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Strategies to Improve the Cognitive competencies of Primary school principals

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Abstract

This study was carried out to develop a framework for enhancing the cognitive abilities of elementary school principals. The grounded theory (GT) strategy was utilized. The participants consisted of university professors during the academic year 2023-2024. These individuals were selected through purposive sampling and were interviewed, ensuring that the process reached saturation with a total of 25 participants. There are five main components to improving the cognitive skills of elementary school principals, and 22 key concepts. Cognitive Empowerment involves Mindfulness, Self-awareness, Self-improvement, Psychological improvement, strengthening the social brain, and self-development. Strengthening the cognitive competencies of school principals focuses on promoting cognitive knowledge, improving cognitive competencies, and enhancing cognitive skills. Implementing a Competency-oriented evaluation system involves establishing performance evaluation centers, Modifying and providing standard cognitive criteria, and Objectifying and operationalizing the cognitive indicators of school principals. Providing Financial and non-financial Support for Principals includes Promotion of the rank of expert school principals, a Merit-based payment system, encouraging competent principals, an Appropriate foundation for increasing cognitive competencies, a Supportive environment and atmosphere, and facilitating rules and regulations. Merit-based selection in recruiting and hiring involves the Appointment of competent ministers, succession planning, and recruiting and hiring expert and efficient principals.

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Introduction:

1.1. In-depth exploration of solutions

A key area of transformation within the realms of management and leadership of organizations involves the emphasis on cognitive sciences, which is presently being viewed as a novel strategy for organizational development. The cognitive management strategy, which centers on the study of thought processes (Lotfi et al., 2019) and conceptual frameworks, gained traction at the tail end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century (Middlehurst, 2012). This strategy has paved the way for the emergence of a fresh perspective known as the cognitive dimensions of organization and management (Mirsepasi, 2009). Cognitive abilities encompass a collection of skills and knowledge related to broad cognitive tasks, including goal achievement, planning, analysis, reflection, self-confidence, and quality. Cognitive is a psychological part that includes cognitive behavior in terms of the ability to consider, solve problems, understand, and process information, stability, and willfulness, so cognitive can be interpreted as academic psychology—individuals related to the knowledge possessed (Oktaviani, Dwihapsari, Islami, Dewi, Fadhilah, & Palupi, 2023). These abilities enhance an individual's capacity to comprehend and address both personal and societal needs (Salthouse, 2016). In the cognitive approach to managing cognitive experiences and beliefs, the information processing, inference, thinking, and decision-making of managers is investigated (Lotfi et al., 2019). According to the cognitive perspective, the brain is not just a reflection of the outside world, but people's thinking serves as a means of communication between the brain and the outside world. Therefore, efforts should be made to understand the internal cognitive processes and the nature of the internal/external transfer of individuals (Ghasempour Khoshroodi et al., 2018). This causes proper attention and focus on cognitive processes and their role in explaining human behavior and effectiveness (Ghaffari et al., 2018; Ghasempour Khoshroodi et al., 2018).

Lately, a fresh division known as cognitive education has been introduced in Iran (Darzi, 2017), and it is expected that education will be one of the key areas benefiting the most from its research (Kharrazi, 2017). Education, serving as the primary driver of growth and advancement (Ghaffari et al., 2018), holds significant importance and worth across various cultures, leading education experts to consistently emphasize the need to address this matter at different junctures (Yeganeh-Darabi & Yeganeh-Darabi, 2014), and although resources are scarce, considerable efforts are being invested in establishing the core principles and groundwork of cognitive education (Ashman and Conway, 2014: 55; Haghighi-Azer, 2014). Thankfully, cognitive skills related to management can be assessed, monitored, and evaluated through cognitive science techniques and research. However, merely assessing these criteria is insufficient. It is important to explore methods for enhancing cognitive abilities. The goal of improving cognitive skills is to boost or broaden cognitive functions by enhancing or strengthening the systems that process information, whether they are external or internal, and by implementing strategies to bring performance back to normal levels and enhance it further. This is supported by research by Eskandari Asl and Piryayi (2018). Conversely, studies in Iran have revealed that cognitive sciences, including cognitive skills, have received limited attention in scientific research, with most efforts concentrated on conducting lectures. While there have been scientific conferences and educational workshops, there has been a lack of a comprehensive and intentional approach to developing strategies for enhancing cognitive sciences and skills within educational settings. Indeed, a primary motivation for carrying out this study is the lack of thorough research on methods to enhance the cognitive abilities of school principals. Thus, there is a strong need for an in-depth study that explores various perspectives on the topic, as well as a detailed framework that encompasses all facets of cognitive skill enhancement. This study seeks to address the inquiry, "How can the cognitive skills of elementary school principals be improved?"

1.2. Theoretical Background

In the modern era, it has become clear that to thrive in the intricate worldwide landscape and ensure longevity in the marketplace, they must possess top-tier talent and capabilities. As the importance of

managers escalates within organizations, this is because organizations are set to encounter growing competitive pressures ahead, necessitating a greater number of skilled and efficient leaders to navigate these obstacles (Shah Sahibi et al., 2019). Salem Qahfarkhi et al. (2018) highlighted that insufficient knowledge of job-related and communication skills negatively influences the efficiency and effectiveness of managers. To enhance the skills of managers, it is essential to define the required skills by policymakers and serve as the foundation for the assessment and appraisal process. Leadership and management rooted in competencies lead to a better integration of individuals' potential knowledge and its growth within the work environment, organizational culture, and strategy (Zermeño et al., 2014). In 2016, the Academy of Management categorized the primary areas of management research into twenty-five fields as follows:

Business policy and strategy, professions, conflict management, critical management studies, entrepreneurship, gender and diversity in organizations, health care management, human resources, international management, management consulting, management training and development, management history, spirituality and religion in management, managerial and organizational cognition, operations management, theory of organization and management, organizational development and change, organizational behavior, communication and organizational information systems, organizations and natural environment, public and non-profit sector, research method, social issues in management, strategy-making activities and practices and technology and innovation management.

Among these fields, the research field of managerial and organizational knowledge is directly related to cognitive sciences. According to the domain statement published by the Academy of Management, this field of knowledge studies individual, communicative, and collective cognition in the organizational context. The main research fields in organizational and managerial cognition are: social construction, culture and cognition, nature and role of mental models and representations, judgment and decision-making, documentation processes, individual differences, and unconscious forms. Perception (such as intuition), emotional institutionalism, emotion, ideology, identity/identification, image, reputation, meaning-making, symbols and artifacts, classification, knowledge creation and management, individual learning, organizational learning and memory, attention, Information processing, and perceptual and interpretive processes (Academy of Management, 2016). According to Lotfi et al. (2019), in the cognitive approach of management, subjective experiences and beliefs, information processing and inference, thinking, and decision-making of managers are examined. For example, when making a decision, the human cognitive system receives and perceives information through the senses. The received information is encoded and stored in the long-term memory after being processed in the working memory.

The brain is known as one of the most interesting and fruitful research fields, and researchers in this field have designed new forms of management and leadership (Satphaty & Mishra, 2017). Knowing how the brain works provides new management opportunities. According to Brito-Gonzalez et al. (2017), brain-based management is based on neural processes related to decision-making, personal development, organizational intelligence (team intelligence), and planning and managing individuals (selection, training, interaction, and group leadership).

According to Abreu (2015), the use of neuroscience in the organization leads to progress in key areas. Cognitive researchers consider the brain as a function that performs a computational process on mental representations (Thagard, 2019). Our brain is responsible for our self-awareness and perception of the world around us. It continuously processes a flow of sensory information. It regulates our movements, the release of hormones from our internal glands, and even our breathing and body temperature. Our brain is the source of all our thoughts, emotions, and creative ideas. Brain cells capture every moment of our existence. Cardenas (2009) states that the abilities or mental skills of both individuals and organizations play a crucial role in enhancing efficiency and generating value for the organization. The mental processes of the brain are referred to as cognitive functions. These functions encompass the mental

activities that lead to comprehension, the selection and retention of information gathered from our surroundings, and the transformation of this information for future use. While studies have indicated that certain brain regions are more associated with specific tasks, broadly speaking, these intricate tasks emerge from the interconnection among various brain areas. These tasks include goal-setting and choosing the appropriate strategy, designing an action plan to achieve the goal, coordinating and evaluating actions, anticipating future challenges, metacognition, guidance, and managing emotions in a way that aligns with values, moral orders, and social norms. Below are some of these functions:

- Decision-making, transferring attention, and changing strategies;
- Planning, setting goals, and starting to act;
- Mental efforts to pursue challenging goals;
- Interaction with other areas of the brain in pursuit of goals;
- Inhibition, resolution of competition, and conflict between motivations;
- Monitoring the results, correcting errors, or stopping the action;
- Motivation and tendency to engage in action;
- Identifying the goals of others, cooperation or competition;
- Managing normative impulses in acceptable formats;
- Working memory activity, collecting and analyzing information;
- Thinking, reasoning, presentation of proof, judgment, and judgment;
- Attention, Concentration, and resistance to distractions (Kharrazi, 2017).

Research Methodology

In this study, we employed a Glaserian Grounded Theory, inspired by Glaser's methodology. Glaser's technique, rooted in his commitment to the foundational Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, commonly known as the traditional grounded theory, is widely recognized by scholars as the gold standard in this field (Rupsiene & Pranskuniene, 2010). To explore the multifaceted aspects of the subject under investigation during the qualitative phase, we utilized a semi-structured and in-depth interview approach. In this study, participants were chosen based on theoretical and purposive sampling methods. The qualitative results, derived from discussions with 25 specialists in cognitive education, underwent a thorough analysis. To begin this process, the researcher initially performed open coding on the interview transcripts. Initially, the transcripts were transcribed onto paper, followed by the identification of codes that were open and unrestricted. During the initial open coding phase, the researcher engaged in data reduction, which involved breaking down the interviewees' statements and opinions into smaller, more meaningful units.

Table 1. Components, concepts, and open codes of strategies for improving the cognitive skills of elementary school principals

Components	Concept	Open Codes
Cognitive empowerment	Mindfulness	selective attention/ control of behaviors, thoughts, and opinions/ mind control/ use of meditation to improve mindfulness/ training attention and concentration/ regulation, management, and processing of attention and will of the brain/ understanding of subtle and unconscious processes/ recognition of distraction and separation from It/ changing unconscious states/ perceptual processing and attention/ increasing scattered attention to the surroundings/ mindfulness training/ silence of the mind/ monitoring the meditation state/ developments related to mindfulness
	Self-awareness	Recognizing one's values, goals, and needs/ Awareness of one's feelings and emotions/ Paying more attention to oneself/ Controlling individual behavior, speech, and reactions/ Ability to recognize and understand mental states/ Ability to reflect rational emotions/ Attention to individual beliefs and attitudes
	Self-improvement	Strengthening morale and self-confidence/self-actualization / being a role model / understanding a unique identity and being independent from others / being analytical and judgmental
	Psychological improvement	Hope / Optimism / Resilience / Cultivating self-efficacy
		The ability to recognize and process the emotions of others / the ability to evaluate and interpret the emotions of others / the ability to recognize the judgments of others / the ability to infer and infer the mental, behavioral, and emotional states of others / the ability to perceive individuals 's preferences and opinions / the ability to empathize and cooperate/understand group relationships and examine the consequences Important/ perception of a person's preferences and opinions
	Strengthening the social brain	Being a lifelong learner/self-reliant/increasing self-responsibility/and self-inspiration
	Self-development	Examining individual strengths and weaknesses/assessment of individual cognitive skills / continuous assessment of personal skills with trained cognitive skills / self-evaluation of school principals / paying attention to the importance of individual assessments of principals/independence of principals in personal assessment / Cultivating self-evaluation/strengthening self-change
Strengthening the cognitive competencies of school principals	Promotion of cognitive knowledge	Knowledge of cognitive skills related to management / Equipping the libraries of education departments and schools / Increasing the culture of reading among principals / Teaching efficient strategies with specific cognitive contents / Providing basic knowledge of the brain to principals / Holding conferences, courses, and research opportunities/ holding in-service courses at the right time and place/ holding training workshops/ using expert professors in training courses/ Avoiding wasting time and money in in-service courses/ focus on scientific topics in the education of teachers/ academic knowledge/ facilitating the continuation of studies in related educational fields/ providing study opportunities to capable principals/ providing special privileges for principals to continue studying in reputable scientific centers/collaboration with expert professors
	Improving cognitive competencies	Strengthening perceptual skills/ the ability to continuously adapt the brain to the changing environment/ the ability to judge/ strengthening critical thinking/ strategic decision-making/ increasing responsibility/ improving memory and information processing speed/ reasoning skills/ the ability to analyze environmental complexity/ The ability to deal with ambiguity/situational ability/strategic thinking/strategic thinking/analytical and conceptual thinking/creative thinking
	Improving cognitive skills	Planning and goal setting skills / Organizational skills / Communication skills / Management skills / Leadership skills / Monitoring and control skills / Development of executive functions / Improving conflict resolution skills / Stress management skills / Problem-solving skills / Increase Flexibility/increasing resilience/improving in the decision-making process/inhibiting control/improving social cognition capabilities/increasing dynamic management capabilities/use

		of alternative strategies and skills/skills to deal with resistances Organizational / strategic planning skill / team building skill / collaborative management skill / influencing others skill / emotion control and regulation skill / motivating organization skill / environmental threat and opportunity identification skill / brain-based learning strategies skill / Knowledge and information management skills
Competency-oriented evaluation system	Establishment of performance evaluation centers	Establishment of evaluation centers/ formation of centralized and decentralized evaluation centers/ formation of scientific groups for proper evaluation of managers/ provision of valid evaluation systems/ formation of performance evaluation centers
	Modifying and providing standard cognitive criteria	Designing standard cognitive tests/ evaluating principals via cognitive tools/ holding standard competency tests for school principals / checking the level of brain function of principals / evaluating cognitive tests for principals / checking the cognitive performance of principals / checking Multifaceted and comprehensive evaluations of the competencies of school principals/Revision and change in the approaches of the educational system/Revision of incorrect criteria for annual evaluation of principals/Revision of traditional evaluation criteria/Avoidance of utilitarianism in the evaluation of principals/360-degree evaluation of school principals/Revision and improvement of Cognitive competencies for principals
	Objectifying and operationalizing the cognitive indicators of school principals	Objectifying and operationalizing the cognitive indicators of school principals/ providing objective measurement criteria to evaluate competencies/ designing an objective, scientific, accurate, and applicable evaluation tool
Financial and non-financial support for school principals	Promotion of the rank of expert school principals	Correct ranking of school principals/ Avoiding providing inappropriate criteria for the job of management in rank promotion/ Modifying structures and criteria for ranking principals/ Paying more attention to skills in ranking
	Merit-based payment system	Increasing the salaries of principals and teachers / increasing principals' incomes and the financial attractiveness of the job / financial plans appropriate to the dignity of teachers / creating financial incentives to increase the competencies of principals / considering sufficient salaries and benefits for expert principals / considering occupational and legal privileges/increasing welfare facilities
	Encouraging competent principals	Encouraging and honoring competent principals/providing ministerial incentives/introducing outstanding competent management models at the level of provinces and the country
	Appropriate foundation for increasing cognitive competencies	Creating a suitable platform to increase cognitive competencies/communication with reputable scientific centers / removing extra activities from school management/investing in cognitive research/focusing on cultural, social, political, and economic infrastructures to institutionalize Competence culture in schools
	Supportive environment &atmosphere	Reviving respect for the teacher's profession / promoting the importance of education in its social dignity / avoiding political and party views in jobs / creating a progressive organization
	Facilitating rules and regulations	Avoiding administrative bureaucracy / Avoiding the adoption of cumbersome administrative rules / Improving the rules governing the structure of the educational system / Modifying inefficient laws
Merit-based selection in recruiting	Appointment of competent ministers	Choosing capable and worthy ministers for the Ministry of Education/ Avoiding excessive partisanship in the education system/ Appointing knowledgeable and competent ministers.
	Succession planning	Establishment of succession planning system in schools / Implicit training for future managers / Avoiding repeated trials and errors in school management system / Avoiding wasting time,

		money, and energy in school management / Focusing on succession processes / Cultivating competent principals / Persistent updating of principals
	Recruiting and hiring expert and efficient principals	Employing expert principals and teachers/Attracting competent principals in the educational system/Appointing competent principals/Paying attention to individuals 's capabilities when hiring/Recruiting teachers and principals to improve the condition of schools / Specialized evaluations of principals and teachers at the beginning of their service/Maximum recruitment of teachers from teacher training centers and top-level universities/Recruitment of efficient principals/Recruitment of experts and well-known individuals in schools/Selecting and hiring competent individuals /Modifying the process of selecting and recruiting principals

Table 1 reveals that the approaches for enhancing the cognitive competencies of elementary school principals are organized into five components and contain a total of 22 concepts. In this part, the initial codes identified during the initial phase of open coding were compared with one another in a step-by-step manner. By consistently referring back to the interviews and analyzing their occurrence, a logical link was established between the codes, leading to the identification of 182 open codes in the second phase of coding. Following this, the 182 codes were analyzed based on their characteristics and their interrelationships, resulting in the extraction of 22 concepts in the conceptualization phase. Subsequently, in the final phase, the concepts were refined and categorized based on their nature and the complex relationships between them at a more abstract level. In conclusion, as indicated in Table 1, five components related to enhancing the cognitive competencies of principals, improving their cognitive skills, implementing a competency-based evaluation system, providing financial and non-financial support to principals, and ensuring merit-based selection in the recruitment and hiring process were identified and enumerated. Consequently, the ultimate model of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

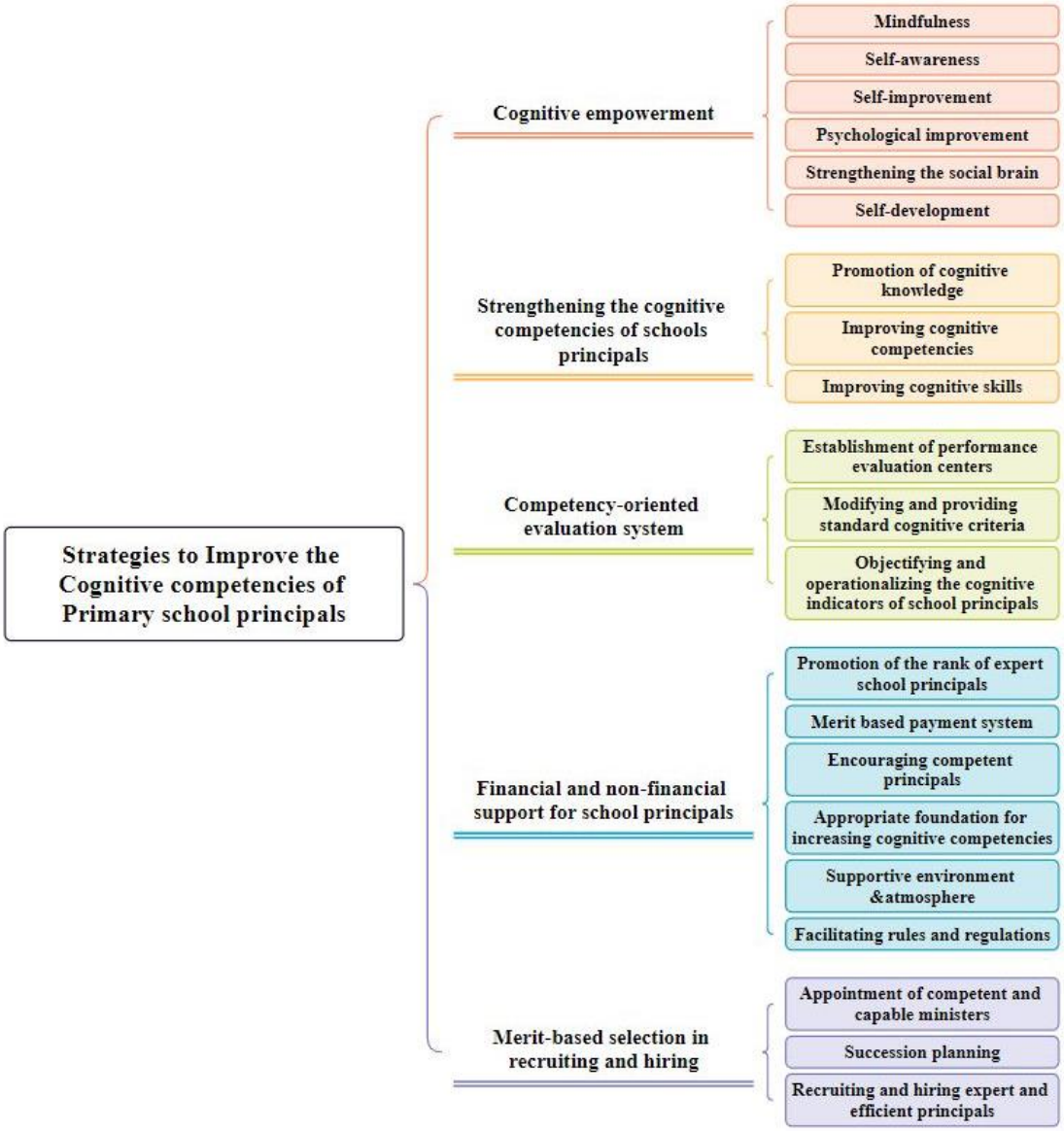

Fig. 1. The model of Strategies for improving the cognitive skills of elementary school principals

Conclusion

One aspect that is very important to know and understand from the development is the cognitive aspect. Cognitive development is a comprehensive development related to thinking skills, such as the ability to reason, remember, memorize, solve real problems, have ideas, and be creative. Cognitive development influences mental and emotional development and language skills (Oktaviani et al., 2023). The strategies for improving the cognitive competencies of elementary school principals consist of 5 components and 22 concepts. The purpose of cognitive enhancement is to strengthen or expand mental capabilities by improving external or internal information processing systems that target the underlying cognitive factor and include interventions aimed at restoring and enhancing performance. The first component of cognitive ability includes six concepts of Mindfulness, Self-awareness, Self-improvement, Psychological improvement, strengthening the social brain, and Self-development. Some of the identified components of cognitive ability, with the findings of Abili et al. (2019), Karimi et al. (2017), Dominick et al. (2014), Chan et al. (2017), and Liikamaa (2015), align with each other. Based on the results, it can be concluded that leaders who are mindful and can foster positive thoughts in their team members can bring about significant changes in the organization's structure by being inspirational and possessing unique skills. Furthermore, mindful leaders manage emotions and focus can spread a sense of calm among their team members and the overall work atmosphere, fostering a mutual trust that encourages the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Within this environment, team members feel comfortable voicing their thoughts and suggestions on different matters. This is because they trust their leaders to be dependable and honest individuals (Niyaz Azari, 2021). The next component is self-awareness. Within the realm of management studies, the ability to be self-aware is highlighted as a necessary condition for mental well-being and the capacity to understand others. Thus, managers must be aware of their primary traits and personalities, as well as their strengths and weaknesses (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). Self-improvement is a concept rooted in science and technology, encompassing specific aspects, processes, and approaches, such as self-leadership, self-management, self-regulation, and self-directed learning, all of which contribute to self-improvement across all three dimensions. A person, directed and supported by the individual they aim to serve, undergoes self-improvement. This process enables leaders with a deep understanding of their own needs as leaders to enhance their motivation by addressing these needs, leading to greater success and improved performance. Consequently, they foster ongoing self-motivation and consistently explore various self-improvement strategies, continually enhancing their skills. Moreover, this oversight and regulation will enhance their sense of responsibility and accountability for their growth initiatives. The setting that fosters education, advanced thinking, and action offers the ideal setting for leaders to enhance their abstract thinking and cognitive abilities (Abili & Mazari, 2019). Self-assessment of the process is thorough and detailed, involving a comparison between the organization's activities and processes. Precisely executing self-assessments allows leaders to base their decisions on concrete data rather than on personal opinions (Majdzadeh et al., 2002).

The second category of strengthening the cognitive competencies of principals includes three concepts. Promotion of cognitive knowledge; Improving cognitive competencies and improving cognitive skills. Some of the identified components of strengthening cognitive competencies are in line with the findings of Abili et al. (2019), Rajab Blokat et al. (2019), Kharrazi (2017), Rezayat and Sadegh-Beigi (2017), Abdollahi et al. (2013), Palamer et al. (2020), Dominick et al. (2019), Mumford et al. (2017), and Likama (2015). The education framework in every nation is shaped by its principles, and the greater the expertise and skill of its people, the more effective and vibrant this framework becomes. The expertise and skill of managers and workers are recognized as the most crucial competitive edge for companies, and the significance of human resources has increased because of their scarcity, worth, availability as a replacement, and inimitability (Gabrira, 2013). Over the past few decades, advancements in understanding the human brain's learning and development processes have motivated scholars and intellectuals to pursue their primary goal: enhancing educational programs, policies, and teaching strategies grounded in this new

knowledge. There is a need to pinpoint where the limits of psychological research meet. Even though there has been significant progress in cognitive science, the success of researchers' work is heavily reliant on how well teachers and school principals understand brain-related knowledge and how to apply it. It appears that these efforts have not been particularly effective or have not achieved the intended outcomes. Studies show that numerous educators struggle to apply their understanding of brain science to classroom activities, often making false assertions that hinder student learning and development. Consequently, it has been suggested that teachers should leverage the credible research from educational neuroscience in their instruction, provided they grasp the key concepts and terminology of this area. This is the reason why incorporating the neurological aspects of learning and development into the training of both pre-service and experienced teachers has emerged as a significant issue for educational neuroscientists. To achieve this, there is an opportunity to deepen knowledge and comprehension of key educational neuroscience concepts and terms, enhance critical thinking skills, and refine educational standards and practices. This, in turn, would increase awareness of the boundaries and potential of educational neuroscience. To enhance cognitive abilities, there is potential to improve the ability to assess neuro-educational content, foster the creation of new knowledge in the field of educational neuroscience, and enhance the professional and research skills of educators (Nouri, 2021). Problem-solving, as one of the skills discovered in this research, encompasses established processes to facilitate discussion, collaboration, and problem-solving across individuals within an organization (Asim et al., 2024).

The third component of the competency-based evaluation system consists of three components: Establishment of performance evaluation centers; Modifying and providing standard cognitive criteria; Objectifying and operationalizing the cognitive indicators of school principals. The topic of assessment & evaluation, on a global scale, holds significant prominence within the realm of educational reform (Boukaiba & Bourouh, 2021). This process involves evaluating the quality of these elements, identifying their strengths and shortcomings, enhancing the strengths, addressing the problems, and implementing preventative steps to mitigate future weaknesses (Al Kasi et al., 2020).

Competency-based approaches are one of the important tools in strengthening and improving management processes. Given the importance of education and the vital role of managers in improving organizational quality, educational managers must take basic steps to acquire or improve the competencies needed in the managerial and occupational fields. One of the challenges of human resource management in organizations is selecting and promoting employees and managers. In this regard, the evaluation center process is used as a guideline for the practical evaluation and development of competencies in conditions similar to the work environment (Riccio, 2010).

The hadith of Imam Ali (AS), who says "O Malik, The good and the bad should not be the same to you," highlights the need for the administrative system to establish, apply, and revise the criteria for evaluating those who deserve it. The evaluation center method stands out as a crucial and efficient way to identify individuals' skills, while also fostering their development. This method assesses a person's abilities in work-like settings and offers the opportunity to evaluate skills through a competency model, thereby enhancing the organization's efficiency (Vazir & Fayyazi, 2016). Assessing someone's competencies is a specialized task that demands a systematic approach, a team of professionals and skilled individuals, and specific facilities and conditions.

The fourth component of financial and non-financial support for managers encompasses components like Promotion of the rank of expert school principals; Merit-based payment system; Encouragement of competent principals; Appropriate foundation for increasing cognitive competencies; Supportive environment &atmosphere, and facilitating rules and regulations. A key aspect of successful leadership is offering support and understanding. Support and understanding are among the most effective strategies for managing stress and making challenges more manageable. Understanding fosters unity within the team, and the importance of understanding in the ethical and social growth of employees is undeniable. Studies have indicated that a deficiency in understanding is

linked to mental-neurological conditions such as antisocial actions, apathy, and diminished capacity to forgive and collaborate (Ahmadi, 2018). Support can lower the amount of adrenaline, testosterone, and particularly cortisol levels. Thus, this approach significantly enhances the likelihood of increasing oxytocin levels in the employee, leading to a stronger sense of belonging, dedication, and accountability (Ahmadi, 2018). In today's context, the environment is considered a crucial element in management, and its definition is linked closely with other key factors in organizational efficiency, such as organizational culture, morale, employee motivation, and the behavioral effectiveness of the manager. The school environment, characterized by its unique qualities, and the attitudes, actions, and progress of those interacting with the school, is shaped by the reciprocal interactions and behaviors among the school's internal groups (Talbzadeh Nobarian et al., 2017). Indeed, understanding the school's environment aids in its development towards managing psychological stress. It becomes evident that visiting various schools reveals the diverse emotional states of their staff. Consequently, it is prudent to acknowledge that a positive, open, and healthy workplace reduces psychological stress for individuals. Thus, principals must be cognizant of the school's environment and leverage it to enforce policies, establish a foundation for enhancing skills and rank, and boost employee motivation.

The fifth level of merit-based selection in the hiring and employment process involves three key components: the selection of skilled and effective ministers, the management of leadership transitions, and the recruitment and selection of proficient and successful managers. Several aspects of merit-based selection in the hiring process align with the research conducted by Abili et al. (2020). Elementary education is a crucial academic level that significantly influences the development, education, and character of students who will become future contributors to society. Given the critical role this stage plays in its lasting and significant contribution to the cultural, social, and economic advancement of society, it is essential to invest in it. School principals play a vital role in planning, leading, coordinating, overseeing, and assessing, as well as in fostering positive relationships with students and staff at schools. Therefore, it is crucial to select and appoint principals carefully, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge in both management and education (Safi, 2012). To establish such a system, it is essential to develop qualified and competent principals, which demands a thorough and complete approach known as "succession planning" (Shojaie & Dari, 2017). Effective workforce planning and succession management are critical components of strategic human resource management, as they ensure that organizations have the right talent in place to meet current and future needs (Elugbaju, Okeke & Alabi, 2024). Succession management focuses on identifying and developing internal talent, thereby ensuring business continuity and reducing the risks associated with leadership transitions (Abiwu, 2016; Rothwell, 2015).

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