

Designing a Learning-Oriented Succession Planning Model for Elementary School Principals

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E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the final paragraph of the Introduction, the authors state that “limited attention has been given to the development of a context-specific and learning-oriented succession planning model for elementary school principals.” This claim requires a more systematic demonstration of the research gap. The Introduction reviews succession planning in several sectors, but it does not clearly distinguish what has already been established regarding succession planning in schools from what remains unknown about elementary school leadership. The authors should organize the literature more analytically by identifying the limitations of previous models, such as insufficient attention to experiential learning, school-level contextual factors, stakeholder participation, principal well-being, or developmental assessment. The research gap should emerge from a critical synthesis rather than from a general statement that few studies exist.

The Introduction is conceptually broad, but several paragraphs discuss family businesses, hospitals, military organizations, universities, cultural organizations, and sport management without sufficiently explaining their relevance to elementary school principal succession. For example, the paragraph beginning with “The role of organizational governance is another important

consideration” draws on evidence from family firms. The authors should either shorten these cross-sector discussions or explicitly identify which mechanisms are transferable to schools and which are context-dependent. A stronger manuscript would distinguish universal succession principles—such as leadership continuity and talent identification—from school-specific requirements such as instructional leadership, child development, parent relations, and teacher professional learning.

In the methodology section, the sentence “This study was conducted using an exploratory qualitative approach and Attride-Stirling’s thematic network analysis” should be supported by a more precise methodological explanation. The manuscript should describe the three levels of Attride-Stirling’s thematic networks—basic, organizing, and global themes—and explain how the analytic procedure moved from coded text segments to each thematic level. At present, the methodology identifies the analytical approach but provides only a general statement that the data were “identified, analyzed, summarized, and classified.” The authors should specify the stages of coding, theme refinement, network construction, verification, and final interpretation so that the analytic process is transparent and reproducible.

The paragraph describing the research population states that participants included “faculty members specializing in educational administration and senior administrators within the education system who had relevant academic and executive experience in succession planning.” The inclusion criteria remain insufficiently detailed. The authors should report the minimum years of academic or managerial experience required, the participants’ organizational positions, academic ranks, educational qualifications, geographical distribution, and direct experience with principal selection or succession programs. A participant-characteristics table is strongly recommended. Such information is essential for evaluating whether the expert sample possessed adequate diversity and whether the resulting model reflects a sufficiently broad range of educational perspectives.

The use of snowball sampling requires further justification because this method may produce a relatively homogeneous expert network. In the paragraph stating that “this process continued until theoretical saturation was reached,” the authors should explain how the initial participants were selected, how many referral chains were used, and whether efforts were made to include experts with divergent institutional backgrounds or viewpoints. The manuscript should also clarify whether theoretical sampling decisions were made during data collection or whether the process was primarily referral-based convenience sampling. This distinction is important because “theoretical saturation” is often associated with iterative sampling guided by emerging concepts, whereas the described method appears closer to purposive snowball sampling.

The statement that “a total of 13 interviews were conducted” is not sufficient to establish saturation. The authors should report how saturation was assessed, at which interview no new basic themes emerged, and whether one or more additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation. A saturation table or code-accumulation description would strengthen methodological rigor. The authors should also distinguish between code saturation and meaning saturation, because the absence of new codes does not necessarily indicate that existing themes have been explored in adequate conceptual depth.

There are inconsistencies between Table 1 and Tables 2 and 3. For example, Table 2 includes “the need for perseverance in the successor,” although Table 1 lists “the need for a strong spirit,” “high patience,” and related characteristics but does not clearly identify perseverance as a separate open code. Similarly, some code labels and assigned identifiers differ from the examples discussed in the narrative. The manuscript states that “the need for talent in the successor” was coded as B12, whereas Table 2 assigns it A14 and uses B12 for instructional leadership. These inconsistencies undermine the traceability of the coding process. The authors should audit all code names and identifiers across the narrative and tables and ensure exact correspondence.

The discussion of emic and etic coding requires conceptual revision. The manuscript states that a participant’s comment about jealousy among colleagues was transformed into the code “motivating other employees.” This transformation appears interpretively distant from the original statement, which may more directly indicate perceived unfairness, destructive competition, envy, reduced morale, or resistance to succession planning. The authors should demonstrate how the final code was derived from the participant’s meaning and provide an audit trail connecting the quotation, initial interpretation, basic theme, and organizing theme. Otherwise, the etic recoding may seem to alter rather than interpret the participant’s account.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the new document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the data collection paragraph, the authors mention that “semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or online,” but they do not provide the interview guide or representative questions. The manuscript should include the principal interview questions, follow-up probes, and the process used to develop and validate the guide. It should also explain whether the interview format differed between in-person and virtual sessions and whether these differences could have influenced rapport, depth of disclosure, or data quality. Including the interview protocol as an appendix would substantially improve the study’s methodological transparency.

The manuscript reports that interviews lasted “approximately 45 to 60 minutes,” were recorded, and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word 2016 before being imported into MAXQDA. However, the authors should clarify whether field notes, nonverbal observations, reflective memos, or analytic journals were also used. Because qualitative thematic analysis depends heavily on researcher interpretation, documenting reflexive practices is necessary. The manuscript should include a reflexivity statement describing the researcher’s professional background, prior assumptions about succession planning, relationship with participants, and procedures used to minimize the influence of preconceptions during coding and interpretation.

The paragraph addressing Lincoln and Guba’s criteria contains a conceptual inconsistency. The authors state, “To enhance dependability, the researcher maintained continuous engagement with the data, repeatedly reviewed the interview transcripts, and re-examined the codes and themes,” whereas prolonged engagement and member checking are more commonly associated with credibility. Similarly, detailed documentation of the research process is generally related to dependability and confirmability rather than credibility alone. The authors should revise this section so that each strategy is accurately aligned with credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. An audit trail, peer debriefing, negative-case analysis, member checking, thick description, and reflexive documentation should be clearly differentiated.

The reported agreement values of 85%, 87%, and 81% require methodological clarification. The manuscript states that five participants agreed with the extracted themes at a rate of approximately 85%, that inter-coder agreement was approximately 87%, and that three experts approved the conceptual framework at a rate of approximately 81%. The authors should explain exactly how these percentages were calculated, what rating scale or decision rule was used, how disagreements were resolved, and whether a recognized coefficient was applied. Simple percentage agreement may overestimate reliability; therefore, the authors should consider reporting Cohen’s kappa, Krippendorff’s alpha, or another suitable agreement index when appropriate.

Table 1 contains 90 open codes, but several codes appear overlapping or nearly synonymous. For example, “the need for a high level of patience in the successor” and “patience as a characteristic of the successor” seem redundant, as do “identification of strengths and weaknesses” and “identification of the successor’s strengths and weaknesses.” The authors should explain whether these distinctions were preserved because they arose from different contexts or participants, or whether they reflect insufficient code consolidation. A careful review is needed to eliminate duplication, improve conceptual parsimony, and ensure that each basic theme represents a distinct meaning unit.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the new document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.