



A Comparative Analysis of Primary School Principal Selection Mechanisms in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 11 June 2025 Revised: 27 August 2026 Accepted: 03 May 2026 Online: 07 September 2026	This study comparatively examines the mechanisms used to select primary school principals in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey. Adopting a qualitative comparative design, it draws on document analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official Ministry of Education regulations, policy documents, international reports published by UNESCO, the OECD, and the World Bank, as well as scholarly literature indexed in Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The analysis was guided by Bereday's four-stage comparative framework: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. The findings show that principal selection in Iran remains largely dependent on written examinations and structured interviews, with limited pre-appointment preparation. By contrast, in Japan and Malaysia, selection is embedded in more systematic models of leadership preparation and ongoing professional development, alongside broader participation by school stakeholders, including teachers and parents. In Turkey, principal selection and evaluation remain centrally administered by the Ministry of National Education, while post-appointment oversight is carried out through educational inspection and related supervisory bodies. Overall, the comparison suggests that Japan and Malaysia have more effectively professionalized principal recruitment through sustained and specialized preparation, whereas Iran and Turkey still require broader structural reform to strengthen the quality and coherence of principal selection.
KEYWORDS	
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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of educational transformation, school leadership is widely recognized as a critical lever for improving educational quality. Leaders play a foundational role in shaping teaching and learning processes while strengthening the professional capacity of teachers (Bush, 2020). Consequently, identifying and appointing school leaders who possess robust leadership competencies has become a primary focus of educational policy worldwide (Fullan, 2016; Robinson, 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that school leadership is the second most influential in-school factor affecting student achievement, surpassed only by the quality of classroom instruction (Grissom et al., 2021). Effective principals leverage data-informed decision-making—including the analysis of student achievement, teacher evaluations, and attendance rates—to improve learning outcomes, enhance teacher retention, and reduce student absenteeism (Leithwood et al., 2004). Accordingly, international policy literature highlights school leadership as a key instrument for advancing educational equity. Broad consensus suggests that leadership should be supported by professionalizing career pathways, redefining administrative roles, and expanding institutional capacity (Pont et al., 2008).

Despite these goals, educational systems globally face shared challenges in fostering effective school leadership. The first major challenge concerns human capital management. Many countries grapple with acute teacher shortages, an aging workforce, and difficulties in teacher recruitment and retention, all of which place unprecedented pressure on school leaders. To counter these issues, educational authorities are increasingly compelled to adopt targeted recruitment strategies, alternative entry pathways, and structured professional development frameworks (OECD, 2023; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2023). Furthermore, data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reveal that rising workload pressures and occupational stress divert principals from instructional leadership toward administrative tasks, underscoring the urgent need to redesign the principalship and strengthen distributed school leadership teams (OECD, 2020).

A second challenge relates to digital transformation and data governance. Modern principals must monitor evidence-informed instruction while ensuring the ethical and responsible use of school data, such as student records and digital learning analytics. They are also tasked with evaluating teachers' technological readiness and integrating digital tools into daily classroom practices (OECD, 2021; Selwyn, 2021). TALIS findings suggest that these expanding expectations—ranging from managing students' social-emotional growth to directing technological changes—make it difficult for principals to focus on the core teaching-learning process without delegating

authority (OECD, 2019, 2020). To alleviate these pressures, policy guidelines from the OECD and Wallace Foundation recommend restructuring leadership roles to enable principals to prioritize setting learning goals, evaluating instruction, and cultivating a positive school learning culture (OECD, 2008; Grissom et al., 2021).

Even in high-performing educational systems, comparative evidence indicates a growing need to reform principal selection policies. This reconsideration is driven by qualified candidate shortages, aging administrative staff, and a persistent disconnect between formal competency standards and actual recruitment practices. Systems increasingly seek to align principal selection with comprehensive professional pathways that integrate preparation, hiring, support, and evaluation (OECD, 2008a, 2008b; OECD, 2020). TALIS findings confirm that in many countries, leadership training begins only after appointment, leaving new principals ill-prepared for administrative demands (OECD, 2020). Similarly, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring reports document substantial cross-national variation in the legal and policy frameworks governing principal selection, preparation, and working conditions, highlighting the need to recalibrate selection criteria (UNESCO, 2024, 2025). At the implementation level, research by the RAND Corporation stresses the value of structured "principal pipelines"—systematic processes through which school leaders are identified, prepared, hired, and supported. RAND's evaluations show that aligning these pipelines with leadership standards is a highly cost-effective way to generate meaningful improvements in school performance (Gates et al., 2009).

A growing body of literature reinforces the necessity of strengthening principal selection systems. In a comparative study, Khanal (2024) observed that selection policies in many countries lack coherence and require revision to emphasize competency-based criteria, multi-stage assessments, and stakeholder participation. Research by the Learning Policy Institute indicates that preparation programs incorporating administrative internships, individualized mentoring, and rigorous screening significantly improve leadership quality and student learning. Similarly, the Wallace Foundation (2023) found that systematic planning for principal identification and support enhances recruitment quality and reduces administrative turnover. Lee (2023) concluded that successful principal selection depends on the interaction of individual qualifications, organizational support, and local participation. Additionally, Doss (2022) demonstrated that candidates' performance indicators during pre-service preparation predict subsequent improvements in student achievement and principal retention.

Further evaluations of university-based preparation redesigns suggest that stronger alignment among universities, educational agencies, and local districts clarifies selection criteria

and improves recruitment quality (Diliberti, & Schwartz, 2023). This alignment is critical, as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified principal turnover and burnout, necessitating robust retention policies (Herman et al., 2022). The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2021) similarly reported that the scope of the principalship has expanded considerably, warns that failing to redesign selection processes and support mechanisms will exacerbate early departures. Longitudinal evaluations of large school districts confirm that structured pipeline initiatives improve school-leader matching and minimize turnover (Gates et al., 2019). Comparative studies also show that self-efficacy, perceived rewards, and systemic support are key drivers of leadership attraction (Müller & Hancock, 2019). Ultimately, collaborative and distributed leadership enhances institutional capacity, meaning that selection processes must actively assess candidates' ability to lead instruction and foster participatory environments (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

In Iran, a parallel body of research has emerged to address these leadership challenges. Mehralizadeh and Chenani (2024) demonstrated that current selection approaches in Karkheh County significantly affect leader performance, noting that weak professional criteria and the absence of post-appointment monitoring undermine instructional leadership. Using a meta-synthesis approach, Soltani et al. (2024) identified professional competencies, organizational ethics, teaching experience, multi-stage assessment, and stakeholder participation as the primary factors influencing elementary principal selection. Tamaddoni and Hosseingholizadeh (2023) identified centralized administration, a lack of pre-selection training, weak merit-based appointment systems, and low local involvement as key challenges facing Iranian principals. Furthermore, Sefarnejad et al. (2023) found that the influence of discretionary factors in appointments, combined with the poor execution of decisions issued by the Supreme Council of Education, has diminished selection quality. Consequently, researchers emphasize that instructional leadership, communication skills, and professional ethics must be integrated into elementary selection frameworks (Diyarat et al., 2023).

More broadly, the Iranian system of school principal selection continues to face major structural challenges. These issues stem from the lack of a fully merit-based system, non-transparent evaluation procedures, and the intrusion of non-specialist or administrative considerations into the appointment process (Mehralizadeh & Chenani, 2024). Although formal guidelines exist, their implementation remains fragmented, lacking objective monitoring and competency-based assessment. In many cases, appointments are shaped by administrative

connections or bureaucratic seniority rather than demonstrated leadership capacity (Tamaddoni & Hosseingholizadeh, 2023).

Given this context, comparative research provides a valuable framework for examining the current situation in Iran and identifying successful international models. Ghaderizafreh et al. (2022) identified a lack of objective criteria, weaknesses in structured interviews, and minimal stakeholder participation as primary shortcomings in Isfahan schools. Zarei et al. (2022) found that while a formal competency framework has been articulated in upstream policy documents, the corresponding implementation and evaluation mechanisms remain weak. Momenzadeh Gorjaneseuei et al. (2022) argued that principal empowerment requires continuous performance evaluation, support for organizational creativity, and reduced centralization. To address these needs, Shabani et al. (2018) proposed a four-dimensional competency model encompassing cognitive-technical, personal-ethical, interpersonal, and performance-leadership skills. Drawing on the Fundamental Reform Document of Education, Mardani et al. (2018) argued that “qualified principals” must demonstrate both professional skills and ethical-religious qualifications. Piriaei and Niknami (2017) proposed a policy-implementation model to clarify promotion criteria and career progression. Additionally, Alijani et al. (2019) demonstrated that involving parents and teachers in selection enhances the legitimacy of appointments. Comparatively, Hosseini and Kouhinejad (2016) highlighted the need for specialized pre-appointment training and structured interviews, drawing on Japanese models. Finally, Abdollahi (2014) identified a significant gap between the professional characteristics of incumbent secondary school principals and formally approved criteria, calling for greater alignment between selection procedures and actual leadership competencies.

Despite the growing body of literature on principal competencies in Iran, most existing research has remained descriptive and inward-looking. Studies have focused heavily on localized implementation problems using unstructured interviews, with limited attention to cross-national comparisons. The present study addresses this gap by comparing the primary school principal selection mechanisms of Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey. By analyzing these diverse education systems, the study aims to identify key similarities and differences to derive actionable policy implications for reforming and improving principal selection processes in Iran.

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative research design based on Bereday's (1964) four-stage framework for comparative inquiry: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. The country was treated as the macro-level unit of analysis. Data were collected

through systematic document analysis of both primary and secondary sources relevant to the selection of primary school principals.

The case countries were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling. This strategy was adopted to capture a wide range of institutional arrangements, governance structures, and professional approaches to principal selection across different educational systems. Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey were chosen because they represent distinct policy configurations in terms of centralization, professional preparation, stakeholder involvement, and the relationship between selection and career development. At the same time, all four cases offered sufficient access to authoritative and comparable documentary sources, which is essential for rigorous cross-national analysis. The data corpus consisted of four main categories of documents:

- (a) official laws, regulations, and ministerial guidelines concerning the selection of primary school principals in the selected countries;
- (b) international policy reports published by organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank;
- (c) peer-reviewed scholarly articles indexed in Scopus, ERIC, and ScienceDirect; and
- (d) official policy documents, directives, and regulatory texts issued by Iran's Ministry of Education.

For Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey, the analysis drew on primary legal and regulatory documents, international policy reports, and peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2025. For Iran, authoritative Persian-language policy documents and scholarly sources published between 2011 and 2025 were included. Priority was given to primary sources and highly cited or methodologically robust secondary studies in order to ensure the credibility and consistency of the comparative evidence. The analysis proceeded in accordance with Bereday's comparative model. In the description stage, relevant legal, policy, and procedural information for each country was identified and organized. In the interpretation stage, these data were examined in relation to the broader administrative and professional context of each education system. In the juxtaposition stage, country-specific findings were placed within a common analytical matrix to enable structured cross-case examination. In the final comparison stage, recurring patterns, major differences, and policy implications were identified across the four national systems.

Following data extraction and coding, the materials were organized using a shared analytical framework composed of the following cross-case indicators: eligibility criteria; pathways for identifying and screening candidates; governance and decision-making authority; structured

assessments and interviews; pre-appointment training and professional certification; post-appointment monitoring and evaluation; and the involvement of parents and local community stakeholders. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation by comparing legal documents, policy reports, and scholarly analyses across cases. In addition, peer debriefing was used during the coding and interpretation process to strengthen the consistency and credibility of the findings.

3. Findings

A. Description

Iran

The selection and appointment of primary school principals in Iran is formally governed by the *Regulation on the Selection and Appointment of School Principals*, adopted under Resolution No. 997 of the Supreme Council of Education in 2021. This regulatory instrument serves as the primary policy document defining the qualifications, criteria, and administrative procedures for school leadership. The regulation explicitly conceptualizes school principalship not merely as an administrative post, but as a position of educational leadership, aiming to institutionalize meritocracy, enhance leadership quality, and establish a transparent, accountable selection system aligned with the *Fundamental Transformation Document of Education* (Supreme Council of Education, 2021).

Article 3 of the regulation establishes a dual framework of general eligibility and specialized competency criteria. General requirements mandate a minimum of five years of service at the relevant educational level, physical and psychological fitness, verified moral qualifications, and a clean administrative record. Beyond these baseline requirements, the specialized competency framework evaluates capacities in instructional leadership, human resource management, educational planning, school financial administration, and participatory stakeholder engagement. Additionally, candidates are expected to demonstrate proficiency in educational technologies, school-level data analysis, and crisis management (Supreme Council of Education, 2021).

Administratively, the selection process comprises multiple consecutive stages: candidate identification, credential review, preliminary screening, general and specialized written competency examinations, a structured interview, and final appointment by the district education authority. While provincial and local education offices manage candidate evaluation and nomination, the final decision remains centralized. The regulation also outlines a post-appointment evaluation mechanism requiring periodic performance reviews based on designated indicators,

with provisions for reassignment or revocation of appointment in cases of persistent underperformance (Supreme Council of Education, 2021).

Despite this formalized structure, empirical studies suggest that implementation remains constrained. Research by Ghaderizafreh et al. (2022) and Sefarnejad et al. (2023) indicates that the highly centralized governance of the Ministry of Education causes the process to function primarily as an administrative appointment mechanism rather than a dynamic system for identifying instructional leaders. Key systemic challenges include inadequate pre-appointment preparation, the limited application of multi-source evaluation instruments, and the heavy influence of bureaucratic seniority in final decisions (Institute for Education Studies, 2020).

Japan

In Japan, the recruitment and appointment of primary school principals operate within a legal framework established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), operationalized by municipal and prefectural boards of education. Guided by the *School Education Act* and the *Local Educational Administration Act*, the system defines the principal as an instructional leader responsible for curriculum design, teacher development, school-community relations, and quality assurance (MEXT, 2022). Local boards of education hold the statutory authority to identify, evaluate, and nominate candidates through a merit-based system.

Candidates typically possess extensive teaching experience—frequently exceeding ten years—and must demonstrate prior leadership capacity in intermediate roles, such as vice-principal (Kyoto) or head teacher (Shuto). A key structural feature is the requirement of formal principal preparation programs. Administered by prefectural boards of education or specialized training centers, these programs cover instructional leadership, school data analysis, performance management, team building, educational technology, and crisis intervention (NCEE, 2023). Completion of these programs is a critical prerequisite for advancing in the selection process.

The selection process employs multi-stage assessments, including written competency examinations, structured situational interviews, professional portfolio reviews, and evaluations of prior administrative performance. Local boards of education utilize standardized criteria to assess both educational vision and managerial capacity, occasionally integrating school-based appraisals and feedback from teachers and parents (OECD, 2019). Following appointment, principals must participate in annual in-service professional development focused on emerging educational technologies, collaborative governance, and student welfare. Japan's accountability framework is highly integrated; principals undergo external administrative evaluations and are required to

conduct annual school self-evaluations, fostering a professional culture of continuous improvement (UNESCO, 2024).

Malaysia

The selection of primary school principals in Malaysia is directed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and has undergone significant professionalization under the *Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025)*. This reform aimed to transition school leadership from a seniority-based promotion track to a competency-based pathway. The cornerstone of this policy is the *National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders* (NPQEL), a mandatory credential administered by the Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB), which serves as the national specialized institution for leadership preparation (IAB, 2025).

The NPQEL program is structured around comprehensive modules in instructional leadership, human resource management, data-driven decision-making, strategic planning, and digital school governance. It incorporates an internship-based practicum alongside multi-stage evaluation methods, including digital portfolios, assessment center simulations, and structured interviews (Ng, 2017). Aspiring leaders who fail to secure this qualification are excluded from the candidate pool, establishing a standardized competency baseline prior to appointment.

Once qualified, candidates undergo final screening by the MOE, which reviews professional records, competency scores, and prior performance. The selection process aligns with the Blueprint's mandate that principals act as active instructional leaders. Consequently, selection criteria prioritize teacher capacity building, student learning outcomes analysis, and participatory management (MOE, 2025). Empirical evaluations indicate that the NPQEL framework has strengthened the managerial and instructional capabilities of school principals (Kaniatullah et al., 2024). Following appointment, the MOE enforces participation in structured in-service training and refresher courses to ensure leadership practices remain aligned with national educational standards (UNESCO, 2024).

Turkey

In Turkey, the selection and appointment of primary school principals are centralized under the Ministry of National Education (MEB). The process is governed by the *Regulation on the Appointment of School Administrators* (initially issued in 2017–2018 and revised in 2021 and 2024), which provides a standardized framework aimed at enhancing procedural transparency and

minimizing discretionary appointments (MEB, 2024). The Turkish selection system relies on a multi-component quantitative scoring model:

- *Written Examination:* Candidates must pass a national written exam covering educational law, school administration, instructional leadership, communication principles, and educational evaluation.
- *Professional Record Evaluation:* A standardized scoring system evaluates candidates' professional portfolios, including years of teaching experience, postgraduate degrees, completed training programs, and professional awards.
- *Structured Interview:* Shortlisted candidates undergo a formal interview conducted by provincial committees, evaluating oral communication, problem-solving capacity, and leadership disposition.

Additionally, candidates are required to obtain a certificate in educational administration through MEB-sponsored training programs covering collaborative leadership, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and educational technology integration. Research indicates that this structured framework has improved objective competitiveness and clarity in principal recruitment (Delibaş & Ateş, 2021). Post-appointment, principals are monitored by educational supervisors and provincial inspection boards. Annual performance evaluations assess student outcome trends, school safety, teacher satisfaction, and parental engagement (OECD, 2020).

B. Interpretation

Iran

The evolution of principal selection in Iran reflects a centralized, administrative trajectory shaped by educational modernization since the early twentieth century. During the first Pahlavi era (1921–1941), the establishment of the Ministry of Education introduced a centralized, French-inspired bureaucratic model. Under this framework, school leadership was conceptualized primarily as an administrative agency of the central state, prioritizing bureaucratic compliance over pedagogical expertise. Following the 1979 Revolution, this centralized structure was preserved but oriented toward ideological and value-based qualifications (Alagheband, 2016). Throughout the late twentieth century, principal selection remained dependent on teaching seniority and basic screening. Although the *Fundamental Transformation Document of Education (2011)* and the *2021 Principal Appointment Regulation* introduced a discourse of professional educational leadership, the operational reality remains constrained by centralized administrative practices. The persistence of bureaucratic compliance as a primary selection factor suggests a historical continuity where

institutional loyalty often competes with technical and instructional leadership competencies (Qaderizadeh et al., 2022).

Japan

In Japan, school leadership underwent a significant democratic and professional restructuring during the post-WWII period, guided by the *Fundamental Law of Education (1947)*. The role of the principal transitioned from an authoritarian administrative office to a socially collaborative, professionally grounded leadership role. During the high-growth decades of the 1950s and 1960s, Japan institutionalized extensive teaching experience as a prerequisite for principalship, ensuring that principals enjoyed strong pedagogical credibility among school staff (Aspinall, 2013). Decentralization reforms in the 1990s transferred substantial selection and oversight authority to local and prefectural boards of education. Consequently, Japan's contemporary selection mechanism reflects a balance between national competency guidelines (MEXT) and local governance. This historical trajectory indicates a successful institutional transition where the principal's authority is validated by both professional consensus and local public accountability (MEXT, 2022).

Malaysia

The historical development of educational leadership in Malaysia is characterized by the post-independence (1957) challenge of nation-building, superimposed on a British colonial administrative legacy. In the immediate post-independence decades, principal selection was primarily seniority-driven. The establishment of the Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB) in 1979 marked the first systematic attempt to professionalize school administration (IAB, 2021). During the 2000s and 2010s, Malaysia transitioned from seniority-based appointments to a mandatory pre-appointment credentialing model (NPQEL). This shift decoupled school leadership from general teaching seniority, establishing it as a distinct professional career pathway. Historically, Malaysia's trajectory demonstrates how institutionalizing specialized preparation can reform selection practices, transforming the principalship into a specialized professional field (MOE, 2025).

Turkey

Since the founding of the Republic in 1923, Turkey has maintained a highly centralized educational administration designed to promote national cohesion. Historically, school principals were conceptualized as administrative representatives of the state within local communities (Tansel,

2024). During the late twentieth century, principal appointments were frequently subject to shifting political priorities. In response, MEB reforms in the 2010s and 2020s sought to standardize selection by introducing a national written examination and structured interview scoring (MEB, 2024). This historical trajectory represents a transition toward competitive, merit-based selection aimed at reducing administrative patronage. However, frequent changes to the regulatory framework indicate that stabilizing these selection mechanisms remains an ongoing challenge.

C. Juxtaposition

This section compares the principal selection processes in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey across four major dimensions: the legal framework, eligibility requirements, selection stages—with particular emphasis on the nature of interviews—pre- and post-appointment training, and mechanisms of oversight. A central feature of this analysis is its simultaneous attention to both formal policy texts and the realities of implementation, as the gap between the two often shapes the actual quality of school leadership.

Iran: The gap between regulation and practice

Interviews dominated by administrative conformity rather than instructional leadership

Although Iran's official regulation presents the principal interview as a structured, competency-based component of the selection process, field evidence and recent research suggest that, in practice, these interviews function less as assessments of instructional leadership and more as formal administrative exchanges (Qaderizadeh et al., 2022; Sefrnezhad et al., 2023). The questions typically focus on administrative discipline, familiarity with regulations, or value-oriented dispositions rather than on the candidate's capacity to lead teaching and learning. Common prompts tend to address issues such as how a principal would respond to teacher noncompliance, how the candidate understands commitment to official educational values, or how much experience they have in implementing ministerial directives. By contrast, in countries such as Japan and Malaysia, interview processes are more often situational and anchored in authentic school-based problems—for example, how a candidate would interpret declining Grade 3 learning outcomes and design an improvement plan based on school-level data. In this respect, principal selection in Iran more closely resembles an administrative appointment procedure than a genuine assessment of educational leadership competence (Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2020). As a result, candidates are often incentivized to rely more on organizational relationships and bureaucratic experience than on demonstrated instructional expertise. One principal quoted in

Sefrnezhad et al. (2023) observed that the interview questions were repetitive and excessively formal, and that no one asked how learning would actually be led within the school. Such field-based evidence suggests that the notion of the competency-based interview has not yet been fully institutionalized within Iran's educational administration. Whereas Japan and Malaysia frequently employ assessment centers involving multiple assessors and simulation-based tasks, interviews in Iran are typically conducted by three-member committees whose composition is more administrative than educational. Consequently, the formal process may still produce principals who score highly in terms of organizational conformity and bureaucratic loyalty, yet demonstrate limited capacity in the use of school data, the leadership of teacher teams, and the management of learning improvement.

Selection committee composition and the challenge of oversight

Selection committees in Iran are composed primarily of district-level administrative officials, with only limited involvement from specialists or scholars in educational leadership. In contrast to systems such as those in Malaysia and Japan, which draw on assessment centers or local boards of education, the absence of independent oversight bodies in Iran weakens transparency and accountability.

The absence of standardized pre-appointment preparation

Iran lacks a national, standardized pre-appointment preparation program for aspiring principals. Most school leaders receive professional development only after assuming the position, a sequence that may reduce leadership effectiveness during the critical early phase of appointment (Sefrnezhad et al., 2023). Taken together, these patterns suggest that, despite the existence of a relatively coherent legal framework, principal selection in Iran remains dominated in practice by bureaucratic prerequisites, restrictive assessment practices, and the absence of a professionalized pre-appointment pathway. As a result, principals are more likely to function as implementers of directives than as leaders of learning.

Japan: Leadership grounded in professional credibility and local governance

In Japan, principal legitimacy is rooted in professional credibility and extensive teaching experience. The underlying assumption is that a principal must first be an expert teacher. This principle gives rise to an interconnected system of selection, development, and evaluation.

Situational interviews and performance-based assessment

Principal interviews in Japan commonly involve the analysis of authentic school scenarios, the interpretation of learning data, conflict management, and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. These methods assess the candidate's capacity for education-centered leadership rather than mere compliance with administrative structures (Yokota, 2024).

Local governance and public accountability

Local boards of education play a direct role in principal selection, supervision, and evaluation. This governance structure strengthens alignment between schools and their communities and contributes to public trust in the leadership process.

Pre-appointment preparation and sustained professional learning

Japan operates one of the most comprehensive pre-appointment preparation models, including school-based practicums, mentoring arrangements, and annual refresher programs. This continuity supports long-term professional growth rather than one-time credentialing.

Malaysia: Professionalizing the leadership pathway through NPQEL

Malaysia has transformed principal selection from a seniority-driven model into a competency-based leadership pathway through the implementation of NPQEL.

- A mandatory and standardized pre-appointment route

Completion of the NPQEL is a prerequisite for entry into the principal candidate pool. The program includes specialized leadership training, internship-based projects, multi-stage interviews, and competency-based assessment.

- Building a leadership talent pipeline

This model has contributed to the rejuvenation of the principal workforce, the strengthening of data-informed leadership, and the development of competencies in educational technology. In effect, Malaysia has established a structured leadership pipeline rather than relying on ad hoc administrative promotion.

Turkey: Moving toward a competitive multi-component model

Through recent reforms, Turkey has moved principal selection toward a competitive, score-based model. This approach combines quantitative indicators with qualitative assessment and seeks to introduce greater transparency and objectivity into decision-making. The evaluation

process typically includes a national written examination to assess managerial knowledge and familiarity with educational law, a scoring system for professional records such as teaching experience and prior administrative roles, structured behavioral interviews focused on problem-solving and school-based scenarios, and, in some cases, specialized credentials in educational administration. Compared with Iran, Turkey's reliance on written testing and quantitative scoring has reduced the role of purely discretionary judgment and introduced a greater degree of competition and procedural clarity. At the same time, frequent regulatory revisions and variation in implementation across regions remain important challenges. Overall, the Turkish model may be understood as an attempt to move from bureaucratic appointment toward competitive and standardized selection, although its connection to a systematic professional development pathway remains less robust than in Malaysia.

A cross-national comparison of principal selection in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey suggests that the differences among these systems cannot be reduced simply to regulatory arrangements or administrative procedures. Rather, they reflect deeper assumptions about what school leadership is understood to mean within each education system. In Japan and Malaysia, the principal is defined primarily as a leader of learning, and the selection process is correspondingly designed to assess specialized leadership competencies. In Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey, the principal continues to be viewed to a considerable extent as an implementer of policies and regulations, and selection mechanisms therefore place greater emphasis on conformity to administrative frameworks and central directives. For this reason, a comparative analysis that simultaneously considers legal frameworks, assessment methods, professionalization pathways, and oversight mechanisms offers a more accurate picture of the actual quality of principal selection systems. The comparative synthesis may be summarized as follows:

- **Iran:** a relatively coherent legal framework, but bureaucratic and centralized implementation; reliance on administratively oriented and value-laden interviews; absence of a comprehensive pre-appointment preparation system.
- **Japan:** selection grounded in professional credibility and teaching experience; use of situational interviews; strong local governance capacity and sustained professional development.
- **Malaysia:** a formal professionalization pathway through NPQEL; multi-stage competency-based assessments; development of a leadership talent pipeline.
- **Turkey:** a competitive multi-component model; integration of written examination, interview, and professional record; movement toward greater transparency than in previous decades.

Overall, the comparison indicates that the quality of educational leadership in these countries is shaped less by regulations alone than by the underlying logic of governance, the prevailing organizational culture, and the quality of implementation in practice.

Table 1. Technical Juxtaposition of Principal Selection Systems

Indicator	Iran	Japan	Malaysia	Turkey
Eligibility Requirements	Min. 5 years teaching experience; basic administrative points.	Min. 5 years teaching experience; completion of local leadership training.	Mandatory NPQEL certificate; demonstrated school leadership potential.	Min. 5 years teaching experience; baseline regulatory credentials.
Selection Instruments	Written examinations and administrative interviews.	Competency exams; situational and behavioral interviews.	Multi-stage assessment centers; portfolios; panel interviews.	National written exam; portfolio scoring; structured interviews.
Pre-Appointment Pathway	Optional or localized introductory training.	Continuous pre-service leadership programs and mentoring.	Mandatory 6-month specialized leadership preparation (NPQEL).	Short-term management certification modules.
In-Service Development	Ad hoc administrative and managerial courses.	Continuous annual training and peer learning networks.	Systematic executive development programs by IAB.	Periodic in-service training under MEB direction.
Oversight & Evaluation	Centralized regional Ministry inspectors.	Dual oversight by local boards of education and school self-evaluation.	MOE performance tracking and school quality indicators.	Provincial supervisors and MEB inspection boards.
Stakeholder Involvement	Minimal involvement of parents and teachers.	Active role of local committees, parents, and teachers in feedback.	Moderate to high stakeholder feedback integration.	Limited to moderate parent-teacher association input.

In Iran, the process of selecting school principals is supervised by the Ministry of Education. In Japan, the selection process is primarily overseen by local boards of education. Both Malaysia and Turkey operate under the supervision of their respective Ministries of Education; however, the selection process in Turkey exhibits a higher degree of reliance on local oversight than is observed in Malaysia. In all four countries, teaching experience is established as an essential prerequisite for the selection of school principals. In Malaysia, in addition to teaching experience, applicants must obtain the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) certificate, which serves as a mandatory credential for appointment to this position.

All examined countries utilize written examinations and structured interviews to assess leadership competencies. However, in Malaysia, this process incorporates a multi-stage assessment center framework that allows for a more comprehensive and detailed evaluation of candidates' managerial and professional competencies. In Japan and Malaysia, pre-appointment training for school principals is highly specialized, encompassing structured coursework in educational management and instructional leadership. In Iran and Turkey, such training is less systematically organized and places a heavier structural reliance on prior teaching experience.

Following appointment, all countries implement in-service training programs designed to enhance the managerial and leadership skills of active principals; however, these programs are executed on a more continuous and periodic basis in Japan and Malaysia. Furthermore, while supervision and evaluation in Iran and Turkey are primarily conducted by central Ministry of Education authorities, Japan and Malaysia vest greater oversight responsibility in boards of education and local administrative authorities. Similarly, in Japan and Malaysia, the participation of teachers, parents, and the local community in the selection and evaluation of school principals is considered highly important. In contrast, such stakeholder participation remains limited in Iran and Turkey, where administrative and top-down supervisory procedures receive greater emphasis.

This comparative analysis, drawing on empirical literature and international policy reports, highlights critical divergence points across the four nations. The identified differences—particularly in pre-appointment training, in-service professional development, supervision and evaluation mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement—offer valuable comparative insights that can inform and improve the principal selection and development framework in Iran.

D. Comparison

Based on the data presented in the descriptive and interpretive sections, as well as in the comparative juxtaposition table (Table 1), the process of selecting primary school principals in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey can be compared across several key dimensions, including institutional framework, selection instruments, pre-appointment professionalization pathway, oversight mechanisms, and the degree of stakeholder participation. A comparative analysis of these dimensions shows that although all four countries possess legal frameworks for the selection of school principals, there are meaningful differences in the way these policies are operationalized and in the extent to which the school leadership pathway has been professionalized.

Structural Similarities

The first notable similarity among the four countries is the existence of formal legal frameworks for the selection of school principals. In Iran, this framework has been developed in the form of the *Regulation on the Selection and Appointment of School Principals* (Supreme Council of Education, 2021); in Japan, laws related to school administration are defined in the documents of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and in local educational administration laws; in Malaysia, extensive reforms within the framework of the *Malaysia Education Blueprint* have redesigned the structure of principal selection; and in Turkey, the regulations of the Ministry of National Education (MEB) define the legal framework of this process (MEXT, 2022; MOE, 2025; MEB, 2024). The second similarity is the requirement of teaching experience as a prerequisite for entry into school leadership. In all four countries, teaching experience is regarded as one of the fundamental criteria for determining eligibility for principalship, and typically at least five years of teaching experience is required to enter this professional pathway. This reflects the relative consensus among educational systems on the importance of educational experience as a foundation for school leadership (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, in all countries, a combination of examinations, record reviews, and professional interviews is used in the process of selecting school principals. Although the weighting and implementation of these instruments differ, their shared purpose is to assess candidates' managerial competencies and educational leadership capacities (Ng, 2017; MEXT, 2022).

Key Differences in the Professionalization of the Leadership Pathway

The most important difference among the countries concerns the level of professionalization of the school leadership pathway. In this regard, Malaysia and Japan have established more systematic structures than Iran and Turkey. In Malaysia, obtaining the NPQEL certificate from the Aminuddin Baki Institute is a mandatory requirement for entry into the leadership pathway, and candidates must complete specialized courses in educational leadership, internships, and multi-stage assessments prior to appointment (Ng, 2017; MOE, 2025). Similarly, in Japan, principals participate in formal principal preparation programs before appointment and acquire managerial experience at intermediate levels of the school system. In contrast, in Iran and, to some extent, Turkey, pre-appointment training is less institutionalized, and the leadership pathway is shaped more on the basis of teaching experience, administrative experience, and more limited forms of evaluation. Although Turkey has attempted to standardize the selection process through the use of national

examinations and a scoring system, the professionalization pathway for school principals is still not as structured as the Malaysian model (MEB, 2024).

Differences in Governance and Stakeholder Participation

Another important difference among the countries concerns the level of centralization or decentralization in educational governance. In Japan, local boards of education play a pivotal role in the selection and supervision of principals, and this increases principals' accountability to the local community (MEXT, 2022). In Malaysia as well, although macro-level policies are determined nationally, the process of preparing and developing principals is conducted by specialized institutions with broad stakeholder participation. By contrast, in Iran and Turkey, the process of selecting principals is carried out mainly within the administrative structures of the Ministry of Education, and the participation of teachers, parents, and the local community in this process is more limited. Such centralization may reduce the flexibility of the principal selection system and its connection with the actual needs of schools. Overall, the comparative analysis of the four countries indicates that the quality of school principal selection systems depends less on the mere existence of formal regulations than on the degree of professionalization of the leadership pathway, the transparency of selection instruments, and the level of participation of professional and local bodies. Countries such as Japan and Malaysia, by creating systematic pathways for principal preparation and employing multi-dimensional assessments, have been able to transform school leadership into a specialized profession. In contrast, in Iran and, to some extent, Turkey, although clear legal frameworks exist, the mechanisms of selection, pre-appointment training, and stakeholder participation need to be further strengthened in order to fully realize the approach of "educational leadership."

Table 2. Institutional and Analytical Dimensions of Selection Systems

Analytic Domain	Iran	Japan	Malaysia	Turkey
Level of Professionalization	Semi-professional; leadership treated as a promotional extension of teaching.	Professionalized; structured career progression with local backing.	Fully professionalized; institutionalized via mandatory credential (NPQEL).	In transition; standardized via exams but lacks integrated prep.
Dominant Selection Logic	Administrative-compliance and bureaucratic seniority.	Professional credibility and instructional competence.	Competency-based leadership and strategic talent management.	Exam-based competitiveness and quantitative scoring.

Pre-Appointment Status	Non-mandatory/supplementary.	Mandatory component of career advancement.	Mandatory prerequisite for candidacy.	Mandatory short-term credential.
Governance Structure	Highly centralized (Ministry of Education).	Decentralized (Prefectural/Municipal Boards of education).	Centrally governed with specialized institutional agency (IAB).	Centralized national administration (MEB).
Primary Institutional Agency	No dedicated national leadership academy.	Prefectural education centers and local boards.	Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB).	Ministry training departments (MEB).
Selection-Development Link	Weakly coupled.	Strongly coupled.	Systematically coupled.	Moderately coupled.
Principal Accountability	Vertical administrative accountability to Ministry.	Dual accountability: local community and administrative.	Performance-based and school quality accountability.	Administrative accountability to central inspectors.

4. Conclusion

Drawing on descriptive, interpretive, and comparative insights, this study critically examined the selection processes for primary school principals in Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Turkey. Although all four nations operate under formalized legal frameworks—employing standardized instruments such as examinations, portfolio reviews, and structured interviews—the analysis reveals critical divergences in their “dominant logic of implementation,” the professionalization of leadership pathways, and the efficacy of the linkage between selection and professional development. These findings underscore that formal regulations are insufficient, in isolation, to guarantee effective educational leadership; rather, the operationalization of these mandates within the distinct educational governance context of each nation remains the decisive factor in leadership quality.

While teaching experience remains a near-universal prerequisite for principalship, the nature of competency assessments varies significantly. In Japan and Malaysia, evaluation instruments are predominantly situational, prioritizing a candidate’s capacity to lead learning, analyze school-level data, manage conflict, and facilitate teacher team development. Conversely, in Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey, the selection process leans heavily toward assessing administrative compliance, regulatory familiarity, and tenure. This dichotomy suggests that while some systems conceptualize the school principal primarily as a “leader of learning,” others maintain a definition rooted in the role of a “policy implementer.”

The most pronounced distinction lies in the professionalization of the pre-appointment pathway. Malaysia’s mandatory National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) has effectively transformed school leadership into a structured career trajectory,

integrating specialized training, internships, and multi-stage competency assessments. Similarly, Japan's model—characterized by a gradual promotion structure, formal training, and local oversight—establishes a coherent chain of experience and evaluation. In contrast, despite the regulatory intent of Iran's 2021 policy, the absence of a mandatory, standardized pre-appointment preparation system creates a gap where managerial training is often deferred until after the appointment. While Turkey has progressed toward standardization through multi-component models, its integration with a sustainable professional development pathway remains less robust than the Malaysian framework.

Educational governance, specifically regarding the degree of centralization and stakeholder engagement, further delineates these systems. Japan's model empowers local boards of education, ensuring that principals remain accountable to both administrative and social stakeholders. Although Malaysia exhibits centralized policymaking, it maintains a professional separation between policy and implementation through specialized leadership institutions. Conversely, selection in Iran and Turkey remains heavily sequestered within the Ministry of Education's administrative structure, limiting the influence of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. Such high-level centralization potentially widens the gap between formal policy goals and the pragmatic needs of schools.

The evidence suggests that the quality of educational leadership is contingent not merely on regulatory design but on organizational culture, professionalization mechanisms, and the realities of policy implementation. In systems like Japan and Malaysia, where leadership pathways are intrinsically linked to pre-appointment training, multidimensional assessment, and social accountability, the principalship has achieved a specialized professional identity. To bridge the current policy-practice gap in Iran and Turkey, this study advances the following imperatives for educational leadership policymakers:

- *Institutionalizing Pre-appointment Preparation:* Policymakers in Iran and Turkey should prioritize pre-appointment training models focused on instructional leadership and human resource management. Integrating internships and mentoring programs is essential to bolster managerial efficacy prior to the assumption of formal leadership roles.
- *Enhancing Multi-source Evaluation and Local Oversight:* There is a critical need to transition toward multi-source evaluation frameworks and continuous monitoring. Incorporating local oversight and self-evaluation mechanisms would not only enhance procedural transparency but also align school leadership more closely with institutional quality assurance.

- *Promoting Stakeholder Participation:* Strengthening the engagement of teachers, parents, and local communities in the selection and evaluation processes is paramount. As evidenced by the Japanese and Malaysian models, such participation fosters social legitimacy and the sustainability of educational leadership (MEXT, 2022; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2025).

In conclusion, this comparative analysis elucidates that pre-appointment training, in-service professional development, and stakeholder engagement are the primary drivers of quality in school leadership. While Japan and Malaysia have successfully leveraged specialized preparation and continuous evaluation to elevate the principalship, Iran and Turkey face structural challenges that necessitate a reconsideration of existing selection processes. This study underscores the imperative of moving toward competency-based, participatory selection frameworks to foster more robust and responsive educational leadership.

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