



Designing a Professional Development Model for Pre-School Principals in Education: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to develop a model for the professional development of pre-school principals in the education. The study used a qualitative approach with a grounded theory approach. A group of experts, including senior education managers, university professors in the field of educational management, and prominent human resources consultants, were selected using the snowball sampling method. The selection of experts and interviews with them continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred after the eleventh interview. The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Based on open, axial, and selective coding of the data, the research model was developed. In the developed model, the professional development of pre-school principals was identified as the core central concept. Causal conditions included the internal motivation of pre-school principals for professional development, their job commitment, ethical behavior, and their level of education and qualifications. The research results also showed that psychological and technical empowerment of education principals, satisfaction of pre-school education staff, parents, and students were identified as strategies and outcomes, respectively. In the developed model, parental concerns about the quality of pre-school educational management and competition between pre-school centers were identified as contextual variables, while standardization and updating of the conditions for the appointment of pre-school principals and the requirements of higher-level organizations for the professional development of pre-school principals were identified as intervention factors. The findings provide practical implications for the designing the professional development programs for pre-school principals.

Keywords: Professional development, Principals, Pre-school, Grounded theory

Introduction

The performance of the education system, overseen by educational administrators, is not only crucial from an economic and social progress perspective but also significantly impacts workforce mobility and expectations (Gitomer, 2012). Therefore, it holds great importance in shaping individual and collective well-being. Education and upbringing are considered the most effective means of instilling values and behaviors, enabling individuals to engage in social and economic services, pursue careers, and ultimately achieve personal well-being, based on their talents and aspirations. Given the diverse responsibilities and functions of education in society, including cultural acceptance and social integration, its value and significance are undeniable (Michalos & Michalos, 2017).

As educational systems evolve and expand, it necessitates changes in policy-making and educational management, as well as the economic implications, efficiency, and outcomes (economic growth,

scientific advancement, human capital, development, and well-being) ([Singh et al., 2022](#)). These aspects have garnered attention from professionals, planners, and educational system officials. However, despite the significant impact of education and its outcomes, the immense human and material resources invested in it are not fully leveraged for effective utilization and efficiency. Addressing these issues and achieving improved results stemming from the minimal investment necessitates a reevaluation of educational management, particularly in pre-school settings.

Consequently, attaining a quality and effective educational system requires an integrated approach to development across various educational domains, with an indispensable emphasis on the development of educational management. Professional development, in the context of promoting the effectiveness of teachers and school administrators for student growth and success, is of paramount importance ([Hirsh, 2009](#)). Recognizing the crucial role of school leadership in supporting potential changes and enhancing the quality of education is increasingly evident ([Kythreotis & Pashiardis, 2006](#); [Marzano et al., 2001](#)). As such, for transformative changes in educational systems and the cultivation of innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial human resources, specific principles and methodologies must be applied. Therefore, relying on past frameworks and structures will not suffice. The most essential aspect of transforming educational systems lies in changing the perspectives of educators in the teaching process and the executive performance of the educational system ([Salimi & Hosseini, 2017](#)).

Professional development of school administrators serves as the foundation for the development of education and upbringing. Leadership in schools has a direct influence on learners and plays a fundamental role in enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences ([Kinney, 2008](#)). It goes without saying that professional development of school administrators is vital for the sustainability and effectiveness of schools ([Angelides, 2012](#)).

Two approaches exist for the professional development of school administrators: the rational-technical approach and the applied-feedback approach. The rational-technical approach believes that the knowledge and skills of administrators are among the most crucial factors in their professional development, as their development often involves accumulating knowledge and skills, especially in educational and teaching expertise. In the second approach, it is believed that there is a specific knowledge between theory and practice called the applied-feedback approach, which influences the professional development of teachers and school administrators ([Han & Feng, 2013](#)).

By possessing desirable professional qualifications, school administrators will be able to lead schools in a manner that lays the foundation for educational development. Undoubtedly, education will reach development when it possesses developed human resources. As mentioned earlier, the most influential human resource in the educational system is school administrators. Therefore, by developing school

administrators professionally, the grounds for achieving the goals of the educational system in the realm of development are laid ([Ahadi et al., 2017](#)). Consequently, through the design and implementation of a development process, educational administrators will acquire professional characteristics and exhibit professional performance.

In various studies, the professional development of educational administrators has been examined. For example, [Porsesh et al. \(2021\)](#) revealed that the professional development of primary education teachers and managers, guided by the fundamental transformation document, encompassed a total of 206 fundamental themes, 53 organizing themes, and 16 comprehensive themes. These themes covered various aspects, including teachers' characteristics, motivation, leadership programs, teacher groups, educational groups, specialist-professionals, professional development, issues and problems faced by teachers, school factors, environmental-educational conditions, macro environmental conditions, teachers' involvement in professional activities, guidance, networking, educational strategies, and individual consequences. Additionally, the global perspective on the professional development of primary education teachers and managers consisted of 20 fundamental themes, 8 organizing themes, and 1 comprehensive theme. These themes incorporated global components and eight organizing themes, namely guidance, networking, leadership, specialist-professional, educational group, leaders' group, educational strategies, and consequences.

[Shirazinejad et al. \(2018\)](#) carried out research entitled "Identification and Validation of Factors for the Professional Development of School Administrators Based on the Fundamental Transformation Document of Education." In this study, through the analysis of semi-structured interview results in two phases of coding and drawing inspiration from previous research, a total of 12 components (general themes) were identified, including: 1. Management for Learning and Education, 2. Creating an Appropriate Learning Environment, 3. Evaluation and Curriculum, 4. Visioning, 5. Continuous School Improvement, 6. Effective Communication and Collaboration, 7. Community and Stakeholder Relations, 8. Resource Management, 9. Guidance and Leadership of Individuals and Teams, 10. Professional Ethics, 11. Ethical-Islamic Principles and Norms, 12. Staff Professional Development.

[Zarei et al. \(2018\)](#) conducted research entitled "Designing a Model for the Professional Development of School Administrators in the Education System by 1404 with a Futures Approach in Hormozgan Province." According to the proposed model in this research, the development of professional skills is at the core of the model. For individual skill development, administrators need empowerment programs, and for group skill development, human resource improvement programs are required. Finally, providing opportunities for general and specialized education is essential for knowledge development.

[Hayat et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted research entitled "A Qualitative Study of Needs and Methods of Professional Development for School Administrators." This study showed that the professional development needs of high school administrators included five main areas: educational leadership, organizational management and leadership, ethical leadership, social participation, and technology.

[Reston \(2015\)](#) demonstrated in his research that the most important professional standards for school administrators in the professional development program include the following: mission, vision, and fundamental values of educational leadership, ethical behavior, and adherence to professional norms, organizational justice and accountability, curriculum and educational programs, teaching and assessment methods, student care and support processes, upgrading the professional abilities of school staff, designing professional programs for teachers and staff, employing and utilizing the capacities of families and relevant school associations, research-oriented management, and comprehensive school improvement.

In their research, [Ng and Kenneth Chan \(2014\)](#) found that in the professional development programs for school managers, aspects such as interpersonal skills, crisis management, proper resource management, and awareness of educational regulations are prioritized. They also recommended that the learning programs for managers should be focused on their specific needs, content-related needs, and multidimensional approaches.

[Kanokorn et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted a study titled "Professional Development of School Managers" and found that the satisfaction of school managers is determined by the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Therefore, they are obliged to enhance their knowledge, skills, and professional competencies. The study also revealed that school managers improve their professional development through activities such as action research, strategic planning, and structural leadership. The effective model of their professional development includes dimensions such as needs assessment, goal setting, empowerment, self-learning, focused seminars, action research, and continuous evaluation.

[Wallace \(2009\)](#) investigated the modeling of the impact of managers' professional development on the performance of teachers and the success of students. He found that the professional development of managers has a direct impact on the performance of teachers and indirectly leads to the success of students and the improvement of their learning levels.

Undoubtedly, the fundamental shaping of one's personality occurs predominantly during the preschool years. The preschool phase is among the most critical periods for personal maturation and growth, characterized by significant developmental traits. Consequently, leading nations worldwide accord particular significance to this age group and its educational pursuits ([Yar Ahmadi et al., 2020](#)). Preliminary investigations in the field of education and informal interviews with senior administrators

of this organization have revealed the reality that, despite the immense importance and necessity of fostering the professional growth of preschool educational administrators in this region, no comprehensive research has been undertaken in this domain, and the organization lacks a specific framework for progress in this regard. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to address the following fundamental question through the design of a methodical approach: "What constitutes the professional development model for preschool educational administrators in the field of education?"

Material and Methods

The present research was conducted with an applied objective and an applied-exploratory approach, using the Grounded Theory method. The statistical population consisted of a group of experts, including senior managers of education, university professors in the field of educational management, and prominent consultants in the human resources domain. The expert characteristics included the following: expertise in the field of developing pre-school education managers and management systems. The snowball sampling method was employed to select the participants. The first expert was selected based on initial reviews, and after completing the interview with the first person, he/she was asked to introduce other experts who could provide valuable insights into the professional development of pre-school education managers and contribute to the research model. This process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after 11 interviews. Since the Grounded Theory method was used, the main data collection tool was in-depth and unstructured interviews with the experts. In these interviews, the researcher tried to engage in a soft conversation and gain the initial trust of the interviewees, asking indirect questions about the future, backgrounds, and consequences of professional development of pre-school education managers in education and training, thus obtaining initial concepts for designing the model.

To ensure the validity of the interviews, a long-term involvement of the researcher with the research environment and continuous observations in the research setting were employed. This included building trust with the research subjects, learning the culture of the environment, and controlling misunderstandings arising from the researcher's interventions or participants' perceptions. Additionally, to ensure the reliability of the interviews, after each interview, the extracted codes were shared with the interviewee to ensure that the codes inferred by the researcher matched the mental constructs of the interviewee (Member checking credibility). In order to analyze the interviews and achieve a conceptual model for the research, the Grounded Theory method and three-stage open, axial, and selective coding were used.

Results

The findings have been reported in the form of three stages of open, axial, and selective coding.

Open coding: This stage of analysis was devoted to identifying and extracting initial concepts from the content of the interviews. Accordingly, after each interview, the researcher, through repeated examination, extracted and coded the existing concepts in the interview text. In total, 11 interviews were conducted, resulting in 130 initial concepts extracted. After reviewing and consolidating them while removing duplicate concepts, 38 final concepts were identified (Table 1) (Codes alongside concepts consist of a Latin letter and a number. The Latin letter (in alphabetical order) indicates the interviewee, and the number next to this letter indicates the number of the concept extracted from that specific interview).

Table 1. Final concepts extracted the open coding stage

Code	Concepts
A ₁ , B ₄ , E ₆	Today, parents are constantly comparing preschool centers in terms of quality and management
A ₂ , B ₉ , G ₅ , K ₁	A preschool center manager must first understand the need for professional development and the importance of professional development
A ₃ , B ₁	Preschool education managers should strengthen their communication skills
A ₄ , B ₂ , D ₈ , F ₂	An ethical manager considers professional development as his duty and religion
A ₅ , E ₄ , G ₁₀ , J ₁ , K ₂	Most of the parents of preschool students have a special sensitivity on the expertise of the educational staff, including management
A ₆ , C ₁₀ , I ₄	We must achieve a strong standard in the field of professional development of educational managers of preschool centers
C ₁ , F ₉ , G ₄ , H ₄	It is certainly more enjoyable to work with a professional manager
A ₇ , D ₇ , G ₃ , K ₃	The preschool educational director must have education related to this field of work
A ₈ , B ₃ , J ₂ , C ₈	The job commitment of preschool educational managers is the foundation of many improvement and excellence projects
A ₉ , C ₁₁ , E ₁₀	Self-control should be strengthened in preschool educational managers
A ₁₀ , G ₂ , H ₉	Sometimes effective action is not taken until something is communicated from above
B ₅ , F ₄ , I ₆	Preschool administrators' belief in observing professional ethics in decisions and mutual behaviors is very helpful
A ₁₁ , B ₆ , F ₆ , K ₄	Parents' expectations are completely different from the past and they are much more aware of educational issues than before
A ₁₃ , E ₃ , J ₁	In the professional development of preschool managers, it is very important to improve their knowledge and skills in specialized matters in the field of children's education
B ₁₀ , D ₁₁ , E ₂ , F ₁₁	Professional development cannot be expected from an uncommitted manager
A ₁₄ , B ₇ , D ₄ , E ₁₃	It may be necessary to review the qualifications of preschool educational managers according to the current cultural, technological and competitive requirements of the society.
D ₁ , F ₃ , H ₇	The welfare organization can establish and communicate requirements and obligations for the professional development of preschool educational managers.
C ₃ , F ₁₀ , G ₈ , H ₁	There is a long way between words and actions, and the director of the preschool center must show with determination that he is looking for his professional development.
B ₁₁ , D ₆ , E ₁ , J ₃	Parents want a completely professional educational management
A ₁₂ , C ₉ , F ₁ , H ₃	Preschool educational managers need high psychological skills
B ₈ , C ₂ , G ₇	A person who has a high job commitment improves his job and communication skills in order to help the organization's goals
C ₇ , F ₁₂ , G ₁₂ , H ₈	What is perhaps less paid attention to is the satisfaction of preschool students with the management system
C ₅ , D ₉ , I ₅ , J ₄	A higher level of education of preschool educational managers makes their vision more open regarding the purpose of professional development

C ₄ , D ₂ , J ₂	We must witness the practical movement of preschool managers in the direction of their professional development
A ₁₅ , C ₁₄ , E ₉	The level of professionalism of preschool managers has a direct effect on educational and administrative affairs
E ₈ , G ₁₁ , K ₅	A professional preschool manager is well aware of parents' wishes and needs and can design a strategy to respond to these wishes.
C ₁₅ , G ₁ , I ₂	The desire and inner motivation of the preschool manager for professional development has a tremendous effect on the effectiveness of this process
D ₅ , F ₇ , J ₅	Management level of preschool centers is one of the important items in determining parents' satisfaction
D ₃ , E ₁₁ , F ₁₃ , J ₆	Change and movement towards development starts from within people
C ₁₃ , I ₃ , J ₃	The satisfaction of employees, especially the educational staff of preschool centers, has an important effect on the quality and should be taken into consideration by the educational managers of these centers.
F ₅ , J ₆	The student is the main customer of preschool services, and the director of the center must make every effort to satisfy him
I ₁ , K ₆ , J ₄	The Ministry of Education, as one of the custodians of preschool education, can take effective measures regarding the professional development of preschool educational managers.
H ₆ , J ₇	Parents' satisfaction is very effective on the brand of preschool centers
E ₇ , D ₁₀ , K ₇	Strengthening the managerial capabilities of preschool educational managers is an important and decisive point
B ₁₃ , E ₁₂ , F ₈ , J ₇ , I ₇	A professional and capable preschool manager must pay special attention to the satisfaction of his main beneficiary, the student
C ₁₂ , E ₅ , J ₅	Every year we see the establishment of new preschool centers in the cities of the country
A ₁₆ , C ₆ , H ₂ , G ₆	The behavior and professional decisions of preschool managers will bring more satisfaction to the employees
B ₁₂ , G ₉ , H ₅	The options available to parents to choose a preschool center have increased

Axial Coding: In this stage, an attempt was made to create broader categories called "themes" based on a deep consideration of the identified concepts and recognizing their similarities and differences. Concepts that were related and congruent were placed under these broader categories. The outcome of this process was the identification of 14 main themes, along with their corresponding concepts, presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Identified themes along with their corresponding concepts

Categories	Concepts (open codes)
Concern of parents regarding the quality of preschool educational management	Parents' expectations are completely different from the past and they are much more aware of educational issues than before
	Parents want a completely professional educational management
	Most of the parents of preschool students have a special sensitivity on the expertise of the educational staff, including management
The inner desire of preschool educational managers for career advancement	Change and movement towards development starts from within people
	A preschool center manager must first understand the need for professional development and the importance of professional development
	The desire and inner motivation of the preschool manager for professional development has a tremendous effect on the effectiveness of this process
Technical empowerment of preschool educational managers	In the professional development of preschool managers, it is very important to improve their knowledge and skills in specialized matters in the field of children's education
	Strengthening the managerial capabilities of preschool educational managers is an important and decisive point

The level and appropriateness of university education of preschool educational managers	The preschool educational director must have education related to this field of work
	A higher level of education of preschool educational managers makes their vision more open regarding the purpose of professional development
The requirements of upstream organizations regarding the professional development of preschool educational managers	The welfare organization can establish and communicate requirements and obligations for the professional development of preschool educational managers.
	The Ministry of Education, as one of the custodians of preschool education, can take effective measures regarding the professional development of preschool educational managers.
	Sometimes effective action is not taken until something is communicated from above
Satisfaction of preschool (educational/administrative) staff	It is certainly more enjoyable to work with a professional manager
	The level of professionalism of preschool managers has a direct effect on educational and administrative affairs
	The behavior and professional decisions of preschool managers will bring more satisfaction to the employees
	The satisfaction of employees, especially the educational staff of preschool centers, has an important effect on the quality and should be taken into consideration by the educational managers of these centers.
Satisfaction of preschool (educational/administrative) staff	A person who has a high job commitment improves his job and communication skills in order to help the organization's goals
	Professional development cannot be expected from an uncommitted manager
	The job commitment of preschool educational managers is the foundation of many improvement and excellence projects
Career commitment of preschool educational managers	Preschool education managers should strengthen their communication skills
	Preschool educational managers need high psychological skills
	Self-control should be strengthened in preschool educational managers
Psychological empowerment of preschool educational managers	What is perhaps less paid attention to is the satisfaction of preschool students with the management system
	A professional and capable preschool manager must pay special attention to the satisfaction of his main beneficiary, the student
	The student is the main customer of preschool services, and the director of the center must make every effort to satisfy him
Student satisfaction	What is perhaps less paid attention to is the satisfaction of preschool students with the management system
	A professional and capable preschool manager must pay special attention to the satisfaction of his main beneficiary, the student
	The student is the main customer of preschool services, and the director of the center must make every effort to satisfy him
Determination of preschool educational managers towards professional development	We must witness the practical movement of preschool managers in the direction of their professional development
	There is a long way between words and actions, and the director of the preschool center must show with determination that he is looking for his professional development.
	Preschool administrators' belief in observing professional ethics in decisions and mutual behaviors is very helpful
Parental consent	An ethical manager considers professional development as his duty and religion
	Today, parents are constantly comparing preschool centers in terms of quality and management
	The options available to parents to choose a preschool center have increased
Standardization and updating of conditions for the certification of preschool educational managers	Every year we see the establishment of new preschool centers in the cities of the country
	Parents' satisfaction is very effective on the brand of preschool centers

Selective Coding: In this stage of analysis, the main focus was on placing (aligning) the identified themes on the paradigm model. Figure 1 represents the outcome of this process.

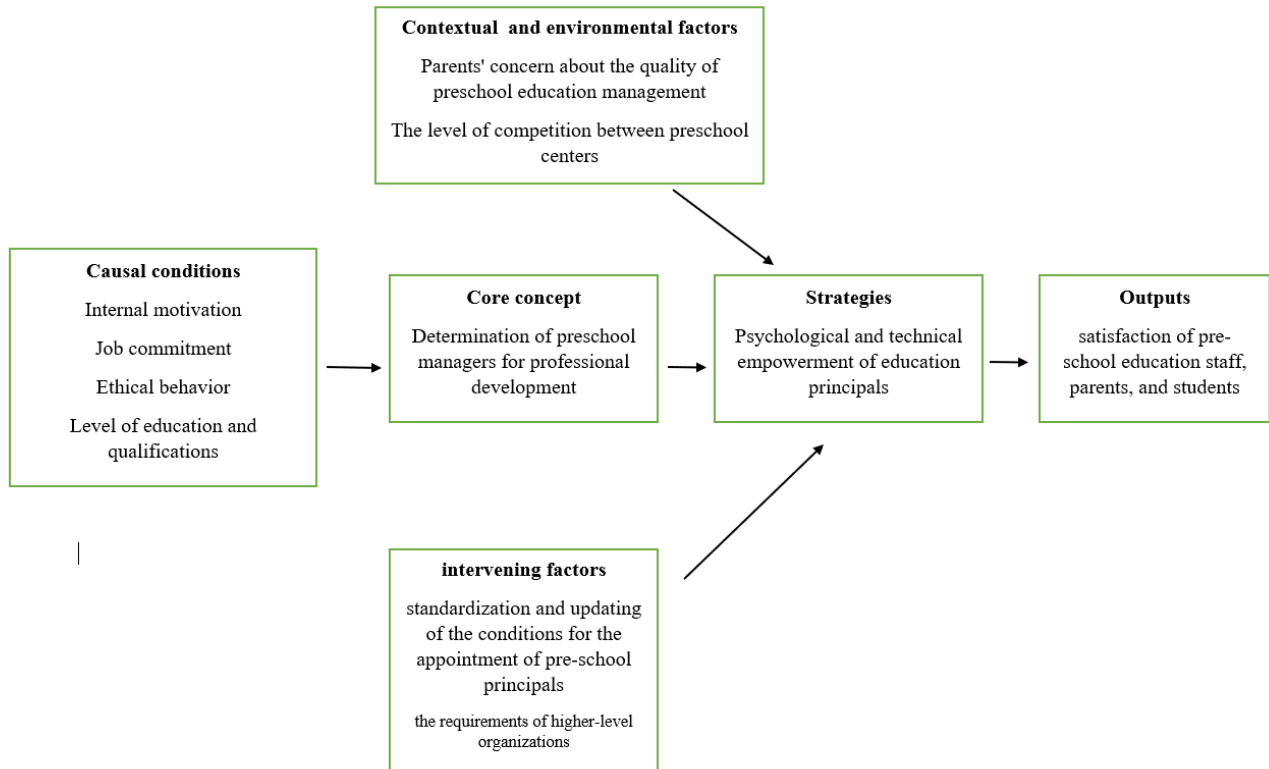


Figure 1. The identified themes on the paradigm model

Discussion

Based on the obtained results, the core essence of the research pattern was to establish a strong determination among pre-primary educational managers for professional development. In this important variable, components such as goal-setting, planning, and practical actions of educational managers towards their professional development were concealed. Four important causal factors directly influence this central core, which are the internal motivation of pre-primary educational managers for career advancement, their job commitment, their ethical conduct, and the level and relevance of their academic qualifications to pre-primary education. These factors can directly and significantly lead them to a more serious and steadfast determination for professional development.

Furthermore, the research results showed that psychological empowerment and technical empowerment of pre-primary educational managers can have very positive outcomes such as employee satisfaction (educational/administrative) in pre-primary education, parental satisfaction, and student satisfaction.

In addition to this, the research also highlighted the role of contextual and environmental variables and interventionist variables (such as parents' concern about the quality of pre-primary educational management, competition among pre-primary centers, standardization and updating of the conditions for appointing pre-primary educational managers, and top-down organizational requirements regarding the professional development of pre-primary educational managers) in the research model. These variables can directly influence the strategies of the model.

It is worth noting that the results of this research are consistent with the findings of various other studies, such as those conducted by [Shirazinejad et al. \(2018\)](#), [Hayat et al. \(2014\)](#), [Ng and Kenneth Chan \(2014\)](#), [Kanokorn et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Reston \(2015\)](#).

Based on the experiences gained from this research, future researchers are advised to test the outcome model of this study on a broader population using quantitative approaches such as structural equation modeling. Additionally, other methods such as the Delphi method and content analysis can be used in modeling phases in studies like this to somewhat overcome the time constraints faced in this research. Moreover, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies in other educational levels, using the same model, to gradually witness the design of a native model in the field of professional development of educational managers.

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