

## Experiential Leadership Learning: Narratives of a Multiple Case Study of Mexican School Leaders Appointed to Indigenous Schools

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## **Experiential Leadership Learning: Narratives of a Multiple Case Study of Mexican School Leaders Appointed to Indigenous Schools**

Manuel Lopez-Delgado and Argelia Estrada-Loya

### **Abstract**

Training and preparation of school leaders has an impact on the quality of leadership displayed in their readiness for the leadership practice. However, in Mexico the training and preparation processes for school leaders are unclear and lack uniformity. Commonly, school leaders learn to lead in their role without previous preparation for the position. This paper presents the findings of a study conducted through narratives that analyzed the leadership learning processes of novice and experienced school leaders. The study identified important learning experiences as the receptive observation, malleable observation, practical experiences of leadership, previous experiences in headship functions, and the formal exercise of headship as relevant in their leadership learning. Based on the findings, strategies are proposed to strengthen leadership learning taking into consideration initial teaching training, continuous professional development, and situated learning.

Keywords: experiential learning, leadership learning, school leaders, Mexico

### **Introduction**

School leaders are considered key agents for school improvement and the academic outcomes students can achieve. Several studies have shown that the school leadership practice has an important influence in school efficacy. It has been demonstrated that school leaders' pedagogical and academic leadership positively impacts curriculum design and its implementation; the support of effective teaching and assessment practices; and meeting the needs of teachers, students and other stakeholders in the learning community (Waters et al.,

2003). The value of school leaders' practices in improving educational processes suggests the need of a strong previous preparation before their appointment so that they enact their role effectively (*Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación* [INEE], 2015). Pont et al. (2009) mention that international institutions such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommend improving the preparation and development of school leaders as doing so positively impacts their knowledge and the way schools are led and managed.

Despite the importance of school leaders, in Mexico the processes of preparation and development are not systematized and standardized. Teachers do not obtain leadership positions without proper and specific preparation. For several years up until 2013, the appointments to leadership positions in schools were conducted in two ways. First, through a point-based system that appointed tenured leadership positions based on three aspects: teaching seniority, academic preparation (masters and doctoral degrees), and professional development courses. Of these aspects, teaching seniority was the most important factor followed by academic qualifications, which usually were scarcely related to leadership preparation since the promotion system did not require training in educational leadership. Most school leaders currently appointed obtained their position following this point-based system.

The other way of access to headship was a direct appointment by educational authorities and was validated by union officials without following the point-based system as the official established criteria. This form of appointment was used regularly to fill temporary vacancies, and the time of appointment was indefinite. Direct appointment was usually based on the relationship that pursuing school leaders had with the teachers' union (Alvarez et. al, 2007). Both ways of appointment suggested that a good classroom teacher could be a good school leader without the

need of leadership training and preparation. However, in practice this was not always the case since school leadership roles require specific abilities for the position.

Sometimes appointments either by the point-based system or the direct method had little relationship with good teaching and leadership competency and more with the political work done in favor of the teachers' union. In the case of the point-based system, 50% of key staff for the office of promotion was mandatory for the teachers' union members. This resulted in many cases of participants with the most points not being appointed as school leaders because those participants did not agree with the union's political activities and practices (Slater et al., 2006). And, in the case of direct appointment, school leaders needed to be validated by the teachers' union. The influence of the teachers' union was great, as it had the possibility to mobilize thousands of teachers to campaign and to vote in an election, which gave the power to negotiate with the government. This is why the union always looked for mechanisms to influence the appointment of loyal school leaders in all schools.

However, in 2013 an educational reform was implemented that proposed a reorganization of the educational system, which included a new way to appoint school leaders and to limit the influence of the teachers' union. The new process of appointment considered an exam to guarantee competency for leadership positions and a two-year induction period (*Diario Oficial de la Federación* [DOF], 2013). This was seemingly an advancement regarding the appointment of school leaders as it eliminated the patronage practices present in the appointment of school leaders either by the point-based system or direct appointment. However, in spite of the 2013 system that currently dictates the procedures and criteria for leadership appointments, leadership preparation has not improved because the required qualification for teachers pursuing leadership positions is merely a teaching certificate.

In both approaches, the point-based system and the 2013 reformed method, preparation for leadership positions was and is not taken into consideration. Both follow the logic that a good classroom teacher would be a good school leader without need of specific preparation for the position. In this regard, Pont et al. (2009) point out that this approach is problematic because “it is important to build a strong knowledge base for school leaders because effective leadership will not emerge just from teaching experience” (p. 113). In this regard, Moorosi and Bush (2011) mention, “[the] less focus on [leadership] preparation means that there is a chance that schools are placed on the hands of unqualified personnel” (p. 71).

Current school leaders in Mexico appointed either by the point-based system, the exam, or direct nomination have not been required and/or offered leadership preparation, which means they learn to lead mainly in practice. They are offered a position with little and limited knowledge of how to enact it effectively. Thus, this study explored how school leaders in Mexico developed their leadership learning in conditions of limited preparation and the implications of this approach in their leadership development.

## **Related Literature**

### ***Professional and Experiential Learning***

Traditional approaches in preparation and learning suggest that there are systematized processes that happen in a training institution that enables learning of specific practices of a profession before being appointed (Uribe, 2010; Gyssels, 2007). In most professions, it is expected to have a level of knowledge before being appointed. In this process, the professional and specialist identity is constructed through the domain of knowledge and criteria established by recognized specialists of the field. Another perspective proposes that professional learning needs to be viewed in an integral way considering the time practicing the profession. This

approach suggests that practical experience enables mastering of learning and acquirement of cultural codes built for those who practice the profession, as well as allows for the development of a professional identity (Brown-Ferrigno, 2003; Ducoing & Fortoul, 2013). In this approach, leadership learning is a process that happens throughout the professional life. Identity is built through the development of skills and the domain of standard knowledge set by the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which the profession is practiced. In this conception, professional identity includes the field's knowledge, the development of skills and abilities needed in the profession, the building of cognitive resources to access new knowledge and skills, the domain of several cultural codes, and the possibility to respond to the challenges of the field.

Taking into consideration the previous conceptualization, the fact that school leaders do not have specific academic preparation for their role does not mean that they do not have professional preparation. It is important to consider that in the Mexican case, school leaders are teachers who traded teaching for school leadership. They are adults with a history and a built form of learning (Gyssels, 2007). This means they are adults in professional development with many lived educational experiences. Baudouin (2009) proposes that experience is a key referent in preparation of adults since experience enables or limits the capacity to learn something new. This is something that differentiates adult learners from children. Experience is then a key element in the professional development of school leaders.

The term experience refers to two aspects. First to a specific situation that lives the subject in a space and determined time. The second refers to how through lived experiences the subject obtains learning, which keeps accumulating with previous knowledge. It could be understood experience as a synonym of the accumulation of empiric learning. However, in Western tradition, lived experience is relegated to a second place in professional learning (Marti

& Gil, 2012), as it appears unsystematic. Experience is given less importance in comparison to academic preparation based on theory, sometimes even being ignored, precisely for coming from a practice where problems are solved using common sense and not using a rigorous methodology.

In the theory of situated learning, experiences as anecdotal in specific contexts offer relevant learning. Situated learning proposes that learning and doing are two mutually inherent processes: knowledge is at the same time a part and the result of the action (Diaz-Barriga, 2003). In this sense, experience enables the improvement of practice and mastering of knowledge. This theoretical posture suggests the need of some conditions for learning to take place. A first condition proposes that learning is closely related to practical actions in real situations. In this scenario, experience has a relevant role in learning because it presents real, concrete, and expected challenges. These challenges enable meaning to be built of the lived experience and allow for the advancement in the appropriation of knowledge and understanding of what to do and how to solve future similar challenges. Another condition points to learning happening from the need to perform an activity previously identified that the person does not yet know. Learning is then a process of internal searching about something that we do not know. Learning happens in this process of internal searching regarding something we need to perform, an action, and also during interactions with others to find solutions for our knowledge needs (Wenger, 2001).

Another approach suggests that learning happens with the mediation of others. Nobody can learn a new practice only by themselves (Vasquez, 2011). In this approach, the guidance of an experimented person plus practice is needed. It is possible to identify the first two conditions in the leadership learning of school leaders in Mexican schools. They learn their role and

function during their practical experience, and they do it because they need to solve real situations their roles demand as challenges unexpectedly appear.

Situated learning is the product of a practical experience in real context that enables learning (Tiburcio & Jimenez, 2016) and in interaction with others. Leve and Wenger (1991) also emphasize how the context becomes an important learning resource. Regarding experience, it is relevant in the learning process of school leaders' roles and in building their identity because experience is the main source of knowledge in their professional development. However, due to the empirical source of learning that characterizes situated learning, this has been given little importance to the point that it is considered that school leaders in Mexico lack of knowledge to effectively perform their position. This is why it is important to understand the life stories of school leaders – to help identify the experiences they report as relevant to acquiring the elements that enabled them to improve and develop their leadership learning and processes.

### **Leadership Learning**

Pertaining to leadership learning, it is reported as an effective experiential and active leadership learning approach (Zhang & Brundrett, 2010) in leadership development. “Active learning strategies integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection” (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 120). Cosner et al. (2018) specify that active learning implies the engagement in practical experiences where practice inquiry, reflection, and scrutiny take place and those experiences can be used later as a learning resource. Active learning supports leadership learning by allowing pursuing leaders the practice of leadership in authentic situations (Gray & Bishop, 2009), in which leadership learning happens during, through, and after practical experiences (Orr, 2020). Cosner (2020) points out that the most recognized active learning approaches for leadership development have been problem- and case-based learning, simulations, and action research.



Cosner (2020) calls these first-generation active learning approaches and identifies a next generation of active learning pedagogical approaches. The next generation of active leadership learning includes digital cases, digital simulations, and clinical simulations (Dexter et al., 2020); course-embedded and clinically enacted methodologies (Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019); and real-time job-embedded approaches (Honing & Honsa, 2020). An important aspect of leadership learning happens when there is openness to learn and individuals are in *learning mode*, which is defined as intentionally framing and pursuing each element of the experiential learning process with a growth mindset (Heslin & Keating, 2017).

### **Methodology**

This work was conducted using a multiple-case design following the approach proposed by Stake (2006) to analyze in depth the leadership learning process of four school leaders, two novices and two experienced. Two main criteria were considered to select the cases: a) seniority in their role, and b) their current workplace's (school's) socio-economic location. The seniority aspect was determined considering the criteria reported by Garcia et al. (2010), who mention that a school leader could be considered novice for up to three years into the position and experienced when up to eight years. Regarding socio-economic criteria, parents' income level and years of schooling as suggested by the Mexico National Institute of Information and Geography were taken into consideration.

The study analyzed four cases, including two experienced school leaders (with more than five years in the position) and two novices (with less than a year in the position). For both the *experienced* and *novice* types, one was from the middle-class urban context and the other from the urban marginal. These two contexts were considered, as they constitute most public schools in the city where the study was conducted. A deep interview was used to obtain the life story that

narrated the development process experienced by each school leader. This methodology enabled us to obtain through their narrative their processes of leadership learning and development as they reflected and remembered past events related to their leadership learning.

Interviews were conducted as a recurrent cycle of three sessions. In the first interview the narrative focused on their preparation process, taking into consideration their initial teaching training. The second addressed their self-perception as school leaders. The information collected and analyzed from the first two interviews was used to build a schematic model called a *biograma* (Bolívar 2012), which was analyzed for verification with the participants in the third interview. A *biograma* is a schematic summary that synthesizes gathered information. The methodology proposed by Bolívar (2012) suggests sharing the *biograma* with the participants. This allows for completion of information, clarification of aspects or events, and addressing of gaps and doubts that might have arisen in the preliminary data analysis of the first two interviews.

The creation of the *biograma* made it possible to identify experiences that school leaders reported as relevant in their preparation process. Data analysis was conducted using the narrative biographic methodology also of Bolívar (2012) where fragments of the interview were highlighted in which participants described their relevant experiences regarding their preparation. These relevant experiences were previously identified in the *biograma*. This helped to analyze each fragment of the interview through both an open and a focused codification (Saldaña, 2016). Data analysis focused on the experiences that school leaders gave relevance to because they were challenging situations (Baudouin, 2009), and when they reported these experiences left learning for future performance in their role. Codification allowed us to create micro-essays through the narrative that followed two approaches: first, a chronological approach

described the order that experiences took place; next, an analytical approach explaining each relevant experience and the reasons participants considered them relevant.

## **Findings**

### ***Learning Experiences***

Analysis of the preparation pathways that school leaders followed found that despite the lack of a systematic, standardized, and institutionalized process of learning about their function, there was evidence of progressive learning experiences. Learning experiences were events related to effective performance of school leaders that facilitated their development and effectiveness in their role. This study found two experiences that favored building the concept of a school leader. These experiences were *receptive experiences* and *malleable observation*. Likewise, two experiences were identified that facilitated leadership learning and the development of leadership skills useful for their role as school leaders. These were the *practice of leadership* and *previous experiences in headship functions*. However, a fifth experience was present at the center of their leadership learning process. This was the *practical exercise in their role* that promoted to rebuild their concept of school leadership and to internalize a new concept, knowledge, and understanding of their function, as well as helped them adopt and incorporate the cultural codes that identify school leaders. Each experience will be analyzed individually and complemented with extracts of the participants' interviews.

### **Receptive Observation**

Participants reported that their first notions of school leadership were acquired through their initial observations in their role as students. They mentioned the experience they had as students influenced how they perceived the role of school leaders and the need to act according to the expected conduct from this authority figure. Meaning was built from the interactions they

as students had with school leaders as authority figures. These experiences were their first contacts with school leaders; hence, in those experiences they started to build their concept of school leaders and their role in relation to others at the school (e.g., teachers, administrative and support staff, parents, and students). This concept was internalized as unique, true, and what a school leader had to be, how they had to act, and how they had to perform to be perceived as effective. The following quote shows this receptive observation and how it is now brought to the present for a school leader when they perform their role:

I remember when I was a little girl, just imagine that the headteacher visited a classroom! I was confused for a while. He was an authority figure, and you did not have close contact with him. When I started my appointment as a school leader, I realized that this position is not to be in the office all the time. Of course there are times you need to be in the office but not all the time.

This experience has been lived by many when they were students, but in the case of school leaders it was reported as important because this was a starting point regarding their concept of a school leader. They mentioned to have totally and partially adopted some of the traits they observed in these school leaders. The initial built concept includes several cultural codes, including the need to differentiate themselves as school leaders from teaching staff, to have a certain image that shows superiority regarding the rest of the learning community, and even to be differentiated in the way they dress. This conceptualization was built in their previous observation of several school leaders throughout their student life, resulting in their now-accepted image of what constitutes a school leader.

It is relevant that in the building of this image there was a process of observation without questioning or judging the person who represented the figure of school leader, and this built

image was accepted as valid and unique. Therefore, this experience is called receptive observation because participants just received and internalized information. In this experience the concept of school leader is something distant, something that belongs to another person, possessing unknown activities and functions. However, school leaders are perceived as authorities in schools. Here interacts the conceptualization and exercise of authority that the observed school leader displays. Later in their career, they as observer teachers and as pursuing school leaders integrated this initial conceptualization to their self-preparation repertoire.

There are also elements of leadership learning reported by participants that emerged from culturally identified codes – especially those related to the image that school leaders have to display to differentiate themselves from other members of the learning community. In the participants' experience, the idea built of what a school leader is influences the expected behaviors in the role. The most relevant experience of the receptive observation phase is the concept of school leader built from the lived experience and interaction with school leaders in their life as students. Likewise, the incorporation of role activities and expectations are influenced by these initial experiences that once they are appointed as school leaders need to assume.

### **Malleable Observation**

This experience is usually lived during their role as teachers in the professional relationship with their school leaders in how they enact the position. Therefore, the interaction happens in an asymmetric relationship of power where they as teachers learning to be leaders have a minor hierarchy, but at the same time they can find support in their school leader to solve the challenges they face as teachers. Here, there is also a process of observation to the position of school leader; however, this observational experience is related to the received support from the

person in the leadership position. The teacher pursuing leadership applies a value discernment, either approving or disapproving of their school leaders' actions. They as teachers pursuing leadership roles thus rebuild their concept of school leader in relation to what a school leader should be. They integrate into their new concept those leadership actions that they approve of and eliminate the actions that do not favor future effective teaching or leadership.

Malleable observation enables reinterpretation of their school leader concept built from the previous receptive observation phase. The new concept could adhere in most part to the leadership practice conducted by a specific school leader or oppose firmly the practice of another. Or throughout their teaching experience they may have adopted features of several school leaders that they consider positive. However, in their leader concept, they may also consider features that should not belong and may try to avoid them later in their leadership practice. The following extract shows the reflection of a school leader and how she took elements of several school leaders while she was a classroom teacher to build her concept of school leader.

I think I have built the concept of effective leadership in relation to the experience of school leaders I have worked with. When I started working, the school had an interim school leader who was very nice to everybody, but some teachers were harsh on him. Many programs implemented by the ministry of education failed because there was a lack of guidance in the implementation. There was even a time that teachers started to fight amongst themselves because of these programs. Later, I moved to another school where the school leader was very focused on the administrative aspect of the function. She knew the rules and law very well, what you as a classroom teacher had to do or should not do, but she never threatened you. She was a person that always arrived to the school very

early and left late. She was very responsible and the way she talked to you, her tone of voice. From her I started to have an idea of how I wanted to be as a school leader. Then, I moved to another school and the school leader was also a very nice person; I arrived in February, and I was pregnant, then I had my maternity leave. I came back in August, and she died in September. It was a very short time that I worked with her; however, she was a very good person. Everybody knew her in the community, and she had a very good reputation. Then, another headteacher was appointed, and he was absent very often. He used to leave the school in charge of a different teacher every time he was not going to come. A few weeks later, chaos started to emerge. Everybody felt that they were the assistant headteacher even though there was not an official appointment. Everybody felt like the boss. Remembering this school leader I would be ashamed if people said that I hardly ever came to the school.

In this experience pursuing school leaders are still classroom teachers and they also face challenges in their teaching practice. The solutions to these challenges also generate learning at the classroom and teaching level that participants acknowledge proves useful now that they are school leaders and can provide pedagogical guidance to teachers. In this experience, they as pursuing school leaders keep seeing themselves separate from the school leader role, and therefore, they know still little about the function although they already have some cultural codes that belong to school leaders. In countries with consolidated preparation models for school leaders this experience is relevant because one of the activities they engage in 'shadowing,' the observation of an experimented and successful school leader. This activity enables future school leaders to build benchmarks of what school leaders should do and how to enact their role.

However, in the Mexican case, this experience lacks relevance and appears unnoticed, and in their pathway to headship they are limited to what they can observe in their school leaders.

### **Practical Experiences of Leadership**

In these experiences, participants mentioned that they lived collaborative meaningful experiences before their appointment to headship, and in several of these experiences they assumed leadership roles either formally or informally. A relevant leadership learning aspect in these experiences was their introspective exercise to keep the characteristics of their personality that were useful to lead a group of people. At the same time, those experiences served as guidelines to follow when they were faced with leadership challenges. These experiences could be present alternatively with the previously described experiences of *receptive observation* and *malleable observation* in their pathway of leadership learning.

They reported the exercise and development of leadership for instance when they had experiences as the chief of class during their higher education studies, or the leader of a team in an assignment or activity, and later in their work as teachers' leaders. Such leadership experiences could have been outside the educational field, for example, participants reported leading in cultural and religious groups. The following extract shows how the performance of leadership functions before promotion to headship helped them to develop aspects of leadership that would be useful once they obtained their position as school leaders.

I had leadership experiences as a student with the student council and with the youth group in my church. Later, I also developed my leadership with the experiences I had as a classroom teacher since as teachers we were always organizing. I participated often in the organization of civic, sporting, and cultural events. I think all those leadership experiences influenced the development of my leadership skills.



These experiences enabled the building of a concept and skills for the practice of school leadership. The concept of school leader is still a bit distant, but the leadership experiences help to build referents regarding how to persuade others to achieve common goals in a team. In some countries, with consolidated models of school leader preparation, there are talent identification programs. When teachers show leadership potential, they are invited to continue their preparation to be considered for a formal leadership position. However in Mexico, this is an aspect that does not have relevance in the selection of future school leaders.

### **Previous Experiences in Headship Functions**

This experience is present when they as classroom teachers, besides their teaching activities, participate in tasks and activities related to the function of headship. This could happen because the school leader delegates several functions among the teaching staff or because the school leader considers that a specific teacher has the ability and knowledge to help him/her with particular activities. They as teachers have to perform activities that usually are duties of school leaders, such as leading the teaching staff in activities that improve student learning (but without being their entire responsibility). This experience enables them to learn the functions a school leader needs to perform from two perspectives. First, they observe and participate in effective leadership practices in which the teaching staff is organized as a collective to design and apply strategies centered on student learning. They also perform some actions specific to the headship position that school leaders delegate to teachers. This enables teachers to assume the role of a practical learner of school leadership, whether the extra tasks assigned to them are either related or little related to school leadership.

This role of practical learner is not a planned exercise, but it is relevant since it gives teachers an introduction and induction to the leadership function and contributes to their

visualization of themselves as future school leaders. The following extract shows a school leader that mentions how the leadership experience during her time as a classroom teacher helped her to develop leadership skills useful once in the position:

I was appointed to the school as a teacher and probably he (the school leader) saw something in me, and he gave me the opportunity to help him in academic aspects and to organize teachers. And then, I realized that a school leader is not somebody that reads lessons plans and checks lists. We developed a close friendship and he used to tell me that school leaders do not just have to authorize lessons plans. But they need to know all the teaching process. He also often encouraged the teaching staff to make proposals to the School Council, and I remember we analyzed each of them. He also advised me to pursue headship; he saw leadership potential in me.

The practical exercise of leadership enables the development of leadership skills and supports the building of referents to enact leadership positions effectively. In this experience the figure of a school leader still is a concept that belongs to another person. However, they as teachers start to build an idea of how school leadership needs to be performed. In this experience, teachers pursuing headship changed their relationship with leadership because they perceived that through leadership they could influence and persuade others. Still the knowledge of the role and cultural codes pertaining to headship are limited. However, broadly speaking, this experience lacks importance for the preparation of school leaders for the Mexican context since not all pursuing heads live it. Only those who have a school leader who shares their leadership with the teaching staff could experience it. In this study we reviewed four cases and only one reported to have lived meaningful school leadership experiences in her time as a classroom teacher. Whereas in countries with consolidated models of preparation, leadership practice is an

aspect that pursuing school leaders develop and these experiences are introduced in their preparation programs.

These four experiences before their appointment as school leaders (*receptive observation, malleable observation, practice of leadership, and previous experiences in headship functions*) could strengthen the preparation of school leaders if they are lived as intentional experiences with the purpose to enable a better understanding of school leaders' roles and functions. These experiences also contribute to the development of leadership and administrative skills that favor the process of induction to the position. In this regard, there are some elements that enable preparation through the situated learning approach. However, these possibilities randomly appear for some pursuing school leaders,

### **Formal Exercise of Headship**

This experience implies the formal enactment of the headship position, the performance of specific activities in the role, and solving challenges that arise once in the position. The leadership exercise in the role is an essential aspect of leadership learning for school leaders because when they needed to solve problems related to their role, they mentioned they had learning experiences. While previous described experiences give elements for building and appropriation of the concept of a school leader, this particular experience offers elements to reinterpret the previous conceptualization of headship.

This experience presents a process that enables leadership learning and a deeper understanding of headship. It enables school leaders to learn from three sources. First, they need to learn the specific functions and tasks of headship. Second, the enactment of headship helps them to develop skills and aptitudes – such as mediation, empathy, and assertiveness – needed to perform effectively. Third, they consolidate the development of the concept of a school leader

that they are still reinterpreting. Each school they work at as a school leader constitutes a unique experience in the practice of leadership, as each school holds particular conditions and circumstances that favor specific interactions between them and the teaching and supporting staff, parents, and students. To have different leadership experiences in several schools amplifies the possibility of leadership learning, knowledge, and seniority in the position (Wenger, 2001).

Learning experiences do not follow a standard continuum in the development process of school leaders. In all cases, leadership learning started with receptive observation and began to consolidate with the formal experience of headship. However, the emergence and sequence of other experiences could appear in a different order. Sometimes an experience is lived twice, and it is possible to have two experiences simultaneously. These experiences are important in the leadership development process as the main sources of learning for a school leader. On the other hand, daily and experiential knowledge is as valid as the knowledge product of research or established from rationality. These experiences offer referents to strengthen the process of development of school leaders.

### **Discussion**

The process found has valuable elements that favor leadership preparation. Being the most important is “in situ” learning, which the leadership practice favors, as well as the creation of meaning through interaction with other members of the learning community. However, in their leadership development, how was described by participants, there were practical experiences without systematic reflection and without learning intention, which seems an incomplete learning processes. Although these experiences favored the improvement of their leadership practice, the lack of deliberate reflection process caused to go back to some already

overcame practices. Thus, their leadership development and practice in general had little changes and in moments seemed stuck, limited, and reduced.

The process of development described by school leaders includes potential elements that could be improved substantially. Being the most important includes the possibility to integrate a reflective and intentional guided practice (departing from a theoretical perspective) that promotes gradual and sustained changes to improve the leadership practice using activities such as observation, training, leadership practice, and mentorship. The conducted analysis found that teachers pursuing leadership perform observation activities in a non-systematic way and are limited to the possibilities that their current school leader offers, and not precisely a successful school leader. These teachers lack training activities with exception of those who had the chance to live some experiences of headship functions. Once in the position, they may also have a deficient follow-up process limited to just having to comply with what their school supervisor asks of them.

School leadership preparation and development needs to be improved with systematic preparation plus self-learning strategies – strategies that ensure incorporation of knowledge and also the development of skills and aptitudes needed to develop an effective leader. This study found certain elements that could favor the preparation and development of school leaders such as leadership learning based on practical experiences and the existence of incipient communities of practice.

A possibility for improvement would be the generation of networks for professional preparation of school leaders that promote effective reflective spaces for their challenges, problems, and progression (Nicastro, 2014). Practical participation generates several possibilities to build meaning where the practical experience is a departure point to solve challenges and

problems in the practice of leadership. The participation in professional networks of collaboration and mentoring could help to improve the process of preparation and practice of school leaders. Ideally such networks could be composed of interested school leaders committed to improving their practice. Ideally participants would be school leaders with different levels of experience, as well as those pursuing school leadership positions. This could favor exchange of experiences and building of meaning between novice and experienced school leaders.

Another possibility in the improvement of school leaders' preparation is to strengthen the processes of initial preparation of teachers and the professional development pathways for teachers and in-service school leaders. The findings of this study suggest that there are previous experiences that contribute to building the concept of a school leader and to developing some useful skills for headship. It also showed that previous experiences in headship are privileged spaces for learning the headship role/functions and building an effective leadership identity. Therefore, some strategies to strengthen the preparation of school leaders would be to offer intentional leadership learning experiences of *malleable observation* and *previous experiences in headship functions* to contribute in the building of a better leadership concept and in the development of useful skills for the position. Likewise, during the induction process, it would be useful to offer mandatory courses around the legal framework in education, mediation, and human relationships. In this sense, a preparation program taking into consideration the following suggestions/concrete actions made by the participants could be implemented:

- Conduct short exchange exercises for teachers pursuing leadership positions so that they have the possibility to work with recognized and effective school leaders. During their visiting periods, teachers could participate in specific actions assigned to them. These

visits could be structured in a way that teachers pursuing headship could observe and analyze the leadership practice of effective school leaders.

- Teachers pursuing leadership positions could participate in their schools designing and implementing projects that involve the participation of parents of children with low academic outcomes. Such projects should be part of the general school plan and should be implemented and evaluated during a school year period to determine strengths and areas of improvement in their work with parents.
- Participate in courses or workshops that address three central themes: knowledge of the legal and normative framework of education, mediation as a tool to solve conflicts, and human relationships. It is important to note that participants in this study mentioned these topics. These courses should promote a comprehensive analysis between theory and practical experiences.
- After a period in the leadership practice, new leaders could act as mentors for aspiring school leaders.

This study showed that the premise of learning in practice enables leaders to understand the process of leadership learning. This study also provides possibilities for the improvement of leadership development and practice. In this regard, the integration of the strategies described above could strengthen the process of preparation for school leadership.

### **Conclusions**

The analyzed cases in this paper show what the theorists in situated learning establish regarding how experience contributes to learning. However, it would be important to ask about the type of leadership learning that is being obtained. Although it does help in the building of practical leadership learning that contributes to the development of competence, school leaders

experience this process alone and the lack of intentional reflection reduces it to an exercise in trial and error. Likewise, the results identified by the Mexico Ministry of Education found that during several years it has been privileged the preparation of school leaders in the practical exercise of the position, which has enabled development of a normative leadership style usually centered on managerial aspects (SEP, 2010). It is perceived as mainly an empirical leadership preparation process. The OECD has recommended strengthening the preparation processes to develop and improve the leadership practice (Pont et al., 2009). This recommendation was also suggested by the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), which found that a fifth of Mexican school leaders have an experiential preparation to develop their skills for the position (INEE, 2015).

On the other hand, to improve preparation it is needed to take into consideration the suggestion made by Weiss (2016) regarding educational reforms that usually disregard the existence of a culture that include practices, relationships, and traditions that exist in schools and the educational system. In this view, radical reform is usually proposed, considering that before the implemented changes there was nothing, which causes the investment of time to interpret and implement it effectively. Taking this into consideration, the intent is not to entirely change the current process of school leaders' preparation, despite its limitations, but to strengthen it – recognizing the existence of positive aspects in the found experiences. This will favor that all teachers pursuing leadership positions experience them meaningfully since these experiences will be intentionally designed to enable leadership learning.

Finally, it is relevant that in this study, seniority was not related to the accumulation of learning experiences. Most previous lived experiences in the phases found before their headship appointment (receptive observation, malleable observation, leadership practice, and previous



experiences in headship functions) as those in the current exercise of the position are indeed related to the accumulation of learning resources that help leaders solve the challenges they face in their positions as school leaders.

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