, reinforcing the value of simplifying situations and offering practical solutions as key qualities of effective leadership.

My professional path continued with the opening of two British Nurseries focusing on the early years. I was able to hone my leadership skills further by training, boosting self-esteem, and empowering the young generation of teachers. I was fortuitous to work with 48 nationalities under one roof. Furthermore, this raised my performance to a higher standard and cemented my personality beyond its normal limitations, by working diligently with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Dubai. After I had a baby, I started working in one of the oldest schools in UAE which was older than the country itself. By 2015 the facet of education had completely changed in UAE, and teacher candidates like me were directed to become certified teachers by the teaching licensure system as visualized by the Prime Minister of UAE in the National Agenda 2021-UAE.

Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

My tenure in this setting posed significant challenges, notably due to my transition from the role of Managing Director at a British Nursery to commencing a new career as a Teaching Assistant within a formal school environment. This transition compelled me to employ my skill set anew. I encountered skepticism from many of my colleagues who perceived this shift as a substantial setback in my career trajectory, moving from a Managing Director to a Teaching Assistant role.

However, from my perspective, this transition represented a rebirth, demanding that I rebuild my professional journey from its very foundation. Despite the formidable challenges it presented, I embraced this opportunity with a resolute and confrontational attitude. Determination is what kept me going until I reached a stage when I resumed the post of an Assistant Supervisor leading a team of over 50 teachers and 730 + children.

During this tenure, the biggest challenge that I faced was the global pandemic where I was expected to offer continuing education to the students without any loss of learning. For this, I had to uncover ways to teach online which could be followed by all the teachers with ease. Here there was a call for innovation in leadership. I was feeling quite anxious, as I needed to determine how to create a PowerPoint presentation with audio and video components and deliver it across multiple platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom.

It was quite a challenging process for me as I worked with a team that spanned a wide age range, with the eldest teacher aged 62 years and the youngest one aged 25 years. Maintaining a healthy equilibrium and offering effective online teaching strategies amidst such diversity was indeed a task. Despite facing difficulties, including some team members deciding to resign, I managed to keep the team together with the support of my Line Manager. Together, we navigated through these challenging times.

Although I have been part of the teaching community since 1994, one of my most rewarding experiences occurred when a lesson I delivered was acknowledged and applauded by nine observers and inspectors from the Dubai School Inspection Bureau. This was a defining moment for me prompting me to recognize another leadership attribute: being a role model. This experience prompted me to consider the leadership style of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed, the honorable Prime Minister of UAE, renowned for his transformational leadership style which transformed and developed Dubai from a desert into a global metropolis (Almansoori, 2018).

By drawing this comparison, I sought to emphasize the importance of leadership in inspiring others and driving positive change. Much like H.H. Sheikh Mohammed's transformative leadership, I aimed to lead by example and inspire my team members to excel and embrace opportunities for growth and development. The comparison underscores the profound impact of effective leadership on both individual and collective achievements.

A transformational leader is an individual who encourages and inspires (transforms) people he/she leads to achieve extraordinary outcomes (Robbins & Coulter, 2007). Working for over seven years in this reputed school, I felt blessed as I was addressed in varied roles like teacher, reading ambassador, DSIB literacy head, and assistant supervisor. At this juncture, I found it imperative to ascend to the subsequent tier of achievement.

I decided to continue my further education as I strongly believe, in the words of Dr. Radhakrishnan, an esteemed Indian Philosopher and former President of India, who emphasized the importance of teachers being among the most brilliant minds in society. Additionally, Dr. Radhakrishnan highlighted that teachers are lifelong learners, illustrating that the journey of learning is ongoing for both educators and their students. I support the view that being an educator one needs to continue learning to avoid any kind of stagnation. I persevered in pursuing my goal,

recognizing that my professional growth had come to a standstill in Dubai and that I needed to progress.

Leadership and Challenges in Canada.

It was intimidating to leave my husband and my little daughter behind to move on and study in Canada. My experience of over two and a half decades was highly admired and I was embraced with respect. I was looked at as an asset to the Faculty of Education, however, I never envisaged the number of challenges that were awaiting me. There were a few concerns at work, and I had two options: finding solutions or resigning. I decided to stay, continue, and find a solution. My effort and valiancy were appreciated. An extraordinary leader is defined by results and not attributes. The situation spoke volumes here when this standpoint was overseen gracefully, and I was acknowledged as an effective leader.

Specializing in leadership and administration enabled me to delve deeper into various facets of leadership, including ethical leadership, issues of racism in leadership, the contemporary role of principals, and the pursuit of social justice in leadership. This specialized study, guided by my professor, enriched my knowledge base and equipped me to navigate these complex challenges effectively. This s has been my journey in my field of expertise so far and although it was uneven, it has embodied a unique leadership style in me that helps to shine and brighten the corner where I am today. And this journey continues.

As my brother told me once, a leader is not the one who leads the crowd, he is the one who grows with them. Taking his advice, I advanced in life, no matter how many hardships I had to face, I ensured that I grew beautifully with the team and simultaneously made it dynamic. I would like to say in conclusion that just as a smooth sea never makes a skilled sailor similarly a plain road will never make a great leader. A leader becomes extraordinary by facing challenges diligently, expanding horizons, and refraining from limitations.

Throughout my life, I have been guided by the belief that self-study is the most effective form of education. This principle, ingrained in me by my teachers, mentors, family members, and loved ones who prioritize independent learning and personal growth, has served as a cornerstone of my approach to education and professional development.

A leader needs to look within and identify the true wisdom, which enlightens the pathway to success. There are no formulae made to be followed to become a versatile leader, one becomes an admirable leader only when he is not swayed by the weight of the problems and handles them with a calm mind rather than becoming a part of the chaos in front of him. Precisely, the harder the journey the stronger one will become. It is so easy to become a manager who is told what is to be done, I choose to become a leader who never gives up on her visions because a visionary is more powerful than one with all the facts like the ruler of Dubai.

Despite all odds, I am all set to embark on yet another journey with multiple experiences and determine my value further with what I make out of myself keeping consistency as the main key to success.

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