

## Developing Principal Leadership through Experiential Learnings

Bahdin Nur Tanjung<sup>1</sup>, Elfrianto<sup>2</sup>, Lilik Hidayat Pulungan<sup>3</sup>, Mutiara Akbar Nasution<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Tjut Nyak Dhien, Indonesia

<sup>2,3</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

E-mail: [bahdin@utnd.ac.id](mailto:bahdin@utnd.ac.id); [elfrianto@umsu.ac.id](mailto:elfrianto@umsu.ac.id);  
[lilikhidayatp@umsu.ac.id](mailto:lilikhidayatp@umsu.ac.id); [mubarton.7213250020@mhs.unimed.ac.id](mailto:mubarton.7213250020@mhs.unimed.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and analyze how principal leadership development occurs through experiential learning. This study uses a literature review method to examine various literatures related to the concept of principal leadership and experiential learning. In the context of ever-evolving education, principals face complex challenges, ranging from policy changes to technology integration. The results of the study indicate that structured reflection, mentoring, practice-based training, and institutional support are key elements in leadership development. Reflection allows principals to evaluate decisions and actions in depth, while mentoring provides direct guidance from more experienced leaders to overcome real challenges. Practice-based training, such as leadership simulations and case studies, helps principals improve their skills in making strategic decisions. In addition, institutional support plays an important role by providing resources, supportive policies, and a conducive environment for continuous learning. This article recommends a holistic approach that integrates these elements to create an effective and relevant leadership development strategy in various educational contexts. With a systematic experience-based approach, principals are expected to be able to become adaptive, innovative, and effective learning leaders in facing the challenges of 21st century education.

**Keyword:** Principal Leadership; Experiential Learning; Professional Development

### Corresponding Author:

Bahdin Nur Tanjung,  
Universitas Tjut Nyak Dhien,  
Gg. Rasmi No.28, Sei Sikambing C. II, Kec. Medan Helvetia, Kota Medan,  
Sumatera Utara 20123, Indonesia  
Email: [bahdin@utnd.ac.id](mailto:bahdin@utnd.ac.id)



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The leadership of school principals plays a vital role in improving the quality of education. As the challenges in the education sector grow increasingly complex, principals are required to continuously develop their competencies (Anderson, 2022). Experiential learning, which involves active reflection on daily practices, has been recognized as an effective approach to enhancing leadership abilities (Kolb, 2015). Furthermore, principals are seen as key figures in digital transformation in schools, where their ICT skills and leadership significantly influence educational outcomes (Gerick et al., 2024).

Principals are not only administrative managers but also learning leaders responsible for the success of students and teachers in achieving educational goals. In this context, the ability to adapt leadership approaches relevant to the needs of the school is essential (Fullan, 2016). For instance, principals who exhibit secure-base leadership create an environment of trust and safety, fostering innovation and risk-taking among staff and students (Khalijan et al., 2024). Principals are expected to become proactive agents of change, capable of analyzing situations and making results-oriented strategic decisions.

Experiential learning offers a practical approach for principals to understand and overcome the challenges they face. According to Dewey (1938), experience is the primary source of learning, enabling individuals to evaluate and continuously improve their practices. Principals can use their experiences in managing conflicts, guiding teams, and handling crises as opportunities for learning. Moreover, secure-base leadership principles emphasize the importance of balancing security and exploration, which aligns with experiential learning's focus on reflective and adaptive practices (Khalijan et al., 2024).

Moreover, experiential learning includes a structured reflection process. Reflection helps principals identify successes and shortcomings in their practices and design strategies for improvement (Smith & Peterson, 2021). In other words, reflection enables principals to understand the impact of their actions on various operational aspects of the school, including teacher and student performance. Additionally, principals' active engagement in ICT-related tasks has been linked to better teacher capacity and, indirectly, to student achievement, demonstrating the need for strategic, reflective leadership in a digital age (Gerick et al., 2024).

In education, mentoring is also an effective method of experiential learning. Through mentoring, principals can receive direct guidance from more experienced leaders who provide practical insights into addressing specific challenges (Robinson et al., 2020). Mentoring offers principals opportunities for discussion and constructive feedback, which is crucial for self-development. Similarly, leadership models, such as secure-base leadership, advocate for intellectual bonding and trust-building, which mentoring relationships inherently foster (Khalijan et al., 2024).

The leadership of principals is also influenced by participation in practice-based training. Such training includes leadership simulations, case studies, and collaborative projects designed to enhance principals' skills in decision-making and team management (Gibbs et al., 2019). These training sessions expose principals to scenarios that mirror real-world challenges, allowing them to develop relevant and applicable skills. Studies have also shown that principals' engagement in international leadership initiatives, such as the ICILS framework, equips them with a better understanding of global educational trends and the role of technology in schools (Gerick et al., 2024).

However, the development of principal leadership through experiential learning is not without challenges. Limitations in time and resources, along with a lack of reflective culture in some educational institutions, often hinder its implementation (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Principals frequently face administrative demands that consume their time, making it difficult to allocate time for reflection and personal development. Moreover, the lack of systemic support for leadership initiatives, as highlighted in studies on secure-base leadership, further complicates efforts to enhance principal capacities (Khalijan et al., 2024).

Institutional support is a key factor in ensuring the success of experiential learning. Schools and educational institutions need to create an environment that supports principals in learning from their experiences. This includes providing adequate time and resources, as well as fostering a culture of reflection and collaboration among school staff (Fullan, 2016). Furthermore, international studies underscore the importance of tailored leadership programs that consider the contextual needs of principals, such as those emphasized in the ICILS 2018 framework (Gerick et al., 2024).

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to comprehensively explore the development of principal leadership through experiential learning. The SLR methodology is chosen to ensure that the findings are derived from high-quality and relevant evidence. The research process is detailed in several stages.

The first stage involved a structured search strategy to locate relevant articles from reputable scientific databases, including Scopus, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. Keywords and Boolean operators such as "principal leadership" AND "experiential learning" AND "professional development" were used to retrieve studies. Articles published between 2014 and 2024, peer-reviewed, available in full-text format, and directly relevant to the research topic were included. Exclusion criteria comprised articles not written in English, duplicates, and those lacking focus on principal leadership development or experiential learning. A search log was maintained to document search terms, databases, and results, ensuring reproducibility and transparency.

The second stage involved the selection of articles from the initial search results, which yielded 50 articles. A rigorous screening process was conducted to ensure alignment with the research objectives. In the first step, titles and abstracts were reviewed to exclude irrelevant articles. Next, full-text reviews were performed to assess the quality and clarity of the studies, resulting in the selection of 20 articles deemed highly relevant for further analysis. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram was employed to document and visualize the article selection process.

In the third stage, the selected articles underwent a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The process began with coding and categorization, where each article was analyzed to extract key themes related to principal leadership development. These themes included reflection as a tool for improving leadership practices, mentoring as a means of guidance from experienced leaders, practice-based training through simulations and collaborative projects, and institutional support for enabling experiential learning. Thematic analysis was conducted systematically, with qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti utilized to manage and visualize data relationships effectively.

The fourth stage focused on synthesizing the findings from the thematic analysis to produce a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Patterns and relationships between the identified themes were analyzed to develop a conceptual framework illustrating the interplay of experiential learning components in principal leadership development. The synthesis also included the identification of best practices and strategies applicable across diverse educational contexts.

Validation and triangulation formed the fifth stage of the research process. To ensure consistency and robustness, the synthesized findings were cross-referenced with existing literature. Triangulation involved engaging external researchers to review the coding and interpretation processes, thereby minimizing interpretive bias and strengthening the reliability of the results.

This study also acknowledges its limitations and adheres to ethical considerations. Potential constraints include database accessibility, language bias, and the exclusion of gray literature. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process, and all sources were appropriately cited to maintain academic integrity.

Finally, the findings of this study are systematically reported following SLR standards, such as PRISMA, to contribute to academic discourse and provide practical recommendations for stakeholders involved in educational leadership development. This methodology ensures an in-depth and evidence-based exploration of strategies for developing principal leadership through experiential learning.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicate that the development of principal leadership through experiential learning involves several interrelated key elements. These elements include structured reflection, effective mentoring programs, practice-based training, and strong institutional support. The findings are elaborated below with in-depth analysis supported by relevant literature.

#### **A. Structured Reflection**

Structured reflection plays a critical role in enabling principals to evaluate their actions, decisions, and their subsequent impacts. This process fosters the development of strategic insights by allowing principals to analyze past experiences and refine their approaches for future challenges. For instance, the use of weekly reflective journals or facilitated group discussions can deepen reflective practices and promote actionable insights (Smith & Peterson, 2021). Reflection not only identifies mistakes but also acknowledges achievements, leveraging strengths to build more effective leadership strategies. This aligns with findings by Khalijan et al. (2024), which emphasize that reflective practices are essential for balancing security and exploration in leadership contexts.

#### **B. Effective Mentoring Programs**

Mentoring creates a vital relationship between experienced leaders and mentees, fostering growth through direct guidance and feedback. Effective mentoring programs typically include regular meetings, collaborative evaluations, and the provision of constructive feedback (Robinson et al., 2020). These programs enable principals to acquire practical solutions to challenges while enhancing their confidence to address complex issues. According to Khalijan et al. (2024), mentoring also nurtures intellectual bonding and trust, essential elements in leadership development. This process mirrors the principles of secure-base leadership, where mentors help mentees take calculated risks and explore innovative approaches within a supportive environment.

#### **C. Practice-Based Training**

Practice-based training emphasizes experiential learning through real-world simulations, role-playing, and interactive case studies. This approach allows principals to develop critical leadership skills by engaging in scenarios that reflect authentic challenges. For example, crisis management simulations help principals refine their decision-making abilities in high-pressure situations (Gibbs et al., 2019). Additionally, findings from Gerick et al. (2024) highlight the value of ICT-based training for enhancing principals' technological competencies, further preparing them for leadership roles in digitalized educational contexts.

#### **D. Strong Institutional Support**

Institutional support is a cornerstone for the successful implementation of experiential learning strategies. Schools and educational institutions must provide adequate resources, supportive policies, and a culture of collaboration to foster continuous learning (Fullan, 2016). Incentives such as professional recognition and opportunities for advancement based on learning outcomes significantly boost principals' motivation to engage in development programs. Khalijan et al. (2024) further underscore the importance of an organizational culture that values reflection and growth, enabling principals to thrive in their roles.

#### **E. Discussion**

These findings emphasize the necessity of a holistic approach to principal leadership development. Structured reflection facilitates self-awareness by enabling principals to evaluate their practices critically, while

mentoring provides an external perspective that fosters continuous improvement. Practice-based training offers direct and immersive experiences, equipping principals with practical skills. Institutional support ensures that the learning process can progress unimpeded, creating a conducive environment for growth.

Despite these advantages, challenges such as limited time and resources frequently hinder the implementation of these strategies. Educational institutions and governments must address these barriers by formulating policies that support principals' active engagement in experiential learning. For instance, flexible, needs-based training programs can be introduced, accompanied by incentive mechanisms such as professional advancement opportunities and performance-based recognition (Gerick et al., 2024). These approaches not only alleviate resource constraints but also motivate principals to actively participate in developmental initiatives.

The integration of technology into leadership development is another critical area for exploration. Digital platforms provide opportunities for principals to access training modules, engage in discussion forums, and utilize reflection tools anytime and anywhere. These solutions address the time constraints commonly faced by principals and create opportunities for continuous learning. As highlighted by Gerick et al. (2024), the effective use of ICT in leadership training enhances the ability of principals to adapt to digitalization, a vital competency in modern educational contexts.

An integrated approach combining theory and practice is essential for maximizing the benefits of experiential learning. While experiential methods yield significant outcomes, linking them with theoretical frameworks like Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2015) can ensure a more systematic and comprehensive learning process. This integration not only enriches the learning experience but also provides a structured pathway for achieving leadership competencies.

Globally, valuable lessons can be drawn from successful programs like the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in the UK. This program effectively combines experiential learning, mentoring, and formal training to prepare principals for operational and strategic challenges. Such programs demonstrate the value of holistic development approaches and offer a blueprint for other educational systems to adopt and adapt (Robinson et al., 2020).

Cultural differences and local contexts must also be considered when designing leadership development programs. Strategies effective in one region may not yield similar results elsewhere. Tailoring programs to the unique needs of local educational systems ensures their relevance and effectiveness. For example, Khalijan et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of adapting leadership models to specific cultural and institutional contexts to address varying challenges effectively.

Collaboration among principals is another impactful strategy for leadership development. Professional networks enable principals to share experiences, exchange best practices, and collectively address common challenges. Platforms such as online discussion forums, workshops, and collaborative learning groups foster a culture of shared learning and mutual support. These initiatives accelerate the professional growth of principals and contribute to a more cohesive educational leadership community (Smith & Peterson, 2021).

Finally, involving all stakeholders in the leadership development process is crucial. Teachers, administrative staff, students, and parents provide valuable insights into the challenges and needs within schools. Their active participation enriches the experiential learning process and fosters a collaborative school culture. This inclusive approach not only enhances principals' leadership competencies but also strengthens relationships within the educational ecosystem (Fullan, 2016).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical elements of experiential learning in developing principal leadership, including structured reflection, mentoring, practice-based training, and institutional support. These elements collectively form a comprehensive framework for fostering leadership competencies that align with the dynamic demands of modern education systems. By engaging in structured reflection, principals can deepen self-awareness and refine their strategies, while mentoring offers personalized guidance to navigate real-world challenges effectively. Practice-based training immerses principals in realistic scenarios, enabling them to build both technical and interpersonal skills. Institutional support serves as a foundation, ensuring the availability of resources and fostering a culture of growth and innovation.

Looking forward, the integration of technology presents a promising avenue for enhancing experiential learning. Digital platforms offer accessible tools for training and reflection, mitigating time and resource constraints faced by many principals. Additionally, global collaboration, such as sharing best practices across national contexts, can enrich experiential learning frameworks and create a globally informed perspective on leadership development.

This study also underscores the importance of an integrated approach that bridges theory and practice. By aligning experiential methods with frameworks like Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, educational stakeholders can create systematic and impactful training programs. Lessons from successful initiatives, such as the NPQH program in the UK, further illustrate the value of combining experiential learning with formal training to achieve operational excellence.

Ultimately, the development of principal leadership through experiential learning requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders—including educational institutions, policymakers, teachers, and communities. By fostering environments that prioritize collaboration, innovation, and reflective practices, principals can be empowered to fulfill their strategic roles as instructional leaders, contributing significantly to the advancement of education in diverse local and global contexts.

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