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# Meritocracy in the Selection of Senior Physical Education Managers in the Ministry of Education

Anahita. Sadeghi Niyarki<sup>1</sup>, Mokhtar. Nasiri Farsani<sup>2\*</sup>, Mehdi. Naderi Nasab<sup>2</sup>

1 PhD Student of Sport Management, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qa.C., Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

2 Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qa.C., Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

Corresponding author email address: [nasiri.mokhtar@iau.ir](mailto:nasiri.mokhtar@iau.ir)

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify the factors affecting the merit-based selection of senior physical education managers in the national Ministry of Education. The present study was mixed-methods research (qualitative–quantitative) with an exploratory approach. The statistical population in the qualitative phase consisted of all experts in the research field (senior physical education managers of the Ministry of Education, faculty members familiar with the research literature, and specialists), while the quantitative phase included physical education managers and teachers in metropolitan areas of the country. The statistical sample in the qualitative phase consisted of 18 experts selected until theoretical saturation was achieved using purposive theoretical sampling and snowball sampling techniques. In the quantitative phase, considering that 5 to 10 samples were required for each item, a total of 384 individuals constituted the statistical sample. The data collection instruments included a semi-structured interview in the qualitative phase and a researcher-made questionnaire in the quantitative phase. Content validity was assessed based on expert opinions, and construct validity (exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses), composite reliability indices, Cronbach's alpha, divergent and convergent validity, and structural equation modeling were employed. The model fit index was reported as GOF = 0.43. Finally, eight factors were identified: merit-oriented governance, professional ethics in power, transformational leadership in physical education, structural justice in access to opportunities, commitment to educational–health missions, professional autonomy in decision-making, intelligent resource management, and the organizational–cultural identity of managers. Therefore, the development and implementation of a “transparent system for managerial evaluation and appointment” based on objective merit indicators (such as professional competence, ethical commitment, and resource management capability), along with continuous supervision by independent monitoring bodies to prevent the influence of informal networks, is recommended.

**Keywords:** Meritocracy, Senior Managers, Physical Education, Ministry of Education

## Introduction

The development of effective educational systems in contemporary societies depends significantly on the quality, competence, and strategic capability of their managers. In particular, senior managers in physical education within educational systems hold a critical position because their decisions directly influence students' physical development, health promotion, educational equity, and the effective utilization of institutional resources. Physical education is no longer

considered merely an extracurricular or recreational activity; rather, it represents a multidimensional educational domain associated with cognitive development, academic achievement, psychological well-being, and the cultivation of lifelong healthy behaviors among students. Evidence from educational and sport sciences demonstrates that properly managed physical activity programs contribute substantially to improving the cognitive and academic performance of children and adolescents, highlighting the necessity of appointing competent leaders who can design, support, and sustain effective physical education systems (Bailey et al., 2021). Moreover, systematic reviews of school-based interventions indicate that successful implementation of physical activity programs depends not only on curriculum design but also on organizational leadership, resource allocation, and managerial commitment to sustainable educational goals (Lubans et al., 2020). Therefore, identifying the factors influencing the merit-based selection of senior physical education managers has become an essential issue for improving educational governance.

Meritocracy refers to a governance and management approach in which individuals are selected, promoted, and evaluated based on competencies, expertise, ethical qualifications, and demonstrated capabilities rather than personal relationships, political influence, or informal networks. In public organizations, merit-based leadership selection has been introduced as a mechanism for improving organizational performance, enhancing accountability, and strengthening public trust. However, despite its theoretical attractiveness, the implementation of meritocracy faces numerous challenges because organizational decisions may still be influenced by hidden power structures, social inequalities, and subjective interpretations of competence (Diefenbach, 2020). The paradox of meritocracy suggests that organizations claiming to operate based on merit may unintentionally reproduce inequalities if transparent assessment mechanisms and objective competency frameworks are not established (Van Dijk, 2020). Furthermore, critiques of meritocratic systems emphasize that merit must be understood within broader social and institutional contexts to prevent the transformation of meritocracy into a justification for existing inequalities rather than a mechanism for justice and fairness (Sandel, 2020). Therefore, the design of merit-based systems for selecting senior managers requires multidimensional models that integrate professional competence, ethical principles, structural justice, and organizational values.

In educational organizations, leadership quality is one of the most influential determinants of institutional effectiveness. School leadership research has consistently emphasized that competent leaders affect learning environments, organizational culture, teacher motivation, and student outcomes through strategic decision-making and the creation of supportive professional conditions (Leithwood et al., 2020). Recent evidence further confirms that educational leaders improve teaching and learning processes by influencing organizational direction, developing people, redesigning structures, and managing instructional systems effectively (Leithwood & Azah, 2024). Similarly, international research on school leadership demonstrates that successful leaders contribute to educational improvement through transformational practices, long-term vision, and the ability to align organizational resources with educational objectives (Day et al., 2022). Accordingly, leadership selection in educational environments cannot rely solely on administrative experience but must incorporate comprehensive competency-based criteria that reflect the complex responsibilities of modern educational management.

Competency-based leadership models have become increasingly important in identifying and developing effective educational managers. These models emphasize a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavioral capabilities required for successful leadership performance. In educational contexts, competency-based approaches provide structured frameworks for evaluating managerial readiness and ensuring alignment between leadership characteristics and

organizational needs (Collinson, 2023). Similarly, research in sport management highlights that talent acquisition and leadership development require competency models capable of assessing strategic thinking, communication abilities, professional expertise, and adaptability to dynamic environments (Yamamoto, 2024). Managerial competence has also been shown to influence the quality of school sport programs by improving planning processes, resource coordination, stakeholder engagement, and implementation effectiveness (Morgan, 2023). Therefore, the selection of senior physical education managers should be based on a comprehensive evaluation of professional competencies rather than traditional appointment practices.

The concept of meritocracy in sports organizations has received increasing scholarly attention due to the unique characteristics of sport management, including the integration of educational, social, health-related, and performance-oriented goals. A meritocracy-based approach in sport organizations emphasizes the identification, development, and appointment of individuals who possess managerial knowledge, leadership abilities, ethical commitment, and strategic capabilities. Studies on talent management models for meritocracy in sports organizations indicate that systematic identification and development of managerial talent are necessary for creating sustainable leadership structures and improving organizational effectiveness (Rezapour et al., 2024). Furthermore, optimal management of sports organizations through a meritocratic approach requires transparent selection procedures, performance-based evaluation systems, and alignment between individual capabilities and organizational missions (Yarmohammadi Monfared et al., 2024). From an economic perspective, merit-based management in school sports also contributes to more efficient resource utilization and improved organizational outcomes by ensuring that leadership positions are occupied by qualified individuals (Kim, 2025).

One of the fundamental components of merit-based managerial selection is ethical leadership. Senior managers in educational physical education systems are responsible not only for administrative decisions but also for creating ethical climates that influence employees, teachers, and students. Ethical leadership theory emphasizes that leaders serve as role models whose behavior shapes organizational norms, fairness perceptions, and ethical decision-making processes (Brown et al., 2020). In schools, ethical leadership contributes to developing cultures of integrity, responsibility, and trust by ensuring that managerial practices are consistent with moral principles and institutional values (Harris, 2021). Consequently, professional ethics in positions of power should be considered a central criterion in selecting senior physical education managers because unethical leadership can undermine organizational legitimacy, reduce employee motivation, and weaken educational effectiveness.

Transformational leadership represents another essential dimension of merit-based management in physical education. Transformational leaders motivate individuals, encourage innovation, develop shared visions, and promote continuous improvement within organizations. In educational systems, transformational approaches enable leaders to move beyond routine administrative activities and focus on meaningful organizational change. Effective leadership requires coherence between goals, strategies, and organizational actions, allowing institutions to respond successfully to changing educational demands (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Moreover, the moral purpose of educational leadership emphasizes the responsibility of leaders to create environments that promote equity, improvement, and collective development (Fullan et al., 2020). In the context of physical education, leadership development is also connected with reflective practice, collaboration, and continuous professional learning, which enhance the quality of sport and educational programs (Culver & Trudel, 2020).

Another important dimension of meritocracy is structural justice in access to managerial opportunities. Fair and transparent systems must provide equal opportunities for qualified individuals and prevent discrimination, favoritism, or political interference in appointment processes. Justice theories emphasize that institutional fairness requires attention not only to resource distribution but also to participation, recognition, and representation within organizational structures (Fraser, 2009). In educational management, meritocratic leadership systems across different countries demonstrate that objective evaluation mechanisms and transparent criteria contribute to improving fairness and effectiveness in leadership appointments (Marin & Minguez, 2022). However, educational governance has increasingly been influenced by broader policy networks and organizational reforms, making it necessary to protect leadership selection systems from external pressures that may conflict with professional merit principles (Ball, 2012). Therefore, depoliticizing managerial appointments and strengthening structural justice are essential requirements for implementing real meritocracy.

Commitment to educational and health missions is another defining characteristic of qualified physical education managers. Unlike many administrative positions, physical education leadership directly contributes to students' holistic development by integrating educational objectives with health promotion. Mission-driven leadership emphasizes that managers should understand the broader social and developmental purposes of physical education rather than focusing only on operational responsibilities (Ferguson et al., 2021). Furthermore, effective public management requires leaders who create public value by aligning organizational activities with social needs, accountability, and long-term benefits (Bryson et al., 2014). Accordingly, senior physical education managers must demonstrate commitment to educational values, student well-being, and sustainable health-oriented policies.

Resource management capability is also a major determinant of leadership effectiveness in educational physical education systems. Senior managers must allocate financial, human, physical, and technological resources efficiently while balancing institutional constraints with educational priorities. Research on resource leadership indicates that effective educational managers must simultaneously address system demands and preserve professional values through intelligent and strategic resource management (Moos & Aase, 2021). In addition, the organizational–cultural identity of managers plays a fundamental role in shaping institutional behavior. Organizational culture theory emphasizes that leaders influence shared assumptions, values, and behavioral patterns, making cultural awareness and identity alignment essential characteristics of successful managers (Schein, 2010). Therefore, merit-based selection must consider not only technical competencies but also the extent to which managers embody the values and cultural mission of the educational system.

Considering the multidimensional responsibilities of senior physical education managers, traditional appointment approaches are insufficient for addressing the complex demands of modern educational systems. Effective meritocracy requires an integrated model that includes professional competence, ethical behavior, transformational leadership, structural justice, mission commitment, professional autonomy, intelligent resource management, and organizational–cultural identity. Such a framework can provide a scientific foundation for designing transparent evaluation and appointment systems that enhance managerial quality and strengthen educational outcomes.

The aim of the present study was to identify the factors affecting the merit-based selection of senior physical education managers in the Ministry of Education.

## Methodology

The present study was applied research in terms of purpose and employed a mixed-methods qualitative–quantitative design with an exploratory approach. Accordingly, the study was conducted in two main phases (the first phase qualitative and the second phase quantitative). In the first phase, the statistical population consisted of all experts in the field of the research, including senior physical education managers of the Ministry of Education, faculty members familiar with the research literature, and specialists. In the quantitative phase, the population consisted of physical education managers in the Ministry of Education and physical education teachers in the metropolitan areas of the country. The statistical sample in the qualitative phase included 18 experts selected through purposive theoretical sampling and snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. In the quantitative phase, considering that 5 to 10 participants were required for each item, 384 individuals constituted the statistical sample. Buscema (2001) stated that in exploratory factor analysis, a minimum sample size of 150 is also defensible. Therefore, 150 participants were considered separately from the statistical sample for exploratory factor analysis. A researcher-made questionnaire was used in this study.

The development of the meritocracy questionnaire for the selection of senior physical education managers in the Ministry of Education was conducted in two stages. First, the researcher reviewed the literature and theoretical foundations related to meritocracy among senior physical education managers in the Ministry of Education. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts to identify the relevant factors. Initially, explanations regarding the research topic were provided, and the participants were asked to express their opinions regarding each factor and to mention any additional factors they considered relevant. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved (18 interviews were conducted until saturation). According to Speziale, Streubert, and Carpenter (2011), saturation refers to the continuation of data collection leading merely to repetition of previously collected data without yielding new information. Therefore, the number of participants is not determined prior to the study, and decisions regarding subsequent participants depend on the information obtained from previous participants. Sampling continues as long as new factors emerge from interviews and the collected information is not repetitive.

To examine interview reliability, the inter-coder agreement method between two coders was employed, yielding a coefficient of 0.75, which was considered acceptable. To confirm the content validity of the questionnaire, the preliminary version of the questionnaire was provided to the interviewees for evaluation regarding the appropriateness and clarity of expressions (use of simple and understandable terms) and the use of common language (avoidance of technical and specialized terminology). Following collection of the questionnaires, the participants' comments were incorporated. In the quantitative phase, Cronbach's alpha was used and confirmed reliability. In the qualitative phase, data were analyzed using the constant comparative method through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding using MAXQDA version 2018. In the quantitative phase, descriptive statistics were used to classify raw scores. Exploratory factor analysis was employed for psychometric evaluation of the research constructs. To ensure construct validity and confirm the factors identified in the previous stage (exploratory factor analysis), confirmatory factor analysis using the partial least squares method was conducted. Furthermore, path analysis using structural equation modeling was applied through SPSS version 23 and PLS version 2 software.

**Table 1. Specialization Status of Interview Participants**

Specialization	Frequency	Percentage
Senior Physical Education Managers of the Ministry of Education	8	44.44
Faculty Members Familiar with the Research Literature	7	38.88
Specialists	3	16.68
Total	18	100

## Research Findings

To analyze the conducted interviews, the unstructured Glaser method was employed using MAXQDA version 2018. This method consists of three stages. The first stage involves open coding. Open coding is the analytical process through which

concepts are identified and their characteristics and dimensions are discovered within the data (Lee, 2001). At this stage, the grounded theory researcher develops initial categories of information regarding the phenomenon under study through segmentation of the information (Creswell, 2005). In other words, to extract data from the interviews, after transcribing the interviews into text, open coding was conducted by coding key concepts. Through analysis of the interview texts, initial open codes were generated. In the present study, 189 initial open codes were extracted from the interviews, and after summarizing similar codes, 100 final open codes were obtained.

The second stage involved axial coding. Axial coding is the process of relating categories and connecting categories at the level of characteristics and dimensions. This coding is termed axial because coding occurs around the axis of a category (Lee, 2001). At this stage, categories, characteristics, and dimensions derived from open coding are organized and positioned appropriately to generate increasing knowledge regarding relationships (Lee, 2001). In other words, axial coding leads to the formation of categories and subcategories. During this stage, all final open codes were reviewed again and compared with the research literature.

**Table 2. Axial Categories**

Axial Categories	Axial Categories	Axial Categories
Professional Managerial Competence	Transformational Leadership	Social Responsibility
Organizational Justice	Depoliticization of Management	Communication Competence
Process Transparency	Interorganizational Interaction and Cooperation	Professional Sustainability
Criterion-Based Evaluation	Human Resource Development	Alignment with the Macro Educational System
Professional Ethics	Management of Material and Spatial Resources	Use of Evidence-Based Knowledge
Commitment to Educational Mission	Cultural and Value Identity	Professional Role Models

The third stage involved selective coding.

Selective coding refers to the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and refining categories that require further development. Based on the results of open and axial coding, selective coding constitutes the main stage of theory development. In this process, the core category is systematically connected to other categories, and these relationships are presented within a narrative framework while categories requiring further refinement and development are modified. In the present study, the obtained results were presented in the form of a model.

**Table 3. Final Axes**

Final Axes	Final Axes
Merit-Oriented Governance	Commitment to Educational–Health Mission
Professional Ethics in Power	Professional Autonomy in Decision-Making
Transformational Leadership in Physical Education	Intelligent Resource Management
Structural Justice in Access to Opportunities	Organizational–Cultural Identity of the Manager

In this study, exploratory factor analysis was used to determine and identify the organization of sports events for people with disabilities and veterans. Therefore, prior to factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) criterion was used to ensure sample adequacy, and Bartlett’s test was employed to determine the correlation among variables (items).

**Table 4. Results of Bartlett’s Test and KMO**

Test	Indicator	Value
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	KMO Value	0.70
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ )	5698.599
	Degrees of Freedom	1596
	Significance Level	0.001

According to the findings presented in Table 6, the obtained KMO value was 0.70. This value indicates that the research sample size was adequate for factor analysis and that factor analysis could appropriately be performed on the data to reduce them into a series of latent factors. Furthermore, the results of Bartlett's test (Sig = 0.001,  $\chi^2 = 5698.599$ ) indicate a high correlation among the items. Therefore, proceeding with the subsequent stages of factor analysis was justified.

To ensure construct validity and confirm the factors identified in the previous stage (exploratory factor analysis), the factors were examined using confirmatory factor analysis through the partial least squares method. If the factor loading is less than 0.30, the relationship is considered weak and disregarded. Factor loadings between 0.30 and 0.60 are considered acceptable, whereas values greater than 0.60 are highly desirable (Habibi, 2012). Based on the results reported in Table 8, the factor loadings of the research items were acceptable, and the t-statistics exceeded 1.96; therefore, all items were retained (Figures 1 and 2).

**Table 5. Results of Confirmatory Factor Loadings**

Factors	Item	Factor Loading	t-value	Significance Level
Professional Ethics in Power	1	0.41	4.37	0.001
	2	0.79	22.50	0.001
	3	0.62	8.79	0.001
	4	0.58	9.05	0.001
	5	0.71	11.91	0.001
	6	0.73	14.77	0.001
	7	0.38	3.89	0.001
	8	0.65	10.38	0.001
Professional Autonomy in Decision-Making	9	0.53	5.13	0.001
	10	0.56	5.23	0.001
	11	0.55	6.04	0.001
	12	0.40	3.54	0.001
	13	0.65	7.74	0.001
	14	0.61	6.27	0.001
	15	0.63	8.20	0.001
Merit-Oriented Governance	16	0.72	14.74	0.001
	17	0.78	16.54	0.001
	18	0.80	17.74	0.001
	19	0.39	3.72	0.001
	20	0.29	2.60	0.001
	21	0.46	4.35	0.001

**Table 6. Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Values for Research Variables**

Components	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Significance Level
Professional Ethics in Power	0.71	0.80	0.50	0.001
Professional Autonomy in Decision-Making	0.75	0.83	0.66	0.001
Merit-Oriented Governance	0.71	0.79	0.51	0.001
Transformational Leadership in Physical Education	0.74	0.81	0.51	0.001
Structural Justice in Access to Opportunities	0.72	0.80	0.53	0.001
Commitment to Educational-Health Mission	0.75	0.82	0.64	0.001
Intelligent Resource Management	0.72	0.79	0.54	0.001
Organizational-Cultural Identity of the Manager	0.70	0.80	0.51	0.001

The Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) index pertains to the overall section of structural equation models. Through this index, the researcher can evaluate the overall fit after examining the measurement model and the quality and predictive power of the structural model. This index is the square root of the product of the average communalities and the average coefficients of determination. Values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.43 are interpreted as weak, moderate, and strong, respectively (Stevens, 2009).

Based on the calculations performed using the above formula, the Goodness-of-Fit index for the present research model was calculated as 0.43, indicating a strong and favorable fit. Therefore, it can be concluded that the overall fit of the model is appropriate and that the model possesses high and suitable explanatory and predictive power regarding the system variable.

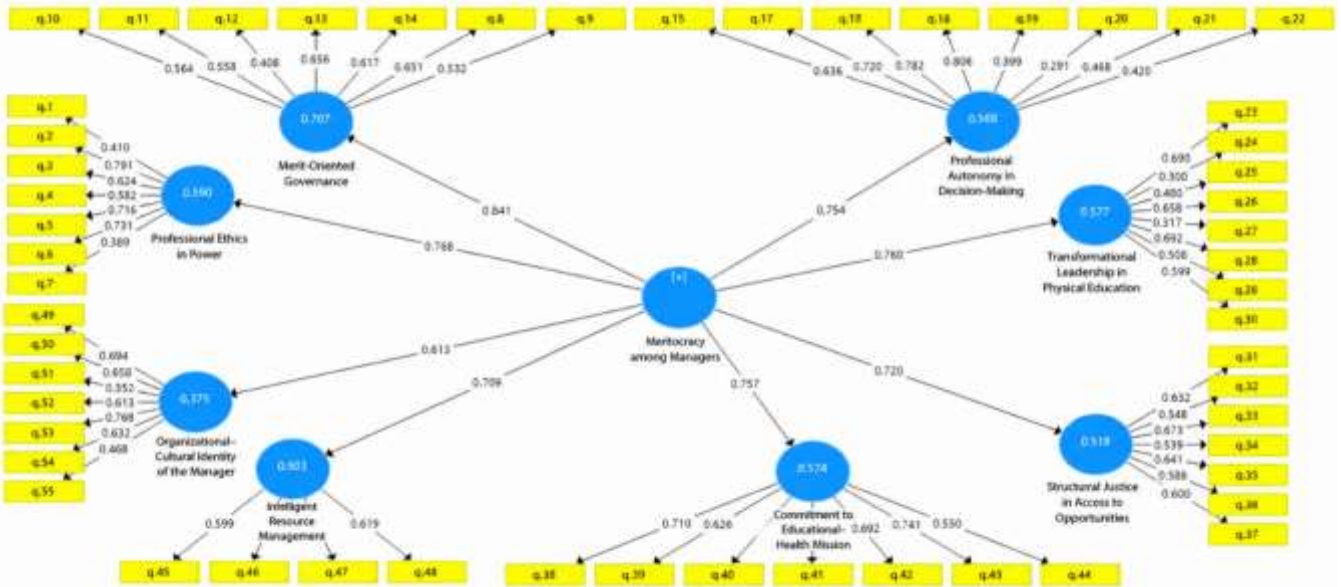


Figure 1. Factor Loading Coefficients of the Research Model

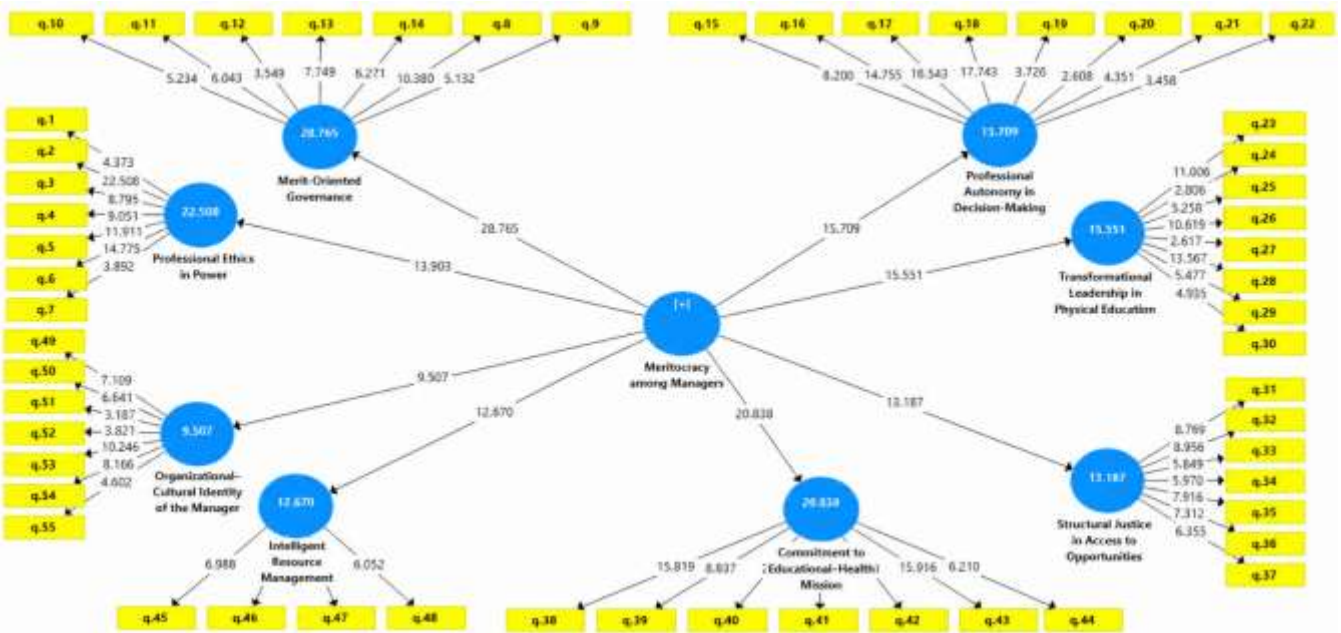


Figure 2. Significance Coefficients of the Research Model

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the factors affecting the merit-based selection of senior physical education managers in the Ministry of Education. The results of qualitative and quantitative analyses led to the identification and validation of

eight major dimensions, including merit-oriented governance, professional ethics in power, transformational leadership in physical education, structural justice in access to opportunities, commitment to educational–health missions, professional autonomy in decision-making, intelligent resource management, and the organizational–cultural identity of managers. The findings demonstrated that meritocracy in the appointment of senior physical education managers is not limited to technical qualifications or administrative experience but represents a multidimensional managerial framework that integrates professional competence, ethical orientation, strategic leadership, justice, and organizational alignment. The acceptable factor loadings, reliability indicators, and model fit indices confirmed that the proposed model has sufficient validity and explanatory capability for understanding merit-based leadership selection in educational physical education systems.

One of the most important findings of this study was the identification of merit-oriented governance as a key factor influencing the selection of senior physical education managers. This finding indicates that effective managerial appointment systems require transparent procedures, competency-based evaluation mechanisms, and systematic approaches for identifying qualified individuals. This result is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that meritocracy in public and educational organizations depends on replacing subjective and relationship-based selection systems with structured frameworks based on competence and performance. Diefenbach argued that although meritocracy is considered a fundamental principle of modern public administration, its effectiveness depends on the existence of objective criteria and institutional mechanisms that prevent informal influences in leadership selection (Diefenbach, 2020). Similarly, studies on sports organizations have demonstrated that talent management and merit-based leadership models improve organizational effectiveness by ensuring that managerial positions are assigned according to capability, expertise, and leadership potential rather than non-professional considerations (Rezapour et al., 2024). This finding is also aligned with research indicating that meritocratic approaches in sports organizations contribute to optimal management by establishing systematic processes for evaluating and developing leadership talent (Yarmohammadi Monfared et al., 2024). Therefore, the development of merit-oriented governance mechanisms can be considered a foundation for improving the quality of physical education management.

Another important result was the role of professional ethics in power as an essential dimension of meritocracy among senior physical education managers. This finding suggests that managerial competence should not be evaluated only through technical skills but should also include ethical behavior, responsibility, transparency, and commitment to organizational values. This result is supported by ethical leadership theories, which emphasize that leaders influence organizational culture through their decisions, behaviors, and moral standards. Brown et al. explained that ethical leaders act as role models who strengthen fairness, trust, and responsible behavior within organizations (Brown et al., 2020). Similarly, Harris highlighted that ethical leadership in educational environments creates a culture of integrity and supports sustainable organizational improvement (Harris, 2021). Therefore, in the context of physical education management, ethical leadership can prevent misuse of authority, increase organizational trust, and ensure that decisions are consistent with educational and social values.

The findings also confirmed transformational leadership in physical education as one of the fundamental components of merit-based managerial selection. This result indicates that senior managers should possess the ability to inspire employees, create shared visions, encourage innovation, and guide organizational change. Previous research supports this result by demonstrating that successful educational leadership is strongly associated with the ability to influence organizational processes and improve learning outcomes. Leithwood et al. emphasized that effective leaders improve educational systems

by establishing direction, developing people, and redesigning organizational structures (Leithwood et al., 2020). In addition, recent studies have shown that leadership practices directly affect teaching quality, organizational effectiveness, and student development (Leithwood & Azah, 2024). Day et al. also confirmed that school leadership contributes to educational outcomes through transformational practices and strategic improvement processes (Day et al., 2022). Furthermore, the importance of reflection, collaboration, and continuous learning in transforming sport-related practices supports the necessity of transformational characteristics among physical education leaders (Culver & Trudel, 2020). Accordingly, senior physical education managers should not function merely as administrators but should serve as transformational agents capable of developing dynamic and innovative educational environments.

Another dimension identified in this study was structural justice in access to opportunities. This finding highlights the importance of fair selection processes, equal access to managerial positions, and elimination of discriminatory or politically influenced appointment systems. The result is consistent with theories of organizational and social justice, which argue that fairness requires transparent structures that provide individuals with opportunities based on qualifications and capabilities. Fraser emphasized that justice should involve fair participation and recognition within institutional systems rather than only the distribution of resources (Fraser, 2009). Furthermore, research on meritocracy has indicated that without appropriate structural mechanisms, merit-based systems may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities. Van Dijk described this issue as the paradox of meritocracy, where organizations that claim to be meritocratic may reproduce bias when evaluation systems lack transparency (Van Dijk, 2020). Similarly, Sandel argued that merit must be understood critically and implemented with consideration of fairness and social responsibility (Sandel, 2020). Therefore, the establishment of transparent appointment systems is necessary to ensure that competent physical education managers receive fair opportunities.

The identification of commitment to educational–health missions as another major component demonstrates that senior physical education managers must understand the broader objectives of physical education beyond administrative duties. This result reflects the unique position of physical education, which integrates learning, health promotion, and student development. Previous studies have confirmed that physical activity contributes to students' cognitive, psychological, and academic outcomes, making effective management in this field particularly important (Bailey et al., 2021). Furthermore, school-based physical activity programs require strong organizational support and leadership commitment to achieve sustainable effects on student health and fitness (Lubans et al., 2020). Ferguson et al. also emphasized that mission-driven leadership in physical education promotes holistic student development by aligning managerial decisions with educational and developmental goals (Ferguson et al., 2021). Therefore, commitment to educational and health-oriented missions should be regarded as a critical criterion in selecting senior physical education managers.

The results also demonstrated the importance of professional autonomy in decision-making. This finding indicates that qualified managers require sufficient independence to apply expertise, make evidence-based decisions, and respond effectively to organizational challenges. This result corresponds with studies emphasizing that professional leadership depends on empowering managers to make strategic decisions while maintaining accountability. Competency-based leadership models highlight autonomy, decision-making capability, and adaptability as essential characteristics of successful educational leaders (Collinson, 2023). Similarly, competency frameworks in sport management emphasize that effective talent acquisition should focus on identifying individuals capable of independent judgment and strategic problem-solving

(Yamamoto, 2024). Thus, excessive bureaucratic restrictions may limit managerial creativity and reduce the effectiveness of merit-based leadership.

Another confirmed factor was intelligent resource management, indicating that senior physical education managers must possess the capability to effectively manage human, financial, material, and organizational resources. This result is consistent with studies showing that managerial competence directly influences the quality and effectiveness of school sports programs through improved planning and resource coordination (Morgan, 2023). Moos and Aase also emphasized that educational leaders must balance organizational demands and professional values through effective resource leadership (Moos & Aase, 2021). Moreover, merit-based management in school sports can improve economic efficiency by ensuring that resources are managed by competent leaders capable of achieving institutional objectives (Kim, 2025). Therefore, intelligent resource management represents a fundamental element of managerial merit in physical education systems.

The final identified dimension was the organizational–cultural identity of managers. This result indicates that effective managers should possess values, beliefs, and behavioral characteristics aligned with the culture and mission of the educational system. Organizational culture theory explains that leaders play a critical role in shaping shared values, norms, and organizational behaviors (Schein, 2010). In addition, successful educational transformation requires coherence between organizational culture, leadership actions, and strategic objectives (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Fullan et al. further emphasized that educational leadership must be based on moral purpose and collective improvement, demonstrating the importance of alignment between personal leadership identity and institutional missions (Fullan et al., 2020). Furthermore, public value governance perspectives suggest that managers should create value not only through efficiency but also through accountability and responsiveness to social needs (Bryson et al., 2014). Considering the influence of broader educational policies and institutional networks, maintaining a strong organizational identity can also protect professional leadership from external pressures and fragmented governance structures (Ball, 2012). Moreover, evidence from international educational systems shows that merit-based leadership selection contributes to organizational effectiveness when leadership criteria are aligned with institutional goals and cultural expectations (Marin & Minguéz, 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that meritocracy in selecting senior physical education managers requires an integrated and multidimensional approach. The proposed model emphasizes that effective selection should consider managerial competencies, ethical principles, transformational capabilities, structural fairness, mission commitment, decision-making autonomy, resource management skills, and cultural alignment. These components collectively provide a comprehensive framework for establishing transparent and scientifically grounded appointment systems that can enhance the effectiveness of physical education management in educational organizations.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although experts and physical education professionals were included in the research process, the study population was limited to specific educational and managerial contexts, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other organizational environments. Second, data collection relied partly on self-reported perceptions through interviews and questionnaires, which may be influenced by individual interpretations and experiences. Finally, although the proposed model was statistically validated, longitudinal examination of its practical implementation and outcomes was beyond the scope of the present study.

Future researchers are suggested to examine the proposed meritocracy model in different educational levels, geographical regions, and organizational contexts to evaluate its broader applicability. Comparative studies between educational systems

and sports organizations can also provide deeper insights into universal and context-specific factors affecting merit-based managerial selection. Furthermore, future research may use longitudinal designs to investigate how implementing merit-based appointment systems influences organizational performance, teacher satisfaction, student outcomes, and the long-term effectiveness of physical education programs.

Based on the findings of this study, educational policymakers and decision-makers are advised to establish transparent systems for evaluating and appointing senior physical education managers based on objective indicators of competence, ethics, leadership capability, and professional performance. Training programs should also be designed to strengthen transformational leadership, resource management, and ethical decision-making skills among current and future managers. In addition, independent monitoring mechanisms should be developed to ensure fairness, reduce the influence of informal networks, and support the sustainability of merit-based governance in educational physical education management.

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### Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### AI use statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language editing, translation refinement, formatting, and consistency checks. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy of the data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and final content of the manuscript.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted using interview and questionnaire data. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants' responses was preserved. The research procedure was designed to avoid harm to participants and to respect the principles of informed participation and academic integrity.

### Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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