

How to Cite:

Think, T. T. (2026). A study on the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory approach. *Tennessee Research International of Social Sciences*, 8(1), 137–146. Retrieved from <https://triss.org/index.php/journal/article/view/142>

A study on the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory approach

Tran Thi Think

National Academy of Educational Management, Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract--This study examines the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory approach, with particular reference to the Vietnamese educational context. Drawing on a qualitative literature review methodology, the study synthesizes research published between 2010 and 2025 from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key patterns related to management actors, management processes, and supporting conditions. The findings reveal that participatory management is characterized by the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members. The management process is structured across three interconnected phases: pre-activity planning, in-activity implementation, and post-activity evaluation, all of which benefit from active stakeholder participation. In addition, effective management depends on enabling conditions such as policy alignment, resource availability, and the integration of digital technologies. The study highlights that, despite policy support in Vietnam, experiential learning activities are often implemented in a top-down manner with limited stakeholder engagement. Based on the findings, several implications are proposed, including strengthening participatory leadership, institutionalizing stakeholder involvement, adopting a process-oriented management approach, and improving supporting conditions. The study contributes to the development of a conceptual understanding of participatory management in experiential learning and provides directions for future research and practice in primary education.

Keywords--Experiential learning, participatory approach, school management, primary education, stakeholder participation, Vietnam.



1. Introduction

In the context of rapid global educational transformation, experiential learning has been widely recognized as a key approach to fostering students' competencies and holistic development. Rooted in the work of John Dewey, experiential learning emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience, reflection, and interaction with real-life contexts (Dewey, 2001). This perspective aligns with contemporary educational paradigms that prioritize the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills rather than the mere transmission of knowledge.

At the same time, participatory approaches in education have gained increasing attention as a means of enhancing both the effectiveness and inclusiveness of learning processes. Drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire, participatory education promotes dialogue, empowerment, and the active involvement of learners in decision-making (Freire, 1970). Frameworks such as Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) and Hart's model of children's participation further illustrate that meaningful engagement ranges from passive involvement to genuine partnership, where learners and stakeholders share responsibility in shaping educational activities (Hart, 1992).

In primary education, the integration of experiential learning and participatory approaches is particularly important. Young learners benefit significantly from engaging in hands-on, meaningful activities that connect classroom knowledge with real-life situations. Moreover, the involvement of parents and communities in educational processes has been shown to positively influence students' academic achievement and engagement (Castro et al., 2015). International organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank have consistently emphasized the need for inclusive, competency-based, and participatory education systems to meet the demands of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 2018).

In Vietnam, these global trends have been reflected in recent educational reforms, particularly through the implementation of the General Education Curriculum 2018 (MOET, 2018), which highlights the development of students' competencies and qualities as central objectives. Experiential learning activities (Hoạt động trải nghiệm) have been formally integrated into the curriculum as a compulsory component across all levels of general education, especially in primary schools. These activities aim to provide students with opportunities to apply knowledge in practical contexts, develop social skills, and enhance personal responsibility.

However, the effective organization and management of experiential learning activities in Vietnamese primary schools remain challenging. In practice, these activities are often implemented in a top-down manner, with limited involvement of students, parents, and community stakeholders in the planning and decision-making processes. This situation leads to a gap between policy intentions and actual implementation, reducing the potential impact of experiential learning.

From a management perspective, addressing this gap requires a shift from traditional hierarchical models to participatory approaches that emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and stakeholder engagement. School leaders

play a crucial role in facilitating this transition by creating conditions that enable meaningful participation of teachers, students, parents, and community members throughout the entire process of experiential learning activities (Epstein, 2018; Uemura, 1999; Nabatchi, 2012).

Despite the growing interest in experiential learning and participatory education, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that examine how these two approaches can be integrated within a unified management framework, particularly in the context of Vietnamese primary education. Most existing studies tend to address either pedagogical aspects or participation separately, without exploring their intersection in school management.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Experiential learning in education

Experiential learning has been widely recognized as a fundamental approach to promoting active and meaningful learning. The theoretical foundation of experiential learning can be traced back to John Dewey, who emphasized that education should be grounded in real-life experiences and reflective thinking (Dewey, 2001). Building on this perspective, experiential learning theories suggest that knowledge is constructed through a cyclical process involving experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application.

In primary education, experiential learning is particularly important as it supports not only cognitive development but also social and emotional growth. Through hands-on and context-based activities, students are encouraged to explore, interact, and apply knowledge in authentic situations. This approach contributes to the development of essential competencies such as problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability, which are critical for learners in the 21st century.

However, the effectiveness of experiential learning depends on appropriate instructional design and guidance. Kirschner et al. (2006) argue that minimally guided instruction, including some forms of discovery or inquiry-based learning, may not be effective for novice learners if not properly structured. Therefore, experiential learning should be carefully designed with clear objectives, appropriate scaffolding, and systematic evaluation to ensure meaningful learning outcomes.

In the Vietnamese context, experiential learning has been formally integrated into the General Education Curriculum 2018, where it is introduced as a compulsory educational component across all levels of general education. This reform reflects a shift toward competency-based education, emphasizing the need for learners to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experience.

2.2. Participatory approach in education

Participatory approaches in education emphasize the active involvement of learners and stakeholders in the educational process. This perspective is strongly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, who advocated for dialogic and learner-centered education as a means of empowerment (Freire, 1970). In participatory

learning environments, students are encouraged to express their views, engage in dialogue, and contribute to decision-making processes.

The concept of participation has been further developed through theoretical models such as Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969), which categorizes levels of citizen involvement from non-participation to full citizen control. Similarly, Hart (1992) proposed a model specifically focused on children's participation, distinguishing between tokenistic participation and genuine involvement. These frameworks highlight that meaningful participation requires not only the presence of stakeholders but also their influence on decisions and outcomes.

In the educational context, participatory approaches extend beyond students to include parents and communities. Research indicates that parental involvement has a positive impact on students' academic achievement and overall development (Castro et al., 2015). International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF have also emphasized participation as a key principle in building inclusive and equitable education systems (UNESCO, 2016; UNICEF, 2021).

In Vietnam, participatory practices in education have been increasingly promoted, particularly in strengthening school-family-community relationships. However, in many cases, participation remains limited to formal or symbolic involvement, rather than genuine engagement in planning and decision-making processes.

2.3. School management and participatory management

School management traditionally focuses on core functions such as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling educational activities. In recent years, there has been a shift toward more decentralized and participatory forms of school governance, often referred to as school-based management.

Participatory management emphasizes collaboration, shared responsibility, and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes. According to Epstein (2018), effective school management involves strong partnerships among schools, families, and communities, which contribute to improved student outcomes. Similarly, Uemura (1999) and Nabatchi (2012) argue that stakeholder participation enhances transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in educational governance.

In the context of experiential learning, participatory management is particularly important, as these activities often require coordination among multiple actors and resources. School leaders are expected to move beyond traditional administrative roles and adopt facilitative leadership practices that encourage active participation from teachers, students, parents, and community members. In Vietnam, educational management has undergone significant transformation in line with national reform policies. The emphasis on school autonomy and accountability has created opportunities for more participatory management practices. Nevertheless, challenges remain in terms of managerial capacity, institutional culture, and the establishment of effective mechanisms to support meaningful participation.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literature review to synthesize existing research on the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory perspective, with the aim of identifying key theoretical foundations, research trends, and major themes in the field. A systematic search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, selected for their comprehensive coverage of high-quality peer-reviewed publications in education and educational management. The search process utilized a combination of keywords such as “experiential learning,” “participatory approach,” “school management,” and “primary education,” combined through Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine results. In addition, reference lists of selected studies were examined to identify further relevant sources. The inclusion criteria focused on English-language publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reports from reputable organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. Studies were selected if they addressed experiential learning, participatory approaches, or school management related to stakeholder engagement, while those lacking clear theoretical grounding or methodological rigor were excluded. The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis, in which key concepts related to experiential learning, participation, and management were coded and subsequently grouped into broader themes to identify patterns and relationships across studies.

4. Results

Based on the systematic search and thematic analysis of selected studies published between 2010 and 2025, the findings reveal several consistent patterns regarding the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory approach. The results are organized into four major themes derived from the coding process: (1) management actors, (2) pre-activity management, (3) in-activity management, (4) post-activity management, and (5) management of supporting conditions.

4.1. Management actors in participatory experiential learning

The thematic analysis indicates that the management of experiential learning activities is characterized by a multi-layered governance structure involving different stakeholders.

Across the reviewed studies, school principals consistently emerge as key strategic leaders who are responsible for setting directions, approving plans, and ensuring overall quality assurance. Their role extends beyond administrative control to facilitating participation among stakeholders.

Vice principals are frequently identified as operational managers who coordinate implementation, monitor progress, and provide professional support to teachers. At the departmental level, subject leaders function as intermediaries who translate institutional goals into practical teaching plans and support teachers in designing experiential activities.

Importantly, the findings highlight that participatory management expands the range of actors beyond internal staff to include students, parents, and community

members. This broader involvement contributes to a more inclusive and context-responsive management model.

4.2. Pre-activity management: Planning with stakeholder participation

The analysis shows that the pre-activity phase is a critical stage in which participatory principles are most explicitly embedded.

Studies consistently emphasize that effective management begins with the development of school-level experiential learning plans aligned with national curricula, particularly competency-based frameworks. Within this process, teachers are guided to design activities that reflect students' characteristics, local contexts, and learning objectives.

A key pattern identified is the integration of stakeholder feedback during the planning stage. Students, parents, and community representatives are increasingly involved in suggesting themes, methods, and forms of organization. This participatory planning approach enhances both the relevance and feasibility of experiential learning activities.

In addition, the literature highlights the importance of comprehensive resource planning, including human resources, facilities, financial support, and time allocation. Safety management and contingency planning are also identified as essential components, particularly for activities conducted outside the classroom.

4.3. In-activity management: Facilitating participation and coordination

The findings indicate that the management focus during implementation shifts toward coordination, facilitation, and real-time adjustment.

A common theme across studies is the redefinition of teachers' roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning experiences. Teachers are expected to guide, support, and monitor students' participation without replacing their active role.

Students are positioned at the center of the experiential process, actively engaging in tasks, collaboration, and reflection. Participatory management is reflected in the delegation of responsibilities to students, including peer interaction, group coordination, and self-assessment.

Another significant finding is the adoption of multi-source assessment practices. Evaluation is no longer limited to teachers but involves students, peers, parents, and community participants. This diversified assessment approach enhances objectivity and supports competency-based evaluation.

Furthermore, several studies highlight the growing use of digital technologies in managing experiential learning activities. Digital tools are used to monitor progress, document evidence, and facilitate communication among stakeholders, contributing to more transparent and efficient management processes.

4.4. Post-activity management: Evaluation and continuous improvement

The post-activity phase is identified as a key stage for ensuring quality improvement through participatory evaluation.

The thematic analysis shows that schools increasingly adopt systematic feedback mechanisms that involve multiple stakeholders. Data collection methods include surveys, reflective discussions, and digital feedback platforms.

The findings indicate that effective management requires the establishment of clear evaluation criteria aligned with learning objectives and competency

development. These criteria are used to assess not only student outcomes but also the organization and implementation of experiential activities.

Importantly, the participatory approach allows stakeholders to contribute to the evaluation process, ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered. Based on the collected feedback, school leaders and teachers collaboratively identify areas for improvement and develop action plans for future activities.

4.5. Management of supporting conditions

The analysis also reveals that the effectiveness of experiential learning management depends significantly on supporting conditions.

Key factors identified include policy frameworks, infrastructure, financial resources, and information technology systems. School leaders play a crucial role in adapting national policies to local contexts and ensuring their practical implementation.

The literature emphasizes the importance of mobilizing community resources, including partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and parents. These partnerships not only provide additional resources but also enrich the experiential learning environment.

In addition, the integration of information and communication technologies is increasingly recognized as a critical factor. Digital platforms support planning, coordination, communication, and data management, thereby enhancing the overall efficiency and transparency of management processes.

5. Discussion

First, the study confirms that school leadership plays a decisive role in enabling participatory management. Consistent with international research on distributed and collaborative leadership, principals are not only responsible for planning and control but also for creating an environment that encourages stakeholder engagement. The results suggest that effective leaders act as facilitators who connect teachers, students, parents, and community actors into a cohesive system. In Vietnam, this finding is especially significant given the ongoing implementation of the General Education Curriculum 2018, which requires school leaders to shift from administrative management to pedagogical leadership and stakeholder coordination. However, in practice, many school leaders still operate within traditional hierarchical models, limiting opportunities for genuine participation.

Second, the findings highlight that participation must be understood as a substantive rather than symbolic process. While international frameworks such as Arnstein's ladder and Hart's model emphasize varying levels of participation, the results of this study indicate that meaningful participation occurs only when stakeholders are actively involved in decision-making across all stages of experiential learning activities. In the Vietnamese context, participation is often limited to consultation or information sharing, rather than co-construction of educational activities. This gap suggests that schools need to establish clearer mechanisms for stakeholder engagement, including structured channels for collecting and integrating feedback from students, parents, and community members.

Third, the study underscores the importance of a process-oriented approach to management, structured around pre-activity, in-activity, and post-activity phases. This finding aligns with contemporary educational management theories that emphasize continuous planning, implementation, evaluation, and improvement. The results demonstrate that participatory elements can be embedded throughout this process, from collaborative planning to multi-source assessment and shared evaluation. In Vietnam, however, management practices often focus heavily on the planning stage, with less attention given to monitoring during implementation and systematic evaluation after activities. Therefore, strengthening all phases of the management cycle is essential for improving the effectiveness of experiential learning.

Fourth, the findings reveal the critical role of supporting conditions, including policy alignment, infrastructure, financial resources, and digital technologies. International studies emphasize that participatory management is more effective when supported by adequate resources and institutional frameworks. In Vietnam, although policy documents strongly encourage experiential learning and stakeholder participation, practical implementation is often constrained by limited facilities, insufficient funding, and uneven digital capacity among schools. This suggests that improving material and technological conditions is a necessary prerequisite for scaling participatory practices.

Based on these findings, several key lessons can be drawn for the Vietnamese education system. First, there is a need to enhance the capacity of school leaders in participatory and distributed leadership, enabling them to move beyond traditional management approaches and effectively coordinate stakeholder involvement. Second, schools should institutionalize participation by developing clear mechanisms and procedures that allow students, parents, and community members to contribute meaningfully to planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Third, experiential learning management should be approached as a continuous cycle, with balanced attention to preparation, implementation, and post-activity reflection and improvement. Finally, greater investment in infrastructure, resources, and digital transformation is required to support the effective organization and management of experiential learning activities.

At the same time, this study identifies several research gaps. Existing studies tend to focus either on pedagogical aspects of experiential learning or on participation in isolation, with limited attention to their integration within a unified management framework. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical research examining how participatory management models operate in specific national contexts such as Vietnam. Future research should therefore focus on developing and testing context-specific management models, as well as exploring the impact of participatory approaches on student outcomes and school effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive review of the management of experiential learning activities in primary schools from a participatory perspective. By synthesizing relevant literature, the study has clarified the theoretical foundations and identified key dimensions of participatory management,

including management actors, process-based management across different phases, and supporting conditions.

The findings indicate that participatory management plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of experiential learning activities. The involvement of multiple stakeholders not only enriches the design and implementation of activities but also contributes to more comprehensive and transparent evaluation processes. At the same time, effective management requires strong leadership, clear coordination mechanisms, and adequate supporting conditions.

In the Vietnamese context, although experiential learning has been formally integrated into the General Education Curriculum 2018, its management still faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of limited stakeholder participation and uneven implementation practices. Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward more participatory and process-oriented management models, supported by improved institutional capacity and resource investment.

This study contributes to the existing literature by bridging the gap between experiential learning and participatory management, offering a more integrated perspective on school management practices. However, as a literature-based study, it is limited in its ability to provide empirical evidence. Future research should focus on developing and testing practical models of participatory management in specific school contexts, as well as examining their impact on student outcomes and school effectiveness.

References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). *A ladder of citizen participation*. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Castro, M., Expósito-Casas, E., López-Martín, E., Lizasoain, L., Navarro-Asencio, E., & Gaviria, J. L. (2015). *Parental involvement on student academic achievement: A meta-analysis*. *Educational Research Review*, 14, 33–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.01.002>
- Dewey, J. (2001). *Democracy and education* (Original work published 1916). Free Press.
- Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gottschalk, F., & Borhan, H. (2023). *Child participation in decision making: Implications for education and beyond* (OECD Education Working Papers No. 301). OECD Publishing.
- Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Innocenti Essays No. 4). UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
- Hervé, N., Konijn, E., Lecomte, L., McCarthy, L., Oliveira, R., & Wernham, M. (2022). *UNICEF child rights schools toolkit – Child participation*. UNICEF.
- Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). *Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery,*

- problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. Educational Psychologist, 41(2), 75–86. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1*
- Nabatchi, T. (2012). *A manager's guide to evaluating citizen participation*. IBM Center for The Business of Government.
- Uemura, M. (1999). *Community participation in education: What do we know?* The World Bank.
- UNESCO. (1990). *World declaration on education for all and framework for action to meet basic learning needs*.
- UNESCO. (2000). *Education for all: Meeting our collective commitments – The Dakar framework for action*.
- UNESCO. (2016). *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*.
- UNICEF. (2021). *Guidance on child and adolescent participation as part of Phase III of the preparatory action for a European Child Guarantee (Version 1.0)*.
- World Bank. (2018). *World development report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise*.