

## **Developing promotion criteria and procedures for school principals in the United Arab Emirates<sup>1</sup>**

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***Abstract:** This study explores the perceptions of school vice principals and teachers regarding effective criteria and procedures for the promotion of school vice principals to principal positions in the UAE. The study consists of two phases. The first phase employs qualitative research methods and involves focus groups of teachers and vice principals. The second uses quantitative methods of research, by employing the data collected from the qualitative focus group, to draft a new set of criteria. The criteria are used to create a questionnaire for a larger sample of vice principals, principals, and teachers. The findings from the study show that vice principals and teachers would like to modify the current criteria used by the Ministry of Education to promote school vice principals to the leading position in UAE schools.*

***Keywords:** school principal, UAE schools, promotion criteria*

In 2005, a United Arab Emirates (UAE) newspaper claimed that the country's school system needed radical reform. The article reported that education in the UAE was held back by outmoded teaching and assessment methods, poor libraries, a lack of technology, old buildings, unqualified principals and teachers and an inadequate budget (anon., 2005). Following this, large-scale developments started to be introduced into the country's education system. This reform program focused on:

- clarifying an educational policy that emphasized the role of an active student in a modern knowledge society, and would mobilize social and political support for investment in education
- having internationally benchmarked performance expectations for all education levels, reflecting the needs of the UAE community within a global context
- introducing a national 10-year plan to bring schools up to international standards

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- changing educational management in the system by establishing regional support centers (instead of departments of education), merging small schools, and enhancing the capacity of school communities to improve performance at all levels
- providing the appropriate resources and support to achieve the required adjustments (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer and El Nemr, 2007).

In 2007, the UAE government allocated 25% of the federal budget to the Ministry of Education (MoE) for this reform program. However, significant reform in school education cannot be accomplished without a leader, a change agent who can persuade the school community to support the proposed changes. In response to this need, the MoE developed new promotion criteria for school principal positions in 2008.

As is the case in most centralized school systems, school principals in United Arab Emirates are chosen by the MoE. In order to be considered for selection, candidates must already be at the level of vice principal or subject supervisor. Furthermore, they must have:

- a bachelor's degree
- three years of experience teaching in K-12 schools
- an 'excellent' performance record in the last year and a 'very good' performance record in the previous two years
- an International Computer Driving License (ICDL)
- a minimum score of 500 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or a score of 5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

If these requirements are met, candidates must achieve at least 75 points in an interview that focuses on their knowledge of educational principles and their management skills. This discussion seeks to establish whether or not an individual candidate is highly capable in the areas of strategic planning, supervision, decision-making and time management, and knows how to properly conduct a meeting. The interview will also reveal the level of the candidate's interpersonal skills, including his or her ability to work with others and consider diverse viewpoints. The candidate must then attend training workshops on strategic planning, school supervision, school community, social issues, and assessment. The final requirement is for the candidate to earn a good performance report, after he or she has been working as a principal for one year (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The problem is that there is no evidence that these criteria, and this process, will ensure the appointment of the type of leaders that are needed to transform UAE schools. Taking this concern further, the study outlined in this article explores the perceptions of vice principals and teachers in relation to the alternative criteria and procedures they are recommending for promotion to the top principal position.

### **Research questions**

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of school vice principals and teachers about the criteria and procedures that should be used by the MoE to promote them to school principalship?
2. How different are the perceptions of vice principals and teachers about the criteria and procedures that should be used by the MoE to promote vice principals?
3. Do the current criteria and procedures for promoting vice principals and principals need to be modified from the point of view of vice principals and teachers? And, if so, how?

This study will add to existing literature on educational leadership, with a focus on the Arab countries. It is particularly relevant to the United Arab Emirates, where the education system is experiencing significant change, and where there is a dearth of pertinent literature.

There is no doubt that school leadership plays a crucial role in school effectiveness (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005; Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008 & Huber & Muijs, 2010). School principals are change agents who create excellence in their schools (Méndez-Morse, 1992). They identify needed adjustments and guide their schools to adjust to them, encouraging teachers to be open-minded risk-takers, try new and different instructional methods, and adapt curricula to meet students' needs.

Moreover, successful school principals develop and support the school vision. They foster a culture of caring and trust, creating high performance expectations for teachers and students. Successful principals also mentor and support the professional development of teachers. They respond to challenges positively, obtaining and allocating resources, and encouraging collaborative work among teachers, students and the school community (Drake & Roe, 2003;

Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale (2007) added further competencies, such as hiring staff who are committed to the school vision, redesigning the school around learning teams, and sharing responsibilities.

Therefore, it is vital that the selection of candidates for school principal positions is based on appropriate criteria and procedures, so that an education system undergoing reform has the high quality leaders it needs.

It is worth noting that the selection process for school leaders varies from one country to another, due to cultural and political differences (Su, Gamage, Mininberg, 2003). Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008) mention that in decentralized school systems (such as the USA, England, and New Zealand - school principals are appointed by the governing bodies of their district schools, whereas in Austria, Korea and Spain, the promotion to principal is based upon a teacher's seniority. However, change is afoot in Korea, where a competencies scale is currently being developed, to ensure that teachers are qualified for school leadership. In Austria, Denmark, and Ireland, candidates are now obliged to submit a proposal for leading a school.

In England, principals must demonstrate their abilities through a set of field visits, interviews, presentations and assessment in specific skills. In many countries, training is optional and focuses on management roles and government regulations. Interestingly, Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008) report that some educational systems in developed countries (the Netherlands and Sweden, for instance) call for applications for school principal positions to be filled from outside the teaching profession. For example, in the Netherlands, school principals are hired from the private sector, and are trained in management and leadership.

The value of this selection approach is debatable. How can a school principal successfully lead an establishment that focuses on learning and teaching, when he or she has no experience in a classroom or knowledge of the indicators that demonstrate progress in learning? This approach could prove successful but only if the candidate hired from outside education is restricted to technical tasks and works as a co-principal with someone who has deep knowledge of student learning.

In Australia, a school principal must hold a postgraduate leadership certificate from a recognized organization and be a registered teacher in his or her state (McKenzie, Mulford & Anderson, 2007). In France, teachers elect their school principals and the Ministry of National

Education appoints them on the condition that they have three to five years' experience and take certain obligatory qualification courses, including practical training experience in the administrative work of schools (Derring et al., 2005).

In the United States and England, school principals must be licensed or certified in order to take on that role. In most states in the USA, for example, candidates for the principalship are required to have one to five years of teaching experience, and to demonstrate previous administrative work in schools. All school principals must also be certified as school leaders through specific preparation programs. Most US states require school principals to renew their certification periodically and almost half of them require school principals to take a standardized assessment test (LeTendre & Roberts, 2005).

In fact, making it mandatory for potential school principals to achieve licensure or undertake professional development courses in leadership ensures that the candidate is formally qualified for the position. Further, to show continuing evidence of outstanding performance and skills, the licenses of school principals should be renewable, with salary schedules reflecting licensure levels (Mazzeo, 2003).

Defining criteria for school principals, however, does not ensure that those who are eventually will be able to lead a school effectively. Appropriate procedures are also crucial in the effort to secure high quality school leaders and administrators. Clifford (2010) highlights practices that could obstruct the selection of the right candidate to the position of school principal. These include disregard for provided personnel and instruction information; ignoring selection criteria and standards; ambiguity about the role and responsibility of the selection committee, and not knowing how to weigh collected information.

Clifford suggests the following process to assist in the successful selection of candidates. First, give due consideration to standards and research for selection, then establish a consistent and reliable research committee. After that, carry out a blind review of applications, conduct interviews based on professional standards, visit the school, and engage the stakeholders. Importantly, resist quick or emotional decisions.

In a similar vein, Morrison (2009) emphasizes that a high score in the interview does not guarantee that the candidate would necessarily perform successfully in the school. It therefore becomes important to have clear and direct questions during the interview and to take the candidate 'on a tour to see how they relate themselves to staff,

community and students' (p.103). Mohajeran and Ghaleei (2008) feel that investigating the personal qualities of a candidate is also an important consideration. Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2006) say that the qualities to look for include honesty, openness, good communication skills, flexibility, commitment, passion, empathy, and the belief that children can succeed.

On the other hand, Bush (2011) cautions against having a defined set of criteria for school principals, saying that this might lead to an inequitable situation where not all worthy candidates are promoted because of the bias against candidates who do not fit into a particular predefined pigeonhole. This view is also supported by Rammer (2007), who advocates for the appointment of school principals through the use of inconsistent or unplanned tools. Since the hiring of school principals depends mostly on the skill and understanding of the school superintendent within the context of a district's local needs, Loeb and Valant (2009) assert that the process for selecting a principal should be well-constructed. The selection process should also be encouraging and rewarding for all of the qualified candidates.

Making school leadership an attractive career choice means professionalizing the recruitment process and criteria, and making them clear and consistent. Salaries need to be increased, and professional organizations for school leaders need to be formed. School leaders should also be provided with different options for career development, such as roles in educational leadership and consultation (Macpherson, 2009; & Pont, Nusche, and Moorman, 2008).

Current literature reports that many schools in developed countries (for instance, Australia, England and the USA) are experiencing a shortage of qualified school principals or have ill-prepared existing school principals (Davis et al., 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2011).

In England, the National College for School Leadership developed a succession planning strategy to prepare qualified school principals. In 1997, it established a national training program for potential principals, which must be undertaken by all new school principals (Bush, 2011).

In Canada, school boards recruit school principals by rehiring retired principals to run induction and mentoring programs; encouraging potential principals to complete leadership courses and giving them leadership roles; giving teachers leave of absence to trial leadership positions; and promoting teachers to the position of vice principal (Lacey et al., 2008).

In general, developed countries employ four main strategies to ensure quality and quantity in school leadership, including redefining school leadership responsibilities; distributing school leadership by forming structured teams or informal groups based on expertise and needs; and developing school leadership skills through initial training, induction programs and in-service training.

Preparation programs should produce school principals who are ready to face the challenges and duties of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Hale and Moorman (2003) recommend that professional development programs for school principals should focus on instructional leadership. This strengthens teaching and learning and emphasizes professional development and accountability. They should also be experts in community leadership, building partnerships between teachers and communities. Finally, they must demonstrate visionary leadership, motivating the school community to be committed to the belief that students can attain a high level in their education.

A literature review documented qualitative and quantitative studies that have been conducted to examine the efficiency of preparation programs for school principals. In a qualitative study, Reid (2008) interviewed 12 primary school principals, six of whom had a minimum of four years experience as a principal, while the rest were first-time principals with just 18 months experience. The study explored the effect of coaching and leadership development on participants before they were given their current roles. The results demonstrated that compulsory training pre and post appointment should be delivered to new principals, so they can practice their leadership roles with confidence.

Fuller, Young and Baker (2011) used a quantitative approach to analyze the state administrative databases at the Texas Education Agency (TEA). They found that principals who attended principal preparation programs in research and doctoral institutions are subsequently able to improve the competence and qualifications of the teachers they supervise.

A survey was carried out to compare 65 principals who graduated from selected exemplary leadership preparation programs to a national sample of 111 principals, in order to establish the influence of exemplary leadership preparation on the performance of school principals. The study found that the participation of school principals in an exemplary leadership preparation program correlated distinctly and positively with school improvement in their schools (Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Weinstein et al. (2009) confirm that new school principals need to be prepared and supported, not only before taking up the position of principal but also during the transition. This can be done by practising leadership roles before taking over the position, having an ongoing connection with another principal, and shadowing another principal for a short time. Clark, Martorell, and Rockoff (2009) emphasized that ensuring a school principal has prior experience as an assistant principal would advance school performance.

Therefore, Lee, Kwan and Walker (2009) reported that vice principals need opportunities and incentives to mentor new teachers and to engage in their own professional development. This, in turn, generates a desire and motive for them to take up principal positions.

In summary, reforming the education system in many countries called attention to the significant role of the school principal in school improvement, causing policy-makers to search for various means to ensure the quality, and the quantity, of school principals. It must be noted that effective criteria and procedures for promotions to school principal position are different in different education systems, due to the unique needs and context of each jurisdiction. In the UAE, for example, policy-makers need to consider the systemic context, while benefitting from the global experience. Therefore, this study seeks to describe the perceptions of teachers and vice principals, in the light of this international experience.

## **Methodology**

This study followed a sequential, exploratory mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2006), as it used two phases: the initial phase (being qualitative data collection and analysis), followed by a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis. Quantitative and qualitative data was mixed at some stage of the research process within this study, since the mixed methods helped to explore how participants viewed the topic of the study in the first phase. In the second phase, a questionnaire was formulated using data from an analysis of the information collected in the first phase. The qualitative data and analysis were then used to explain, or elaborate on, the quantitative results, and to strengthen both methodologies (Creswell & Clark, 2006).

### **The first phase: qualitative data collection**

Six focus groups from Al Ain education zone participated in the study. This comprised two groups for vice principals and four for teachers. Schools in the zone are segregated by gender. Therefore, the vice principal focus groups consisted of one for males and another for females. The teacher focus groups consisted of two male and two female focus groups. Six participants were selected for each group because a small group size allows everyone to contribute (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

Teachers participating in the focus groups were selected by school principals, based on the following criteria:

- active involvement in school activities and projects
- positive performance based on their annual reports
- representation of different subjects.

To conduct the focus group interview, 12 vice principals were selected randomly from a list of schools in Al Ain city to form two focus groups: one for male vice principals and the other for female vice principals. Further, four schools - two male schools, and two female schools - were selected randomly to form focus groups for the study. A letter from the educational zone director was sent to the relevant principals, requesting help to conduct the study in their schools. Principals were also contacted by the researcher, in order to obtain permission and arrange for the visits.

School vice principals were called to arrange for the two focus group interviews in a school of their preference, and at a time convenient to them. Each principal was asked to select one focus group of teachers, using the criteria outlined earlier, and to arrange a meeting venue and time for focus groups to be held on their premises.

Right at the beginning, the purpose of the interview was explained to the participants, who were assured that any information about their identities, or the content of the interview, would remain confidential. Interviewees were also informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time.

The interviews were recorded after consent was obtained from the participants. The audiotapes were then transcribed into English. All focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour.

The focus group members were given the current criteria that MoE uses to promote vice principals to principal positions. They were then asked to examine the criteria carefully, and answer the following questions.

- Do you think that these criteria are enough to promote a vice principal to a principal position? If so, why? Or why not?
- Do you think that these criteria would likely help principals to implement the Ministry of Education's ongoing changes in schools? Which criterion is most important? Why?
- Would you want to remove any of these criteria? If so, why? Do you suggest other criteria? If so, what and why?

### **Establishing trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness ensures validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) and means accurately describing the perspectives of the participants. In this phase, trustworthiness was established by transcribing the audiotapes, then establishing the inter-coder reliability. This was achieved by asking a colleague to re-examine the transcripts to verify the interpretations from the data and to check themes as they emerged from the transcripts. The colleague reviewed all of the narratives from the focus group transcripts. After this, he identified the themes, and we met to discuss and reach consensus on each theme. Finally, we were able to reach 100 per cent agreement on the identification of the themes.

### **The second phase**

Findings from the literature review and focus group interviews in Phase 1 of the study were used to prepare a new set of criteria and procedures that could be used to promote vice principals to the position of principal. Sixteen criteria were included. Six were taken from the literature review, which included passing a written exam in administration, based on international standards; presenting a written proposal on leading schools; playing a lead role in supporting teachers in their professional development; communicating with organizations in the community; and maintaining good relationships with students. These criteria were used in a questionnaire to be distributed to participants in Phase 2 of the study.

In the following section, a description of the participants, procedures, instrument, data analysis and the results of the second phase is delineated.

### **Target population and sample**

Three educational zones - Sharjah, Fujairah and Al Ain - were selected randomly out of the ten UAE education zones. The researcher sent the

questionnaire to each Research Affairs Office (RAO), which are in charge of conducting studies for the MoE. Then, each educational zone sent the questionnaire to their schools. Seventy-two vice principals (18 from Al Ain, 25 from Sharjah and 29 from Fujairah) participated in the study. Four hundred and thirty-one teachers (246 from Al Ain, 147 from Sharjah and 59 from Fujairah) responded to the study. Of the total 600 questionnaires that were sent out, 503 were returned, giving a response rate of 84%.

All vice principals were Emirati, and had bachelor's degrees, while two had master's degrees. All teachers were also Emirati and taught a variety of subjects, including Arabic, English, science and math.

Table 1.  
*Vice principals' demographic information*

Zone	School level		Gender		
Al Ain	18 (25%)	First	17 (23.6%)	Males	22 (30.6%)
Sharjah	25 (34.7%)	Second	24 (33.3%)	Females	34 (47.2%)
Fujairah	29 (40.3%)	Secondary	22 (30.6%)		

*Note. Percentages do not add up to 100, due to missing data.*

Table 2  
*Teacher's demographic information*

Zone	School Level		Gender		
Al Ain	225 (52.2%)	First	79 (18.3%)	Males	170 (39.4%)
Sharjah	147 (34.1%)	Second	159 (36.9%)	Females	178 (41.3%)
Fujairah	59 (13.7%)	Secondary	178 (41.3%)		

*Note. Percentages do not add up to 100, due to missing data.*

As can be observed in Tables 1 and 2, most participants were teachers. More females than males responded, and most participants worked at the secondary school level. The average years of work experience for all participants was 12.8 years (SD = 8.00).

### **Quantitative data collection**

After securing the educational zone's permission, a follow-up telephone call with the Research Affairs Office in each educational zone was arranged to ensure the delivery of the questionnaires and to follow up on their collection. The cover page of the questionnaire included the

researcher's contact number, in case there were any questions from the participants. Questionnaires were returned to the researcher by mail, from each Research Affairs Office in the educational zones.

Based on the focus group findings and the literature review, criteria for promoting a vice principal to a principal position were used to design content for a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was reviewed for content and face validity by a team of experts consisting of three faculty members from the College of Education at the United Arab Emirates University. Modifications based on their suggestions were made. Some questions were shortened and others were eliminated because they were ambiguous.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first pertained to demographic information and the second investigated the agreement of participants with the level of importance of proposed criteria and procedures for vice principal promotion. A five-point Likert rating scale was used to measure responses (1=Not Important, 2=Low Importance, 3=Neutral, 4=Important, 5=Very Important).

## **Data analysis**

### **Qualitative data analysis**

The audiotapes were transcribed by the researcher, and read to get a general sense of the data. The transcripts were re-read for emergent themes, which were clustered and combined to generate a list of criteria and procedures for school principals' positions.

### **Quantitative data analysis**

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 19). The descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations were used to analyze the questionnaire items. For inferential statistics, the researcher used t-test and specified Alfa at .05 level.

## **Results**

### **The qualitative results**

Reviewing and analyzing the qualitative data yielded the following criteria, responding to the first question regarding the perceptions of school vice principals and teachers about the criteria and procedures

that should be used by the MoE to promote them to school principalship.

- ***A bachelor's degree and a master's degree in educational leadership are preferable.*** All vice principals and teachers agreed that the vice principal should have a bachelor's degree and it is preferable to have a master's degree in leadership. One vice principal pointed out that *'the school principal who has a master's degree in leadership will be up-to-date and will know better how to deal with the school community and with current and future reforms'*.
- ***Six years or more of administrative experience as vice principal in a school.*** Most participants expressed their concern about the length of experience of vice principals. One female teacher suggested requiring at least six years of experience in administrative work at a school, affirming that *'it is better to have six years of experience in working as administrator so she knows what to expect'*.
- ***Training courses in computer skills, and English language.*** All participants considered that passing the ICDL, TOEFL, or IELTS was an unnecessary criterion for promotion. One female teacher explained that *'getting certain scores in English or computer tests has nothing to do with the personal quality of the candidate or their roles as [sic] educational leadership'*. Another female teacher argued that *'ICDL will not tell that the school principal knows how to use a computer, and it is not difficult to get the certificate. A lot of school principals have ICDL, but they do not use computers'*. Another participant from the male focus group made the following comment: *'TOEFL is required for postgraduate studies, not to be promoted to an administrative position. We need English language to communicate with foreign visitors, and we can do it without burdening us with TOEFL'*.
- ***'Very good' performance record in the previous two years.*** Most of the participants mentioned that having a *'very good'* performance record as opposed to an *'excellent'* one for the two preceding years was enough because it was sometimes hard to achieve an *'excellent'* rating due to administrative subjectivity. One vice principal indicated that *'there is a norm among the school principals not to give the vice principals 'excellent' because these principals think that vice principals need a many*

*years in order to be excellent which could hinder some of the vice principals becoming principals, although they deserve it.'*

Further, the focus group interview for vice principals and teachers came up with the following themes for procedures that vice principals should undertake before they are promoted to school principalship.

- ***The involvement of school community.*** Some of the participants stipulated that the school community (such as teachers, students and parents) should be involved in promoting vice principals. A female teacher said, *'teachers, students and parents could be surveyed or they can be given the opportunity to elect the school principal because they know the vice principal's work and performance from their daily interaction'*. However, some did not like the idea of involving parents and students because they thought they might sometimes be biased. Therefore, a vice principal suggested that, if it were necessary to engage parents and students, their participation should be based on criteria where objectivity could be ensured.
- ***A field visit by a specialized committee.*** Most members of the focus groups declared that a field visit to the school by a promotion committee would give an accurate picture of the concerned vice principal's performance. One teacher argued that a field visit to observe the actual work of a vice principal was better than examining the vice principal's papers in deciding whether or not promotion is deserved. *'Documentation and paper-gathering did not reflect the real work of the vice principals in their schools'*, he said. Another vice principal stated that: *'those who know how to gather papers and gather documentation get promoted and those who make changes in their school and do not know how to document their work do not get promoted'*.
- ***Getting at least 80 points out of 100 in the personal interview.*** All participants stated that candidates for the principalship should get at least 80 points out of 100 in the interview. The interview should be about the prospective principal's competencies and responsibilities, and his or her new role as a school leader. A vice principal stated that *'the interview process should be objective and based on competencies and responsibilities of the school principal'*. A vice principal said, *'it is easy to pass the interview because we know what kind of*

*questions that could be asked in the interview. Our friends could easily tell us after they finish their interview which could help us to prepare ourselves well*'. For these reasons, it was concluded that the candidate should get at least 80 points.

### **The quantitative results**

To answer the first question of this study, regarding how school vice principals and teachers perceived the criteria and procedures used by the MoE to promote them to the position of school principal, it appeared that vice principals agreed that *having a bachelor's degree in education* (4.01), *work experience as vice principal for at least two years* (4.45), *previous evaluation* (4.42), *getting ICDL* (4.43), *passing the training programs* (4.29), *supporting teachers* (4.10), and *having good relationships with students* (4.49) were the most important criteria. On the other hand, *having a master's degree in educational leadership* (2.85), *getting a high score on TOEFL or IELTS* (2.69), and *presenting a written proposal on leading a school* (2.91) were deemed the least important factors from the vice principals' point of view (Table 3).

The results (shown in Table 3) indicate that teachers opinions' were similar to those of the vice principals on most of the listed criteria for promotion to the principalship. However, there were a few differences between the two groups. For example, the teachers considered: *passing exams based on international standards* (4.05), *getting a high score on the personal interview* (4.25), and *getting 'excellent' in the evaluation of the first year* (4.01) as important factors for promotion. Additionally, all criteria and procedures were considered important (above the average 3) by the teachers' group, while the importance of some of these criteria was less than the average from the point of view of the vice principals.

To answer the second question regarding the difference between the perceptions of vice principals and teachers in relation to the criteria and procedures that should be used by the MoE to promote vice principals, an independent t-test was conducted on each criterion and procedure. The results, summarized in the last column of Table 3, specified seven criteria, where the difference between the two groups is statistically significant.

Table 3  
*Vice principals and teachers perceptions of criteria for promotion to principalship*

Criterion	Vice principals		Teachers		t-test	p
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
1. Had a bachelor's degree in education	4.01	1.13	4.37	.93	-2.26*	.024
2. Had a master's degree in educational leadership	2.85	1.38	3.47	1.35	-3.50**	.001
3. Had more than six years experience in teaching	4.48	.80	4.54	.82	-.58	.563
4. Passed a writing exam based on international standards in administration	3.94	.83	4.05	1.12	-.78	.435
5. Had at least two years of experience as vice principal	4.54	.83	4.37	.97	1.32	.188
6. Got at least 'very good' in the evaluation of the last two years as vice principal	4.42	.78	4.23	.94	1.57	.117
7. Passed the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) successfully	4.43	.82	4.22	1.04	1.57	.116
8. Got at least 600 in TOEFL or 6 in the IELTS	2.69	1.29	3.31	1.30	-3.73**	.000
9. Got at least 80 points out of 100 in the personal interview	3.94	.94	4.25	.84	-2.76**	.006
10. Passed the preparation training workshop for school principalship	4.29	.85	4.51	.71	-2.27*	.024
11. Got an 'excellent' in the evaluation of the first trial year	3.77	1.09	4.01	.95	-1.91	.057
12. Presented a written proposal on leading schools	2.91	1.10	3.58	1.13	-4.56**	.000
13. His/her performance in the field was evaluated by a specialized committee	3.77	1.07	3.98	.99	-1.58	.116
14. Had a leading role in supporting teachers in professional development	4.10	.74	4.25	.79	-1.40	.162
15. Had a leading role in communicating with organizations in community	3.62	.93	3.96	.94	-2.76**	.006

\*:  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

In addition, the differences between the two groups on each of these seven criteria were in the same direction. Specifically, teachers gave more importance to each criterion than the vice principals. Six procedures were suggested, and the importance of each was summarized, based on the vice principals' responses in Table 4. Among the six procedures, two procedures related to the promotion interview were clearly considered more important than others. The first and the most important procedure was '*interview questions should focus on the new school principal's roles as a leader*' (with a mean [] of 4.12 and a standard deviation [SD] of .78).

Table 4  
*Vice principals' and teachers' perceptions of procedures for promotion to principalship*

Procedure	Vice Principals		Teachers		t-test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1. Consulting teachers in the promotion process	3.42	1.37	4.07	1.04	-4.50**
2. Consulting students in the promotion process	2.75	1.21	2.82	1.35	-.40
3. Consulting parents in the promotion process	2.82	1.21	2.92	1.29	-.55
4. Asking the same questions in the interviews	3.37	1.25	3.57	1.23	-1.23
5. Interview questions should be based on the school principal's competencies and responsibilities	4.07	.94	4.27	.76	-1.93
6. Interview questions should focus on the applicant's future roles as a leader	4.12	.78	4.31	.78	-1.86

\*\*  $P < .01$

The teachers assessed the importance of each of the six procedures listed in the questionnaire and the results are shown in Table 4. The two most important procedures from teachers' perspectives were the same as those of the vice principals, i.e. *interview questions should focus on the new school principal's roles as a leader* ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) and *interview questions should be based on the school principal's competencies and responsibilities* ( $M=4.27$ ,  $SD=.76$ ). The least important procedures from the teachers' perspectives were the same as those of the vice principals, i.e. *consulting students* ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) and *consulting parents* ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). The only

difference between the two groups (teachers and vice principals) was the importance of *consulting teachers*. While the teachers considered this procedure important (M=4.07, SD=1.07), the vice principals saw it as less important (M=3.42, SD=1.37).

To statistically compare the perceptions of the vice principals and teachers (question two), an independent t-test was conducted on each of the listed procedures. As can be observed from the results in the last column of Table 4, the perceptions of the two groups - vice principals and teachers - are only significantly different on one procedure, namely *consulting teachers*. Teachers considered this as the most important procedure and gave it more importance than the vice principals did. Where there were minor differences, they all had the same general tendency: the teachers gave more importance to each procedure than the vice principals did.

Based on the focus group interview and questionnaire results, a list of proposed criteria and procedures has been developed (Table 5). This list was developed using the criteria or procedures in which an agreement between the qualitative (focus group interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire results with a mean of 4 and more) phase results is reported. Further, the criteria or procedures that get 4 (4=agree) or more as a mean in quantitative results by vice principals and teachers (but were omitted in the qualitative results) are reported. If criteria or procedures were omitted in the quantitative results, I referred to the agreement between vice principal, school and teachers in the qualitative phase. However, in case of the disagreement between vice principals and teachers in the quantitative results, I referred to the qualitative results. The following table (Table 5) shows that vice principals and teachers would like to modify the current criteria and procedures (answering the third question of the study):

Table 5  
*Comparison between the current criteria and procedures and the proposed ones*

The current criteria and procedures	The suggested criteria and procedures
1. a bachelor's degree	1. a bachelor's degree; and a master's degree in educational leadership is preferable
2. three years of experience in teaching K-12 schools	2. having more than six years of experience in teaching
3. an excellent performance record in the last year of promotion and a very good performance record in the previous two years	3. Having two years at least of experience as vice principal in a school
4. an International Computer Driving License (ICDL)	4. very good performance record in the previous two years
5. having not less than a score of 500 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or a score of 5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)	5. passing successfully the International Computer Driving License (ICDL);
6. getting a good performance report after being assigned to a principal position for one year;	6. passing the preparation training workshop for school principalship
7. achieving at least 75 points in an interview	7. having a leading role in supporting teachers in professional development
8. the interview focuses on educational information, management skills, such as strategic planning, supervision, making decisions, time management, meeting management, and interpersonal skills	8. getting at least 80 points out of 100 in the personal interview
9. attending training workshops on strategic planning, school supervision, school community, social issues, and assessment.	9. the interview questions should be based on the school principal's competencies, responsibilities, and future roles
	10. visiting the field by a specialized committee
	11. consulting teachers as part of the promotion process.

## Discussion

The present study set out to explore the perceptions of vice principals and teachers about the criteria that should be used by the MoE to promote vice principals to principalship in UAE schools. Several observations were recorded, based on the results of the two phases of the study. Both vice principals and teachers agreed that the vice principal should have a bachelor's degree in education, more than six years of experience in teaching, two years of experience as vice principal, achieve at least 'very good' in an evaluation of the last two years as vice principal, and pass the preparatory training workshop for school principals. These results are concurrent with international studies that emphasize teaching and leadership experience, in addition to support through preparation programs (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009; Landon & Schwartz, 2009; Weinstein, Jacobowitz, Ely & Young & Baker, 2011). The fact that teachers gave more importance to each criterion than the vice principals could be due to the fact that most vice principals were preparing themselves for promotion and were worried that these criteria could delay their promotion. Another explanation could be that teachers might want to push vice principals to work harder.

In fact, the first criterion for promotion in the Ministry of Education criteria - having a bachelor's degree - suits the current situation in UAE schools, keeping in mind that the education system is developing and few school principals have master's degrees, even today. To avoid a shortage of school principals, this criterion could be maintained as it is for now, with a master's degree requirement considered as a goal for the future. To begin with, preference could be given to those who hold a master's degree at the time of application for a principal's position.

At the same time, initiating succession planning that prepares potential candidates for school leadership positions is a necessary measure to cover any shortage of qualified school leadership (Pont, Nusche, and Moorman, 2008).

A second suggested criterion is having more than six years of experience in teaching, which is stressed by most education systems in developed countries. However, there is no consistency in the number of years of teaching experience required by different countries (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

Being a vice principal before taking over the school principal position is suggested by the qualitative study, to ensure that candidates have

sufficient experience to run the school. This is consistent with the findings of Clark, Martorell and Rockoff (2009). Developed countries differ with regards to this criterion, however, with some only requiring administrative experience, such as a committee chair position (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010).

In keeping with the previous criterion, the fourth necessitates a 'very good' performance record as vice principal. This was supported by the qualitative and quantitative results. The participants in the qualitative phase explained that having a 'very good' record is an attainable and acceptable level for performance, in contrast to the current requirement, which requires an 'excellent' performance record in the last year of promotion and a 'very good' performance record in the previous two years. It was affirmed that such a criterion can prove problematic, due to the subjectivity of performance evaluation.

The qualitative and quantitative results did not suggest that candidates for principalship should hold TOEFL, IELTS qualifications. Participants believed, as was revealed in the qualitative part of this study, that *'getting certain scores in English tests has nothing to do with the personal quality of the candidate or their roles as educational leadership'*. Instead, participants suggested that vice principals should complete English language courses. It should be noted that there is no evidence, even in past literature, to show that knowledge of the English language is essential criteria for holding a leadership position in schools.

The study results of the quantitative study affirmed that obtaining the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) is an essential criterion in promotion to school principalship. This could be justified by the ever-growing role of technology in schools today.

Passing the preparatory training workshop for school principals is a requirement supported by the literature review, as well as the quantitative results. Most developed countries require a certificate in principal or leadership training programs to ensure the effectiveness of the selected candidates (Huber & Hiltmann, 2010). This criteria is further supported by Fuller, Young and Baker (2011) and Orr and Orphanos (2011).

Another criterion suggested in the qualitative study, and supported by the quantitative study, is the candidate playing a leading role in supporting teachers in professional development. This, in turn,

contributes to school effectiveness, as is confirmed by the majority of findings about school effectiveness (Mulford, 2003).

Vice principals generally did not agree that passing a writing or written exam based on international standards in administration, and presenting a written proposal on leading schools should be used as criteria - a claim that is supported by literature (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008). One interpretation of this perception is that these vice principals did not want to be burdened with new tasks and the many changes that would have to be implemented in their schools, as seen in Thorne's (2011) study (which was also completed in the United Arab Emirates, in Abu Dhabi specifically). In fact, new school principals could be trained at international standards, and asked to develop a proposal to lead their schools by the end of their first trial year of work, after they have had had time to analyze and identify their school's needs.

The qualitative study results indicated that the vice principal's work should be examined by a special committee in the field, so as to identify the vice principal's achievements and effects. This recommendation is supported by Clifford (2010) and Morrison (2009) who suggested that a visit would help the committee recognize candidates' attitudes and skills, and give the committee a chance to interview teachers and students. The participants in the qualitative study indicated that sending folders of achievements did not present an accurate picture. However, this finding contrasts with the results of the quantitative part of the study: the mean was 3.77 and 3.98 for vice school principals and teachers respectively, when it came to their view on the presentation folders. This could be interpreted as showing that some vice principals and teachers do not want to be under pressure to prepare for field visits, which could prove unfavorable for them.

Vice principals and teachers did not favor involving students and parents in the procedure of promoting vice principals to school leadership positions because they were worried about favoritism. In addition, teachers supported the criterion that they should be involved in promoting vice principals, while the vice principals were against it. This finding is supported by the qualitative results in which a male vice principal stated that *'people here are not used to such practices and they can misuse it'*, and *'it should be based on criteria where objectivity could be ensured'*. This result was not supported by Clifford's (2010) suggestion to engage the stakeholders, such as students and parents, a disparity that could be explained by the difference in the culture of schools in the UAE, as compared to those in the West (Su, Gamage, Mininberg, 2003), where the involvement of the community in schools

is common practice. However, even in the West, it is still common to hear the complaint that some members of the governing body members involved in making school decisions lack professionalism, preparation, the capacity to take care of the tasks, and clarity in their role (Pont, Nusche, Moorman, 2008).

The participants in both parts of the study indicated that including questions in the interview that were based on school principal competencies and responsibilities, and principals' roles as leaders, is important. These criteria are supported by Clifford (2010) who emphasized using standards and research results for school principal competencies, such as developing and supporting school vision, fostering a culture of caring and trust, creating high performance expectations for teachers and students, mentoring and supporting teachers' development, obtaining and allocating resources, and encouraging collaborative work among teachers, students and school community members (Drake & Roe, 2003 & Leithwood, & Riehl, 2003). However, behavioral information, or personality traits, should be taken into consideration to ensure professional success (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2006; Huber & Hiltmann, 2010; Mohajeran & Ghaleei, 2008).

### **Limitations**

Firstly, identification of the focus groups members by the school principal could potentially be a cause for bias and loss of objectivity. However, criteria were set to minimize such subjectivity. Secondly, the findings are limited to data collected from the participants of this study only.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The current criteria for promoting candidates to school principal should be modified, based on the changes and needs of the UAE education system. The promotion procedures also need to be reviewed to ensure objectivity. Obligating every candidate to have a master's degree in order to be school principal will take time to be implemented; master's degrees are not common. Insisting on this requirement would mean that schools, especially in rural areas, would have a shortage of school principals. However, providing vice principals with professional development, and mentoring or coaching, would equip them with leadership skills. Further, training the interview committee on how interview should be properly conducted, and what capacities and qualities should be looked for in a school principal, as well as requiring

them to visit candidates onsite, would lead to successful promotion procedures.

Based on the study results, the following are the proposed criteria and procedures considered important by vice principals and teachers to promote a vice principal to the role of school principal.

- a bachelor's degree, with a master's degree in educational leadership being preferable
- more than six years of experience in teaching;
- at least two years of experience as vice principal in a school
- a 'very good' performance record in the previous two years
- passing the preparatory training workshop for school principalship
- successfully passing the International Computer Driving License (ICDL)
- a leading role in supporting teachers in professional development
- getting at least 80 points out of 100 in the personal interview.

Likewise, school vice principals and teachers were keen to modify the current procedures, and proposed the following amended procedures:

- basing interview questions on the school principal's competencies, responsibilities and future roles
- a field visit by a specialized committee
- consulting teachers as part of the promotion process.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will help policy-makers to develop applicable and effective criteria and procedures to promote vice principals to school principalship. Further investigation should be undertaken to examine how the current criteria and procedures correlate with school principal performance.

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