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Understanding School Educational Leaders' Perceptions of Professional Development in Relation to Prevailing Theories and Practices

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ABSTRACT

This follow up study has been conducted under Interpretivist paradigm while using Qualitative approach. There were 17 school heads including male and female and also representative of urban and rural areas from Punjab School Education Department selected with purposive sampling. The data were collected with the help of Semi-structured interview protocol validated through experts' opinion. The collected data were analyzed with the help of Manual Thematic analysis. Based on results, it is revealed that professional development was found to be essential for enhancing school leadership, yet its impact was limited by a persistent gap between theory and practice. While participants reported positive changes in leadership identity, decision-making, and collaboration, the study concludes that professional development must be contextualized, sustained, and practice-oriented to become a truly transformative force in educational leadership.

Keywords: School Leadership, Professional Development, Educational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, professional development (PD) has emerged as a central mechanism for strengthening the competence, confidence, and capacity of school leadership. Effective leadership development is now recognized not as a single event but as a continuous, context-responsive process that enables school leaders to navigate complex educational challenges and drive improvement in teaching and learning outcomes (Pitriani, 2024). Theories of educational leadership—particularly instructional, distributed, and transformational models—emphasize the need for PD programs that are sustained, collaborative, reflective, and closely tied to practical school realities rather than remaining confined to theoretical abstraction (Frontiers in Education, 2023; Tahir et al., 2023). However, despite this theoretical consensus, a consistent concern across global educational contexts is that PD initiatives for school leaders often fail to fully align with their lived experiences, institutional needs, and prevailing theoretical frameworks.

Professional development, in its ideal form, serves as a structured opportunity for leaders to refine their instructional, managerial, and interpersonal competencies. When properly implemented, PD fosters innovation, enhances leadership efficacy, and cultivates organizational cultures that support continuous learning (Pashmforoosh et al., 2023). However, in many educational systems, PD remains largely perfunctory, episodic, and disconnected from the actual demands of school leadership. This mismatch between theory and practice can diminish engagement, reduce relevance, and undermine the transformative intent of professional learning experiences. Studies have repeatedly shown that when school leaders perceive PD as top-down, one-size-fits-all, or overly theoretical, their motivation to engage meaningfully declines (Tahir et al., 2023). Consequently, understanding how school leaders themselves perceive the value, applicability, and impact of PD is essential to bridging the gap between leadership theory and practice.

Over the past decade, global reforms in educational leadership have increasingly emphasized evidence-based approaches to leadership development. For example, distributed leadership theory highlights the importance of shared decision-making, professional collaboration, and participatory learning environments (Harris & Jones, 2020). Similarly, instructional leadership models argue that principals' primary focus should be on improving teaching and learning processes rather than administrative routines (Hallinger, 2021). Transformational leadership, meanwhile, stresses vision building, motivation, and emotional intelligence as drivers of school improvement (Leithwood & Sun, 2020). Despite these theoretically robust frameworks, many PD programs still operate on outdated, transmission-based models where learning is delivered in isolation from real-world school contexts.

A 2023 study by Frontiers in Education reported that virtual professional leadership learning communities can significantly enhance principals' instructional leadership competencies when PD is situated within collaborative and contextually relevant platforms. Likewise, a Nigerian study found that principals' leadership

practices were a strong predictor of teacher professional development outcomes, indicating the reciprocal relationship between leaders' PD and the quality of teacher growth (*Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 2024). However, these studies also noted that school leaders often experience a lack of alignment between PD content and practical leadership challenges—suggesting a disconnect between prevailing theories and actual implementation.

This growing divergence between what leadership theory prescribes and what school leaders experience in practice raises important questions about the design, delivery, and evaluation of PD initiatives. Many PD programs remain bound to traditional workshop-style formats that provide little room for critical reflection, peer collaboration, or sustained mentoring. As a result, leadership development often becomes an exercise in compliance rather than transformation (Tahir et al., 2023). Research indicates that the most impactful PD programs are those that allow leaders to engage in situated learning—where concepts are explored through the lens of authentic, context-specific problems (Pitriani, 2024). Yet, this approach requires policy-level commitment, institutional support, and a reconceptualization of PD as an ongoing, inquiry-driven process rather than an isolated event.

In contemporary education systems, the role of the school leader has expanded far beyond traditional management. Leaders today are expected to function as instructional mentors, organizational strategists, and agents of systemic change. Consequently, their PD must evolve accordingly. As noted by Harris and Jones (2020), leadership effectiveness depends not merely on acquiring new knowledge but on the ability to apply that knowledge adaptively within complex school environments. This adaptation requires PD programs that balance theoretical frameworks with opportunities for experimentation, feedback, and reflection. When theory and practice interact dynamically, PD becomes a catalyst for professional growth and institutional renewal.

Nonetheless, the literature suggests that many school leaders perceive PD as externally imposed, bureaucratically driven, and insufficiently responsive to their developmental needs (Pitriani, 2024; Tahir et al., 2023). Such perceptions can lead to superficial participation and limited transfer of learning into practice. Moreover, in developing educational systems, PD is often constrained by limited resources, inconsistent policy frameworks, and inadequate follow-up mechanisms. The result is a fragmented professional learning ecosystem where theoretical sophistication coexists with practical stagnation.

Understanding the perceptions of school educational leaders regarding their professional development is therefore critical for several reasons. First, it provides insights into how PD is experienced and valued at the ground level, revealing factors that enhance or hinder engagement. Second, it helps identify the extent to which PD initiatives reflect or diverge from established leadership theories. Third, it offers an evidence base for reimagining PD programs that are contextually grounded, inclusive, and transformative.

This study seeks to explore the perceptions of school educational leaders

about their professional development in relation to prevailing theories and practices. Specifically, it examines how leaders interpret the relevance of PD opportunities to their professional realities, what barriers they encounter in applying learned concepts, and how they envision more effective PD models. By situating leaders' perceptions within the broader theoretical discourse, the study aims to contribute to both scholarship and practice in educational leadership development.

The need for such inquiry is particularly urgent in contexts where educational reform is accelerating and school leaders are tasked with implementing new curricula, technologies, and accountability systems. Without meaningful PD that equips them to manage change effectively, even the most well-designed reforms risk faltering at the implementation stage. As noted by Leithwood and Sun (2020), leadership remains the second most significant factor influencing student outcomes after classroom instruction. Hence, developing leaders through well-designed PD programs is not merely an administrative concern but a pedagogical imperative.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that while the theoretical foundations of professional development are strong, their translation into practice remains inconsistent. School educational leaders' perceptions play a pivotal role in determining whether PD serves as a source of empowerment or as a procedural formality. Investigating these perceptions offers an opportunity to realign PD with its intended purpose: fostering reflective, adaptive, and transformative leadership that bridges the gap between theory and practice.

In recent years, scholarly attention has grown around the professional development (PD) of school educational leaders, especially as educational leadership theories—such as instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership—emphasize the necessity of leadership growth that is continuous, contextually responsive, and aligned with actual school challenges (Ping et al., 2024; Bellibaş et al., 2025). Empirical studies confirm both promise and concern: for example, Aziz et al., (2022) found that while responsibility and accountability features of distributed leadership are perceived strongly in Punjab schools, other dimensions such as vision and collaboration are weakly experienced. In Muzaffarabad, Mughal et al., (2024) report that secondary school principals perceive transformational leadership at moderate levels in their practice, suggesting variations across local contexts. Meanwhile, Shakir & Naz (2023) and Claridad (2024) show that effective leadership practices correlate positively with teacher performance and development when PD is well-designed. However, critiques emerge too: Saleem (2023)'s phenomenological study of the School Leadership Development Programme in Punjab highlights misalignment between PD content and the operational realities of school heads; similarly, Educators' Perception about Leadership Competencies (Khosro & Alwi, 2022) underscores gaps between leadership theory and what university educators experience in leadership roles. In Bahawalpur, Bukhari et al., (2025) find satisfaction among secondary school heads with leadership development programs, but also note limited implementation of learning outcomes in daily practice. Collectively, these studies suggest that although theories prescribe robust and adaptive leadership

development, practice often remains constrained by limited relevance, weak follow-up, and institutional barriers. This paper thus seeks to understand how school educational leaders perceive their professional development in relation to these prevailing theories, to identify the theory–practice gaps, and to suggest how PD can become more aligned, effective, and contextually grounded.

METHODOLOGY

This follow up study has been conducted under Interpretivist paradigm while using Qualitative approach. There were 17 school heads including male and female and also representative of urban and rural areas from Punjab School Education Department selected with purposive sampling. The data were collected with the help of Semi-structured interview protocol validated through experts' opinion.

Data Analysis & Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional development (PD) of school educational leadership in the comparative context of prevailing theory and practices. Data were gathered from both school heads and officials engaged in the planning and implementation of professional development programs. Thematic analysis yielded five overarching themes: Access and Participation in PD Opportunities, Relevance and Quality of PD Content, Institutional and Structural Support, Impact of PD on Leadership Practices, and Suggestions for Improvement. The results are stated in detail as under:

Access and Participation in PD Opportunities

Professional development theory emphasizes the importance of continuous and equitable access to training for school leaders. However, participants' accounts revealed considerable challenges in terms of availability, regularity, and equitable participation in PD programs.

One participant shared that opportunities to attend PD sessions were sporadic and often inaccessible to many while saying:

We are told about leadership workshops only when dates are fixed, and usually these are last-minute. In theory, professional development should be a continuous journey that accompanies us throughout our leadership career. But in practice, I have rarely attended more than two sessions in a year, and those too were not well-planned. It creates a feeling that leadership development is optional, not integral.

Another Participant reflected on how access varied according to location and hierarchy.

Colleagues in urban areas get more invitations and facilities to attend training, while those in rural regions are often excluded. In my district, I was selected once in three years, and even then the sessions were too far away. This unequal access is demotivating and shows how far the practice is from theory, which stresses equal opportunity for growth.

One of the participants emphasized the lack of systematic identification of needs.

Nobody ever asked us what areas we want training in. Instead, we are called

for random topics. In principle, leadership PD should be based on needs analysis, but our reality is that someone in the office decides topics without consulting heads. This makes us feel we are just fulfilling attendance requirements rather than learning.

Another participant shared how inconsistent scheduling created barriers.

Sometimes two workshops are planned back-to-back, then nothing for months. This irregularity means we cannot sustain learning. Theoretically, PD should build on prior sessions and create continuity. But here, we attend a workshop, return to school, and there is no follow-up. It feels like a disconnected chain of events.

Similarly another participant pointed to the challenge of attending training during busy administrative cycles.

When annual exams or admissions are going on, we are suddenly called for workshops. Leaving the school at that time is nearly impossible. This shows lack of planning. In professional development theory, timing and context are crucial, but our practice overlooks this.

One of the participants explained how some heads avoided participation due to personal cost.

“When no travel allowance or accommodation is provided, many heads refuse to go. I personally had to spend from my pocket twice. Not everyone can afford that. This creates inequity in participation and discourages even those who are interested.”

Another participant (an official) admitted that:

We acknowledge that our planning for participation is weak. Ideally, all heads should rotate through opportunities equally, but due to resource constraints and political pressures, some are selected more often. We try to ensure fairness, but practice does not always reflect the principles outlined in leadership development frameworks.

Relevance and Quality of PD Content

Prevailing theories of professional development emphasize contextualized, practice-oriented, and adaptive content. However, participants consistently reported that PD content was overly theoretical, generic, and disconnected from the realities of school leadership.

One of the participant stated that:

We spend hours listening to slides filled with theories of leadership. They explain models like transformational or instructional leadership, but there is no discussion about how to apply these in our schools with overcrowded classrooms and resource scarcity. The gap between theory and our ground realities is glaring.

Another participant explained that:

One training I attended was about motivation and staff management. The presenter talked about Herzberg’s theory and Maslow’s hierarchy, which we studied long ago. What we need is practical guidance on how to motivate teachers when salaries are low and morale is poor. Without contextual examples, the theory remains abstract.

One of the participant reflected that:

Sessions are heavily lecture-based. There is little room for group discussion, case studies, or role play. Professional development literature stresses active learning, peer collaboration, and reflective practice. But what we experience is a one-way delivery, leaving little room for engagement.

One of the participant shared the stance that:

I once attended a session about school-community collaboration, but the trainer had never worked in a school like ours. They spoke in general terms, not realizing we face parents who cannot even visit the school regularly due to work pressures. Relevance was missing entirely.

A participant (an official) admitted that:

We often adapt modules from international sources because they appear updated. But localization is weak. We know contextualization is necessary, but due to limited time, we sometimes deliver as they are. This reduces relevance for heads, and they complain rightly.

Another participant explained the absence of follow-up:

“We are told about frameworks, but there is no follow-up on whether we understood or applied them. Good practice suggests coaching or mentoring after workshops, but in reality, after the session ends, everything is forgotten.”

A participant (another official) added:

“We do include theory because we believe heads should be aware of global models, but we agree more practical components like simulations and problem-solving activities are needed. Balancing theory with practice is a challenge we are still working on.”

Institutional and Structural Support

Theorists stress that professional development must be supported by strong institutional structures, including incentives, resources, and enabling environments. Participants, however, revealed systemic barriers that hinder meaningful engagement in PD.

One of the participant stated:

“We manage everything ourselves. No TADA, no accommodation, nothing. Only those who are personally motivated attend. The system does not reward us. Professional development theory says institutions must support learning with resources, but our reality is self-dependence.”

Another participant explained:

Most trainings are arranged far from our schools, sometimes in other districts. Without travel facilities, participation means personal expense. I know many heads who skip such sessions because they cannot afford them. This shows how lack of institutional support weakens leadership development.

A participant pointed to workload issues that:

“We are expected to leave our schools during peak exam season to attend training. No substitute arrangements are made. We face pressure from parents and teachers, yet officials insist on attendance. The institution fails to consider our realities.”

One of the participant added:

“There is no recognition for those who attend training. Whether you attend ten sessions or none, promotions and postings are the same. In theory, PD should be linked with career advancement. In practice, there is no connection, so many do not take it seriously.”

Another participant (an official) admitted: “Budgetary constraints are real. We want to provide travel allowance and accommodation but allocations are limited. Sometimes we depend on donor projects for these facilities. This is not sustainable, but we have little choice.”

One of the participant emphasized the psychological aspect. “When we are forced to attend without incentives, it creates resentment. Instead of being excited to learn, we feel burdened. A supportive institutional culture is missing.”

Another participant (another official) reflected: “We know support is weak. Ideally, training should be embedded into institutional policy with allocated resources. But education budgets prioritize other areas, and leadership development is often sidelined. This makes it difficult to sustain structural support.”

Impact of Professional Development on Leadership Practice

Across participants, the impact of PD was strongly acknowledged, particularly in terms of leadership identity, instructional supervision, communication, and collaborative practices. Many reported positive transformations in their leadership approach, shifting from management-centered to learning-centered roles. However, concerns about sustainability and contextual relevance persisted. The results highlight a significant gap between the theoretical grounding of PD programs and their long-term integration into daily school practices. The overall finding suggests that while PD has meaningful effects, systemic alignment and contextualization are required for maximizing its impact.

One of the participants observed that:

Professional development programs had a direct influence on their ability to engage in instructional leadership. Before attending such programs, they largely focused on administrative duties; however, exposure to theory-driven training helped them recognize the importance of academic leadership. They emphasized that PD enhanced their confidence in monitoring classroom instruction, holding reflective discussions with teachers, and linking practices with school improvement. Yet, they cautioned that without sustained follow-up, the impact of PD often faded over time.

Another participant described that:

PD as transformative, particularly in terms of decision-making and conflict resolution. They explained that after attending training aligned with leadership theory, they were better able to mediate between teachers and parents, applying a more systematic approach rather than relying solely on intuition. They also noted improved skills in strategic planning, though they admitted that the lack of practical school-based modules sometimes limited the transfer of theoretical knowledge into their day-to-day leadership.

One participant stated that:

The greatest impact of PD was seen in their professional identity as a leader. They shared that leadership training helped them transition from being “a senior teacher” into someone who could actively foster collaboration among staff. The participant highlighted that after PD sessions, they initiated peer-mentoring groups and began organizing reflective sessions with teachers, which had a noticeable impact on school culture. They concluded that PD enhanced their leadership vision, but required contextual adaptation to be fully effective.

Another Participant explained that:

Professional development allowed them to view school improvement as a collective endeavor rather than an individual burden. Training on distributed leadership encouraged them to involve middle leaders and teachers in decision-making processes, which improved staff morale and teacher ownership. They credited PD for changing their leadership style from authoritative to more participatory, though they felt systemic constraints, such as rigid district-level policies, often restricted this positive shift.

One of the Participant emphasized that:

PD improved their communication and interpersonal skills, which directly strengthened teacher-leader relationships. They observed that PD programs emphasizing reflective practice helped them listen to teachers’ concerns more empathetically and negotiate changes in teaching practices without creating resistance. They linked this to a reduction in teacher turnover in their school, highlighting the practical benefits of leadership-focused PD.

According to another participant:

PD had a clear impact on their instructional monitoring and evaluation skills. They mentioned that after training, they were better equipped to design feedback tools, conduct classroom observations, and provide constructive suggestions to teachers. However, they stressed that the practical impact was limited when training remained generic and not subject-specific. They recommended tailoring PD to the specific needs of schools for greater effectiveness.

Another participant reflected that:

PD broadened their perspective on equity and inclusion. They described how workshops addressing inclusive leadership encouraged them to consider the needs of marginalized students and teachers, which in turn influenced school policies. This impact was seen in initiatives such as differentiated teaching support and resource allocation. The participant emphasized that PD played a key role in shaping their awareness of social justice dimensions in leadership.

Suggestions for Improving Professional Development

Participants provided comprehensive and practical suggestions to enhance the quality and effectiveness of PD. Central recommendations included contextualization, sustained mentoring, peer collaboration, digital integration, and stronger alignment with policy. The collective stance underscores a recognition that PD must move beyond theoretical input to embrace applied, locally relevant, and continuous approaches. Such improvements would bridge the gap between prevailing theory and practice, ensuring that PD becomes a transformative force for school leadership.

One of the participant suggested that:

PD programs should be more closely linked to the actual challenges school leaders face. They emphasized the importance of situating training in real-life school contexts, with follow-up coaching and mentoring rather than one-off workshops. According to them, sustained professional learning communities would enable leaders to test and refine strategies over time, ensuring that training has a lasting influence.

Another participant recommended that:

Integrating theoretical input with case studies and simulations. They argued that many school leaders struggle to connect leadership theories to practice because PD programs often present concepts in isolation. They advocated for scenario-based training that allows leaders to apply theoretical frameworks to practical school situations such as staff conflicts, resource allocation, or policy implementation.

One of the Participants proposed that:

Greater use of peer collaboration and networking in PD. They explained that engaging with other school leaders across districts would allow them to learn from diverse experiences and strategies. They also suggested establishing formal mentorship structures where experienced leaders could guide emerging ones. This peer-based approach, they argued, would provide ongoing professional support beyond formal training events.

Another Participant stated that:

Digital and blended PD opportunities were essential. They highlighted the limitations of traditional in-person workshops, particularly for school leaders managing heavy administrative workloads. Online learning platforms, webinars, and digital resource libraries were suggested as flexible alternatives that could make PD more accessible and continuous. They also stressed the role of AI and data-driven tools in providing personalized learning experiences.

Similarly, another participant stressed that:

PD should include strong practical components such as school-based projects, reflective journaling, and action research. They argued that engaging in such hands-on activities would help leaders test theories within their own contexts and develop solutions tailored to their schools. They also emphasized the value of feedback mechanisms that allow leaders to reflect on their progress over time.

One of the participants suggested that:

Involving policymakers and district officials in PD design. They pointed out that many limitations of PD arise because training content is disconnected from the administrative and policy framework in which schools operate. By including higher-level stakeholders, PD programs could align better with systemic reforms, creating a more coherent approach to educational leadership development.

Another participant recommended that:

Culturally contextualized PD programs. They explained that many imported training modules fail to reflect local realities, traditions, and challenges. For example, leadership case studies from Western contexts may not resonate with the hierarchical structures and resource limitations common in their schools. They advocated for developing indigenous PD frameworks rooted in the socio-cultural dynamics of the education system.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the professional development of school educational leadership in the comparative context of prevailing theory and practices, revealing both its transformative potential and persistent challenges. Findings demonstrated that while professional development is widely valued for enhancing leadership capacity, fostering collaboration, and shaping instructional practices, its effectiveness is often constrained by a gap between theoretical models and practical realities. Many programs remain generic, short-term, and disconnected from the socio-cultural and policy contexts of schools, limiting their sustained impact. Nevertheless, participants reported positive changes in leadership identity, decision-making, communication, and inclusivity when PD was continuous, practice-oriented, and contextually relevant. The study concludes that meaningful professional development must integrate theory with school-based applications, align with systemic policies, and provide sustained support through mentoring, reflection, and peer collaboration. Bridging the theory–practice divide is therefore critical for enabling PD to serve as a transformative force, equipping educational leaders to not only manage but also to inspire and lead meaningful change in contemporary schooling.

Recommendations

Based on conclusion, it has been recommended that Professional development programs should be redesigned to integrate theoretical insights with practical, school-based applications and continuous mentoring support. Policymakers and institutions must ensure contextual relevance, sustainability, and collaborative learning structures to strengthen the long-term impact of leadership development initiatives.

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