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Leadership Pipelines in Succession Planning for School Leaders: A Literature Synthesis and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract:
Educational leadership sustainability depends not only on the effectiveness of incumbent school principals but also on the capacity of educational institutions to prepare future leaders systematically. However, succession planning is frequently conceptualized as a replacement mechanism rather than an integrated process of leadership development and organizational continuity. This study aims to synthesize the literature on leadership pipelines and succession planning for heads of educational institutions, clarify their conceptual relationship, and identify priorities for future research. An integrative literature review was employed to examine relevant scholarly publications addressing leadership development, talent identification, competency development, succession processes, and leadership transitions. The literature was analyzed through thematic synthesis to identify recurring concepts, organizational mechanisms, conceptual distinctions, and unresolved research issues. The synthesis generated three interconnected themes. First, leadership pipeline development represents a continuous process of cultivating leadership capabilities through progressive responsibilities, mentoring, coaching, and experiential learning. Second, succession planning functions as a strategic organizational mechanism for anticipating leadership needs, evaluating candidate readiness, preserving institutional knowledge, and supporting leadership transitions. Third, integrating these processes provides a conceptual foundation for aligning individual leadership development with institutional succession requirements. The study advances an integrative perspective that distinguishes leadership pipeline maturity from succession readiness while emphasizing their potential complementarity. It also identifies future research priorities concerning leadership competency assessment, equitable access to developmental opportunities, organizational context, and the relationship between leadership preparation and transition outcomes. This study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by reframing succession as an ongoing organizational capability rather than an isolated appointment decision. Its conceptual propositions require further empirical validation through longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods research across diverse educational settings.

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Introduction (مقدمة)

Educational leadership has become an increasingly important factor in sustaining organizational effectiveness, improving teaching and learning, and maintaining the long-term development of educational institutions. School leaders are expected not only to manage administrative responsibilities but also to establish a shared vision, develop teachers' professional capacity, facilitate organizational change, and ensure that educational improvement remains sustainable. These responsibilities make the position of school principal strategically significant, as leadership decisions influence organizational culture, staff collaboration, instructional priorities, and the direction of institutional development. However, the sustainability of educational leadership depends not only on the capabilities of current principals but also on the extent to which educational institutions can identify, develop, and prepare future leaders. Leadership continuity, therefore, represents a fundamental organizational concern rather than a matter that can be addressed exclusively when a leadership position becomes vacant (Azukas et al., 2025).

One of the most important challenges in educational leadership is the transition from incumbent leaders to their successors. Principal succession is an inevitable process, yet its consequences extend beyond the replacement of one individual by another. Changes in school leadership may affect organizational stability, teachers' professional relationships, the continuation of improvement initiatives, and the preservation of institutional knowledge. Aravena (2022), in a review of research on principal succession published between 2003 and 2019, identified four major themes: factors influencing succession, the tension between change and continuity, the effects of succession on teachers, and the evaluation of succession programs. The review also highlighted the relatively limited and narrow scope of the available evidence. These findings suggest that principal succession should be understood as a multidimensional organizational process involving individual leadership capacity, institutional conditions, and the continuity of educational improvement. Consequently, educational institutions require a more systematic approach to preparing future principals before leadership vacancies occur, rather than relying predominantly on recruitment and appointment at the point of transition (Zepeda et al., 2012).

The problem becomes more complex when succession planning is treated primarily as an administrative procedure for identifying a replacement. Such an approach may ensure that a vacant position is filled, but it does not necessarily establish whether the appointed individual possesses the competencies, contextual understanding, and organizational experience required to lead effectively. Succession planning in educational institutions must therefore address two interrelated questions: who will assume future leadership responsibilities, and how will potential successors acquire the capabilities necessary to perform those responsibilities? Jackson and Allen (2022), examining succession planning for senior leaders in higher education, emphasized that the suitability of succession planning depends on institutional context, organizational culture, leadership needs, and the available talent pool. Although their discussion focuses on higher education, the underlying argument is relevant to educational leadership more broadly: succession arrangements cannot be separated from the organizational processes through which leadership capacity is developed. This perspective highlights the need to move beyond a replacement-oriented model toward an approach that integrates leadership development, institutional readiness, and continuity of organizational goals (Piodena et al., 2026).

Within this context, the leadership pipeline offers a potentially valuable framework for connecting leadership development with succession planning. Rather than viewing leadership as a position attained only after formal appointment, a pipeline perspective conceptualizes

leadership capacity as something developed progressively through professional experience, competency development, mentoring, coaching, and increasing responsibility. This approach makes it possible to examine how teachers, coordinators, department heads, vice-principals, and other educational professionals may be prepared for more complex leadership roles. Importantly, progression through these roles should not be interpreted as an automatic promotion sequence. It requires explicit competency expectations, opportunities to demonstrate leadership capabilities, developmental feedback, and assessments of readiness for different levels of responsibility. When incorporated into succession planning, the leadership pipeline can help educational institutions establish a more coherent relationship between talent identification, professional development, leadership assessment, and eventual appointment. It also provides a conceptual basis for understanding succession as a continuous process of organizational capacity building rather than an isolated human resource decision (Pendola, 2026).

Nevertheless, developing a leadership pipeline for educational institutions presents several conceptual and practical challenges. Potential leaders do not develop within identical organizational environments, and leadership readiness cannot be determined solely by length of service, formal qualifications, or previous administrative appointments. School leaders must respond to instructional demands, institutional cultures, community expectations, policy requirements, and the specific needs of teachers and students. Moreover, the availability of potential successors does not automatically guarantee that they will be willing or able to assume leadership positions. Organizational support, access to professional development, mentoring opportunities, career expectations, and the perceived attractiveness of school leadership may influence whether prospective leaders enter and remain within the leadership pipeline. These considerations indicate that a useful succession framework must account for both the development of individual capabilities and the organizational conditions that enable those capabilities to emerge. It must also recognize that internal leadership development and external recruitment may serve complementary purposes, depending on institutional circumstances and the competencies required for a particular leadership position (Greany et al., 2026).

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for examining these issues, but the relationship between leadership pipeline development and succession planning for school leaders requires further conceptual clarification. Aravena's (2022) review concentrated on principal succession and the consequences of leadership transitions, whereas Jackson and Allen (2022) discussed the contextual considerations involved in succession planning for senior leaders in higher education. These contributions offer valuable insights into succession processes and institutional conditions, but they address different aspects of the broader leadership continuity problem. A further analytical challenge is to establish how the identification of potential leaders, progressive competency development, mentoring, leadership experience, readiness assessment, and succession decisions can be understood as interconnected components of a coherent framework specifically suited to school leadership. Accordingly, the research gap addressed in this study is not the complete absence of literature on principal succession or leadership development. Rather, it concerns the need for a more integrated synthesis of these related concepts and a clearer articulation of the mechanisms through which leadership pipeline practices may support succession planning for heads of educational institutions. This gap provides a basis for examining the connections, distinctions, and potential complementarities between the two concepts (Galvin Sim Siang Lin et al., 2026).

The need for such a synthesis is also reflected in emerging discussions of school leadership recruitment, retention, and long-term sustainability. Greany et al. (2026), for example, distinguish among pipeline, pool, and reservoir approaches to leadership succession in England. Their discussion illustrates that succession can be conceptualized not only in terms of matching prospective leaders with available positions but also in terms of developing a broader group of

potential successors and cultivating leadership capacity across the workforce. This distinction is analytically important because it raises questions about the breadth of talent identification, the distribution of development opportunities, and the relationship between organizational succession needs and individual career development. For educational institutions, a narrow focus on a small number of predetermined successors may limit flexibility, whereas a broader developmental approach may expand the range of professionals capable of assuming future leadership responsibilities. At the same time, broader talent development requires appropriate selection criteria, sustained institutional commitment, and mechanisms for evaluating whether development opportunities translate into leadership readiness. These considerations reinforce the importance of examining leadership pipeline and succession planning as related but analytically distinguishable processes (Galvin Sim Siang Lin et al., 2026).

Building on this problem, the present study proposes an integrated perspective in which leadership pipeline development is examined as a potential mechanism for strengthening succession planning for heads of educational institutions. The study's novelty lies in its intention to synthesize the relationship between leadership identification, competency development, progressive leadership experience, mentoring and coaching, readiness assessment, and leadership transition within a unified analytical framework. Rather than treating succession planning merely as a procedure for replacing an outgoing principal, this perspective positions it within a broader process of developing sustainable leadership capacity. The synthesis also aims to distinguish between the developmental functions of a leadership pipeline and the decision-making functions of succession planning, thereby clarifying how the two processes can complement one another without being treated as interchangeable concepts. In addition, the study seeks to formulate a future research agenda that identifies priorities for conceptual development, empirical testing, contextual comparison, and the evaluation of leadership development practices across different educational settings. These contributions are intended to advance the conceptual understanding of leadership continuity while providing a foundation for more systematic research on the preparation of future educational leaders.

Accordingly, this study aims to synthesize the literature on leadership pipelines and succession planning for heads of educational institutions, clarify the conceptual relationship between leadership development and leadership transition, identify recurring themes and unresolved research gaps, and formulate an agenda for future research. The study is guided by three questions: (1) How have leadership pipelines and succession planning been conceptualized and examined in the literature on educational leadership? (2) What mechanisms, organizational conditions, and challenges connect leadership pipeline development with succession planning for school leaders? and (3) What theoretical, methodological, and empirical priorities should guide future research on sustainable leadership succession in educational institutions? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute an integrative conceptual perspective that connects leadership development with organizational continuity and provides a basis for examining how educational institutions can prepare future leaders more systematically.

Method (منهج)

This study employed an integrative literature review to synthesize existing knowledge on leadership pipelines and succession planning for heads of educational institutions, with particular attention to conceptual relationships, developmental mechanisms, organizational conditions, and future research opportunities. This approach was selected because the study seeks not only to summarize previous findings but also to critically examine and integrate insights from different theoretical and empirical perspectives to develop a more coherent understanding of sustainable educational leadership succession. The literature search was

designed to identify relevant peer-reviewed publications through Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking to identify additional studies relevant to the research objectives. The search strategy combined keywords and related expressions, including "leadership pipeline," "school leadership succession," "principal succession," "succession planning," "educational leadership development," "leadership readiness," and "talent management in education." Publications from 2016 to 2026 were prioritized to capture contemporary developments, while seminal theoretical works published before this period were considered when necessary to establish the conceptual foundations of leadership pipeline and succession planning. The inclusion criteria comprised scholarly publications that substantively addressed leadership development, succession processes, principal preparation, talent identification, or leadership continuity in educational institutions. Studies from other organizational settings were also considered when they offered clearly transferable theoretical insights into leadership pipeline development or succession planning. Publications without sufficient relevance to the research questions, non-scholarly opinion pieces, and duplicate records were excluded. The selection process involved screening titles and abstracts, assessing the relevance of full texts, and evaluating each publication's conceptual contribution to the review objectives (Al Jaber et al., 2025; Hilalludin et al., 2025).

The selected literature was analyzed through thematic synthesis, combining deductive categories derived from the study's conceptual framework with inductive themes emerging from the reviewed publications. The initial analytical categories included leadership identification, competency development, progressive leadership experience, mentoring and coaching, readiness assessment, succession decision-making, organizational support, and leadership transition. During the synthesis process, these categories were compared across publications to identify recurring patterns, conceptual distinctions, relationships between leadership development and succession planning, and areas in which the existing literature remained fragmented or insufficiently developed. Particular attention was given to the mechanisms through which leadership pipeline practices may contribute to succession readiness, as well as the institutional conditions that may strengthen or constrain this relationship. The analysis also distinguished between findings supported by empirical evidence and propositions derived primarily from conceptual discussions, thereby avoiding the assumption that proposed relationships have already been empirically established. Based on the resulting thematic structure, the study developed an integrative conceptual perspective and formulated a future research agenda addressing theoretical refinement, methodological development, contextual variation, and empirical evaluation of leadership succession practices (Fitria et al., 2025; Fitria & Hilalludin, 2025). The rigor of the review was supported by transparent documentation of search terms, eligibility criteria, screening decisions, and thematic coding procedures. Because this study constitutes a literature-based synthesis rather than primary empirical research, its conclusions are limited by the coverage, methodological quality, and contextual distribution of the available publications.

Result (نتائج)

The integrative synthesis of the literature was organized into three interrelated themes: (1) leadership pipeline development as a continuous process of building leadership capacity, (2) succession planning as an organizational mechanism for ensuring leadership continuity, and (3) the integration of leadership pipelines and succession planning as a basis for future research. These themes reflect three analytical dimensions of sustainable educational leadership: the development of prospective leaders, the institutional management of leadership transitions, and the relationship between individual readiness and organizational succession needs. The synthesis indicates that leadership development and succession planning address complementary aspects

of leadership continuity. Leadership pipelines emphasize the progressive development of leadership capabilities, whereas succession planning focuses on anticipating future leadership needs and preparing appropriate transitions. Their integration provides a conceptual basis for understanding how educational institutions may move from reactive replacement practices toward more systematic approaches to leadership sustainability. The following sections elaborate on these themes and identify the principal relationships, distinctions, and unresolved issues emerging from the literature.

Leadership Pipeline Development as a Continuous Process of Building Leadership Capacity

The first theme concerns the development of leadership capacity as a progressive process rather than an activity initiated only when an individual is appointed to a leadership position. A leadership pipeline perspective emphasizes the identification of potential leaders, the provision of developmental experiences, the acquisition of increasingly complex responsibilities, and the assessment of readiness for future leadership roles. Within educational institutions, this perspective provides a basis for examining how teachers and other educational professionals may develop the competencies required to become coordinators, department heads, vice-principals, and ultimately school principals. However, progression through these roles should not be understood as an automatic career sequence. Leadership readiness depends on the interaction between professional knowledge, interpersonal capabilities, organizational experience, and the capacity to respond to the particular demands of educational leadership (Fitria & Hilalludin, 2025).

The literature on leadership development suggests that preparation for leadership requires more than formal training or the completion of professional development programs. Prospective leaders need opportunities to apply their knowledge through authentic responsibilities, collaborative problem-solving, mentoring, and reflective learning. In educational settings, these experiences may include coordinating instructional improvement, facilitating teacher collaboration, managing school-level initiatives, and participating in institutional decision-making. Such activities enable potential leaders to develop a practical understanding of organizational processes while demonstrating their capacity to assume greater responsibility. Mentoring and coaching can complement these experiences by providing guidance, feedback, and opportunities to reflect on leadership decisions. Nevertheless, the availability of developmental opportunities alone does not establish that an individual is ready for promotion. Institutions also need transparent competency expectations and assessment mechanisms to determine whether professional growth translates into the capabilities required for a specific leadership role (Sugari et al., 2025a).

Another important finding concerns the distinction between identifying leadership potential and developing leadership capability. Talent identification helps institutions recognize individuals who may be suitable for future leadership responsibilities, but identification without sustained development may produce a pool of potential candidates who lack the necessary experience or confidence to assume leadership positions. Conversely, professional development that is disconnected from future organizational needs may improve individual competencies without strengthening succession readiness. A leadership pipeline therefore requires coordination among talent identification, competency development, experiential learning, and readiness assessment. This relationship is particularly relevant to schools, where leadership responsibilities involve not only administrative management but also instructional leadership, teacher development, communication with families, and the maintenance of a supportive learning environment (Sugari et al., 2025b).

The synthesis also highlights the importance of organizational context in shaping leadership pipeline development. Schools differ in their size, organizational structures,

leadership cultures, staffing conditions, and access to professional learning opportunities. Consequently, a uniform leadership development pathway may not adequately reflect the needs of every institution. Smaller schools, for example, may have fewer formal intermediate leadership positions, while other institutions may offer more extensive opportunities for distributed leadership and professional specialization. These differences suggest that leadership pipelines should be understood as adaptable developmental arrangements rather than rigid promotion ladders. Their effectiveness depends on whether developmental experiences are aligned with institutional needs, accessible to prospective leaders, and supported by a culture that encourages professional growth and leadership responsibility (Cansoy et al., 2025; Caspillo, 2025).

Taken together, this theme positions leadership pipeline development as a continuous capacity-building process involving identification, development, experience, feedback, and assessment. Its contribution to succession planning lies in establishing the developmental conditions through which prospective leaders can become prepared candidates. However, the presence of a pipeline does not independently guarantee successful succession, because institutions must also establish how leadership readiness is connected to actual succession decisions and future leadership requirements.

Succession Planning as an Organizational Mechanism for Ensuring Leadership Continuity

The second theme concerns succession planning as a forward-looking organizational process designed to anticipate leadership transitions and maintain institutional continuity. Rather than concentrating exclusively on replacing an outgoing principal, succession planning involves identifying future leadership needs, evaluating the availability of prospective successors, preparing candidates for possible transitions, and establishing arrangements that support the transfer of responsibilities and institutional knowledge. This perspective is consistent with the broader understanding of principal succession as a process that may influence organizational change, continuity, teacher experiences, and the sustainability of improvement initiatives. Aravena (2022), in a review of principal succession research, identifies several dimensions of succession that extend beyond the appointment of a replacement, thereby underscoring the organizational significance of leadership transitions (Fathurrohman & Mirza, 2025a, 2025b).

One central finding of the conceptual synthesis is that succession planning and leadership appointment represent distinct organizational activities. Appointment is a decision about who will occupy a particular position, whereas succession planning prepares the institution for future leadership needs before a vacancy occurs. An institution may successfully appoint a qualified principal while still lacking a systematic approach to succession if the transition depends entirely on emergency recruitment, informal recommendations, or the availability of a single candidate. Conversely, an institution may identify several potential successors but remain unprepared for an effective transition if it lacks clear selection criteria, leadership readiness assessments, or procedures for transferring critical institutional knowledge. Succession planning therefore requires a combination of anticipatory workforce planning, candidate development, transparent selection processes, and transition arrangements (Thant Sin, 2023; Veronita et al., 2025).

The synthesis further indicates that succession planning must balance leadership continuity with the need for renewal. Continuity is important because incoming principals must understand the institution's history, organizational culture, ongoing improvement priorities, and relationships with teachers and other stakeholders. However, continuity should not be interpreted as preserving existing practices without critical evaluation. New leaders may need to respond to changing educational policies, emerging instructional challenges, technological developments, and evolving student needs. Succession planning must consequently prepare leaders who can preserve valuable institutional knowledge while also evaluating which practices

require adaptation. This balance is particularly important when succession occurs during periods of organizational change, when the institution must maintain operational stability without limiting opportunities for improvement (Harnano et al., 2026; Hussain et al., 2025).

Organizational readiness is another significant dimension. Effective succession planning requires leadership commitment, reliable information about staffing and future vacancies, agreed-upon leadership competencies, and opportunities to evaluate prospective candidates. It also requires attention to the institutional conditions that influence whether potential leaders are willing to pursue leadership positions. Heavy workloads, limited professional support, uncertain career pathways, and inadequate recognition may discourage capable professionals from seeking leadership responsibilities. Accordingly, succession planning cannot be reduced to maintaining a list of potential replacements. It must also address the conditions that enable leadership talent to emerge, develop, and remain available to the institution.

The literature also suggests that internal leadership development and external recruitment should not necessarily be treated as competing alternatives. Internal candidates may bring contextual knowledge, established professional relationships, and familiarity with institutional priorities. External candidates may contribute different experiences, new perspectives, and competencies that are less developed within the existing organization. The appropriate balance depends on institutional circumstances, the availability and readiness of candidates, and the competencies required for the position. Succession planning is therefore better understood as a strategic process that prepares for multiple possible scenarios rather than assuming that a predetermined internal candidate will always be the most appropriate successor (Nuraini, 2026a; Octaviani, 2026).

Overall, this theme conceptualizes succession planning as an institutional mechanism for anticipating transitions, evaluating leadership readiness, preserving organizational knowledge, and maintaining the capacity for continued improvement. Its relationship with leadership pipeline development is complementary: succession planning clarifies the institution's future leadership requirements, while pipeline development creates opportunities to prepare individuals to meet those requirements. The extent to which these processes are formally connected, however, remains an important question for further conceptual and empirical investigation.

Integrating Leadership Pipelines and Succession Planning: An Emerging Conceptual Framework and Future Research Priorities

The third theme focuses on the relationship between leadership pipeline development and succession planning. The synthesis suggests that the two concepts address different but interconnected organizational problems. Leadership pipelines concentrate on how prospective leaders acquire the capabilities necessary for progressively more demanding responsibilities, whereas succession planning concentrates on how an institution anticipates leadership vacancies and prepares for leadership transitions. When these processes operate independently, institutions may experience a disconnect between the development of individual capabilities and the selection of future leaders. A leadership development program may produce competent professionals without a clear pathway to leadership positions, while a succession plan may identify potential replacements without ensuring that those individuals have received sufficient developmental preparation (Ansori & Nugraha, 2026; Fadhilah & Wasliman, 2026).

An integrated perspective can be organized into five connected functions: anticipating future leadership needs, identifying potential candidates, developing leadership capabilities, assessing readiness and making succession decisions, and supporting the transition into leadership roles. These functions should be interpreted as a recurring organizational cycle rather than a strictly linear sequence. Information obtained from leadership transitions can inform

subsequent development priorities, while changes in institutional strategy may require the organization to revise its competency expectations and reconsider its pool of potential successors. This cyclical perspective connects individual professional development with organizational learning and long-term leadership sustainability.

Table 1. Integrative synthesis of leadership pipelines and succession planning in educational institutions

Analytical dimension	Leadership pipeline	Succession planning	Integrated implication
Primary orientation	Progressive development of leadership capabilities	Anticipation of future leadership needs and transitions	Aligns individual development with institutional requirements
Talent identification	Recognizes potential leaders and developmental needs	Identifies possible successors for future leadership positions	Establishes a broader and more purposeful candidate pool
Competency development	Provides training, mentoring, coaching, and experiential learning	Determines competencies required for future leadership roles	Connects developmental activities with succession requirements
Readiness assessment	Evaluates growth and demonstrated leadership capabilities	Assesses suitability for particular positions and transition scenarios	Supports evidence-informed succession decisions
Organizational knowledge	Develops understanding of institutional processes through experience	Supports continuity and transfer of institutional knowledge	Reduces dependence on undocumented individual knowledge
Institutional governance	Requires developmental opportunities and supportive leadership culture	Requires transparent procedures, accountability, and planning	Strengthens organizational coordination and succession governance
Evaluation and improvement	Examines developmental progress and competency acquisition	Examines transition quality and continuity of institutional priorities	Creates feedback for revising development and succession arrangements

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis. The table presents an analytical framework derived from the concepts discussed in the literature; it should not be interpreted as a validated empirical model.

The framework presented in Table 1 highlights the importance of alignment between leadership development and succession decisions. First, institutional workforce planning should establish the leadership capabilities likely to be required in the future. These requirements can then inform the identification of prospective leaders and the design of developmental experiences. Second, development should be accompanied by assessment procedures that examine demonstrated competencies rather than relying exclusively on qualifications, seniority, or informal judgments of potential. Third, succession decisions should incorporate institutional needs while maintaining transparent and defensible selection criteria. Finally, the transition into a leadership position should include mechanisms for transferring knowledge, clarifying responsibilities, and reviewing progress during the early stages of appointment. This sequence provides a conceptual explanation of how leadership pipeline practices may support succession planning, although the effectiveness of the proposed relationships requires further empirical testing (Fathurrohman & Mirza, 2025c; Fitriani et al., 2026).

The synthesis also reveals several unresolved issues that deserve attention. One concerns the criteria used to evaluate leadership readiness. Educational institutions may differ in how they define effective leadership and the relative importance they assign to instructional expertise, organizational management, interpersonal competence, strategic thinking, and change

leadership. Another concerns the relationship between leadership development and actual appointment outcomes. Participation in mentoring, professional development, or leadership assignments does not necessarily result in appointment, and the reasons for this discrepancy require closer investigation. A third issue concerns fairness and access. Informal nomination practices or uneven access to developmental assignments may restrict opportunities for certain groups of professionals, potentially narrowing the available leadership pool. Research is therefore needed to determine how leadership pipeline arrangements can promote both institutional effectiveness and equitable access to leadership development (Silalahi et al., 2026; Widiyanti et al., 2026).

Contextual variation represents an additional research priority. Leadership succession in public schools, private schools, faith-based educational institutions, and multi-campus school organizations may be shaped by different governance arrangements, staffing structures, professional expectations, and decision-making processes. These differences may influence whether leadership pipelines are formally established, how potential successors are identified, and how leadership readiness is assessed. Comparative studies could clarify which aspects of an integrated framework are applicable across institutional settings and which require contextual adaptation. Longitudinal research could also examine how participation in developmental experiences relates to subsequent leadership appointments, transition quality, and institutional improvement over time (Sari, 2025; Shofiah & Macariola, 2025).

Finally, the synthesis indicates that leadership pipeline integration should be examined as an organizational process rather than assumed to be effective simply because institutions adopt formal succession policies. Future studies should investigate how institutional leadership commitment, organizational culture, professional learning opportunities, and succession governance influence the relationship between leadership development and transition outcomes. Researchers could also develop and test indicators for measuring pipeline maturity, candidate readiness, succession preparedness, and the sustainability of leadership transitions. Such work would help establish whether the proposed conceptual relationships hold across different educational contexts and identify the conditions under which leadership pipeline development contributes most effectively to succession planning.

In summary, the three themes collectively position leadership pipeline development and succession planning as complementary dimensions of sustainable educational leadership. The first explains how leadership capabilities can be developed progressively; the second clarifies how institutions can anticipate and manage leadership transitions; and the third connects these processes within an integrated conceptual perspective. This synthesis provides a foundation for further theoretical refinement and empirical investigation into how educational institutions can develop future leaders while maintaining organizational continuity and the capacity for ongoing educational improvement.

Discussion (مناقشة)

Leadership Pipeline Development as a Continuous Process of Building Leadership Capacity

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that leadership pipeline development should be understood as a long-term organizational investment rather than a series of isolated leadership training activities. This interpretation is consistent with the leadership pipeline model developed by Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2011), which emphasizes the transitions individuals must navigate as they move toward roles involving increasingly complex responsibilities. The model highlights the importance of developing the skills, allocating time appropriately, and adopting work values required at each leadership level. Applied to educational institutions, this perspective suggests that becoming a school principal involves more than demonstrating strong

teaching performance or possessing formal qualifications. Prospective principals must learn to shift from concentrating primarily on individual instructional responsibilities toward coordinating professional collaboration, managing organizational resources, facilitating institutional change, and establishing strategic priorities. The transition is therefore qualitative rather than merely positional, because each successive leadership role requires different patterns of thinking, decision-making, and responsibility (Rina Miftakhi & Yopi Malagola, 2025; Sari, 2025).

An important implication of this theoretical perspective is that professional competence in one role does not automatically translate into effectiveness in another. An excellent teacher, for example, may possess strong pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills but require additional preparation to supervise colleagues, mediate organizational disagreements, evaluate school-wide instructional practices, or allocate resources. Similarly, a successful department coordinator may need to develop broader strategic capabilities before assuming responsibility for an entire institution. The leadership pipeline model helps explain why institutions should not equate technical excellence with leadership readiness. Instead, they need to establish developmental transitions that allow prospective leaders to acquire and demonstrate competencies relevant to the demands of their anticipated positions. This interpretation also cautions against treating seniority or length of service as sufficient indicators of leadership potential. Experience becomes developmentally meaningful when individuals are given opportunities to reflect on their decisions, receive constructive feedback, and undertake responsibilities that expand their leadership capabilities (Ramadan & Soro, 2025; Rina Miftakhi & Yopi Malagola, 2025).

This argument is supported by Fusarelli, Fusarelli, and Riddick (2018), who examine leadership development and succession planning in education through the perspective of human capital theory. Their analysis emphasizes the importance of strategic, long-term approaches to developing leadership capacity, particularly in educational settings experiencing recruitment and retention challenges. Human capital theory provides a useful explanation for why leadership development should be considered an institutional investment: professional learning, mentoring, coaching, and leadership experiences can strengthen the knowledge and capabilities available within an organization. However, the value of this investment depends on whether development opportunities correspond to actual leadership requirements and whether institutions can retain, deploy, and support the capabilities they develop. From this perspective, a leadership pipeline should not be evaluated solely by the number of participants enrolled in leadership programs. It should also be assessed in relation to the quality of developmental experiences, demonstrated competency growth, readiness for leadership responsibilities, and the extent to which development contributes to institutional needs (Nugroho et al., 2026; Nuraini, 2026b).

Nevertheless, the application of human capital theory to educational leadership requires a critical qualification. Treating leadership capacity exclusively as an organizational resource may overlook the agency, professional aspirations, and career choices of individual educators. Prospective leaders are not simply assets to be accumulated for future appointments; they are professionals whose willingness to pursue leadership depends on their experiences, values, workload, professional relationships, and perceptions of institutional support. A leadership pipeline that identifies talented educators without providing meaningful developmental opportunities, manageable responsibilities, or transparent career pathways may fail to translate potential into actual leadership readiness. Accordingly, leadership development should be conceptualized as a reciprocal process in which institutions provide opportunities for growth while prospective leaders actively construct their professional identities and assess their willingness to assume greater responsibility (Najwa et al., 2025; Natalia et al., 2026).

The perspective of distributed leadership further expands this analysis. Spillane,

Halverson, and Diamond (2004) conceptualize leadership practice as emerging through interactions among leaders, followers, and the situation rather than residing exclusively in the formal authority of a single individual. This perspective is particularly relevant to schools because instructional improvement, teacher collaboration, student support, and organizational development frequently require contributions from multiple professionals. When leadership responsibilities are distributed through appropriate structures, prospective leaders can gain experience in coordinating colleagues, facilitating collective decisions, and responding to institutional challenges before assuming formal principalship. Such experiences can provide an important developmental bridge between individual professional competence and whole-school leadership. However, distributed leadership should not be reduced to the informal delegation of additional tasks. Without adequate authority, mentoring, feedback, and recognition, additional responsibilities may increase workload without generating meaningful leadership development (Khoriah, 2026; Lorensius et al., 2022).

The relationship between leadership pipelines and distributed leadership therefore suggests that institutions should create structured opportunities for prospective leaders to participate in authentic organizational decision-making. These opportunities might include leading instructional improvement teams, coordinating professional learning communities, managing cross-departmental projects, and participating in strategic planning. Such assignments can make leadership development more closely connected to the everyday practices of educational institutions. They can also help organizations identify the competencies that candidates demonstrate under realistic conditions rather than relying exclusively on interviews, academic credentials, or subjective perceptions of leadership potential (Istiqomah et al., 2026; Khoriah, 2026).

From a critical standpoint, leadership pipelines also raise questions about fairness and access. If participation in developmental assignments depends primarily on personal relationships with incumbent leaders, institutions may repeatedly select candidates who are already visible or influential while overlooking capable educators whose potential has not been formally recognized. A more defensible approach would establish transparent competency criteria, multiple pathways for demonstrating leadership potential, and regular opportunities for professional feedback. These arrangements can help reduce excessive dependence on informal nomination and make leadership development more accessible across the professional workforce. At the same time, standardized criteria should remain sufficiently flexible to recognize different forms of leadership contribution and the diverse contexts in which schools operate (Najwa et al., 2025).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives indicate that leadership pipeline development is most valuable when it combines progressive competency development, authentic leadership experience, organizational support, and fair access to developmental opportunities. The theoretical contribution of this interpretation lies in positioning the pipeline as a developmental infrastructure connecting professional growth with future institutional responsibilities. Rather than assuming that leadership talent will naturally emerge through years of service, educational institutions must intentionally create the conditions through which leadership capability can be developed, demonstrated, and evaluated. This provides the necessary foundation for succession planning, while also establishing the limits of a pipeline approach when it is disconnected from institutional workforce needs and actual leadership transition decisions.

Succession Planning as an Organizational Mechanism for Ensuring Leadership Continuity

The findings also suggest that succession planning should be interpreted as a strategic governance process that connects future leadership requirements with organizational continuity.

This interpretation extends beyond a narrow replacement-oriented understanding in which succession planning begins only after a principal announces retirement, resigns, or moves to another institution. Aravena (2022), in a review of principal succession research covering 2003–2019, identifies factors affecting succession, the tension between change and continuity, effects on teachers, and the evaluation of succession programs as important dimensions of the field. These dimensions indicate that principal succession is not merely an administrative event but a process with implications for organizational relationships, school improvement, and institutional stability. Consequently, succession planning needs to anticipate both the availability of future leaders and the organizational consequences of leadership transitions (Ab Talib, 2017; Hamid, 2024).

This argument is particularly important because leadership vacancies can expose weaknesses in institutional planning that may remain invisible while an incumbent principal continues to serve. Schools may depend heavily on the personal knowledge, relationships, and decision-making practices of one individual. When that person leaves, the institution may struggle to maintain ongoing programs, communicate priorities, preserve stakeholder relationships, or make decisions that previously relied on undocumented knowledge. Succession planning can help reduce such vulnerabilities by identifying critical leadership responsibilities, documenting institutional processes, developing potential successors, and establishing procedures for transferring knowledge. However, the objective should not be to eliminate institutional dependence on individual leaders entirely. Effective school leadership necessarily involves personal judgment, contextual understanding, and relationship-building. Rather, succession planning should ensure that essential organizational knowledge and responsibilities can be transferred without creating unnecessary disruption.

Jackson and Allen (2022) provide an important qualification to this argument. Their discussion of succession planning for senior leaders in higher education emphasizes that institutions need to consider their own culture, leadership requirements, external environment, available talent pool, and organizational level when deciding how to combine internal succession planning with external recruitment. Although their analysis concerns higher education rather than school principalship specifically, its central implication is relevant to educational organizations more broadly: succession planning should not be adopted as a universal formula without considering institutional circumstances. Internal candidates may possess valuable contextual knowledge and established relationships, whereas external candidates may introduce new expertise, perspectives, and organizational practices. The appropriate choice depends on the competencies required, the readiness of available candidates, and the institution's strategic circumstances (Ardiantono et al., 2024; Budimanta, 2024).

This qualification challenges the assumption that the most mature succession system is necessarily one that fills every leadership position through internal promotion. An institution may have a well-developed leadership pipeline but still require external recruitment when the available candidates do not possess particular competencies or when a major strategic change demands different leadership experience. Conversely, an institution that relies exclusively on external recruitment may repeatedly lose opportunities to develop existing staff and may experience discontinuity because incoming leaders need time to understand institutional culture and established practices. Succession planning therefore requires a balanced approach that considers internal talent development and external recruitment as potentially complementary strategies. The purpose is not to guarantee a predetermined successor but to strengthen the institution's capacity to respond to future leadership needs (Suprapti et al., 2024; Suud Sarim Karimullah, 2025).

Another important issue concerns the relationship between continuity and organizational renewal. Leadership transitions can create opportunities to reconsider institutional priorities,

challenge ineffective routines, and introduce new approaches to teaching, learning, and organizational management. Nevertheless, abrupt changes without sufficient contextual understanding may disrupt ongoing improvement initiatives and weaken professional trust. Succession planning must therefore distinguish between institutional practices that should be preserved and those that require critical reassessment. This distinction is especially important in schools where improvement initiatives frequently depend on sustained collaboration among principals, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. An incoming principal needs sufficient freedom to exercise professional judgment while also understanding the reasons behind existing policies, organizational commitments, and long-term development goals.

Organizational socialization offers a useful complementary perspective for examining this challenge. Bengtson, Zepeda, and Parylo (2013) investigate how school systems manage the socialization of incoming principals during succession. Their work directs attention to the organizational processes through which new leaders learn institutional expectations, establish professional relationships, and interpret the context in which they are expected to lead. From this perspective, succession planning should not end with the selection or appointment of a principal. It should also include a transition process that helps the incoming leader understand organizational routines, ongoing improvement initiatives, stakeholder expectations, and critical institutional knowledge. Such arrangements can facilitate continuity without requiring the incoming principal to reproduce the predecessor's leadership style or decisions (Dwita et al., 2026a, 2026b).

A further consideration is the governance of succession decisions. When leadership appointments rely heavily on informal recommendations or the personal preferences of incumbent leaders, the process may become difficult to evaluate and vulnerable to perceptions of favoritism. Effective succession planning therefore requires transparent competency expectations, clear decision-making responsibilities, and defensible procedures for evaluating candidate readiness. Transparency does not mean that every succession decision can be reduced to a numerical score. Leadership appointments require contextual judgment, professional evaluation, and consideration of institutional needs. However, the criteria and reasoning underlying those decisions should be sufficiently clear to support accountability and professional trust.

Succession planning also needs to account for the willingness of prospective leaders to pursue principalship. A technically qualified candidate may decline leadership responsibilities because of excessive workload, limited institutional support, uncertainty about decision-making authority, or concerns about professional and personal consequences. This issue demonstrates that the availability of potential successors is not equivalent to the availability of willing and prepared successors. Educational institutions therefore need to examine the conditions under which leadership roles become professionally sustainable and attractive. Mentoring, collaborative leadership structures, appropriate administrative support, and realistic expectations can help create conditions in which capable educators are more willing to consider future leadership positions (Amalia & Musa, 2023; Dwita et al., 2026a).

The central implication is that succession planning should be understood as an ongoing organizational capability rather than a document or list of potential replacements. Its effectiveness depends on the institution's ability to anticipate future needs, assess alternative candidates, preserve critical knowledge, support leadership transitions, and adapt to changing circumstances. This interpretation strengthens the argument that succession planning requires a close relationship with leadership development while retaining its distinct governance function. Pipeline development prepares people for increasing responsibility; succession planning determines how the institution will respond to future leadership requirements and manage the transition into specific positions. The distinction is essential because the existence of a leadership

development program does not automatically ensure a coherent or effective succession process.

Integrating Leadership Pipelines and Succession Planning: An Emerging Conceptual Framework and Future Research Priorities

The principal contribution of this study lies in bringing leadership pipeline development and succession planning together within an integrative conceptual perspective. Although the two concepts are closely related, they should not be treated as interchangeable. Leadership pipeline development focuses on the progressive formation of leadership capabilities, whereas succession planning focuses on anticipating institutional leadership needs and managing future transitions. Their integration addresses a potential organizational disconnect: professional development may occur without a clear connection to future leadership requirements, while succession decisions may be made without sufficient evidence that prospective candidates have received appropriate preparation. An integrated framework provides a basis for examining how these functions can be coordinated without collapsing their distinct purposes (Al-Baihaqi et al., 2024; Hilalludin, 2024).

The proposed relationship can be understood through a cycle of five interconnected functions: strategic anticipation, talent identification, competency development, readiness assessment and succession decision-making, and leadership transition with organizational learning. The first function involves identifying future leadership needs in light of institutional priorities, staffing conditions, and anticipated organizational changes. The second involves identifying a sufficiently broad group of potential candidates through transparent and contextually appropriate criteria. The third provides developmental opportunities through mentoring, coaching, professional learning, and authentic leadership assignments. The fourth evaluates candidates' demonstrated capabilities in relation to specific leadership requirements while maintaining appropriate governance and selection procedures. The fifth supports the transfer of institutional knowledge, the establishment of stakeholder relationships, and the evaluation of transition outcomes. Information generated during the transition can then inform subsequent workforce planning and leadership development, making the framework cyclical rather than strictly linear.

This integration is consistent with the leadership pipeline model of Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2011), which emphasizes developmental transitions across leadership levels, and with the educational leadership perspective of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004), which situates leadership practice within interactions among individuals and organizational contexts. The former helps explain the progressive development of leadership capabilities, whereas the latter draws attention to the relational and contextual character of leadership work. Human capital theory further explains why institutions may benefit from investing in leadership development, while succession planning literature highlights the importance of institutional context and transition management (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Jackson & Allen, 2022). The integration of these perspectives allows leadership succession to be examined simultaneously as an individual developmental process, an organizational planning function, and a context-dependent leadership practice.

However, this proposed framework should not be interpreted as evidence that the integration of leadership pipelines and succession planning automatically produces better leadership outcomes. It is a conceptual proposition that requires empirical evaluation. The relationship may depend on the quality of developmental experiences, the transparency of succession procedures, the availability of leadership positions, the stability of organizational support, and the broader institutional environment. For example, an institution may provide extensive leadership development but experience limited internal succession opportunities because of a centralized appointment system or a low rate of leadership turnover. Another

institution may have frequent vacancies but insufficient resources to provide sustained mentoring and preparation. These differences suggest that the effectiveness of an integrated framework must be evaluated in relation to organizational conditions rather than assumed from the presence of formal policies (Shafi et al., 2024; Subaidi et al., 2023).

A particularly important implication concerns the distinction between pipeline maturity and succession readiness. Pipeline maturity refers to the extent to which an institution has established sustained and coherent processes for identifying and developing potential leaders. Succession readiness, by contrast, concerns the extent to which the institution can respond appropriately to an actual or anticipated leadership transition. These dimensions may be related but are not necessarily identical. An institution may have an extensive leadership development program while lacking clear appointment criteria or transition procedures. Conversely, an institution may have a formal succession policy without having adequately prepared potential candidates. Future research could examine whether these dimensions can be measured separately and whether their interaction helps explain variation in leadership transition outcomes.

The proposed integration also raises questions about equity and organizational legitimacy. Leadership pipelines may improve succession preparedness, but they can also reproduce existing inequalities if access to mentoring, developmental assignments, and nomination processes is concentrated among a limited group of employees. Similarly, succession plans may become overly rigid if they identify a single preferred candidate too early or assume that leadership potential can be determined reliably through a narrow set of indicators. An effective framework should therefore preserve opportunities for multiple candidates, recognize different forms of leadership experience, and distinguish developmental support from the final appointment decision. These safeguards are important for maintaining professional trust and ensuring that leadership succession serves institutional needs rather than merely reproducing existing organizational hierarchies (Ali et al., 2021; Diwanti, 2023).

Several priorities emerge for future research. First, conceptual research should refine the distinction between leadership pipeline maturity, candidate readiness, succession preparedness, and transition quality. Second, longitudinal studies should examine how developmental experiences relate to subsequent appointments and leadership performance over time. Third, comparative research should investigate whether the relationships among pipeline development, succession planning, and transition outcomes differ across public, private, faith-based, rural, urban, and multi-campus educational institutions. Fourth, empirical studies should examine how mentoring, distributed leadership, organizational culture, and transparent selection procedures influence the effectiveness of leadership development and succession arrangements. Finally, researchers should investigate how leadership pipelines and succession planning operate within different governance systems, including contexts in which school leadership appointments are highly centralized or shaped by institutional ownership and organizational traditions.

Methodologically, future studies could combine qualitative case studies, longitudinal designs, comparative institutional analysis, and quantitative evaluation. Qualitative research could explore how prospective principals experience leadership development and how incoming leaders interpret organizational expectations during transitions. Longitudinal research could track the relationship between developmental experiences and subsequent leadership appointments, while comparative studies could identify how institutional conditions influence the implementation of succession strategies. Quantitative studies could develop and test measures of pipeline maturity, readiness assessment, succession preparedness, and transition quality. Mixed-methods approaches could then connect measurable outcomes with the organizational processes that explain them. Such research would help move the field beyond conceptual endorsement of leadership development toward evidence concerning which practices

work, for whom, and under what institutional conditions (Fathorrazi et al., 2025a, 2025b).

The broader theoretical contribution of this study is to position leadership continuity as a relationship between the development of human capability and the strategic governance of organizational transitions. This perspective challenges two incomplete assumptions: that effective leadership development will naturally produce successful succession, and that formal succession planning is sufficient to ensure the availability of capable future leaders. Neither process can fully substitute for the other. Sustainable leadership succession requires institutions to develop prospective leaders while also establishing credible procedures for anticipating leadership needs, evaluating readiness, making appointments, and supporting transitions. The proposed framework provides a basis for examining these relationships and for designing empirical research that can test their relevance across diverse educational contexts.

Ultimately, the integration of leadership pipelines and succession planning offers a promising direction for understanding how educational institutions can reduce dependence on reactive replacement practices and strengthen long-term leadership capacity. Its value lies not in guaranteeing a predetermined successor but in improving an institution's preparedness to respond to changing leadership needs while preserving organizational learning and creating opportunities for renewal. By connecting developmental processes with succession governance, the framework establishes a foundation for future research on the conditions under which leadership preparation can contribute to continuity, adaptability, and sustainable educational improvement.

Conclusion (خاتمة)

This study highlights the importance of understanding educational leadership sustainability as a strategic organizational concern that extends beyond the appointment of individual school leaders. The conceptual contribution of the study lies in establishing a foundation for examining how leadership development can be connected with institutional preparedness, professional growth, and the continuity of educational improvement. This perspective shifts attention toward the organizational conditions that enable leadership capacity to emerge and develop over time, while recognizing that leadership effectiveness cannot be determined solely by formal qualifications, professional seniority, or participation in development programs. By bringing these considerations together, the study provides a basis for rethinking leadership succession as an integral component of educational governance and long-term institutional development rather than an administrative response to an impending vacancy.

The implications of this study extend to educational policymakers, school governing bodies, and institutional leaders who seek to strengthen the sustainability of educational leadership. Leadership development and succession policies should be designed to support professional growth, promote transparent decision-making, and remain responsive to the distinctive needs of educational institutions. At the same time, the proposed conceptual perspective requires further empirical examination to establish how its underlying relationships operate across different governance arrangements, organizational cultures, and educational contexts. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative investigations that assess leadership preparedness, succession processes, and the conditions associated with successful leadership transitions. Such evidence would help refine the proposed framework and clarify its practical applicability. Ultimately, sustainable educational leadership depends not on predicting a single future leader but on cultivating the institutional capacity to develop, evaluate, and support capable leaders as educational needs and organizational circumstances evolve.

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