



A Comparison of Educational Leadership Styles in Schools of Australia, Finland, Iran, Japan and South Africa

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 01 January 2025 Revised: 17 February 2025 Accepted: 27 April 2025 Online: 07 June 2026	Educational leadership styles play a pivotal role in enhancing learning quality, improving school effectiveness, and evaluation of teachers and students' performance. This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of educational leadership styles in schools of Iran, Japan, Finland, South Africa, and Australia. These countries were selected based on "different social systems, different educational outcomes" strategy. The research employed a documentary data collection method and utilized Bereday's comparative approach for data analysis. Findings revealed that distributed, participatory, and learning-oriented leadership styles dominate in Finland and Australia, closely tied to their decentralized structures, institutional trust, and emphasis on teachers' professional development. In contrast, authoritarian and hierarchical leadership styles prevail in Iran and Japan - largely rooted in organizational culture and centralized educational systems-, although Japan exhibits emerging tendencies toward participatory leadership due to its collectivist cultural norms. South Africa - shaped by its unique historical context-, employs a hybrid of transformational, situational, and context-aware leadership styles. The study found educational system structures, organizational culture, economic conditions, and leadership selection processes as critical determinants of leadership styles. Based on the findings, it is suggested that educational policymakers in countries with centralized structures should improve the quality of leadership by increasing the authority of schools, reviewing mechanisms for appointment of principals, and strengthening professional development programs
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1. Introduction

In the current era, education systems are facing unprecedented challenges such as technological developments, socio-cultural diversity, and increasing stakeholder expectations. In this complex context, educational leadership has been recognized as a critical element for improvement of quality of education and school performance (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Windlinger, 2021; Sain, Sain & Aziz, 2024). This concept goes beyond executive management and refers to a dynamic process that facilitates student success through optimizing teaching-learning activities, supporting teachers & creating inclusive learning environments (Mertkan & Gümüş, 2024). Research reveals that educational leaders play a decisive role in achieving the goals of educational system by mobilizing resources, creating coordination among stakeholders, and adapting strategies to changing needs (Connolly, James & Fertig, 2018; Amanchukwu, Stanley & Ololube, 2015).

The concept of educational leadership has undergone a paradigm shift in the last half century. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was largely limited to the administrative role of principals (Edmonds, 1979), but in 1980s, it has shifted toward creating structural reforms in school culture and prioritizing student learning, with a focus on the concepts of “Transformational Leadership” (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and “Leadership for Learning” (McBeath & Dempster, 2009). In the 21st century, the emergence of concepts such as “Distributed Leadership” (Spillane, 2005) and “Participatory Leadership” (Harris & Jones, 2019) has expanded the discourse of leadership from an exclusive focus on principals to the active participation of teachers, students, and society. Nowadays, these developments indicate that educational leadership is not a solitary role, but a collective process that requires flexibility, responsiveness to diversity, and adaptation to technology (McKay, MacDonald & Longmuir, 2022; Sain et al., 2024).

Despite the universal acceptance of educational leadership principles, their implementation in practice is always influenced by institutional policies, cultural values, and socio-historical context of societies (Hosseingholizadeh, Sharif & Taghizadeh Kerman, 2021; Moos, 2013). Recent comparative studies emphasize that the effectiveness of educational leadership styles is strongly influenced by cultural, social & economic variables (Nayak et al, 2024). For example, Hofstede, & Fink’s (2007) cultural dimensions theory suggests that in societies with high “power distance” (such as Iran), authoritarian leadership styles may be more applicable, while in collectivist societies (such as Japan), participative leadership styles are more successful. On the other hand, in decentralized systems (such as Finland), leaders have broader authority to innovate, while in centralized systems (like Iran), there are more structural constraints (Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2014).

In Iran, the high centralization of the educational system and institutional constraints have led school principals to play mainly administrative roles and educational leadership based on improvement of teaching & learning quality has received less attention (Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021; Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019). In this structure, all educational policies, curricula, educational objectives, and even the details of teaching methods are determined by the Ministry of Education at the national level. Schools and school leaders have limited authority to change these policies (Jami and Adibi, 2024). Shatzer et al (2014) indicated that in Finland, educational leaders use a combination of transformational educational leadership style. They place special emphasis on teachers' professional development and autonomy. This approach is consistent with the success of the Finnish education system globally and demonstrates how trust in teachers and support for their professional development can help improve the quality of education. In Finland, the decentralized and trust-based model promotes "distributed leadership" in which teachers are actively involved in the decision-making process as educational leaders (Sahlberg, 2021; Hanhimäki & Risku, 2021).

In Finland, this approach is based on the positive interaction between educational equity, social justice and economic progress (Uljen & Nyman, 2013). In Australia, the increasing emphasis on transformational leadership and use of performance data is an innovative approach in response to contemporary educational challenges. By combining components such as insight-based leadership and adaptability, this leadership style helps to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Moss, O'Mara & McCandless, 2017; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Kidson, 2025). In their study in Japan, Gaitanidou, Laios, Derri & Chatzoudes (2023) found that educational leadership style in this country is influenced by the culture of collectivism. Japanese educational leaders are more likely to use a participatory approach and collective decision-making (Ishikawa, 2011; Yokota, 2020). Educational leaders in South Africa face challenges such as resource scarcity, social inequalities, linguistic diversity, and need to adopt flexible leadership styles that are appropriate to the social context (Zuze & Juan, 2020). Also, in this country, the transition to democratic and distributed leadership after Apartheid has enabled broader participation of educational stakeholders. These developments -aimed at addressing historical inequalities and promoting educational equity-, focus on transformational leadership as a tool for empowering disadvantaged schools (Naidoo, 2022).

In fact, despite the expansion of research in the field of educational leadership, still three knowledge gaps remain prominent: a) limited geographical focus; in that most studies are dedicated to Western countries or specific regions (Bush, 2022); b) neglect of the impact of educational systems; in that the impact of the centralized / decentralized structure of the

educational system on leadership styles has been less studied; and c) lack of a comparative framework; in that comparisons between countries with different levels of socio-economic development have been neglected. Therefore, with the aim of filling these gaps, the present study conducts a comparative investigation of educational leadership styles in five countries of Iran, Japan, Finland, South Africa, and Australia to answers the following questions:

- What are the dominant educational leadership styles in the selected countries?
- What are the similarities and differences between leadership styles among the selected countries?

2. Research Method

The present study was designed to examine and compare educational leadership styles in schools in Iran, Japan, Finland, South Africa, and Australia. The strategy of "different social systems, different educational outputs" was used to select the countries and the level of analysis was macro (country). The data collection method was documentary - primary and secondary sources - such as upstream documents of the selected countries and related articles, international reports, and theses. Also, statistical data related to educational indicators - such as the results of international tests such as PISA and TIMSS - and the performance of schools in the studied countries are also considered as part of the data. To select primary and secondary sources, a purposive sampling method was used, meaning that the sources were selected based on criteria such as relevance to the research topic, scientific validity, novelty, and comprehensiveness. In addition , the data was collected by searching for keywords such as educational leadership, leadership style, etc. in information databases such as the Ministry of Education, UNESCO, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other relevant and reliable databases. The data analysis method is the Bereday's model. It was used to determine the validity and reliability from the expert and peer s' point of view.

3. Findings

Stage One: Description

In the first stage, the selected countries are described in terms of educational system structure and leadership styles in schools.

Iran

With a population of 85 million 961 thousand, Iran has 15 million 972 thousand students according to formal statistics (Statistical Center of Iran, 2023). The Iran education system has experienced numerous changes over the years. Currently, this structure is in the form of a 6-3-3 system, which includes 6 years of primary school, 3 years of middle school, and 3 years of secondary school (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011). The main responsibility for educational and curriculum planning, as well as the recruitment & selection of teachers and school principals, lies with the Ministry of Education, although the Supreme Council of Education also plays an important role in policy-making and major educational decisions (Ministry of Education, 1993).

The Iranian education system faces challenges such as frequent reforms in the educational structure and politicization. The system is lacking in compliance with global standards, especially in educational approaches and tools that are still more traditional (Chahardahcheriki & Shahi, 2012). The high focus on theoretical sciences, insufficient attention to practical skills, and gap in access between rural and urban areas are some of the main challenges of system. However, efforts have been made to improve the quality of education and increase access to it (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022). In the Iran education system, educational leadership is heavily influenced by the centralized structure of government and Ministry of Education and is designed based on Islamic values and national culture. This focus is manifested in several main aspects:

- *Macro-policymaking*: All educational policies, curricula, goals and even teaching methods are determined by the Ministry of Education at the national level. Schools and their leaders have limited authority to change these policies (Jami & Adibi, 2024).
- *Fundamental Transformation of the Iran Education System Document*: As a upstream document, this document determines the general framework of the education system and all schools are required to act on it. This indicates a strong centralization in decision-making.
- *Top-down supervision*: The Ministry of Education and its provincial branches directly supervise the performance of schools. This supervision includes periodic visits, leaders and teachers' performance evaluation and control over implementation of curricula. Professional development programs for teachers in Iran are often inadequate & ineffective. For this reason, many teachers find it difficult to update their skills (Amin Nili, 2023).
- *Integrated Assessment*: National tests – such as the entrance exam and University Entrance Exam—are designed & administered centrally and represent a focus on assessing student

and school performance. This centralized assessment method has prevented schools and educational leaders from responding effectively to the specific needs of students & the local society.

- *Budget and Resources:* School budgets are largely determined & allocated by the government. Schools have limited discretion in managing their financial resources and must operate according to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education. Many schools – especially in deprived areas – face a lack of financial resources, educational facilities, and experienced human resources.
- *Human Resources:* The recruitment of teachers & administrators is also centralized and carried out by education departments (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 2011; Supreme Council of Education, 2012)

The process of selection and appointment school principals in Iran is based on upstream documents - such as the Fundamental Transformation of the Education System Document - and the regulations for appointing school principals. This process, with an emphasis on meritocracy, professional qualifications and commitment to Islamic-Iranian values, includes three main stages: Initial qualification, competitive selection, and probationary appointment. School principal candidates must have a bachelor's degree (preferably in a related field), at least five years of service experience in the education system, and a certificate of educational management courses. After the call is published by the provincial education departments, applicants are assessed through multi-stage assessments - including a written test (measuring specialized knowledge & awareness of applicant about education upstream documents), an oral interview (examining leadership capabilities, moral commitment and compliance with the values of the system), and a review of performance records. Finally, qualified candidates are appointed as “school principal” on a temporary basis for a period of one year. During this period, their performance is evaluated by supervisory committees based on indicators such as improving educational quality, resource management, and stakeholder satisfaction. If they achieve at least 70 percent of the points, the appointment is extended (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011; Supreme Council of Education, 2012).

Despite the centralized structure of the Iran education system, in recent years there have been efforts to increase schools’ authority and move towards decentralization; efforts such as establishment of board of trustees schools. These schools have greater authority in managing resources, selecting teachers, and designing educational programs, but are still required to operate

according to the overall policies of the Ministry of Education. Board of Trustees Schools is run with the participation of the local community and has greater authority in financial & educational management. In some cases, these schools are allowed to design part of their own curriculum. This is especially seen in areas with specific needs (such as rural areas or areas with ethnic minorities). There have also been efforts to increase the role of school leaders in educational and management decisions. This includes more participation of leaders in educational and curriculum planning and responding to the specific needs of students (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 2011; 2012). In addition, in recent years concepts such as "School-centered Management", "Comprehensive Quality Management", "Smart School Management" and "School Excellence Management" have been proposed in the literature on management and leadership of Iran educational organizations. These approaches indicate that school principals must review their leadership style in accordance with new changes and requirements (Pakbaz & Mohseni, 2021).

Japan

Japan has a population of about 125 million with 10.9 million students in primary schools and 3.98 million in secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2023). The Japanese formal public education system is organized as follows:

- Primary education: 6 years (ages 6-12)
- Lower secondary education: 3 years (ages 12-15)
- Upper secondary education: 3 years (ages 15-18), (MEXT, 2024).

The education system is characterized by a combination of centralized & decentralized leadership style:

- The MEXT oversees national education policies & curriculum standards,
- Prefectural and municipal boards of education implement policies & manage schools at the local level,
- Schools have some authority in developing and implementing the curriculum (Tahira, 2012).

Several aspects distinguish the Japanese education system:

- Compulsory education from elementary to junior high school (9 years) ,

- High enrollment rate in upper secondary education (98.8% in 2020) ,
- Strong emphasis on university entrance exams,
- Widespread use of private supplementary schools (*joku*) to supplement regular education,
- Focus on moral education and character development.

The Japanese education system is known for its high academic standards and a literacy rate of 99.8%. However, the system also faces challenges such as intense competition for university admissions and concerns about students' stress and mental health (Zhang, 2024). In terms of global rankings, Japan's education system is among the top countries with a strong focus on mathematics and science. In the PISA (2022) indicators, Japan was one of the leading countries in the world with an overall score of 1599. The emphasis on discipline, careful planning and curriculum competition are among the factors that contribute to the success of education system (UNESCO, 2023).

The selection and appointment process for school principals in Japan is based on a centralized and standardized framework overseen by the MEXT and local governments. The system emphasizes rigorous assessment, leadership qualities, teaching experience and alignment with the national educational philosophy. School principals are required to hold a Type 1 professional certificate (usually requiring a master's degree) and at least five years of teaching or related educational work experience. Final appointment of a school principal is made by the prefectural board of education or local government after undergoing a structured evaluation process - including in-depth interviews, a review of professional records - and an analysis of indicators such as the ability to lead educational change and human resource management. This process aims to ensure the integrity and quality of leadership in the education system, adhering to strict national standards (Razavi, Eymani, & Sharifi, 2021; Yokota, 2024). Despite the advantages of this system such as transparency and coherence, it faces criticisms about reducing flexibility and ignoring the specific needs of schools. Too much focus on uniform national standards may lead to the inability of administrators to adapt to the unique culture of the school or local challenges (Chen, Cheng, & Sato, 2017).

The leadership style in Japanese schools is a blend of traditions and innovations that emphasize respect for hierarchy & collaboration. In this country schools are effective in creating a team culture & collaboration and pay special attention to the professional development of teachers (Harris & Jones, 2019). Hanada and Horie (2021) revealed that Japanese educational leaders emphasize consensus building, maintaining harmony and encouraging collaborative learning. The educational leadership style also emphasizes collaboration & teamwork and school administrators

playing a facilitating role and involving teachers in decision-making. For this reason, “*Distributed Leadership*” is common in Japanese schools (Yukl, 2010). In educational settings where leaders strive to create harmony between macro (top-down) strategies and participatory (bottom-up) approaches, this strategic leads to fostering active participation and a sense of professional accountability among teachers (Gençer & Samur, 2016).

Finland

Finland has a population of about 5.5 million with about 600,000 students (Statistics Finland, 2024). The Finnish education system is structured as follows:

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC): for children up to 6 years
- Pre-primary education: for children from 6 years
- Basic education: 9 years of comprehensive school (ages 7–16)
- Upper secondary education: general or vocational (usually ages 16–19), (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2023).

The Finnish education system is characterized by decentralization and reliance on local authorities:

- The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for overall educational policy and funding,
- Municipalities (local authorities) are responsible for organizing basic education and ECEC, and
- Schools and teachers have considerable autonomy in planning and implementing the curriculum.

Several aspects distinguish the Finnish system from other educational systems:

- No national standardized tests until the end of upper secondary education,
- Emphasis on equity and equal opportunities in education,
- High-quality teacher training (all teachers require a master's degree),
- Free education at all levels, and
- Strong focus on student well-being and individual support (Sahlberg, 2021).

The Finnish education system is recognized globally for its achievements, consistently ranking among the top in international assessments such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), (Liu, 2024). In terms of global rankings of educational performance, Finland continues to have one of the best education systems in the world. The country is known for its innovative teaching methods; focus on interactive learning and educational equity. In the PISA (2022) indicators, Finland ranks highly in science, reading and mathematics, with an overall score of 1485 (UNESCO, 2023).

In Finland, the process of selection and appointment of school principals is based on two main mechanisms and a decentralized educational system. First, the teacher-principal route - as a common approach-, selects principals from among experienced teachers- with at least a master's degree in educational administration and a teaching qualification certificate - appropriate to the level of education under management. This route emphasizes practical experience in the educational environment and gradual professional development. Second, appointments are made by municipalities - as responsible institutions in the decentralized Finnish system - based on merit, educational qualifications and extra-school leadership capabilities (such as regional management and coordination between educational institutions). This duality creates a combination of practical expertise and a macro-management framework that responds to diverse educational needs at local and national levels (Adli, 2023). The Finnish management selection process, modeled after private sector practices, is transparent and competitive. Vacancies for management positions are advertised publicly and applicants are screened through structured interviews, psychological assessments and background checks. Selection criteria include mastery of educational management principles, relevant work experience in education & training and the ability to lead transformational change. In addition, managers are required to complete specialized courses to update their knowledge in areas such as educational innovation and human resource management. This process, despite its focus on meritocracy, is accompanied by challenges such as maintaining a balance between local autonomy and national standards, although the Finnish experience has shown that combining a decentralized system with strict competency-based requirements leads to the development of efficient and accountable managers (Risku & Pulkkinen, 2016).

Finland is a pioneer in an educational leadership style that emphasizes autonomy and participation. In this country, educational leaders act as facilitators and use interactive and distributed approaches. This leadership style has led to increased quality in student academic outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). Educational leadership in

Finland, as a successful model, also emphasizes several key principles that help improve student academic outcomes:

- ❖ **Distributed Leadership:** In this model, educational leaders act as facilitators and give teachers autonomy and autonomy. This approach allows teachers to participate in decision-making and educational planning processes (Robinson & Timperley, 2007),
- ❖ **Building Trust:** Educational leaders in Finland emphasize building trust between teachers and students. This trust helps foster collaboration and innovation in educational environments (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016) ,
- ❖ **Focus on learning and continuous improvement:** Educational leadership in Finland focuses on continuously improving the quality of teaching and learning for teachers and students. This includes using data to make decisions and assess progress (Muijs, 2011),
- ❖ **Shared learning culture:** Creating a shared learning culture in which teachers and students actively participate in the learning process (Attoh, 2024).

South Africa

With a population of 60 million, South Africa has 13.4 million students enrolled in its education system. Approximately 95% of students attend public schools (Expatica, 2024). The structure of the South African education system is as follows:

- **General Education and Training (GET):** Grades R (Reception Year) to 9 (ages 5-15),
- **Further Education and Training (FET):** Grades 10 to 12 (ages 16-18) (Department of Basic Education, 2024).

The system is characterized by a combination of centralized and decentralized leadership:

- The Department of Basic Education oversees primary and secondary education,
- Provincial education departments implement policies and manage schools at the local level.

Several aspects distinguish the South African education system from other countries:

- Compulsory education from Grade R to Grade 9 or age 15
- Introduction of tuition-free schools in 2007 to increase access to education

- Significant investment in education, with about 20% of the national budget allocated to education
- Challenges in overcoming historical inequalities in access and quality of education
- Emphasis on technical and vocational education to address skills shortages.

South Africa's education system has made significant progress since the end of *Apartheid*, increasing access to education for disadvantaged groups. However, challenges remain in improving the quality of education and addressing inequalities in educational outcomes (World Education News Reviews, 2017). In terms of global rankings, South Africa faces serious problems in access to quality education and resource management. The country performs poorly in PISA and other global indicators, largely due to economic inequality, poor infrastructure, and inadequate teacher training (UNESCO, 2023). The process of selection and appointment of school principals in South Africa is guided by the School Principal Appointment Policy of the Ministry of Basic Education and school management institutions. This policy aims to promote transparency and meritocracy, and requires strict criteria - such as a valid three or four-year degree in education, seven years of work experience and a qualification equivalent to Relative Education Qualification Value (REQV 14) - as minimum professional qualification standards. The selection process begins with the publication of a recruitment advertisement by the school board, and after preparing a list of candidates, applicants are assessed through structured interviews and leadership competency assessments. Finally, the final decision is made with the participation of regional representatives and the approval of the education director of district (Mampane, 2015; 2021). However studies show that the implementation of these policies faces serious structural challenges. The politicization of appointments, corruption, and the influence of kinship networks have led to the fact that in some cases merit criteria have become secondary priorities, and formal processes have been undermined by "power games" and local micro-politics. These studies emphasize that these inefficiencies have not only fueled stakeholder distrust, but also jeopardized the effectiveness of educational leadership and achievement of educational justice. As a result, experts are calling for an urgent review of appointment mechanisms, strengthening independent oversight of school management processes, and prioritizing merit-based & transparency - rather than political or ethnic affiliations (Dube & Tsotetsi, 2020; Dwangu & Mahlangu, 2022).

In South Africa, leaders face many cultural and social challenges. The role of leadership in this country is to create inclusive learning environments and respond to cultural diversity, which can help improve the quality of education. Educational leaders in South Africa face challenges such as

resource scarcity, social inequalities & linguistic diversity, and need to adopt flexible and contextual leadership styles (Zuze, & Juan, 2020). Educational leadership styles are also shifting from traditional, authoritarian approaches to transformational leadership. School principals are striving to improve school performance by creating a shared vision and empowering teachers (Mestry, Moonsammy-Koopasammy & Schmidt, 2013). This shift is essential to address the complexities of educational reform and creating a more equitable learning environment (Chipunza & Matsumunyane, 2018). Furthermore, the need for leadership development that is aligned with South African realities has been highlighted, as current educational programs often fail to address the complexities of leadership in this diverse context (Franco, 2020). In South Africa, educational leaders face numerous challenges that are influenced by the cultural and social complexities of the country. Key challenges include:

- ❖ **Cultural Diversity:** Leaders must create inclusive learning environments that respect and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students. This requires a shift from traditional, authoritarian leadership styles to transformational approaches that empower teachers and promote collaboration (Du Plessis, 2021),
- ❖ **Resource Shortages:** Many schools face significant resource shortages that hinder the delivery of quality education. Effective leadership is essential to mobilize available resources and implement innovative solutions to overcome these challenges (Christie & Lingard, 2001),
- ❖ **Historical Inequalities:** The legacy of apartheid continues to impact access to and quality of education, requiring policies that aim to promote equity and equity. Leaders must address these inequalities while also grappling with the complexities of a rapidly changing educational environment (Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007),
- ❖ **Psychological challenges:** Students face psychological issues stemming from social and historical inequalities that can impact their educational outcomes. Leaders must be aware of these challenges and create supportive environments (Fonsén, et al, 2024).

These factors highlight the need to foster adaptive, context-sensitive, and equity-oriented educational leadership styles; leaders who are committed to restoring equal educational opportunities for all students with a deep understanding of the cultural diversity, historical inequalities, and structural differences in the South African education system.

Australia

The population of Australia is 26.6 million, of whom 3.9 million are enrolled as students in schools nationwide (Department of Education, 2024). The structure of the Australian education system is organized as follows:

- Early childhood education: pre-primary (optional, ages 3-5)
- Primary education: 6-7 years (ages 5-11 / 12)
- Secondary education: 5-6 years (ages 12-17 / 18)

The Australian education system is characterized by a mix of federal and state administration with the following features:

- The Department of Education oversees national education policy and funding,
- State and territory governments are responsible for implementing policy and managing schools at the local level,
- The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) provides a national policy for regulated qualifications across all education sectors (Montague, Connell & Mumme, 2017).

Some of the distinctive features of the Australian education system include:

- Compulsory education from age 6 to 16 or 17, depending on the state or territory,
- A system based on the active participation of non-governmental institutions, in which more than 30% of students are enrolled in independent, religious or private schools, and
- A strong emphasis on technical and vocational education alongside theoretical subjects.

Australia's education system is known for its high standards and is a popular destination for international students. However, it also faces challenges such as addressing educational inequalities between different socio-economic groups, particularly for indigenous students (Australian Department of Education, 2024). In terms of global rankings of educational performance, Australia ranks in the upper-middle range of the world. In the PISA index, the country's overall score was 1492. The country is noted for its modern teaching methods and focus on life skills education. However, regional and social gaps are evident in Australian education (OECD, 2022).

Australia is known for its multicultural approach to educational leadership. The process for selecting and appointing school leaders in Australia is influenced by de-centralized state policies, which results in variations in practices between regions. The system is generally based on merit and transparency, with leadership positions advertised publicly and applicants assessed through a rigorous process including structured interviews, an assessment of leadership skills and an analysis of school improvement perspectives. Candidates are required to have extensive teaching experience, completed educational leadership courses and preferably a Master degree in a relevant field. Selection committees, made up of representatives from teachers, the local community, and experts from state education departments, use tools such as reference reports and in-person presentations to review candidates' compliance with the criteria set out in Ministerial Circular 1006. This framework, by emphasizing procedural fairness and maintaining the confidentiality of personal information, assures candidates that appointments are made in line with local educational priorities and national standards (Blackmore et al, 2022; Boyd, 2022). Despite features such as structured accountability and emphasis on merit, studies show that unconscious gender & racial biases and reliance on personal networks can sometimes undermine a fair selection process (Blackmore et al., 2022).

Educational leaders in this country strive to improve education quality through creating educational opportunities that meet diverse needs of students (Lumby & Coleman, 2017). Dimmock & Walker (2005) indicated that Australian educational leaders focus on creating inclusive learning environments, fostering community participation, and responding to the needs of indigenous & migrant students. For this reason, Australia uses a distributed leadership style in schools. School principals play a coordinating role, leadership is distributed across different levels of the school, and an emphasis on innovation and continuous improvement is a characteristic of educational leadership in Australia (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). In Australia, educational leadership is increasingly focused on multiculturalism and inclusion, reflecting the cultural diversity of this society. This approach emphasizes the need for educational leaders to create environments that are responsive to the unique needs of all students—including indigenous and immigrant populations. Key aspects of this leadership model include:

- ❖ **Inclusive Practices:** Leaders are encouraged to implement policies and practices that foster inclusion and cross-cultural understanding. This includes changes to the curriculum as well as broader institutional-wide support and resources (Elias & Mansouri, 2023).

- ❖ **Culturally Responsive Leadership:** Effective leaders adopt culturally responsive practices that recognize and value diversity. This includes understanding students' cultural backgrounds and integrating these perspectives into instructional practices (Vassallo, 2022).
- ❖ **Distributed Leadership:** Leadership is typically distributed across different levels of schools, allowing for shared decision-making and accountability among staff. This model supports innovation and continuous improvement in instructional practices (Moss, O'Mara & McCandless, 2017).
- ❖ **Focus on social justice:** Educational leaders are increasingly tasked with addressing issues of social justice and equity to ensure that all students have access to quality education (Niesche & Keddie, 2011).

In sum, the integration of multicultural values into educational leadership styles aims to create a more equitable and accountable education system in Australia.

Stage Two: Interpretation

After describing the educational structure and leadership styles in the selected countries, this stage attempts to analyze relationship between the characteristics of the educational systems, educational leadership styles, and cultural, social and economic factors influencing each country. This stage goes beyond presenting raw data and focuses on understanding the contexts and logic of the formation of leadership styles. In Finland and Australia, which emphasize decentralization, participatory learning, and educational innovation, democratic, learning-centered, and transformational leadership styles have emerged (Hollinger and Heck, 2010; Sahlberg, 2017). In contrast, in societies such as Iran and Japan, which still centralized educational structures are prevalent, traditional and authoritarian leadership styles continue to dominate, although reforms in favor of increased participation and innovation are observed (Harris and Jones, 2019; Jami and Adibi, 2024). South Africa has also moved towards utilizing flexible and transformative models due to social inequalities and economic constraints (Mestri et al., 2013).

- *Influence of culture on educational leadership styles*

Culture seems to be one of the most fundamental factors influencing educational leadership styles in any country. Finland and Australia, due to their individualistic culture and democratic

values, have adopted participatory and distributed leadership styles in which school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders play a role in educational decision-making (Sahlberg, 2017; Lumby & Coleman, 2017). In contrast, Iran and Japan - which have collectivist and hierarchical cultures - have tended towards authoritarian structures and a focus on organizational hierarchy in their leadership style, although in recent years, a trend towards distributed leadership has also been observed in these countries (Yokota, 2020; Jami and Adibi, 2024). Due to the cultural and historical diversity resulting from *Apartheid*, South Africa has adopted a multidimensional approach that includes elements of transformational and adaptive leadership. In this country, educational leaders must not only manage the education system, but also provide a platform for cultural integration and educational justice (Zuze, & Juan, 2020).

- *Impact of educational structure on leadership styles*

Decentralization and school autonomy are other factors that affect the formation of leadership styles. In Finland and Australia, decentralization policies have allowed schools to have greater autonomy in educational decision-making by adopting distributed and participatory leadership approaches. Therefore, this model has increased trust in teachers, professional growth motivation, and improved the quality of student learning (Sahlberg, 2017; Moss, O'Mara & McCandless, 2017). In contrast, Iran and Japan still have centralized educational systems where major educational decisions are made at the government level and school principals often have an executive rather than a strategic role. This has limited the degree of flexibility in school decision-making and created challenges in implementing new management approaches (Yokota, 2020; Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021). However, in recent years policies have been adopted to reduce centralization and increase the authority of school principals in Iran and Japan, but they have not yet reached the level of Finland and Australia.

- *Impact of economic conditions and financial resources on leadership styles*

The economic conditions of a country strongly affect the type and effectiveness of educational leadership styles. Finland and Australia, which are in a favorable economic situation, have been able to develop learning-oriented and transformational leadership styles based on innovation and professional development of teachers through large investments in the education sector (Uljens, & Nyman, 2013; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford, & Kidson, 2025). In contrast, South Africa faces serious challenges due to economic problems, a lack of educational resources, and a shortage of capable teachers. In such circumstances, educational leaders are often forced to adopt contingent and

transformational leadership styles in order to make the most use of limited resources (Zuze & Juan, 2020). Iran is also facing economic challenges in the field of education, which has caused school administrators to focus more on resource management and implementing government policies than on innovation in educational leadership (Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021).

- *Impact of Assessment and Accountability Systems on Leadership Styles*

Teacher and school assessment systems play a decisive role in the type of educational leadership styles. In Finland and Australia, assessments focus on continuous learning and professional development of teachers, while in Iran and Japan, assessments based on student performance in standardized tests have a direct impact on leadership styles and often lead to the adoption of control-oriented approaches (Moss et al., 2017; Sahlberg, 2017; Amin Nili, 2023; Zhang, 2024). In South Africa, the assessment system considers a combination of educational performance measures and the extent to which schools contribute to reducing inequalities has influenced transformative and socially-oriented leadership in schools (Du Plessis, 2021).

Third Stage: Juxtaposition

In line with the third stage of Bereday's comparative method, descriptive data related to educational leadership styles in five countries of Iran, Japan, Finland, Australia and South Africa, have been placed together without causal analysis and simply in a parallel to provide a suitable platform for deeper analyses in the comparison stage. Table (1) shows the most important effective dimensions in educational leadership styles in these countries and follows a comparative logic at the conceptual and structural levels.

Table 1. Juxtaposition of educational leadership styles in schools of selected countries

Indicators	Iran,	Japan	Finland	South Africa	Australia
Dominant leadership style	Authoritarian with limited tendency towards participation	Participatory-hierarchical with emphasis on democratic consensus,	learning-based and distributed	Traditional and authoritarian in transition to transformational, context-aware	Distributed, innovative, learning-based
Influential culture	Hierarchical, tendency towards centralization, obedience to higher authorities	Collective with emphasis on coordination and group decision-making	Individualistic, democratic, institutional trust and innovation	Multicultural, with challenges of social inequality	Multicultural, Democratic, emphasis on innovation and flexibility
Structure of educational system	Centralized; dependent on government decision-making	Semi-centralized; with central government supervision but with a high participatory space	Decentralized with high local authority	Semi-centralized, with a tendency towards increased autonomy with structural inequality	Decentralized, a combination of federal and state systems
Role of school leader	Executor of high-level orders and subordinate to central policies	Facilitator and coordinator in a hierarchical structure	Leader of learning, innovator and strategic thinker	Involved in educational reforms and reducing inequalities	Participatory coordinator with diverse roles and a key role in developing innovation
Teacher participation in decision-making	Limited and controlled	Relatively high, emphasis on consensus and collaborative work	Very high with limited distributed leadership	in transition and growth, but with institutional challenges	Structured and supported
Teacher professional development	Inefficient, fragmented and unsystematic	Structured and focused on continuous improvement	Structured, continuous and self-directed	Affected by variable and sometimes inadequate resources	A combination of structured and self-directed models
Educational resources and budget	Limited government and uneven across regions	Moderate to good with high government intervention	Stable with focus on educational equity	Insufficient, uneven and dependent on regional policies	Relatively favorable with regional differences
Method of school principal selection and appointment	Centralized and state-run appointments	Administrative appointments with organizational evaluation	Meritorious selection with professional evaluation	Hybrid; local considerations and regional structure	Hybrid; competency and state oversight

Several important points can be deduced from the table: First, in the index of the dominant leadership style, it is observed that Finland and Australia tend to be more participatory, distributed, and democratic styles (Sahlberg, 2017; Moss et al., 2017), while Iran and Japan continue to operate largely under the influence of more traditional and hierarchical structures, although in both cases signs of a shift towards participation and innovation can also be observed (Yokota, 2020; Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021). South Africa, meanwhile, follows a different pattern that includes both transformational and contingent components, based on its specific socio-cultural context (Mestry et al., 2013).

In the education system structure index, there is a clear distinction between countries. Iran, with its highly centralized structure, leaves little authority to schools and educational leaders (Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021). In contrast, Finland provides an example of a fully decentralized system in which municipalities and local authorities play a central role (Shatzer et al., 2014). Australia, with a hybrid system of educational federalism, has also struck a balance between national policies and local needs (Moose et al., 2017). South Africa and Japan are in an intermediate position, although each faces its own challenges.

The role of school leaders is also a reflection of the structure of educational system and culture of countries. In Iran, school principals mainly act as implementers of national policies (Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021); while in Finland, they are learning leaders and innovators who have a real stake in educational decision-making (Sahlberg, 2017). In Australia and Japan, coordinating and facilitating approaches are more common (Moose et al., 2017; Yokota, 2020), but in South Africa, leaders must create a balance between social justice and managerial imperatives (Zuze and Juan, 2020).

In the field of teacher participation in decision-making, Finland provides the most prominent example of active and meaningful teacher participation (Sahlberg, 2017). Australia has also provided structures for systematic participation (Dimmock, & Walker, 2005). Japan, drawing on its tradition of collectivism, has strengthened teacher participation in the form of consultation (Hanada, & Horie, 2021), but in Iran, teacher participation in decision-making is still limited and is mainly limited to implementation and compliance (Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021). South Africa is transitioning from prescriptive to participatory styles, but institutional barriers and insufficient resources have prevented this goal from being fully realized (Zuze and Juan, 2020).

In the Teacher Professional Development Index, a structural difference is observed between countries. In Finland, teacher professional development is based on self-directed models and is

carried out with strong institutional support (Muijs, 2011). In Australia, a mixed model of regional and individual strategies is followed (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). Japan operates in a structured manner in this regard, but in Iran, professional development programs are often formal, inefficient, and not based on real needs (Gençer, & Samur, 2016; Amin Nili, 2023). In South Africa, economic inequalities and lack of resources have prevented the realization of a comprehensive and effective professional development system (Franco, 2020). Indicators such as the influence of culture on leadership style and financial resources also indicate the place of educational leadership in different socio-cultural contexts. For example, hierarchical styles in Iran and Japan are influenced by the cultural structure of obedience to authority and social order, while in Finland and Australia, democratic values, individualism, and trust provide a suitable environment for distributed and learning-oriented leadership.

Finally, the assessment of the selection and appointment index of principals shows that in Iran and Japan, the process of appointing principals is mainly top-down and based on formal and centralized structures. In Iran, this appointment is made through formal examinations and administrative structure of the Ministry of Education (Iranian School Principal Selection and Appointment Regulations, 2021), while in Japan, although there are mechanisms for evaluation, final decision-making is still in the hands of bureaucratic structures (Razavi et al., 2021). In contrast, Finland and Australia use meritocratic and mixed models; in Finland, principals are often selected from among experienced teachers after professional assessments and based on leadership skills (Adli, 2023). In Australia, although state oversight dominates the process, there is a strong emphasis on leadership competencies and individual competence (Blackmore et al., 2022). In South Africa, the appointment of principals is made with local considerations and the influence of regional structures, which is often accompanied by social justice challenges, ethnic pressures and regional differences. The apparent differences in this indicator play a decisive role in the degree of authority, the style of principals' interaction with teachers and the overall orientation of educational leadership in each country (Dwangu & Mahlangu et al., 2022).

Stage Four: Comparison

Comparative analysis of educational leadership styles in selected countries reveals complex relationships between structure of educational system, organizational culture, socio-economic conditions, and macro-policies with the type of leadership prevailing in schools. The findings indicate that in countries with decentralized systems such as Finland and Australia, the institutional context is available for emergence of participatory, learning-centered, and distributed leadership

styles. In these countries, educational leaders have a role beyond executive management and are recognized as facilitators of learning and guides of educational innovations. The existence of institutional trust, professional autonomy of teachers, continuous development of professional skills, and an emphasis on local accountability are among the components that have strengthened these leadership styles in these two countries (Sahlberg, 2021; Moss et al., 2017).

At the other end of the spectrum are Iran and Japan, which, despite significant cultural and structural differences, both still rely on hierarchical and authoritarian structures in educational management. In Iran, the centralization of decision-making in the Ministry of Education has limited the authority of school principals and reduced leadership style to the mere implementation of top-down policies. Although there have been efforts in recent years to devolve authority to schools and promote school-based leadership, this process is still in its early stages. In Japan, the existence of bureaucratic structures combined with collectivist cultural traditions has given rise to a type of participatory-hierarchical leadership in which consensus building, coordination, and teamwork are prioritized (Yokota, 2020; Hossein Gholizadeh et al., 2021).

South Africa is in a unique position. After the end of Apartheid, educational policies have been redesigned with the aim of achieving social justice and reducing historical gaps. The leadership style in this country is a combination of transformational, contingency, and context-aware leadership. School leaders are not only required to manage the school, but are also responsible for playing social, cultural, and psychological roles in contexts of linguistic diversity, poverty and inequality. The inability of supervisory structures, lack of human & financial resources, and influence of ethnic & political relations has pushed leadership styles in this country towards flexibility and adaptability (Zuze and Juan, 2020).

In sum, it can be said that decentralized and trust-based educational systems, democratic cultures, and attention to teachers' professional development provide the basis for participatory and distributed leadership styles. While centralized systems, authoritarian cultures and traditional structures prevent the emergence of innovative styles in educational leadership. Also, countries with higher levels of investment in education have been able to build more effective leadership systems based on professional learning, teacher autonomy, and stakeholder participation. From this perspective, educational leadership is a context-dependent phenomenon that requires an understanding of the complexities of political, cultural, and economic systems of countries. Table (2) shows a comparison of key indicators of educational leadership styles in five selected countries (Iran, Japan, Finland, Australia and South Africa). The symbol ✓ indicates the presence or prominence of the indicator in the educational system of the country in question, and the symbol ✗

indicates the absence or weakness of that indicator in the educational leadership structure of that country. This table provides a platform for comparative analysis and identification of common or distinctive patterns between countries.

Table 2. Comparison and comparison of educational leadership styles based on indicators in schools in selected countries

Indicators	Iran,	Japan	Finland	South Africa	Australia
Dominant leadership style	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
Influential culture	X	✓	✓	X	✓
Structure of educational system	X	X	✓	✓	✓
Role of school leader	✓	✓	X	X	X
Teacher participation in decision-making	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher professional development	X	✓	✓	X	✓
Educational resources and budget	X	✓	✓	X	✓
Method of school principal selection and appointment	X	✓	✓	X	✓
Emphasis on educational justice	X	✓	✓	✓	✓

- *Participatory Leadership*: In countries where participatory leadership is marked with a tick (✓) (e.g. Japan, Finland, Australia & South Africa), school principals actively involve teachers in decision-making processes and an organizational culture around consensus building and team building is strengthened. In contrast, the absence of this style in Iran indicates institutional constraints and centralized structures.
- *Distributed Leadership*: leadership styles was observed in a distributed manner in Japan, Finland and Australia meaning that leadership roles are shared among principals, teachers &

other stakeholders and delegation of authority is provided. The absence of this approach in Iran and its incomplete implementation in South Africa indicate differences in the level of school autonomy and division of responsibility at different levels.

- *Transformational Leadership*: Transformational leadership is present in Finland, Australia, and South Africa, indicating a desire to create fundamental changes and educational innovations.
- *Authoritarian Leadership*: In Iran authoritarian characteristics are prominent, which means that decision-making is concentrated at high levels and there is a lack of teacher participation; While this style is less visible in Finland, Australia, and South Africa, which is consistent with creating an open space for participation and creativity in education.
- *Educational Decentralization*: Countries such as Japan, Finland, Australia, and South Africa, by having a tick, indicate that their education systems have been given the opportunity to delegate more authority and participation to schools and teachers. The absence of this issue in Iran reflects the high concentration of decision-making at the government level and management limitations.
- *Teacher participation in decision-making*: In Japan, Finland and Australia, teacher participation is highlighted as a fundamental pillar in educational decision-making; while in Iran and South Africa (growing participation) the level of teacher participation is less evident.
- *Emphasis on teacher professional development*: With coherent and structured professional development programs, the Finnish, Australian and Japanese systems consider improving teacher skills as a key factor in the quality of education; in contrast, in Iran and South Africa, this development has received less attention due to limited resources and ineffective policies.
- *School autonomy in educational planning*: In Finland, Australia, and Japan, autonomy in planning allows teachers and administrators to make educational decisions based on local needs and specific circumstances; the lack of this autonomy in Iran and South Africa indicates institutional constraints and heavy government intervention in educational affairs.
- *Emphasis on educational equity*: In Finland, Australia, and South Africa, policies are implemented to ensure educational equity and equality of learning opportunities, which are realized through support programs and equity-based assessments; especially in Iran, this approach is either limited or has less impact due to traditional structures.

4. Conclusion

Educational leadership is recognized as one of the key factors in improving the quality of education and student performance. This research examined educational leadership styles in Iran,

Japan, Finland, South Africa, and Australia with a comparative approach. The findings of study revealed that educational leadership styles in the selected countries are strongly influenced by institutional structures, cultural values and socio-economic conditions. The findings of Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, (2014); Nayak et al., (2024) confirm and are in line with finding of present study. In countries such as Finland and Australia, decentralized educational systems, school autonomy in educational planning, and emphasis on teachers' professional development have paved the way for the use of distributed, participatory, and learning-oriented leadership styles. School principals in these countries not only have an executive role but also, as facilitators of educational innovations and learning leaders, strengthen the active participation of teachers in school decision-making. These findings are in line with previous studies (Shatzer et al., 2014; Moss et al., 2017; Sahlberg, 2021; Hanhimäki, & Risku, 2021; Lipscombe et al, 2025) indicating that institutional trust, delegation of authority, and investment in teachers' professional development are key components of the success of education systems.

In contrast, in countries such as Iran and Japan, centralized structures and hierarchical cultures have established an authoritarian leadership environment. However, in Japan due to collectivist values and consensus building, some features of participative leadership are clearly seen. In Iran, institutional constraints and strict government control have caused school principals to be mainly subjected to high-level policy implementation and do not provide real opportunities for teacher participation. This finding is consistent with theory of cultural dimensions of Hofstede-Fink (2007) and studies such as Ishikawa, (2011); Chen, Cheng, and Sato (2017); Hallinger and Hossein Gholizadeh, (2019); Yokota, (2020); Hossein Gholizadeh et al., (2021); Jami and Adibi, (2024); Gaitanido et al., (2023) that authoritarian styles are dominant in societies with high power distance.

South Africa, due to its history of *Apartheid* and the changes resulting from the transition to a democratic political system, also presents a unique model of transformational and responsive leadership styles; meaning that school leaders in this country must not only deal with resource constraints and social inequalities, but need to adopt innovative approaches to create educational justice and cultural convergence. This finding is consistent with of Zuze and Juan, (2020) and Naidoo, (2022), which indicate that the key to success in improving educational leadership requires reducing the power distance and strengthening stakeholder participation by creating conducive institutional conditions and changing cultural attitudes.

With regards to these findings, it is recommended that educational policymakers in countries with centralized systems - especially Iran-, provide the basis for active participation of

teachers by creating favorable institutional infrastructures, promoting delegation of authority, and strengthening professional development courses for school principals. Also, the use of evaluation systems based on fairness and institutional transparency can help improve the performance of educational leadership and create effective learning environments. The findings of study highlighted the importance of reforming education systems by delegating more authority to schools, strengthening professional development programs, and using equity-based assessment systems. As a result, fundamental changes in education policies can significantly improve the quality of educational leadership and facilitate innovation in schools.

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