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Article

## The Process of Developing Leadership Competencies for High School Principals- Insights from Vietnamese Case

**Duong Thi Hoang Yen**

Faculty of Education Management -  
University of Education - Vietnam  
National University,

Email: [dhyen1973@gmail.com](mailto:dhyen1973@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6685-4103>

**Nguyen Phuong Huyen\***

Faculty of Education Management -  
University of Education - Vietnam  
National University

Email: [huyennp2526@gmail.com](mailto:huyennp2526@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0286-6134>

**Nghiem Thi Duong**

Faculty of Education Management -  
University of Education - Vietnam  
National University,

Email: [nghiemthiduong@gmail.com](mailto:nghiemthiduong@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5619-3054>

**Nguyen Huy Hoang**

Director of Department of Education and  
Training, Son La province

Email: [hoanghuynguyensl2021@gmail.com](mailto:hoanghuynguyensl2021@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9959-1116>

### Abstract

Vietnam has recently witnessed application of leadership development for high school principals in their training programs. These applications have set a few best practices for administrators and school leadership in the context of globalization and international integration in the field of education and training. This study was conducted to investigate how these applications of school leadership development from the point of view of Western authors could be compatible in the context of high school policy and leadership in Vietnam. A mixed method research design (both qualitative and quantitative) was utilized. The sample of the quantitative research comprised 295 high school principals of 5 provinces and cities representing the North, Central, and South regions of Vietnam. The findings of the study demonstrated that training and fostering leadership capacity in stages associated with the career of high school principals helped principals prepare for school leadership, although the level of implementation of this process in practice was still between average and below average. Based on the research results, it is suggested to align theoretical foundations with practices of school leadership. It is also recommended to optimize theories of leadership development for cultivating teaching and administration skills among high school principals in Vietnam. The implications of the study rest in simplifying the complexity of sharing developmental direction as well as allocation of resources at the grassroots level to understand competing priorities and misunderstandings.

### Keywords

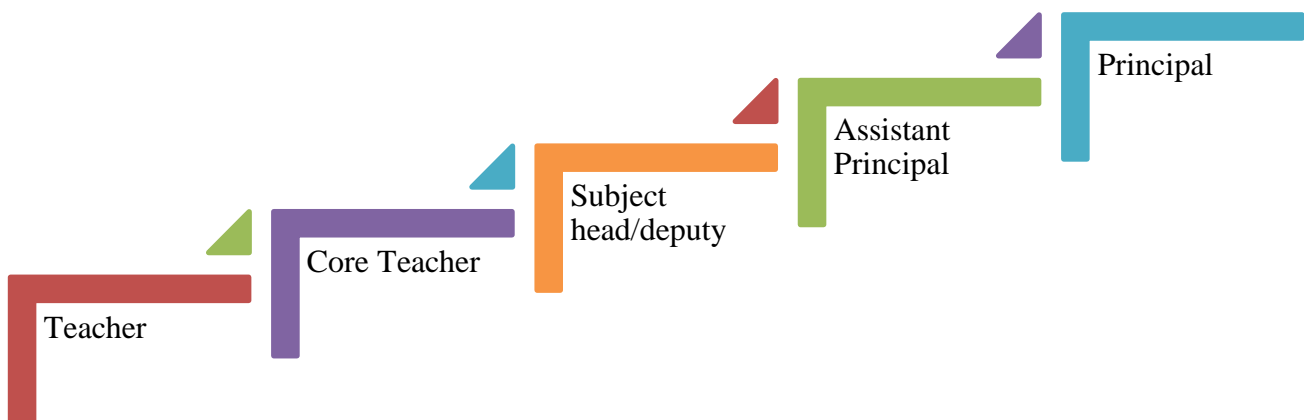
Vietnam, Leadership development theories, Leadership Competencies, Developing principals.

\*Correspondence to Nguyen Phuong Huyen; Faculty of Education Management - University of Education - Vietnam National University, Email: [huyennp2526@gmail.com](mailto:huyennp2526@gmail.com)

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In response to globalization and international integration in the field of education and training, Vietnam has taken initiatives to implement modern theories of leadership development through both formal training programs and on-the-job training of the principals of high schools and school leadership. From the point of view of Western authors, theories of school leadership development have gradually become compatible and implemented in the context of Vietnam despite varying cultural features and educational policies. In practice, most principals in Vietnam are cultivated and promoted from school's teaching staff, with the high school principal's term being fixed by a certain duration, which is usually 5 years. If the career of high school principals were based on a roadmap, it is possible to observe the growth of their management and leadership capabilities at each stage of their career. Each stage will be characteristic of their capacity and varying effects depending on the compatibility of the individual principal's experience, attitude, and socio-political, cultural, and political situation in Vietnam, in general and that of the region.

The career development process of highest school principals in Vietnam can be described as follows (Figure 1):



*Figure 1.* Career development process of high school principals in Vietnam

Effective leadership development begins with the very first stage of a teacher and continues until the candidate reaches the stage of principal. Such a career development process to develop leadership traits among teachers and prepare them for the position of principals is a common career path in many countries. Training plays an important role in this progress march for all deserving teachers to rise to the position of the principal. In Vietnam, too, compared to other career development methods and processes for high school principals, training for leadership development is the best practice and of a special advantage due to cultural and policy relevance. These trainings are highly valued and appreciated by several other professional fields besides school leadership. This is due to their inherent advantages which give strength to policy framing and growth of cultural factors in the Vietnamese schools.

Another observation relevant to leadership development of high school principals is the post-training development and continuation learning. There is a need to focus on post-training stages and devise strategies based on the legacy of previously completed stages of training and learning. This will initiate a continuous learning process in the leadership career of school principals, who must get adaptive to the continuous learning process right from the first year of their tenures. Likewise, leadership development programs should also focus on the context of the local community and the school, considering the socio-economic, cultural, and policy matters at local level. hence, all kinds of formal training and retraining programs to develop the leadership capacity of principals need to be customized according to the specific characteristics of social, political, and cultural policies at local level.

Borko (2004) believes that customized training inside and outside the school community through professional development seminars, group discussions and deliberations among colleagues often help in solving difficult management issues and challenges. Such trainings also lead to establishing practices that will help develop school leadership competencies among the principals. Huber (2004) asserts that, even though most principals have management experience to various degrees at the time of their appointment, they are not necessarily prepared to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century school leadership. Therefore, training programs offered to principals must be developed after analyzing the needs and the contextual factors of each locality where the school is situated.

Recent research was carried out to find solutions to effectively support various forms of training in Vietnam (Huyen & Yen, 2018). This study focused on leadership and management skills of high school principals and gave a few recommendations to emphasize the need to develop training programs locally. The study stressed upon the customization of training solutions, considering participants' specific locations, who were principals of high schools, educational administrators and teachers involved in planning management positions. Finally, it is also important to ensure that leadership development programs for school principals need to follow a process that includes not only formal leadership training programs implemented by training institutions but also such self-training programs by principals themselves making them aware of adaptivity to local policies and cultural contexts.

Despite these theoretical perspectives in place, a research gap still exists to investigate whether such leadership theories play any role in the development of school leadership and administrative heads like school principals. A need was therefore felt to analyze school principals' views on the practice of training and developing school leadership competencies. This study therefore aimed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How are modern theoretical concepts of Western authors regarding the leadership development process of school principals concretized in the context of the current policy and culture of Vietnam?
- (2) What are the recommendations for developing leadership competencies for high school principals in Vietnam?

Based on the research results, a practical agenda could be proposed along with best practices of school leadership as well as recommendations to optimize leadership development programs in cultivating and training high school principals in Vietnam.

### **Literature review and Theoretical Framework**

A school principal is expected to act as an administrator, possess a deep knowledge and understanding of school management and a high motivation to achieve school goals (Cabigao, 2019; Victor, 2017). Balyer (2016) argues that principals are individual stakeholders who are viewed as custodians of the educational community and who have a deep understanding of the socio-political and cultural context. Meador (2019) and Powell and Bratović (2008), too, have agreed and reiterated that school principals are front line administrators who collaborate with the stakeholders to improve both community and school.

Leadership development programs, in the context of modern school leadership, aim at not only to highlight the traditional role of school management but also to maintain the pedagogical quality (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Meraku, 2017). To effectively carry out their responsibilities, principals require thorough preparation and appropriate training (Beatriz et al., 2008). Likewise, Davis et al. (2005) and Schelicher (2012), in agreement stated that training and retraining activities for school principals should be carried out continuously and hierarchically according to each career stage. Bush (2008), in another contemporary study, highlights the need to review the performance of newly appointed principals. The study emphasizes that, to lead effectively, principals need to be aware of "the increasing complexities of the school context, combining with the trend of online management [and] the need for the leadership preparation of the principal."

- **Leadership competencies of high school principals**

Duffy (2009) assesses that leadership capacity in school principals is a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors that demonstrates outstanding performance. Successful school leadership is not about achieving a position in the school, but more about using the knowledge and skills learned to build and develop a successful school, with the success of the principal being measured by the success of the school itself (Lian, 2020) and the principal's skills of effective leadership in diverse school environments (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018).

The principal, first and foremost, is a pillar of the school who plays an important role in the development of school programs based on properly assessing the needs and characteristics of their students, which requires principals to have skills in managing and developing educational programs. Besides, principals need to interact with others to not only bring members of the school together but also to discover and gather their strengths. Lastly, to adapt to the changing social context, the school principal in the current period must have creative leadership to actively lead his school in taking on new challenges and bring changes.

- **Developing leadership competencies for high school principals**

Authors in different global locations have held different views on the diversity of leadership development tools such as training, seminars, forums, and cooperation between universities, research institutes and educational institutions in each locality (Aas & Blom, 2018; Campanotta et al., 2018; Dexter et al., 2020; Weinstein et al., 2018). One of the activities is the leadership competency development - either in whole or in part - that helps school principals improve their performance in their current or future role. From the need-perspective, it has also been stated that advanced learning should be viewed from two angles: first, the requirements of the principals of high schools; and second, the actual needs of the society, both of which are meaningful for their professional development (Ingvarson et al., 2005). Guskey and Sparks (2000) too points out that the principal's participation in development/improvement and compilation of textbooks, learning materials, educational programs, management of school/local education plans are all valuable to their professional development. Leadership development for principals thus needs to be carried out continuously, combining theory and practice. This requires the active participation of both training institutions, state management agencies and especially the principals themselves.

- **The process of developing leadership competencies for high school principals.**

Developing leadership competencies is an ongoing process, especially when modern principals must reinvent themselves continuously to adapt to the changing environment. The principals need to mobilize and manage resources more effectively and lead the school to achieve the status of an open and dynamic organization within the society. However, it is also often stated that effective leadership development is not limited to just one program, one course, or one stage, but needs to be developed in a combination of learning, training, and practice associated with school practice and social contexts (Beatriz et al., 2008).

Beatriz et al. (2008) opined that leadership development would best start with a teacher's position, followed by identifying candidates for the principal's position; providing pre-service training to them and finish the leadership development program with the training in the first year of the principal's term. Such a continuous and ongoing development program takes advantage of the principal's previous experience. Each principal possesses a wealth of experience and a deep understanding of the needs of the job and how to do it effectively. However, regarding the selection of teachers for such leadership training, Bush (2008) argues that, in principle, there should be two main strategies for identifying potential school principals: first strategy can be "self-nomination" by the candidate and the second strategy is deciding on who should be considered for promotion.

The leadership development and training process directed at the high school principal's career can be illustrated in the Figure 2 below:



Figure 2. The leadership development process associated with a high school principal's career

**Step 1: Pre-service training**

Regarding policy practices in Vietnam, potential teachers for leadership and management positions are mainly identified in advance. In OECD countries, as well as in Vietnam, the most important criterion for becoming a school leader is to have a good teaching background. (Bush, 2008). In Denmark, potential teachers need to pass a "trial course" of one or more modules of the Diploma of Leadership Education Program and continue to a full two-year course. In the Netherlands, teachers can take an orientation course on management, followed by a personal development plan based on competency analysis and then further training (Schleicher, 2012). Scotland offers a referral program for teachers who wish to be part of a leadership team (Schleicher, 2012). Unlike the three countries, Singapore requires an intensive leadership qualification for principals who need to obtain the Diploma of Education Administration (DEA) (Bush, 2008).

Like Singapore, Canada's Ontario province also requires school leaders to complete a Principal's Certificate program and adhere to 60 hours of practical experience, including assuming leadership roles in their school with the supervision of a current principal while independently carrying out leadership projects (Bush, 2008). In the case of Portugal, Serrão Cunha et al. (2020) shares that school principals have a crucial role to play on school outcomes and investing in their training is a cost-effective approach for schools' improvement.

Participation in leadership development programs through courses has important implications, which can be illustrated by the following model (Figure 3):

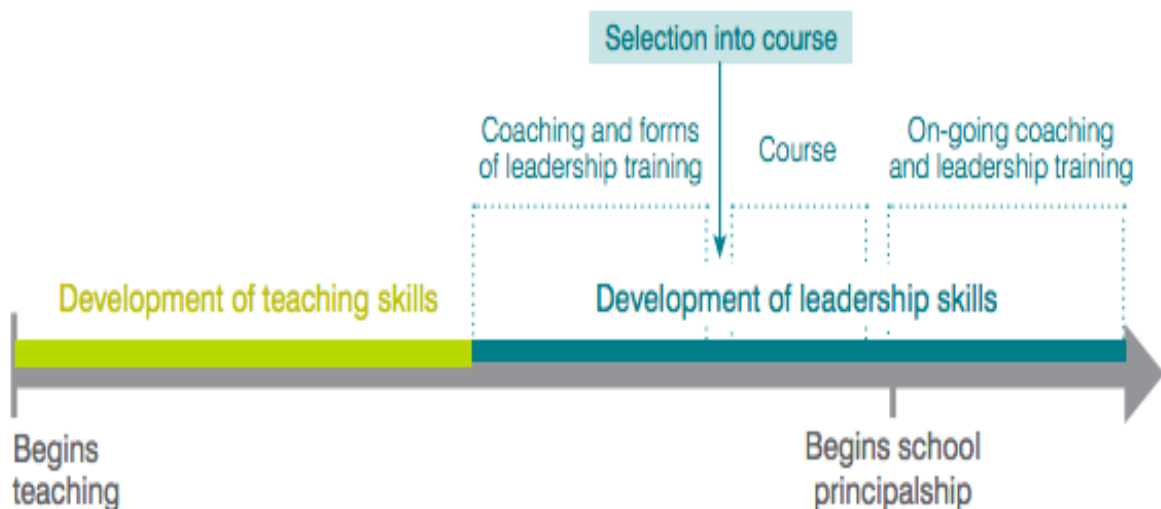


Figure 3. Stylized example of career teacher and leadership development

(Source: Dr. Ben Jensen, Amélie Hunter, Tim Lambert, and Dr. Anna Clark, *Insights Aspiring Principal Preparation*, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015)

## **Step 2: Practical training for first-year principals**

Familiarizing with school leadership in a practical context is meaningful to new principals as it helps them understand the complex realities of school leadership and build their confidence to take on the role effectively. Principals in the first year of their tenure as a principal need support and training through participating in leadership training programs, which can help to familiarize them with all areas of work, school activities, and network building through which leaders can share their concerns. In the UK, the National Professional Standards Program is mandatory for leaders, targeting six key areas: Shaping the future; Learning and teaching; Developing yourself and working with others; Organizational management; Ensuring accountability; and strengthening the community (Bush, 2008). Like the UK, Ontario (Canada), Ireland, Scotland, and Victoria (Australia) all have relatively comprehensive training programs including introductory programs to support the early stages of leadership, provided by professional training facilities (Schleicher, 2012). Similarly, in the United States, there are a variety of programs that develop the leadership skills necessary for new principals to successfully lead high schools (Jensen et al., 2015).

Another way for new leaders to receive practical training is appointing school leaders with years of experience as formal advisors, whose role is to provide ideas and advice and impart their own experiences and skills to newly appointed high school principals (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). At the same time, these long-term leaders also absorb new knowledge as well as refresh the existing knowledge through mentoring and guidance (Beatriz et al., 2008; Schleicher, 2012). The common point in all these authors is to emphasize the ability to mobilize the experience of long-standing principals to train and support newly appointed principals. This factor has developed a culture of learning and sharing between schools and is practical in many countries.

## **Step 3: Training through leadership practice at school**

Holman (2000) argues that it is necessary to approach “theory” and “practice” in a balanced way to develop the leadership capacity of high school principals. However, the conflict between principal’s personal experience and reality also raises questions about traditional authority and preparedness to adapt to new challenges to realize the organization's vision and values (Clarke & Butcher, 2003). Expanding on practical training for school leaders, Burgoyne et al. (2004) make the point that school principals’ management and leadership style depends on specific situations, leading to the need for specific leadership development practices rather than applying a universal model for all principals Burgoyne et al. (2004). Agreeing with this, Thorpe and Gold (2016) argues that the individual manager's contemplation in practical and specific contexts is very valuable.

In summary, effective leadership development needs to be linked to the implementation of the school's mission in the local context. Many different forms of leadership development are implemented in a personalized approach, while promoting the managers’ own initiative and autonomy as they learn from their leadership activities, from their successes and failures, and from observing other local leaders.

## **Step 4: Cultivating through school leadership network**

In many countries, including Vietnam, local or non-local principal professional development networks such as the principals club model have the effect of motivating principals to expand their experiences or change their perceptions about controversial issues. It is also necessary to provide a safe environment in which principals can take risks, fail, learn, and grow. Bush and Jackson (2002) argue that professional development takes place within and outside the school network with rich process strategies such as mentoring, coaching, school visiting, and discussion, which are more likely to promote leadership learning than merely engaging with theories and research. Following the proposed practical process strategies, Bush and Glover (2005) and Bush et al. (2007) found out that connecting experiential learning, participating in a mentoring and coaching network is always highly valued by participating principals (Bush & Glover, 2005).

Herriot et al. (2002) report that the development of principal support groups in Kenya take place through

non-focused training programs for primary school principals (PRISM). These groups are considered "central to the sustainability of good governance in schools" with the main purpose of (1) Forming forums for sharing ideas; (2) Co-developing school policies; (3) Solving management and leadership problems; (4) Finding creative ways to generate additional income; (5) Developing staff; and (6) Improving teaching efficiency.

In Vietnam, it is possible to establish networks for high school principals within and outside of the local area to support leadership development. These networks can either function as independent clubs or as groups to impart coaching and mentoring through casual discussions and formal meetings. Such groups can prove to be a powerful new source of guidance for practicing leaders, as well as a framework for ongoing leadership development.

### **Step 5: Participating in training for subordinates or newly appointed school leaders**

Mentoring and coaching for newly appointed school leaders are increasingly common in professional development. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, it is most understood as the activity in which a more experienced individual assists someone less experienced. In this form, training is used to assist individuals in performing a specific task to develop a skill or ability (Hobson & Sharp, 2005).

Further research on mentoring has revealed it to be effective and having become a standard in the evaluation of high school's principals in several countries. Experienced principals in the US assist and advise a new principal in administrative activities, with the level of support offered affecting their performance evaluation (Mitgang, 2012). In a report in the New Zealand context, it was stated that on-site professional development is most effectively underpinned by a link between principals themselves and a leader outside that principal's school, which is a systematic and practical form of reflection (Stewart, 2000).

## **Method**

### **Research design**

This study employed a non-experimental mixed method research design (both qualitative and quantitative) using a survey method. A questionnaire was distributed to respondents who mainly comprised principals of public and private high schools from the selected provinces. The time to respond to the survey was about 15-30 minutes. The survey was combined with the method of studying retrospectively the legal documents that regulated the appointment of school principals in Vietnam.

### **Instruments of the study**

A questionnaire containing questions about the school leadership capacity of high school principals was designed and implemented by a research team from the Faculty of Education Management, University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Respondents were asked to rate the level of achievement for each section on the Likert scale from the lowest level of 1 to the highest level of 5. In addition, the study also conducted interviews to gain information on local practices about the full implementation of the process and the steps in the process.

### **Research sample**

The survey sample comprised 295 high school principals of five provinces and cities, namely Quang Ninh, Hai Phong, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hue, representing 3 regions of the North, Central, and South of Vietnam. The survey samples were selected using the purposive sampling method, to ensure that there are provinces and cities in the North (Quang Ninh, Hanoi, Hai Phong), in the Centre (Hue city) and the South of Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the survey sample (n=295)

| <i>Factors</i>                        |                  | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                         | Male             | 213           | 72.2%             |
|                                       | Female           | 82            | 27.8%             |
| <b>Province of employment</b>         | Quang Ninh       | 20            | 6,8%              |
|                                       | Hai Phong        | 57            | 26,1%             |
|                                       | Hanoi            | 99            | 33,6%             |
| <b>Work experience (years)</b>        | Hue              | 19            | 6,4%              |
|                                       | Ho Chi Minh City | 100           | 33,9%             |
|                                       | <10 years        | 18            | 6.1%              |
|                                       | 10-20 years      | 117           | 39.7%             |
| <b>Tenure as the school principal</b> | >20 years        | 160           | 54.2%             |
|                                       | <1 year          | 6             | 0.02%             |
|                                       | 1-10 years       | 185           | 62.7%             |
| <b>Total</b>                          | >10 years        | 104           | 35.2%             |
|                                       |                  | 295           | 100%              |

### Data analysis

The data analysis was performed to find the level of performance of pre-service training on school leadership of potential teachers for the position of principals. All the factors derived from the questionnaire were evaluated at ‘Level of Necessity’ and ‘Level of implementation. At the end, the questionnaire data was triangulated with the findings of the interview with the informants, from the provinces selected for this study.

### Results

In Vietnam, policies on training, cultivating, and coaching of leadership and management competencies of high school principals were legalized in 2005 vide Education Law (No. 38/2005/QH11, June 14, 2005) and more recently vide Circular No. 32/2020/TT-BGDĐT dated June 15, 2020, promulgating the Charter of junior high schools, high schools, and multi-level high schools, effective from November 1, 2020. Specifically, these laws have clearly mentioned about training of the high school principals. Article 54, Clause 2 of Education Law 2005 stipulates that "principals of schools in the national education system must be trained and fostered in school management skills"; Article 56, Clause 2 of Education Law 2019, effective from July 1, 2020, also reiterated the need for training and fostering principals in school management skills to meet the performance standards laid down for the school principals.

In addition, Article 18, Clause 2 of the Decree 101/2017/ND-CP issued on September 1, 2017, stipulates that the program to foster state management knowledge must be administered to an individual before that individual is appointed to leadership and management positions. Article 11, Clause 1 the Circular No. 32/2020/TT-BGDĐT stipulates: “a principal [ought to] self-study and self-improve to improve [his] professional and management capacity; to be trained to improve [his] qualifications, to foster [his] professional skills and to receive rights as prescribed by law. Thus, policies on training and cultivating leadership capacity for high school principals in Vietnam are also implemented according to the process associated with the principal's career.

Table 2 sums up the assessment of the principals of the high schools on the training and retraining practices of high school principals as revealed from the survey results.



**Table 2.** Assessment of training and retraining practices of Vietnamese high school principals

| Order  | Factor   | Strongly agree (5) | Agree (4)    | Neither agree nor disagree (3) | Disagree (2) | Strongly disagree (1) | Total       |
|--------|--|--------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Step 1 | Pre-service training   | 122<br>41.4%       | 143<br>48.5% | 20<br>6.8%                     | 9<br>3.1%    | 1<br>0.3%             | 295<br>100% |
| Step 2 | Practical training for first-year principals                               | 135<br>45.8%       | 124<br>42.0% | 27<br>9.2%                     | 8<br>2.7%    | 1<br>0.3%             | 295<br>100% |
| Step 3 | Training through leadership practice at school                             | 130<br>44.1%       | 137<br>46.4% | 24<br>8.1%                     | 3<br>1.0%    | 1<br>0.3%             | 295<br>100% |
| Step 4 | Cultivation through school leader network                                  | 112<br>38.0%       | 150<br>50.8% | 27<br>9.2%                     | 5<br>1.7%    | 1<br>0.3%             | 295<br>100% |
| Step 5 | Participate in training for subordinates or newly appointed school leaders | 129<br>43.7%       | 131<br>44.4% | 32<br>10.8%                    | 2<br>0.7%    | 1<br>0.3%             | 295<br>100% |

The survey results show that over 80% strongly agree and agree with all steps in the process, especially with the high percentage of strongly agree with step 2 “Practical training for first-year principals” (45.8%) and step 3 “Training through practical leadership at school” (44.1%). However, there are also participants that strongly disagree with the proposed steps ranging from 0.3% to 1.7%. A further survey on the need for principals to develop from teachers also showed that 41% strongly agree with the opinion. The results of the interviews with the principals also gave similar results: a majority approved of the development process of principals to begin from a teacher’s position because the maturation process allows the principal to understand key activities in the school, understand both individual and groups of teachers, and the local culture as well.

### Pre-service training

It should be noted that pre-service training process has only started recently and is locality dependent. Prior to this, principals were appointed and then trained in management skills either through self-study or on the job training mostly from their work experience. Table 3 illustrates the survey results showing that principals highly appreciate the necessity of pre-service training in school leadership for potential teachers nominated for the position of principal.

The data indicates the level of performance of pre-service training on school leadership of potential teachers for the position of principals. All the factors were evaluated at ‘Level of Necessity’ and ‘Level of implementation.’ The results reveal that the ‘Level of Necessity’ was rated with lowest mean of 3.96 and the highest mean equal to 4.30; while the ‘Level of implementation’ rated average mean in the range of 3.13 (lowest) to 3.26 (highest). University-level pedagogical training and additional certificates in school management and leadership were also appreciated by principals more than other factors, with a mean of 3.22. In short, the results suggest that it is necessary to continue to develop additional training and cultivating programs for school leaders until they officially become principals and meet the new requirements of Vietnam's educational environment in the current context.

The results of the survey questionnaire were triangulated with the findings of the interview with the informants, from the provinces selected for this study.

**Table 3.** Assessment of the status of pre-service training of the principals of Vietnamese high schools

| Order | Factor   | Level of Necessity |      |          |                    | Level of implementation |      |          |                    |
|-------|--|--------------------|------|----------|--------------------|-------------------------|------|----------|--------------------|
|       |  | N                  | Mean | Std. Dev | Std. Error<br>Mean | N                       | Mean | Std. Dev | Std. Error<br>Mean |
| 1     | Bachelor's Degree in School Management and Leadership  | 295                | 4.22 | .829     | .048               | 295                     | 3.17 | 1.109    | .065               |
| 2     | Bachelor's Degree in pedagogy and supplementing Certificates in school management and leadership               | 295                | 4.10 | .881     | .051               | 295                     | 3.22 | 1.136    | .066               |
| 3     | Postgraduate training (Master, Ph.D.) in School Management and Leadership                                      | 295                | 3.96 | .903     | .053               | 295                     | 3.19 | 1.067    | .062               |
| 4     | Training towards achieving school leadership standards   | 295                | 4.30 | .675     | .039               | 295                     | 3.18 | 1.056    | .062               |
| 5     | Training and developing school leaders before being appointed  | 295                | 4.23 | .766     | .045               | 295                     | 3.21 | 1.065    | .062               |
| 6     | Encourage potential/planned schoolteachers to voluntarily improve their graduate training in school leadership | 295                | 4.19 | .738     | .043               | 295                     | 3.26 | 1.046    | .061               |
| 7     | Selecting potential school leaders through pre-service training  | 295                | 4.11 | .751     | .044               | 295                     | 3.20 | 1.049    | .061               |

Source: Survey questionnaire

**1. Interview regarding pre-service training for school principals** (Informant - Mr. Nguyen T- Director of Department of Education and Training, Thua Thien Hue province).

*“Currently, we do not have a separate training program for principals, most principals are appointed first to undertake management work, then go on to train in management capacity and attend postgraduate training courses on educational management. If principals are better prepared in terms of knowledge and leadership skills through pre-appointment (pre-service) training, they will work more effectively.*

This statement is in conformity with the findings of the survey questionnaire. [Table 4](#) highlights assessment of the practical training of first-year principals trained as a school leader.

**Table 4.** Assessment of Practical training for first-year principals

| Order | Factor  | Level of Necessity |      |                |                 | Level of implementation |      |                |                 |
|-------|---|--------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|
|       |   | N                  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | N                       | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| 1     | School leadership training program by knowledgeable local school leaders                              | 295                | 4.32 | .742           | .043            | 295                     | 3.20 | 1.122          | .065            |
| 2     | Training program in school leadership by a network of senior and experienced school leaders           | 295                | 4.25 | .749           | .044            | 295                     | 3.23 | 1.088          | .063            |
| 3     | Counseling by a local leader or school leader with seniority and experience in educational leadership | 295                | 4.14 | .747           | .043            | 295                     | 3.15 | 1.039          | .060            |
| 4     | Counseling by expert school leadership and school knowledge   | 295                | 4.17 | .790           | .046            | 295                     | 3.16 | 1.036          | .060            |
| 5     | Counseling by senior and experienced administrators, teachers/staff of the school itself              | 295                | 4.09 | .813           | .047            | 295                     | 3.14 | 1.041          | .061            |

The above survey results show that the principals highly appreciate the need for principals to be trained in the first year as school leaders through school practice. This is very evident in all factors, which are rated at 'Level of Necessity' of training rated with the average score of 4.09 (lowest mean) and 4.32 (highest mean); while at the 'Level of implementation' of the training for the first-year principals as school leaders in school practice, the principals' rating was in the range of 3.14 (lowest) and 3.20 (highest). This shows there was no statistically significant difference in the ratings between the factors.

The factor of 'School leadership training program by knowledgeable local school leaders' was rated with the highest average score (4.32) under level of necessity. On the other hand, under the level of implementation, the factor 'Training program in school leadership by a network of senior and experienced school leaders' had a mean of 3.23, closely followed by the factor 'School leadership training program by knowledgeable local school leaders' with a mean of 3.20.

Table 5 presents the assessment of Training through leadership practice at school by the principals of Vietnamese high schools

**Table 5.** Assessment of training through leadership practice at schools

| Order | Factor  | Level of Necessity |      |                |                 | Level of implementation |      |                |                 |
|-------|---|--------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|
|       |   | N                  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | N                       | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| 1     | Training at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Master, Ph.D.) in a leadership capacity  | 295                | 4.05 | .817           | .048            | 295                     | 3.24 | 1.085          | .063            |
| 2     | Develop school leadership through annual professional development activities  | 295                | 4.18 | .684           | .040            | 295                     | 3.16 | .988           | .058            |
| 3     | Develop school leadership as required by the specific context of achieving the goal at the national, regional, local, or school level | 295                | 4.14 | .747           | .043            | 295                     | 3.15 | 1.004          | .058            |

According to the surveyed principals, all three forms of leadership development through school practice were assessed as quite necessary with the mean ranging from 4.05 to 4.18 with a statistically significant difference.

**2. Interview regarding training through leadership practice at school** (Informant: - Ms. Tran Thi Hai Y-Principal of Tran Phu High School - Hoan Kiem – Hanoi)

*“Compared to many localities, Hanoi is quite open and dynamic. I appreciate the school's forms of leadership training because they link theory with practice right in the process of principals working in their leadership roles. This will help us to be more active in both the role of participators and the role of organizing forms of leadership training for ourselves as well as for key staff and teachers in schools and school clusters.”*

This statement is in conformity with the findings of the survey questionnaire. Table 6 presents the assessment of the cultivation of competences through school leadership network of Vietnamese high schools

**Table 6.** Assessment of Cultivation through school leadership network

| Order | Factor   | Level of Necessity |      |                |                 | Level of implementation |      |                |                 |
|-------|--|--------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|
|       |  | N                  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | N                       | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| 1     | Participating in leadership development activities for principals organized by the provincial Department of Education and Training | 295                | 4.23 | .769           | .045            | 295                     | 3.24 | 1.115          | .065            |
| 2     | Participating in the Informal Leadership Development Network of Principals   | 295                | 4.14 | .719           | .042            | 295                     | 3.21 | 1.043          | .061            |

The data in Table 6 reveals that although the data was obtained with a high reliability and statistical significance, there are still differences in the assessment between the ‘level of necessity’ and ‘level of implementation’, with the mean of 3.24 and 3.21 respectively.

**3. Interview regarding school leaders’ network:** (Informant: Mr. Pham Ngoc D - Principal of Hien Da High School - Phu Tho:

*‘Participation in the informal leadership development network of Principals is essential to us. However, in my locality, as in many other places, the activities of the principals’ club are still spontaneous, the topics for each meeting are unclear and inconsistent. Many principals are also hesitant to share difficulties due to their leadership capacity limitations, so the network of principals has not yet become a forum for professional leadership support for members’.*

This statement is in conformity with the findings of the survey questionnaire. Table 7 presents assessment of the participation in training of subordinates or newly appointed school leaders of Vietnamese high schools.

**Table 7.** Assessment of the Participation in training for subordinates or newly appointed school leaders

| Order | Factor   | Level of Necessity |      |                |                 | Level of implementation |      |                |                 |
|-------|--|--------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|
|       |  | N                  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | N                       | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| 1     | Strategies that develop teachers and school administrators into the position of Principals of schools and localities.  | 295                | 4.38 | .712           | .041            | 295                     | 3.29 | 1.117          | .065            |
| 2     | Selecting, providing on-the-job training, recommending participation in fostering leadership development sessions for potential candidates for the position of Principal | 295                | 4.28 | .714           | .042            | 295                     | 3.25 | 1.068          | .062            |
| 3     | Formal or informal coaching and mentoring for newly appointed Principals   | 295                | 4.19 | .706           | .041            | 295                     | 3.18 | 1.066          | .062            |

The obtained data was reliable and statistically significant, showing the evaluation of the forms of fostering school leadership capacity to the ‘Level of Necessity’ through training for subordinates or newly appointed school leaders. The data also revealed that the development and appointment of principals from the position of a teacher within the school itself helps candidates to gain practical experience in each specific school context. This also quickly eliminates the initial confusion to adapt to both new roles and new working environment. The standard deviation was found to be low (< 0.714) in all factors, indicating that there is not much difference in opinion among participants.

The performance evaluation results at the ‘Level of implementation’ were also found satisfactory with reliable and statistically significant data. With a standard deviation of > 1.066, it showed that the differences in opinion reflected differences in policies as well as culture in each locality.

**4. Interview regarding coaching for potential school leaders or first-year principals** (Informant: Mr. Pham Ngoc D - Principal of Hien Da High School - Phu Tho:

*As a principal, I highly appreciate the above-mentioned forms of training because it utilizes local resources and links leadership development with school development. However, I want to mention the difficulty in implementation and the efficiency of the implementation. These activities depend on the current principal's level of authorization and openness, but are the principals willing to act?*

It is obvious from the remarks that although most principals support the professional development of teachers in their schools, staff leadership development is still a perennial issue. The reason is that leadership denies opportunity for teachers, even for the planned leaders as pre-service training, to learn leadership skills. With that in mind, specific strategies to develop teachers into leadership positions are almost nonexistent; there is a lack of strategic planning to support, enabling teachers to participate in training courses, which results in very few opportunities of school leadership development. Teachers are also afraid of expressing their desire to develop and be promoted, so in the preparation of teachers who are subject to planning for management positions, the preparation of competent leadership for themselves is lacking the most.

### **Discussion**

The results of both the quantitative and qualitative phases hint at gaps between expectations and actual performance of each form of leadership development. The results reveal that performance is influenced by too many subjective and objective factors in each school. One such factor was the uneven availability of training institutions in Vietnam for providing training to the high school principals in their first year of tenure. In Vietnam, leadership development activities such as high school clubs are organized by the Department of Education and Training of that locality. There exists a legal provision too by the government to regulate such club activities at the management level. Many informal leadership development networks of principals have been established in localities with similar conditions and contexts. There are also several dynamic educational institutions that have effectively deployed the network of principals. These networks operate under the model of an independent and voluntary professional organization with training always associated with school leadership practices. For instance, in Hanoi, the director of the Hanoi Department of Education and Training, has established principals' clubs.

The network of school leaders inside and outside of respective localities for training and fostering school principals is highly appreciated for its flexibility and mobility in terms of time and place of implementation. It also reflects the characteristics of the local context and the school. The activities of the club network are valued because of their supportive policies and open organizational culture. In other localities, the principal's club network either has not been formed yet or if yes, it is unstable because there is no specific policy. Due to this lack of communication and coordination, many senior principals are afraid of coaching and mentoring the junior principals because they think that all principals are inherently equal.

Compared with other forms of leadership development, participation in such informal leadership development networks of principals is quite new in Vietnam, and in terms of mechanisms and policies, it is not yet complete. Specifically, the principal network operates in a voluntary spirit, leading to effectiveness is dependent on the level of dynamism of each locality, organizational capacity, and activeness of school principals. In many other localities in Vietnam, these clubs operate in a formal way, the organization of the network of principals is not high, and there is a lack of influential and reputable individuals to lead.

## Conclusion, Recommendations, and Implications

This study surveyed the practice of training and fostering management and leadership competences among high school principals in Vietnam in accordance with the career path outlined for their profession. The participants, both survey respondents and interview informants, gave their opinions on both the necessity and implementation level of various stages of training and fostering school leadership competences. The findings of the study could be summed as under:

First, the general assessment of the training and fostering leadership competences is that there is a failure in the implementation of stage-wise training schedules in the career development of high school principals. There is a consensus in previous literature that high school principals must be prepared for school leadership from very early levels. Highly potential teachers should be identified and given continuous training and fostering for the principal's position until they complete one year of their tenure as the principal. The findings reveal that the level of implementation of such a process in practice is still between average and below average.

Second, the policies of training and fostering high school principals should generally be approached from the practical needs at grassroots levels, with school teachers as participants or potential candidates for the position of the principal. Adoption of a network of such future principals by the local administrations based on local strengths and resources that interact with school leadership practices can increase willingness to take risks and try new approaches to address ongoing challenges. It is also from this foundation of trust and support that a support network between successive principals can be developed and perfected as a shared leadership training model. Similar network to train high school principals in Hanoi already exist in the form of principals' clubs but lack communication and coordination.

Leadership development for high school principals in Vietnam has now been regulated in legal documents since 2005 and the process to develop professional capacity for school principals has also been implemented at many levels. The process often begins with those teachers who have the potential and aspiration to become leaders and are willing to undertake training for their professional development. However, to cultivate a potential teacher into a high school principal requires a 5-step process, which is linked with the career advancement practices of the school leadership program, which unfortunately has not been fully implemented due to the lack of training in a career networking system.

The survey results of this study confirm this lack of support in developing school principals in Vietnam which further hints at the incompatibility of school culture and inconsistency in policies. Hence, to develop leadership capacity for high school principals in Vietnam, this study recommends completing the following three tasks:

1. Major educational leadership institutions should develop at least three training programs namely, an intensive training program for potential teachers; a pre-service training program for first-time principals; and a training program that supports first-time principals in their first year. These training programs should be considered as a mandatory requirement, with particular attention to local policies and regional cultures.
2. The local government in collaboration with Department of Education and Training needs to build a network of principals with clear regulations on functions and duties to support newly appointed principals. There should be clear guidelines for the principals to support one another and share the responsibility of fostering new principals. The representatives of local authorities, such as vice-chairmen of the provincial/city or district/province people's committees, should be made responsible for the accomplishment of this task.
3. There should be formal regulations regarding principals involved in the training of newly appointed principals and the assessment of the professional progress of newly appointed principals.

The implications of the study are at two levels: first, the top management level where this study will

simplify the complexity of sharing developmental direction; secondly, the results of this study will help to plan the allocation of resources at the grassroots level that would help to avoid competing priorities and misunderstandings. This is important for ensuring cooperation and efficiency between principals, and by extension, their schools.

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