Competency Evaluation Model for Primary Schools Principals

Ahmad AkbarKhansari[1], Gholamreza Sharifirad2[*], AliAkbar Khoshgoftar Moghadam[3], Jafar Rahmani[4]

1- Phd Student of Educational Management, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

2- Associate Professor, Department of Educational Management, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

3- Farhangian University, Qom, Iran

4- Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Management, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

* Corresponding author's Email: dr.sharifirad@gmail.com

Abstract: The current research was conducted with the aim of designing a model for evaluating the competence of primary education principals. The current research is applied in terms of objective and qualitative in terms of data collection method, which was done with grounded theory method. Research data was collected by studying scientific documents and specialized books (36 articles, 24 master's and doctoral theses, and 14 books) and interviewing experts in the field of educational sciences. The interview process reached theoretical saturation after interviewing 18 people. Snowball sampling method was used to select experts. The results showed that the evaluation model of primary schools principals' competency includes 6 main dimensions: 1- Intellectual and mental competency 2- Operational competency 3- Interpersonal competency 4- Personality competency 5- Leadership competency 6- Moral competency and 13 components of decision-making and problem-solving skills ; social-communication skill; awareness skills; resource management; executive management; teamwork skills; knowledge skills; professional behavior; valuable features; personality characteristics; management skills; moral characteristics and perceptive skills. Findings can help senior managers in the selection process of school principals.

Keywords: Competency evaluation model, principals, primary schools, grounded theory

Introduction

Education and training as one of the most important symbols in the country's development process is considered. An institution that must always be looking to update methods and procedures and stay away from antiquity (Maduako et al., 2022). Because the high importance of this institution in building a better future is not hidden from anyone. Management in this important and fateful institution is considered one of the most important management areas of the country and must always provide conditions for improving its quality using the latest scientific and educational methods. Organizations as the main foundation of society and management in organizations, the most important factor of life, growth and prosperity and vice versa the destruction of organizations. Management leads the movement from the current situation to the desired situation. Managers perform different roles in the organization that vary according to time, place and type of work, while the proper performance of these roles has a great impact on the positive performance of the organization (Nesari et al., 2022).

The role of educational management has been of great importance in every society and community in various ways and is tangible and observable. The sustainable progress and development of any society without doubt depends on efficient education and an up-to-date education and training system. Education and Training not only is one of the most important social institutions but also has a very important and substantial effect on the performance and quality of work of other organizations and sectors of any society (Cebrián & Junyent, 2015). In today's society, one of the most important goals of organizations is to develop the capabilities of managers at different levels of management in order to make their activities more efficient and effective.

Particular attention to competence is due to the organization's capabilities. Successful organizations maintain their competitive advantage by developing the competencies of individuals. The competency-based approach for developing managers is very important; Because in this way they can develop and improve their performance (Horton, 2002).

Mohan (2013) believes that the competency model is a descriptive tool for identifying the competencies required for performing a specific role in work, job, organization or industry. Competence in most cases is the basis and foundation of the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for success and criteria for measuring the capacity required to confirm the eligibility of individuals in the eye is considered. In the definition that most researchers agree on, competence refers to the sum of knowledge, skills, behavior, social roles, self-image, values and acquired behavioral states of the individual during his life (Klieme et al., 2008; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). One of the important goals of human resources is the existence of competencies or the right combination of competencies for each job.

Competence can be considered as a combination of motivation, skill, knowledge and social role and moral characteristics that originated from the field of human resource management (Gunawan et al., 2019). Different perspectives and in some cases incomplete translations have led to the dispersion of literature related to human resource management, especially competence-based management. To the extent that currently one of the important reasons for the lack of clarity of the concept of competence can be various definitions and lack of distinction between the fields of competence and competencies related to individuals. Competence domains indicate that group of activities in which the individual is competent. While competencies related to individuals can be seen as a set of characteristics that enable a person to be competent in a particular field. In fact, competence domains are often based on jobs, while essentially competencies are based on individuals (Garavan & McGuire, 2001).

Therefore, to measure the competence of individuals, some emphasize specific technical skills of the job and some emphasize a combination of individual and social competencies and occupational fields (technical skills). Knowledge, effective and strong communications, creativity, problem solving and

analysis, fast learning and mental agility can be considered as specific factors of competence in the direction of professional performance. It is evident that having a competent individual does not reform an organization and competence-based management system should be used (Beheshti Zavareh et al., 2018).

The competence of educational managers has been the focus of many studies in recent years. Research indicates that identifying and selecting competent managers who have the right mix of skills, knowledge, behaviors and attitudes can significantly improve the effectiveness and efficiency of educational organizations. In summary, research indicates that choosing the right educational managers with the proper competencies and supporting their ongoing development is essential for improving results at all levels of the education system (Catano & Stronge, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2006; Tas et al., 1996; Winterton & Winterton, 2002). For instance, Bayarystanova et al. (2014) examined different approaches to the management of higher education systems. The authors have endeavored to identify the functions carried out by education managers. Despite sharing general principles and management methods, education management exhibits several distinctive characteristics compared to managing other types of institutions, enterprises, and social organizations. The paper presents a model for training education managers. Addressing the issue of professionally training education managers within the higher education system is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of educational reforms in Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstan's education system undergoes various reforms, the presence of qualified managers becomes indispensable, serving as a fundamental factor for the successful implementation of further educational transformations. In another study, Mikkonen et al. (2019) described social and healthcare educators' perceptions of their competence in education. The study had a qualitative design, based on interviews with educators and rooted in critical realism. Forty-eight participants were recruited from seven universities of applied sciences and two vocational colleges in Finland, with the assistance of contact persons nominated by the institutions. The inclusion criterion for participation was employment by an educational institution as a part-time or full-time, social and/or healthcare educator. The participants were interviewed in 16 focus groups with two to five participants per group. The acquired data were subjected to inductive content analysis, which yielded 506 open codes, 48 sub-categories, nine categories and one main category. The educators' competence was defined as a multidimensional construct, including categories of educators' competences in practicing as an educator, subject, ethics, pedagogy, management and organization, innovation and development, collaboration, handling cultural and linguistic diversity, and continuous professional development. Educators recognized the need for developing competence in innovation to meet rapid changes in a competitive and increasingly global

sociopolitical environment. Enhancement of adaptability to rapid changes was recognized as a necessity. The findings have social value in identifying requirements to improve social and healthcare educators' competence by helping educational leadership to improve educational standards, construct a continuous education framework and create national and/or international curricula for teacher education degree programs to enhance the quality of education. We also suggest that educational leadership needs to establish, maintain and strengthen collaborative strategies to provide effective, adaptable support systems, involving educators and students, in their working practices.

In light of the aforementioned, one of the challenges facing the education system is the issue of selecting competent managers. For this purpose, a model of selecting competent managers must be designed in the education system, especially primary education; Therefore, the question that this research seeks to answer is: What is the pattern of evaluating the competence of elementary education managers?

Material and Methods

Considering the research goal of identifying the competencies of elementary education managers and designing an evaluation model, this study is classified as applied research due to its practical objective. It also adopts a qualitative approach for data collection, based on the nature and certainty of the data, and the research method is grounded theory. In the initial phase of this research, we seek to identify the components and dimensions of the competencies of elementary education managers. The research population comprises two main groups:

a) The first group involves reviewing scientific documents, specialized books related to the research, and credible articles. For this part of the research, 36 scientific research articles, 24 master's and doctoral theses, and 14 books were examined.

b) The second group comprises experts in the field of educational sciences, totaling 18 individuals. Selection criteria for this group include relevant educational and managerial qualifications, successful managerial experience in various educational sectors, especially in elementary education, and academic qualifications such as publications related to the research topic.

The sample size was determined using the snowball sampling method. In this method, the researcher initially selects a small number of participants for the study and then uses them as contacts to identify other participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). Each participant directed us to others until the exploration and analysis process reached theoretical saturation point. Initially, two experts in the field of competency of school managers were selected for interviews, and after conducting the interviews with them, new individuals, as recommended by the initial participants, will be interviewed using the same process. In this way, a total of 18 experts were interviewed. So a total of 18 experts participated in the interviews,

consisting of 77.7% male and 22.3% female. 38.9% of the participants have 10 to 20 years of relevant work experience, and 61.1% have more than 20 years of experience. 27.8% have a master's degree in educational management, planning, or education, while 72.2% hold a doctoral degree in educational management. 72.2% of the participants are administrative managers (managers or deputies), and 27.8% are university faculty members and educators.

After reviewing texts and conducting interviews with experts in the first stage and collecting indicators, components, and dimensions of the research model, a Delphi technique was used, along with interviews with 18 experts and specialists in the field of management, using a Likert 5-point questionnaire to gauge their opinions. The characteristics of the participants in the Delphi technique were as follows: 73.7% were male, and 26.3% were female. 20% had 10 to 20 years of relevant work experience, while 80% had more than 20 years of experience. 66.7% were administrative managers (managers or deputies), and 33.3% were university faculty members and educators. It is important to note that all participants in the Delphi panel held a doctoral degree in educational management.

Data Collection Tools

In this research, the following tools were used to collect data:

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with researchers in the field of study after conducting library studies and examining various models. This type of interview is commonly used in qualitative research. The interviews were conducted using predefined questions, but researchers were free to design new questions during the study (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Coordination was made in advance with the interviewees, and the interview topic was explained to them.

Research Execution Method

The research execution method consisted of the following stages:

1. Reviewing scientific documents and previous research to determine the initial indicators and variables (initial model): In this phase, the initial indicators and components were obtained through studying scientific documents and summarizing the data, leading to the creation of the initial research model.

2. Conducting interviews with experts using the data-based method: In this phase, two experienced researchers in the field of study were initially selected for interviews regarding school managers' competencies. After conducting the interviews, they introduced new individuals for further interviews, and this process continued. The interview process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. In this way, 18 experts and specialists relevant to the interview topic participated, and based on the data obtained from the interviews, the initial model was revised. Grounded theory refers to the process in which theory-building is carried out using data obtained from specific observations. Khan (2014)

describes grounded theory as "a systematic and qualitative process to produce a theory that explains a specific process, action, or interaction about a real-world subject at a general conceptual level".

3. Confirmation of the Comprehensive Model Using the Delphi Method: In this stage, the components obtained in the previous stage were validated using the Delphi technique. Participants in this stage included some experts and educational management professors who were selected based on their scientific and research qualifications in this field. The Delphi method is one of the data collection methods used in research when there is a lack of specific information about the research issue. In this way, we benefit from the input of a number of experts in the research topic. The data obtained from the study of scientific texts and interviews (in-depth interviews) with experts were analyzed using the coding method. Prior to commencing the study, the researcher approached each participant, introduced themselves, explained the purpose and interview questions, and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. Participants were asked to provide their understanding of competency and identify the most significant aspects of evaluating managers' competency. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and challenging conditions, some interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces with prior coordination, while others were conducted via telephone calls or in virtual spaces as suggested by the interviewees. Throughout the research, efforts were made to respect the confidentiality, consent, and freedom of the participants to participate or withdraw from the study.

Data Analysis Method

Data, as raw and unprocessed information, provide the researcher with the initial understanding of potential answers related to the research question. In this study, the data were analyzed as follows:

1. Initial components were extracted using content analysis.

2. The components were then reviewed using the grounded theory.

3. The initial research model was developed using the Delphi method. In this stage, the Kendall rank coefficient was utilized to determine the level of agreement in the Delphi technique.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative Analysis of Interviews Using the GT Approach

To elucidate and determine the components of the evaluation model for the competency of elementary school managers in the current study, two types of data were employed: 1) data obtained from the examination of scientific texts, and 2) interviews with experts. Initially, to identify the types of components involved in the evaluation of the competency of elementary school managers, the literature on the subject was examined using the GT approach. Subsequently, to complement and validate the findings, interviews with experts were conducted using the Delphi method.

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. The interviews were analyzed using a continuous comparative analysis method in line with the GT approach, examining each statement and sentence. The analysis of these samples was done step-by-step, immediately after the completion of each interview. The transcriptions of the interviews were typed, and after comprehensive processing, key points and components were gradually extracted.

Research Questions

1. What is the evaluation model for the competency of elementary school managers?

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions need to be examined:

1. What are the dimensions, components, indicators, and methods of evaluating the competency of elementary school managers according to the literature in educational management?

2. What are the dimensions, components, indicators, and methods of evaluating the competency of elementary school managers from the perspective of educational management experts?

In response to the first sub-question, based on the library results obtained from the study of books, articles, and theses in this field, the dimensions, components, indicators, and methods of evaluating the competency of elementary school managers can be determined as follows:

In this study, the concept of "managerial competency" has been selected as the core concept. Its presence is evident throughout the data, and various books and articles refer to it, playing a central role. In other words, other concepts revolve around the evaluation of managerial competency.

The results obtained from the GT approach showed that the evaluation model for the competency of elementary school managers consists of 6 main dimensions:

1- Intellectual and mental competency 2- Operational competency 3- Interpersonal competency 4- Personality competency 5- Leadership competency 6- Moral competency. Furthermore, it includes 13 sub-components as decision-making and problem-solving skills, social-communication skill, awareness skills, resource management, executive management, teamwork skills, knowledge skills, professional behavior, valuable features, personality characteristics, management skills, moral characteristics and perceptive skills. These components and sub-components are clearly explicable within the model for evaluating the competency of elementary school managers (figure 1).
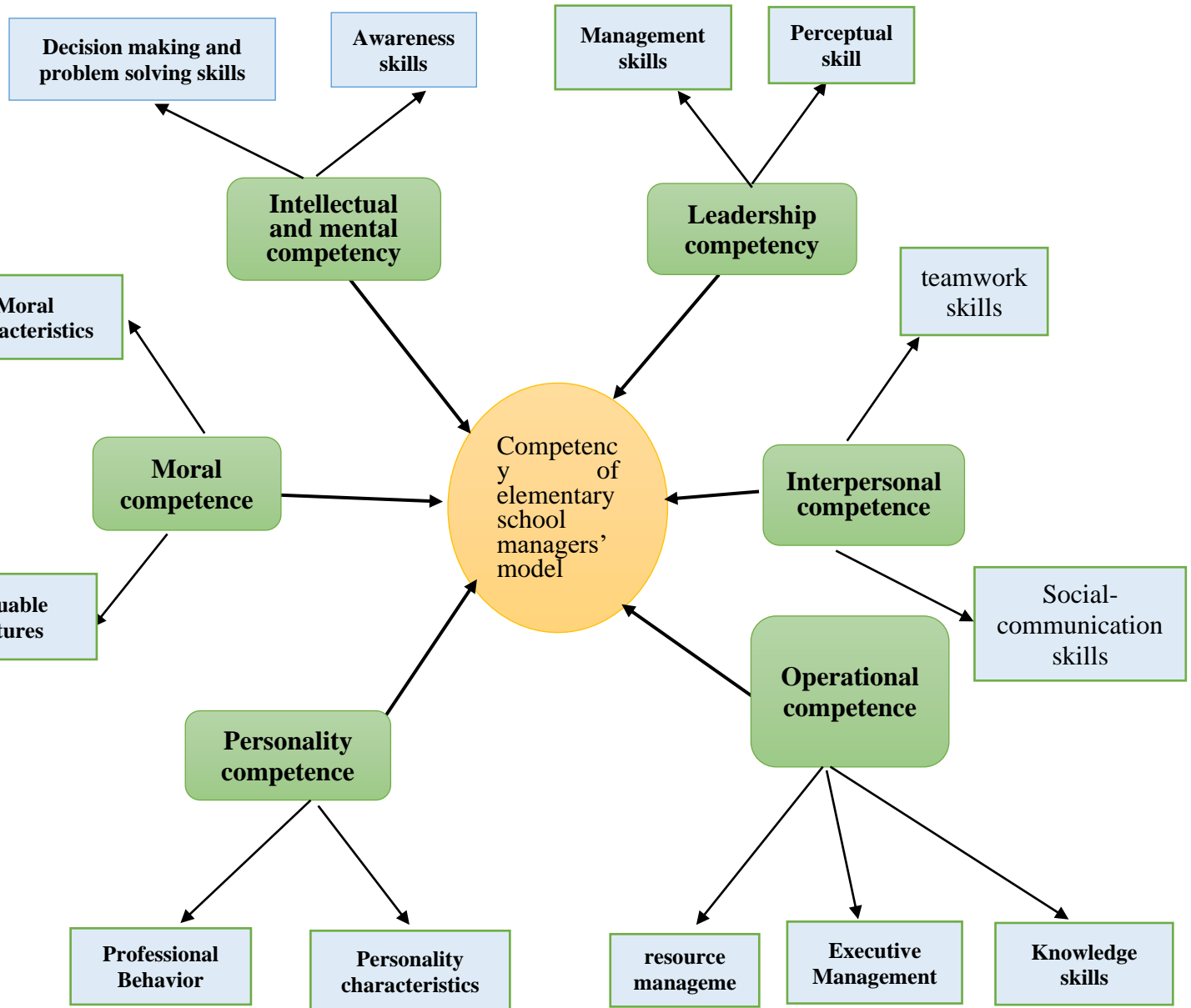
Fig. 1. The model of competency of elementary school managers

Based on the results, one of the dimensions of managerial competency for evaluating the competency of elementary school managers is leadership competency. This dimension consists of two sub-components: perceptual skills and managerial skills.

Aligned with the findings of the current research, the leadership competencies and their sub-components have been investigated in studies conducted by Sherman et al. (2007), Müller and Turner (2010), Sarabi Asiabar et al. (2020), Farahni et al. (2021) and Kalantari et al. (2019).

Leadership competency can be examined by its root meaning, which refers to having the capability, ability, and high skills to perform tasks correctly. Common features of individuals with perceptual competency include being perfectionist, paying attention to significant tasks, working continuously and diligently, having a receptive attitude towards criticism, having high self-confidence, attention to details, time management skills, optimal utilization of minimal resources, crisis management abilities, and other managerial characteristics that can lead the organization to highly effective goals.

Considering that the elementary school period is crucial for a child's personality development and is referred to as a period of creativity and discipline, its significant objectives include nurturing physical and mental abilities, fostering creativity, promoting religious and ethical virtues, acquiring reading and writing skills, providing health education at home and school, and fostering the link between home, school, and social life. Therefore, this period is a turning point for initiating a long and important journey in the lives of elementary school children. During this period, a fundamental transformation occurs in students' minds regarding social issues, and it is a period of flourishing various talents, including artistic, literary, and technical talents. Therefore, elementary school managers have a critical responsibility in managing elementary schools since they deal with young children, and any negligence in leadership and management may have irreparable consequences for them, possibly beyond repair for a long time. Thus, the managerial component plays a significant role in shaping their behavior and personality. Possessing leadership competencies and their sub-components are among the essential traits and competencies that a manager should have.

Managers with leadership competency identify problems through various tools and identify the gap between the current situation and the desired one. They focus on identifying, selecting, and analyzing school processes to improve and enhance them. They determine strategies for improving the school and plan for its enhancement, including project and activity scheduling, prioritization, organization, and mobilization of resources and facilities for better program implementation.

The current research reveals a new dimension for evaluating the competency of elementary school managers: cognitive and mental competency, comprising two sub-components: awareness skills and decision-making and problem-solving skills.

In line with the research findings, other studies by Liang (2023), Godarzi and Soltani (2018), Shabani et al. (2018) and Bonyadi et al. (2019) have also explored cognitive and mental competencies along with their sub-components.

Educational managers hold a crucial and sensitive role, requiring unique competencies, among which cognitive and mental competency stands out. As school can be seen as a humanization factory, managers

must effectively communicate with all members of the school community: students, teachers, staff, and parents. For instance, managers should be aware of students displaying aggressive behavior, lying, or imagination, and be capable of identifying and understanding their teachers' challenges, making efforts to address them. Managers possessing cognitive and mental competency can recognize opportunities, address weaknesses, leverage strengths, value teachers' concerns, and motivate them through rewards and incentives. Creating a warm and intimate environment where teachers interact affectionately, confidently, securely, and with mutual respect alongside students is a valuable gift from a manager.

Managers' familiarity with methods, tools, models, and practical application is expected. Personal involvement of managers in the promotion process is essential for progress, even if teachers and staff participate in improvement activities under their supervision. Participation, defined as engagement in decision-making and decision-building processes, enhances work efficiency, unity, and trust among individuals. Utilizing collective wisdom to optimize the school's organizational culture, fostering a friendly atmosphere, nurturing positive relations and communication among human resources, and gaining trust from the group and workgroup contribute to creating a dynamic and effective educational environment within the school.

The other dimension explored in the current research for assessing the competence of elementary school managers is interpersonal competency, comprising two essential elements: social skills and communication skills.

Consistent with the findings of the present study, interpersonal competencies and their sub-components have been thoroughly examined in research conducted by various scholars, including Jaafari et al. (2023), Shams Morkani et al. (2015), Sherman et al. (2007) and Shabani et al. (2018).

Human resources form the primary capital of any organization, and the organization's outcomes reflect the identity and performance of each member. To be a successful manager, one must possess fundamental skills for establishing effective communication with others. Managers with strong social and communication skills actively engage in dialogues with their team, fostering a friendly environment built on mutual trust and confidence within the organization. Teachers, when encouraged to participate, feel a sense of involvement in school affairs and strive to improve efficiency and effectiveness, supported by the managers.

The feedback system should serve as a platform for talent discovery and identifying the most effective problem-solving approaches. It acts as a catalyst for innovation and enhances creativity among human resources. This system can aid in recognizing the most competent managers, determining the necessary conditions to empower schools in decision-making, and aligning suitable innovations with the school's development. Competency in education and training entails valuing competence, abilities, and skills

required for performing tasks and exhibiting desirable behaviors. The primary criterion for selecting individuals for organizational tasks and actions, as well as their retention and improvement, should be their competence. Interpersonal competency, with its two sub-components: social skills and communication skills, plays a pivotal role in the competency system within education and training.

The next dimension obtained in the current research for evaluating the competency of elementary school managers is operational competency, comprising three main components: resource management, executive management, and knowledge skill.

Aligned with the findings of the current research, operational competencies and their sub-components have been investigated in studies conducted by Jaafari et al. (2023), Shabani et al. (2018), Gladson Nwokah and Ahiauzu (2008) and Chang and Tharenou (2004).

The presence of operational competencies with components like resource management, executive management, and knowledge skill in managers can lead to the cultivation of active and dynamic students. In the educational system, elementary education holds a crucial position. Elementary school managers, considering the formative nature of a child's personality and abilities during this stage, should possess various competencies, including the mentioned operational competency. This importance and sensitivity stem from its influential role in the process of human growth and development, placing the individual as the core of development.

Regarding the resource management component, elementary school managers need to have the ability to establish effective communication with teachers and students, enhancing organizational performance efficiency through teamwork and organizational interactions. The knowledge skill component can promote continuous learning capabilities and encourage others towards continuous learning in managers, which is one of the key competencies required for modern educational managers, especially in elementary education. Having the executive management component can enhance managers' position in achieving predetermined goals, as without this competency, expecting extraordinary and creative tasks from managers would not be justified.

Another aspect explored in the current research to assess the competence of elementary school managers is ethical proficiency, which consists of two sub-components: ethical qualities and values. Consistent with the findings of the current research, studies by Chang and Tharenou (2004), Jaafari et al. (2023), Sarabi Asiabar et al. (2020) and Shabani et al. (2018) have explored ethical competencies and their sub-components.

Regarding ethical competencies and their sub-components, it can be affirmed that these skills in elementary school managers are a blend of essential traits and abilities, leading to their effective and

efficient performance in line with expected standards. It can forecast the quality of their conduct and accomplishments within the framework of their responsibilities and job description. Competency goes beyond merely executing managerial tasks; it refers to an individual's capacity and aptitude to apply and expand their profound knowledge, attitudes, and experiences in various situations within the elementary school and among students.

An elementary manager should recognize that professionalism transcends appearances and is intertwined with the type of behavior displayed. A capable and professional manager is someone who upholds their commitments, follows through on promises, and executes tasks with precision. Giving special attention to the principle of competency-based management and its embodiment in the process of identifying and appointing elementary school managers entails implementing contemporary and effective methods and utilizing tools that can accommodate the competencies of managerial candidates. The current research has uncovered another dimension for evaluating the competency of elementary school managers: personality competency, consisting of two sub-components: personality traits and professional behavior.

This finding aligns with previous research conducted by Golparvar and Oreyzi (2007), Shabani et al. (2018), Shams Morkani et al. (2015), Jaafari et al. (2023) and Liang (2023) all of whom have explored personality competencies and their sub-components.

Regarding personality competencies and their sub-components, it can be asserted that a successful educational manager is someone who lays the groundwork before implementing tasks. This involves various aspects such as breaking old habits, employing systematic thinking, practicing patience, considering long-term interests, eliminating fear as a barrier to change, receiving complete and serious support from the school and district leadership, creating strategic plans at the school level, promoting a participatory approach in the school, and shifting from a subject-centered to a program-centered approach.

Experienced and competent managers and leaders, relying on their managerial competencies, can improve efficiency and effectiveness. They identify the resources and factors influencing these aspects, specifying each one's contribution to enhancement. Successfully executing any task requires a diverse range of capabilities. A competent individual is often described as someone who performs their job satisfactorily. When we closely examine the term "competence," it encompasses attributes such as capability, skill, suitability, expertise, knowledge, experience, proficiency, and talent. Therefore, competency is a fusion of knowledge, skill, and traits necessary for satisfactory and outstanding performance.

Undoubtedly, the role of the manager in the Ministry of Education is vital, crucial, and significant. Managers shoulder all responsibilities and are responsible for optimizing the school system. The success or failure of the education system hinges on their competence. Managers are obliged to guide teachers' behavior towards educational and specialized matters, encouraging public and specialized exchange of ideas within the school. Factors such as their own activities and services that improve efficiency and effectiveness, focusing on long-term and future-oriented activities for the education system, fostering greater participation and facilitation for teachers, and aligning the school with the realization of strategic goals and plans of the organization, are some of the factors necessitating the presence of a competent manager.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education in Iran possesses unique characteristics. Noteworthy attributes include a large human workforce actively engaged in the organization, a relatively high budget allocated to it, and a significant role as a learning and teaching structure. However, there are numerous criticisms from various observers regarding this organization, and one of the reasons is the general dissatisfaction with the quality of its outcomes.

By studying these critiques, it becomes apparent that the current educational system is not responsive to the needs and expectations of society and does not instigate the necessary changes and transformations. Therefore, in the first stage, this vital institution requires competent managers who can bring about positive changes in line with societal needs. To achieve this goal and improve the quality of education, the first step is to identify a competency-based approach. Experts believe that the presence of fundamental competencies in managers will enable them to respond promptly and effectively to societal needs.

It should be emphasized that competent managers possess the ability to focus on the future and anticipate educational system transformations. A manager with professional competencies can utilize their skills in the present while maintaining a forward-looking orientation.

Considering the above points, the current research results can contribute to the examination of theoretical models proposed in the field of educational managers' competencies. Additionally, it can offer a native and practical model for elementary education managers and assess the obtained model, presenting crucial competencies for elementary education managers, ultimately bridging the existing research gap in the field of human resource competency models. The final model resulting from this research can be employed in a competency-based human resource management system within the Ministry of Education for training, recruitment, and evaluation purposes.

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