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

Manuel Lopez-Delgado
Universidad Autonoma de Ciudad Juarez, manuel.lopez.delgado@uacj.mx

Argelia Estrada-Loya
Escuela Normal Superior del Estado de Chihuahua, c.estrada@ensech.edu.mx

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Abstract

Training and preparation of school leaders have an impact on the quality of leadership displayed in their readiness for leadership practice. However, in Mexico the training and preparation processes for school leaders are unclear and lack uniformity. The way of access to headship has promoted that 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.

Introduction

School leaders are considered key agents for school improvement influencing the academic outcomes students can achieve by creating the conditions for effective learning. Several studies have shown that the school leadership practice has an important influence in school efficacy. The pedagogical and academic leadership of school leaders' impact positively 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 suggest 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 it impacts positively in their knowledge and the way schools are led and managed.

Despite the importance of school leaders, in Mexico there is not standardization and systematization of leadership preparation and development. The way of access to the leadership positions in schools has contributed that teachers change their initial focus on teaching for leadership positions without proper and specific preparation. For several years and 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 considering three aspects: teaching seniority, academic preparation as masters and doctoral degrees, and professional development courses. From these aspects, teaching seniority was the most important factor followed by academic qualifications, which usually were little related to leadership preparation because the promotion system did not require training in educational leadership. Most school leaders currently appointed obtained their position following the point-based system.

The other way of access to headship was a direct appointment by educational authorities and 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 training and preparation. However, in practice this was not always the case since school leadership role requires 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 teacher's 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 caused that in many cases participants with the most points were not appointed as school leaders because those participants did not agree with the union political activities and practices (Slater et al., 2006). And, in the case of direct appointment, school leaders needed to be validated by the teacher's union. The influence of the teacher's union was important 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 was implemented an educational reform that proposed a reorganization of the educational system, a new way to appoint school leaders, and to limit the influence of the teacher's union. The new process of appointment considers an exam to guarantee competency for leadership positions and a two-year induction period (Diario Oficial de la Federacion [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 the direct appointment. However, in the 2013 system that currently dictates the procedures and criteria for leadership appointments, leadership preparation was a process that had not improved because the required qualification for teachers pursuing leadership positions is just a teaching certificate.

In both approaches, the point-based system and the current after the 2013 reform, 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 that this approach is problematic because "it is important to build a strong knowledge base, and it is required years of practice 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 develop 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 suggests that these are systematized processes that happen in a training institution that enables learning of specific practices of a profession ideally before being appointed (Gyssels, 2007; Uribe, 2010). 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 to acquire cultural codes built for those who practice the profession and the development of a professional identity (Brwone-Ferrigno, 2003; Ducoing & Fortuol, 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 other professional preparation. In the Mexican case, school leaders are teachers who changed 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 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. Experience could be understood as 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 practice where problems are solved using common sense and not using a rigorous methodology system.

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

vision, experience has a relevant role in learning because it presents real, concrete and expected

challenges that enable possibilities to build meaning of the lived experience and advance in the

appropriation of more knowledge and understanding of what to do and how to solve future

similar challenges. Another condition points that learning happens for the need to perform an

activity previously identified that the person does not know. Learning is then a process of internal

search about something that it is unknown. Learning happens in this process of internal search

regarding something we need to perform, an action, and also with interaction 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, it is needed the

guidance of an experimented person plus practice. It is possible to identify the two first

conditions in the leadership learning of school leaders in Mexican schools. They learn their role

and function in the practical exercise, and they do it because they need to solve real situations

their role demand as identified things they need to know or challenges that 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. Lave and Wenger (1991) also

emphasize how the context becomes an important learning resource. Regarding experience, it

adopts a relevant role 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 perform effectively their position. This is why it is important to understand the life stories of

school leaders to identify the experiences they report as relevant to acquire the elements that

enabled them to improve and develop their leadership learning processes.

Leadership Learning

Pertaining leadership learning, it is reported as effective experiential and active leadership

learning approaches (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 takes place and those experiences can be used

later as a learning resource. Active learning support 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 that the most recognized active learning approaches for leadership development

have been problem- and case-based learning, simulations, and action research. Cosner (2020) call

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

approach (Honig & Honsa, 2020). An important aspect of leadership learning happens when there

is openness to learn and individuals are in *learning mode* defined as intentionally framing and

pursuing each element of the experiential learning process with a growth mindset (Healsin &

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 novels and two experienced. Two main criteria were considered to select the cases: a) seniority in their role, and b) the socioeconomic context where it is located the school they are currently working. The seniority aspect was determined considering the criteria reported by Garcia et al. (2010) who mention that a school leader could be considered novel up to three years in the position and experienced up to eight. The socioeconomic context was considered using the official classification of the Mexico's National Institute of Information and Geography (INEGI, 2012), which uses household median income and years of schooling of parents to determine social classification.

The study analyzed four cases of two experienced school leaders with more of five years in the position and two novels with less than a year in the position. For both the *experienced* and *novel* type of participants was considered one case from the middle-class urban context and the other from the urban marginal. These two contexts were considered, as they constitute most of public schools in the city where the study was conducted. An interview was used to obtain the life story that narrated the development process experienced by each school leader. This methodology enabled to obtain through their narrative the processes of leadership learning and development of each participant as they reflected and remembered past events related to their leadership learning.

Interviews were conducted as a recurrent cycle of construction 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 facilitated to build a schematic model (*biograma* see Bolivar, 2012), which was analyzed for verification with the participants in

the third interview. The *biograma* is a schematic summary that synthesized the information

gathered. The methodology proposed by Bolivar (2012) suggests sharing the *biograma* with the

participants. This favored to complete information, clarify aspects or events that needed deepen

and to address some gaps and doubts that arose in the preliminary data analysis of the first two

interviews.

The construction of the *biograma* made possible to do a pre identification of experiences

that school leaders reported as relevant in their preparation process. Data analysis was conducted

using the narrative biographic methodology also of Bolivar (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 focus codification

(Saldaña, 2016). Data analysis focused on the experiences that school leaders gave relevance

because they were challenging situations (Baudouin, 2009), and when they reported these

experiences left learning for future performance in their role. Codification favored to create micro

essays through the narrative that followed two approaches. First, a chronological approach

described the order that experiences took place. And, an analytical approach in which participants

described and analyzed 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, there were

identified two experiences 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. Besides the adoption and incorporation of the cultural codes that identify school

leaders. Each experience will be analyzed individually and complemented with extracts of the

interviews conducted with participants.

Receptive Observation

Participants reported that the first notions of school leadership were acquired through the 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 accordingly 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 the first contacts

with school leaders; hence, in those experiences started to build the concept of school leader and

the role of others (e.g. teaching, administrative and support staff, parents and students) in relation

to school leaders. This concept was internalized as unique, true and what a school leader had to

be, how to act, and how 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 she performs her role:

> I remember when I was a little girl, just imagine that the headteacher visited a classroom!
>
> I was confused for a while, did not you? 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 time. Of course there are times you need to be in the office but not all the time.

In the case of school leaders remembering the experiences they had with school leaders when they were children was important because this was a starting point regarding the concept of a school leader. They mentioned they have adopted some of the things they consider effective of school leaders they observed in their role as students. The initial built concept includes several cultural codes amongst the need to differentiate themselves as school leaders from teaching staff, to have certain image that that shows superiority regarding the rest of the learning community even to be differentiated in the way they dress. This conceptualization has been built in the previous observation of several school leaders throughout their student life, and they represent the now accepted image of what constitute a school leader.

In building 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. The activities and functions of school leaders need to perform are unknown. However, school leaders are perceived as authorities in schools. Here interacts the conceptualization of authority and its exercise 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 emerge from the cultural identified codes. Especially those related to the image that school leaders have to display to differentiate from others members of the learning community. In the participants'

experience, the idea built of what a school leader is influence 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 faced in the teaching practice. 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 enacting the leadership position. The teacher pursing leadership applies a

value discernment approving or disapproving the actions that his/her school leader does. They as

teachers pursuing leadership roles rebuild the concept of school leader in relation to what a

school leader should be. They integrate to their new concept those leadership actions that they

approve or consider good and eliminate those that do not favor effective teaching or leadership in

the future.

Malleable observation enables reinterpretation of 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 whereas oppose firmly to the practice of

another. Or throughout their teaching experience they have adopted features of several school

leaders that they consider good. However, in their concept also consider features that should not

belong to a good school leader to try to avoid them later in their leadership practice. The

following extract shows the reflection a school leader does narrating 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 them 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 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 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. Few week later, chaos started to emerge. Everybody felt that they were the assistant headteacher even though there was not official appointment. Everybody felt the boss. Remembering this school leader I would be ashamed if people said that I hardly ever come 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

classroom and teaching level that participants acknowledged is 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 is 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 they must 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 the school leaders they work with despite

of being effective or not effective.

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 is the introspective exercise to keep the characteristics of their personality that

are useful to lead a group of people. At the same time, those experiences served as guidelines to

follow when they are faced with leadership challenges. These experiences could be present

alternatively with the previous 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 teacher leaders. Even those 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 helps them to develop aspects of leadership that would be useful once in their position as school leaders.

> I had leadership experiences as student with the student council and with the youth group
> in my church. Later, I also developed my leadership with the experiences I had 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 in the developing of my leadership skills.

This experience enables 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 leaders' 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 amongst the teaching staff or because the school leader considers that an specific teacher has the ability and knowledge to help him/her with some activities in particular. They as teachers have to do activities that usually are duties of school leaders as leading the teaching staff to do activities that improve student learning but without being their entire responsibility. This experience enables 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 collective to design an apply strategies centered on student learning. And, they perform some actions specific of the headship position that school leaders delegate to teachers. This enables that teachers assume the role of a practical learner of school leadership when they participate in extra tasks assigned by their school leaders either related or little related to school leadership.

This role of practical learner is not a planned exercise but it is relevant for the reason that enables an introduction and induction to the leadership function and contributes that classroom teachers visualize themselves as future school leaders. The following extract shows a school leader that mentions how the leadership experience during her time as classroom teacher helped her to develop leadership skills useful once in the position:

> I was appointed to the school as teacher and probably he (the school leader) saw something in me, and he gave 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 check lists. We developed a close friendship and he used to tell me that school leaders do not just have to authorize lessons plans. It is needed to know all the teaching process. He also encouraged often the teaching staff to make proposals in 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 the how school leadership need 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 other people. Still the

knowledge of the role and cultural codes pertaining 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 share his/her leadership with the teaching staff could experience it. In this study there were reviewed four cases and only one reported to have lived meaningful school leadership experiences in her time as classroom teacher. Whereas in countries with consolidated models of preparation, leadership practice is an aspect that pursuing school leaders need to develop and these experiences are introduced in their preparation programs.

These four previous experiences before their appointment as school leaders (*receptive observation, malleable observation, practice of leadership, 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 role and functions. These experiences contribute also to the development of leadership and administrative skills that favors 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 of the role and solving challenges that arise once in the position. The leadership exercise in the role is an essential aspect in the leadership learning for school leaders because in the need 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 school leader, this particular experience offers elements to reinterpret the previous conceptualization of headship.

Here, it is present a process that enables leadership learning and deeper understanding of headship. It enables that school leaders learn from three sources. First, it is needed that they learn the specific functions and tasks of headship. Second, the enactment of headship helps them to develop skills and aptitudes needed to perform effectively in the position such as mediation, empathy, and assertiveness. And third, they consolidate the development of the concept of a school leader that they are still reinterpreting. Each school they have worked as school leader constitute a unique experience in the practice of leadership given that in each school there are specific conditions and circumstances, which favor specific interactions between them and the teaching and supporting staff, parents and students. To have different leadership experiences in several schools amply the possibility of leadership learning, knowledge and seniority of the position (Wenger, 2001).

The 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 begins to consolidate with the formal experience of headship. However, the emergence and sequence of other experiences could appear in different order. Sometimes an experience is lived twice and it is possible to have two experiences at the same time. These experiences are important in the process of their leadership development for being the main source of learning that a school leader has. On the other hand, daily and experiential knowledge is as valid as the knowledge product of research or established from rationality. This way 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 "in situ" learning that the leadership practice favors as well as the creation of meaning through the interaction processes 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 very little changes and in moments seemed of being stuck, limited and reduced.

The process of development described by school leaders has potential elements that could be improved substantially. Being the most important 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 as observation, training, leadership practice and mentorship. The conducted analysis found that teachers pursuing leadership do observation activities in non-systematic way and limited to the possibilities that the school leader they are currently working with offer, 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 have also a deficient follow-up process limited just to comply with what their school supervisor ask them.

School leadership preparation and development need to be improved with systematic preparation plus self-learning strategies that ensure the incorporation of knowledge and also the development of skills and aptitudes needed to develop an effective leadership. This study found certain elements that could favor the preparation and development of school leaders as the leadership learning based on the practical experiences and the existence of incipient communities of practice. This favors to improve the preparation process taking in consideration the positive aspects already present.

A possibility for improvement would be the generation of networks for professional preparation of school leaders that promote reflective spaces of their challenges, problems and progression as effective spaces for preparation (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 by interested school leaders to participate and committed to improve their practice. Participants in these networks could be school leaders with different level of experience. 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 in would be strengthening 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 build the concept of school leader and to develop some useful skills for headship. It also showed that the previous experiences in headship are privileged spaces in learning the headship role, functions and to build 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, it would be useful to offer during the induction process mandatory courses around the legal framework in education, mediation and human relationships. In this sense, it could be implemented a preparation program taking into consideration the suggestions made by the participants with concrete actions that consider the following:

- 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 pursing headship could observe and analyze the leadership practice of effective school leaders.

- Teachers pursing 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 it should be implemented and evaluated during a school year period to know their 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. Participants in this study mentioned these topics. These courses should promote a comprehensive analysis between theory and practical experiences.

- And, after a period in the leadership practice, they could act as mentors for aspiring school leaders.

This study showed that the premise of learning in practice enables to understand the process of leadership learning and at the same time gives 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 with this form of learning. Although it does

help in the building of practical leadership learning that contribute to the development of

competence for the leadership practice, school leaders live alone this process and the lack of

intentional reflection reduce it to an exercise of 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 in

developing a normative leadership style usually centered on managerial aspects (Secretaría de

Educación Pública, 2010). This is mainly an empirical leadership preparation process that is

limited and reduced to managerial aspects. 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). The improvement in the preparation processes

requires actions that help in the development of their leadership practice.

On the other hand, for improving the process of 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, it is usually proposed a radical reform

considering that before the implemented changes there was nothing, which causes the investment

of time to interpret and implement it effectively. Taking into consideration this idea, this does not

mean to change entirely the current process of preparation of school leaders despite being limited,

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 them to solve the challenges faced in the position of school leader.

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