Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences

Identification of Indicators and Components of Attentive Leadership among Educational Managers in Mazandaran Province

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to identify the indicators and components of attentive leadership among educational managers in Mazandaran Province. This research is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative with an exploratory mixed-methods design in terms of data nature. Accordingly, in the qualitative phase, based on grounded theory, a descriptive–survey method was used to identify the indicators and components of attentive leadership among educational managers. The statistical population in the qualitative section included all experts, policymakers, managers, and academic planners, as well as officials from the Department of Education in Mazandaran Province. The sampling method in the qualitative phase was theoretical and purposive, aligned with the principle of theoretical saturation, and a total of 10 participants were selected as the sample. Data collection in the qualitative phase was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The validity and reliability of the data were confirmed. The findings revealed 14 components of attentive leadership, including: defining a strategic direction and future vision; strategic thinking and future foresight; maintaining flexibility and change management; developing human capital and organizational culture; emphasizing ethical values; eliminating distractions; demonstrating friendly and supportive behavior; behavioral flexibility of the leader; creating and sustaining positive working relationships; open communication and feedback reception; empathy and attention to individual needs; decision-making and problem-solving; analytical and critical thinking; and emotional and social intelligence among educational managers in Mazandaran Province.

Keywords: attentive leadership components, educational managers, Mazandaran Province

Introduction

Over the past two decades, educational systems have been reshaped by turbulence, complexity, and continuous reform cycles, placing unprecedented attentional demands on school leaders. Beyond traditional trait- or behavior-based perspectives, a growing stream of scholarship frames leadership as the orchestration of collective attention—prioritizing what people notice, how they make sense of cues, and where they invest scarce cognitive resources to advance learning and equity. "Attentive

leadership" synthesizes this view by positioning leaders as architects of focus who align vision, information flows, motivation, and routines to steer organizations through uncertainty while protecting instructional core work. This introduction situates attentive leadership within established leadership theories, clarifies its mechanisms, and argues for its relevance to contemporary schooling, drawing on empirical and conceptual work across education and allied fields (1-5).

Classical leadership traditions remain foundational, but they are insufficient without an attentional lens. Trait syntheses showed that leader effectiveness cannot be reduced to fixed personal attributes, nudging the field toward interactionist and contingency perspectives (2). In education, evidence has crystallized around the influence of leadership on student learning through mediated pathways—vision, culture, professional learning, and instructional guidance—yet these pathways are ultimately attentional: they specify which problems matter and how resources are channeled to address them (3, 6). Path–goal theory likewise presumes that leaders clarify goals, remove obstacles, and match styles to follower needs; interpreted attentively, the leader's task is to make purpose perceptually salient, simplify choice architecture, and sustain collective focus on proximal performance cues (4).

Attentional leadership provides a forward-looking scaffold that integrates vision setting, situational scanning, and disciplined prioritization. Conceptual work portrays the "2050 leader" as a designer of attention ecosystems: they curate signals amid informational noise, institutionalize deliberative routines, and craft psychologically safe cultures that conserve cognitive bandwidth for deep work and adaptive learning (5). Recent educational studies echo this stance by identifying psychological–environmental dimensions—such as clarity of goals, feedback loops, and environmental structuring—that jointly regulate attention at individual and organizational levels (7). These ideas extend general theories of educational leadership, which emphasize strategic direction, professional capacity building, and organizational learning, by specifying the attentional mechanisms that activate those domains (1, 8).

In schools, learning improvement is ultimately achieved through what teachers choose to notice, discuss, and refine in classrooms. The visible learning tradition underscores the centrality of high-probability instructional influences and the disciplined use of feedback to move achievement; attentional leadership converts that evidence base into routine, collective focus—aligning walk-throughs, data conversations, and professional learning communities to the few practices with the largest effects (9). Data use becomes a means of directing attention when leaders scaffold inquiry cycles, provide timely comparative indicators, and normalize evidence-informed experimentation (8). Complementing this, information science reminds us that search, sharing, and sensemaking behaviors change under uncertainty; leaders therefore must simplify access, filter relevance, and create social structures that reduce cognitive load and bias during information appraisal (10).

A second mechanism is motivational and affective regulation. Attentional control relies on emotional states that support sustained engagement and pro-social risk-taking. The literature on emotional intelligence among educational leaders shows consistent links between emotion regulation, perspective taking, and effective leadership practices across cultures; leaders who monitor and modulate affect can better maintain collective focus in the face of setback, ambiguity, and reform fatigue (11, 12). Parallel organizational research connects leader affect and work–family spillover to followers' experiences and discretionary effort, highlighting the importance of boundaries and recovery practices that preserve attentional capacity over time (13). Instruments that assess "leadership intelligence" further operationalize these capacities, bridging cognition, emotion, and values as mutually reinforcing levers of attention (14, 15).

The strategic dimension of attentive leadership links environmental scanning to prioritization and knowledge mobilization. Studies of strategic leadership show performance gains when leaders translate external trends into coherent agendas and develop knowledge processes that distribute expertise to the point of need; in attentional terms, strategy is effective when it reduces noise, sequences initiatives, and routinizes learning from variation (16). Work design scholarship adds that sustained

participation in prosocial initiatives depends on temporal structures, role clarity, and feedback—practical design features that protect attention and reinforce purpose (17). In entrepreneurial and high-tech contexts, cognitive management and open innovation require leaders to craft porous yet disciplined information boundaries, enabling exploration without diffusion—skills equally relevant for schools navigating edtech, AI, and community partnerships (18).

Attention is also an equity issue. Women's leadership research highlights structural and cultural frictions that tax attentional resources, from stereotype threat to invisible labor; attentive leadership purposefully engineers supportive climates, reciprocal mentoring, and transparent decision processes to distribute cognitive burdens fairly and expand participation in leadership pipelines (19). Post-pandemic analyses likewise emphasize resilience, hybrid coordination, and humane pacing—design choices that conserve attention as schools balance recovery with innovation (20, 21). At the level of teacher experience, empowering leadership has been shown to bolster autonomy and academic optimism, which are themselves attentional regulators that orient effort toward instructional goals and buffer against distraction by operational volatility (22).

The sustainability discourse in management adds a complementary perspective: small and medium enterprises enhance sustainability performance when leaders make environmental and social priorities perceptually prominent in routines and metrics; analogously, school leaders who render student well-being and community partnership visible in dashboards and ceremonies steer attention toward long-horizon value creation (23). Sectoral work outside education—for example, banking—shows that competitive advantage can derive from attentional practices that align tasks and scanning routines with volatile market cues; educational leaders face similar volatility in policy and demography, strengthening the case for attentional architectures that are adaptive yet coherent (24).

Context matters, and the attentional agenda must be localized. Analyses of attention management in Iran emphasize media ecologies, policy rhythms, and organizational norms that shape what issues gain salience and when; leaders require culturally literate strategies to tune signal-to-noise ratios without suppressing voice (25). Theories of educational leadership remind us that models travel poorly unless adapted to context; attentive leadership therefore becomes a meta-capability—selecting, sequencing, and pacing reforms so that teachers have the cognitive space to enact them well (1). The practical corollary is priority pruning: fewer initiatives, richer feedback, longer runways.

Attentive leadership is not merely soft skill—it is a hard-edged discipline of decision design. Leaders can codify "focus infrastructures" that include strategic abandonment of low-yield activities, meeting redesign (clear intents, time-boxed segments, decision logs), and protected blocks for deep instructional work. They can curate data displays that privilege comparative progress on a handful of outcomes and lead with protocols that structure dialogue (e.g., noticing–wondering cycles, warm–cool feedback). These moves translate abstract vision into attentional habits at scale, sustaining improvement while guarding against burnout (5, 8, 9).

Finally, the conceptual frame must remain integrative. A synthesis of leadership theories, from path–goal clarity to strategic learning and emotional intelligence, points to a unifying proposition: effectiveness depends on how leaders continuously shape what people pay attention to, how they make sense of information, and where they invest effort over time. This proposition spans the micro (individual emotion regulation), meso (team routines and norms), and macro (strategy and stakeholder signaling) levels. As education systems navigate AI adoption, demographic shifts, and civic polarization, leaders who can align attention with purpose—while protecting human capacity—will be best positioned to deliver equitable, high-quality learning (4-6, 11, 12).

In sum, attentive leadership offers a coherent, actionable response to the phenomena that most threaten learning: initiative overload, informational noise, and affective depletion. It does so by clarifying purpose, structuring information, cultivating prosocial motivation, and engineering routines that privilege the instructional core. The present study extends this emerging

field by identifying and organizing components of attentive leadership specific to educational managers, building on international theory while remaining sensitive to local context.

Methods and Materials

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative with an exploratory mixed-methods design in terms of the nature of data. Accordingly, in the qualitative phase, based on grounded theory, a descriptive–survey method was used to identify the indicators and components of attentive leadership among educational managers. The primary objective of this phase was to examine and explore the concepts and categories related to attentive leadership and to construct a questionnaire for the quantitative phase. Therefore, this stage aimed to determine the indicators, components, and dimensions of attentive leadership among educational managers through individual semi-structured and exploratory interviews with scientific experts selected purposively. The required qualitative data were collected and analyzed using concept content analysis and category development. These concepts and categories served as the basis for designing the instrument (questionnaire) to present the model of attentive leadership for educational managers in Mazandaran Province.

The statistical population in the qualitative section included all experts, policymakers, managers, and academic planners in the field of education and leadership in Mazandaran Province who had scholarly works such as book authorship, research projects, and supervision or advising of doctoral dissertations. The sampling method in the qualitative phase was theoretical and purposive, in accordance with the principle of theoretical saturation, and 10 individuals were selected as the sample. Data collection in the qualitative phase was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The selection criteria for experts, confirmed by the supervisors and advisors, included individuals with substantial knowledge and information in this area who could provide precise and representative data. During the interviews, opinions were gathered regarding appropriate indicators of attentive leadership among educational managers, and the primary and secondary factors were examined and finalized. The duration of each interview ranged from 50 to 70 minutes.

The data collection tools in the qualitative phase included note-taking forms and semi-structured interviews to identify the indicators of attentive leadership among educational managers in Mazandaran Province. Initial note-taking was carried out through a review of theoretical foundations and prior research, and the collected notes were categorized to design the interview questions. In the next step, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the experts, and the Delphi method was used to achieve consensus and identify the final indicators of attentive leadership. At the beginning of each interview session, participants were introduced to the objectives of the interview. The average duration of each interview was 65 minutes, and key points were documented by the interviewer. To minimize interviewer influence, all interviews were conducted by the principal researcher. After identifying the indicators through theoretical studies and expert interviews, the stages of developing the attentive leadership questionnaire for educational managers in Mazandaran Province were completed.

To ensure the validity of the qualitative phase and the accuracy of the findings from the researcher's, participants', and readers' perspectives, the following steps were taken:

Member checking: Interview participants reviewed the extracted categories and expressed their views regarding their accuracy and relevance.

Peer review: In addition to the valuable feedback of the supervisors and advisors, the extracted categories were examined and classified by several experts, faculty members, graduates, and managers.

Experience of supervisors and advisors: Their years of expertise in management and leadership contributed to the accurate categorization of concepts.

Collaborative research process: Participants were actively engaged in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Content Validity Ratio (CVR): This index, designed by Lawshe, was calculated by obtaining the opinions of subject matter experts about the test content. After explaining the objectives of the instrument and providing operational definitions of the questions' content, experts were asked to classify each item based on a three-point Likert scale as "essential," "useful but not essential," or "not necessary."

Content Validity Index (CVI): The CVI was assessed using the Waltz and Bausell method. Experts evaluated the "relevance," "clarity," and "simplicity" of each item on a four-point Likert scale, rating relevance from 1 ("not relevant") to 4 ("highly relevant"), simplicity from 1 ("not simple") to 4 ("highly simple"), and clarity from 1 ("not clear") to 4 ("highly clear"). A minimum acceptable CVI value is 0.79; any item scoring below 0.79 should be eliminated.

Interview reliability: To calculate the reliability of the coding process, both test–retest reliability and inter-coder agreement (intra-subject agreement) were used. For test–retest reliability, several interviews were selected and re-coded by the same researcher after a short, defined time interval. The codes from the two rounds were then compared. Codes identical in both sessions were considered agreements, while non-identical codes were considered disagreements. In this study, three interviews were selected and re-coded after a 15-day interval. As shown in the related table, the total number of codes in the two sessions was 150, with 63 agreements and 15 disagreements. The test–retest reliability of the interviews calculated using the mentioned formula was 84%. Considering that reliability greater than 60% is acceptable (Wile, 1996), the coding reliability of the interviews in this research was confirmed.

Inter-coder reliability: To measure inter-coder agreement, one faculty member from the Department of Educational Sciences who was thoroughly familiar with the coding process was invited to participate as a research collaborator (coder).

Findings and Results

In this section, the qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews are analyzed, and the results of the qualitative data analysis and their relationship to the research questions are examined.

Research Question: What are the indicators and components of attentive leadership among educational managers in Mazandaran Province?

At this stage, the open coding method was applied. In this step, the researcher transcribed and studied the interviews. Next, any meaningful point in the text of each interview was assigned a specific code by the researcher. Open coding refers to dividing textual data into smaller segments and assigning initial codes to each segment. Each part of the data containing a particular concept was labeled with a specific code. After analyzing the interviews and documents through open coding, 85 initial codes were identified, which were then refined and reduced to 50 codes. Figure 1 presents the word cloud diagram resulting from the open coding process, providing a visual representation of the qualitative data analysis. Table 1 presents the statements obtained from the interviews.

Table 1. Statements Obtained from the Interviews

Interviewee No.	Interview Text
1, 3	Honesty in behavior and speech fosters trust and respect from others and serves as a foundation for effective leadership.
1	One of the key factors for attracting attention in managers is strengthening their positive attitude.
1, 5	Positive-oriented leadership behavior that builds organizational trust between managers and teachers is crucial for attentive leadership. Creating an emotional environment where all school staff feel valued and develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the school.
1	Legal, financial, and educational support for managers creates the foundation for attentive leadership.
1, 5	Interaction in establishing positive communication.
2	A leader must listen to the opinions and ideas of others and use them in decision-making.
2	The ability to analyze the organization's internal and external environment and identify the path toward overarching goals.
2	The ability to identify the path toward overarching goals.

2	A manager should prioritize long-term planning, define a clear and long-term vision, guide the organization in the right direction, and possess strategic thinking.
2, 6	Managers should create an environment where teachers and students are motivated, and collaboration, empathy, and effective communication among staff, students, and parents are strengthened.
2, 3	Managers should have strong motivation, creative thinking, and the ability to accept change and innovation to establish positive and attentive leadership.
2, 6, 7, 8	Active participation of teachers and staff in organizational processes and decision-making increases motivation and commitment to goals. Educational managers should encourage teachers to engage in discussion and idea exchange during meetings and adopt the best suggestions.
3, 6	Managers should listen to followers' concerns, identify opportunities and threats, and have the ability to analyze and forecast for informed decision-making.
3	Having a systemic perspective and a holistic view of the organization and its surrounding environment is a characteristic of attentive leadership.
3	Flexibility: recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses and being able to change approaches when facing different conditions is a key attribute.
3, 8	Guiding the change process toward organizational goals and directing teachers' focus and attention to accept organizational changes and adapt to the environment.
3, 5	Effective leadership requires spiritual and material support for employees so they can actualize their potential and advance in their careers.
3, 5	Creating an effective collaborative and team-oriented culture.
3, 5	Creating an open mental space and being receptive to new ideas.
4	Managers should pay attention to the intrinsic motivations of individuals.
4	Managers should communicate information explicitly and transparently, prioritizing clarity and integrity.
5	Managers should limit unnecessary meetings and schedule focus blocks.
5	A leader must trust in their own abilities to make decisive decisions and encourage others to follow.
5	The ability to make quick and precise decisions and follow through with them without hesitation, and to experiment with innovative solutions without fear, is an important leadership characteristic.
5	The ability to establish effective communication, create mutual respect, foster a positive and supportive work environment, and provide space for dialogue.
5, 10	Exchange of ideas between the leader and team members.
5, 8	Attending to the needs, feelings, and concerns of each team member.
5	Promoting a culture of learning within the school and organization.
5	Managers should balance administrative and managerial tasks with educational leadership roles and use a distributed leadership style to devote more time to instructional leadership.
6	Approaching teachers with compassion and empathy.
6, 8	Creating a safe and supportive environment and taking effective steps toward organizational goals.
8	Managers should be sensitive to the school environment and the needs of students and teachers, adapting their programs accordingly.
8	The ability to adapt to changing conditions and accept feedback and suggestions.
8	Managers should conduct logical and critical evaluations of incoming information to improve organizational decision-making and performance and manage unexpected and crisis-inducing situations.
9	These leaders, through strong communication skills such as oratory and creating a sense of personal connection, guide individuals toward shared goals without relying solely on authority or directives.
10	Commitment to ethical values.
10	Utilization of modern technologies.

According to Table 1, the interviews with experts were summarized and categorized. The open codes (indicators derived from interviews and previous studies) are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Open Codes of Attentive Leadership among Educational Managers in Mazandaran Province

No.	Open Codes	No.	Open Codes
1	Identifying the path toward overarching goals	26	Providing material and spiritual support for teachers
2	Long-term planning	27	Ability to adapt to changing conditions
3	Defining a clear and long-term vision	28	Ability to accept feedback and suggestions
4	Guiding the organization in the right direction	29	Managing unexpected situations
5	Ability to analyze and forecast for informed decision-making	30	Acceptance of immediate changes and emerging issues
6	Identifying opportunities and threats	31	Balancing work and personal life
7	Possessing strategic thinking	32	Ability to establish effective communication
8	Ability to analyze the internal and external environment	33	Creating mutual respect
9	Systems thinking and having a holistic perspective toward the environment	34	Building trust among employees
10	Guiding the change process	35	Creating a positive and supportive work environment
11	Flexibility in facing environmental and organizational changes	36	Providing an appropriate platform for dialogue and idea exchange

12	Ability to embrace change and innovation	37	Strong communication skills
13	Cultivating a culture of continuous learning	38	Empathy and attention to individual needs
14	Focusing on intrinsic motivation	39	Providing developmental support
15	Creating an open mindset and acceptance of new ideas	40	Active and nonjudgmental listening
16	Establishing an effective collaborative and team-oriented culture	41	Experimenting with innovative solutions without fear within the organization
17	Creating a positive, trust-building organizational culture	42	Making rational and timely decisions to maintain focus and attention
18	Commitment to ethical values	43	Evaluating options to preserve focus and attention
19	Transparency and integrity	44	Thorough, critical, and logical analysis of information and data
20	Honest, straightforward, and accurate information exchange	45	Utilizing one's own cognitive abilities
21	Scheduling focus blocks	46	Possessing strategic thinking
22	Limiting unnecessary meetings	47	Applying adaptive strategies to regulate emotions
23	Legal, educational, and financial support	48	Managing mood and expressing emotions appropriately
24	Creating a safe and supportive environment	49	Ability to understand and manage others' emotions
25	Acting compassionately and empathetically toward teachers	50	Ability to understand and manage one's own emotions

According to Table 2, the open codes extracted from the interviews—summarized previously in Table 1—and the research background representing attentive leadership among educational managers in Mazandaran Province were identified. In subsequent stages, these open codes were organized and conceptualized; after refining and categorizing them based on their meanings, each set of codes was assigned an appropriate label.

At this stage of the research, after performing open coding, the process moved to identifying and categorizing the main concepts and categories. The purpose of this step was to find the relationships among the data and organize them into more comprehensive concepts. Accordingly, all open codes extracted from the interview data and the research background were carefully examined and grouped into similar thematic categories to form components (categories). In other words, the 50 identified indicators were classified into 14 components (categories) and used as the basis for qualitative analysis. The axial codes are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Open and Axial Codes of Attentive Leadership

No.	Component (Category)	Indicators
1	Determining the strategic path and future vision	Identifying the path toward overarching goals; Long-term planning; Defining a clear and long-term vision; Guiding the organization in the right direction
2	Strategic thinking and future foresight	Ability to analyze and forecast for informed decision-making; Identifying opportunities and threats; Possessing strategic thinking; Ability to analyze the internal and external environment; Systems thinking and a holistic view of the environment
3	Maintaining flexibility and change management	Guiding the change process; Flexibility in facing environmental and organizational changes; Ability to embrace change and innovation
4	Developing human capital and organizational culture	Cultivating a culture of continuous learning; Focusing on intrinsic motivation; Creating an open mindset and acceptance of new ideas; Establishing an effective collaborative and team-oriented culture; Creating a positive, trust-building organizational culture
5	Emphasizing ethical values	Commitment to ethical values; Transparency and integrity; Honest, straightforward, and accurate information exchange
6	Eliminating distractions	Scheduling focus blocks; Limiting unnecessary meetings
7	Friendly and supportive behavior	Legal, educational, and financial support; Creating a safe and supportive environment; Acting compassionately and empathetically toward teachers; Providing material and spiritual support for teachers
8	Flexibility in leader's behavior	Ability to adapt to changing conditions; Ability to accept feedback and suggestions; Managing unexpected situations; Acceptance of immediate changes and emerging issues; Balancing work and personal life
9	Creating and sustaining positive working relationships	Ability to establish effective communication; Creating mutual respect; Building trust among employees; Creating a positive and supportive work environment
10	Open communication and feedback reception	Providing an appropriate platform for dialogue and idea exchange; Strong communication skills
11	Empathy and attention to individual needs	Empathy and attention to individual needs; Providing developmental support; Active and nonjudgmental listening
12	Decision-making and problem-solving	Experimenting with innovative solutions without fear within the organization; Making rational and timely decisions to maintain focus and attention; Evaluating options to preserve focus and attention
13	Analytical and critical thinking	Thorough, critical, and logical analysis of information and data; Utilizing one's own cognitive abilities

14	Emotional and social intelligence	Applying adaptive strategies to regulate emotions; Managing mood and expressing emotions appropriately; Ability to understand and manage others' emotions; Ability to understand and manage one's own emotions

In this study, 14 components were identified, including determining the strategic path and future vision, strategic thinking and future foresight, maintaining flexibility and change management, developing human capital and organizational culture, emphasizing ethical values, eliminating distractions, friendly and supportive behavior, flexibility in leader's behavior, creating and sustaining positive working relationships, open communication and feedback reception, empathy and attention to individual needs, decision-making and problem-solving, analytical and critical thinking, and emotional and social intelligence among educational managers in Mazandaran Province. These components are analyzed and interpreted as follows.

- **Determining the strategic path and future vision:** One of the components of attentive leadership among educational managers is determining the strategic path and future vision. One interviewee stated, "One of the most important duties of senior management in any organization is to determine the roadmap. This helps us clearly and purposefully specify the trajectory toward the organization's overarching goals. In fact, without a clear path, the organization may become confused and fail to use its resources optimally." In this regard, another interviewee noted, "Long-term planning enables us to prepare for the coming years by considering environmental changes and future trends. This type of planning distances the organization from ad hoc, short-term decisions and concentrates attention on achieving the vision and overarching goals."

- **Strategic thinking and future forecasting:** Another component identified in this study from the interviewees' perspective was strategic thinking and future forecasting. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "Strategic thinking enables organizations to forecast future trends by analyzing past data and simulating different scenarios. Tools such as trend analysis, scenario planning, and futures modeling help managers better understand environmental changes and prepare to face uncertainties. These methods not only assist in anticipating potential events but also enable the organization to design flexible and adaptive strategies and become more resilient to sudden shifts." Another interviewee added, "Strategic thinking can be considered the spirit of strategy, allowing organizations to make far-reaching, future-oriented, and consequential decisions."

- **Maintaining flexibility and change management:** Another identified component of attentive leadership is maintaining flexibility and managing change. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "This is one of the most important characteristics of successful organizations in an era of rapid transformations. Organizations that are flexible can quickly respond to environmental changes and adapt to new conditions. This capability is reinforced by fostering a culture of continuous learning, training and developing employees' competencies, and employing new leadership models that emphasize empowerment and participation. Leaders should identify organizational strengths and weaknesses in a timely manner, recognize opportunities and threats, and, through knowledge management and targeted training, create the conditions for accepting change." In this vein, managers must have the ability to accept change and innovation to manage change. One interviewee remarked, "Adopting change and innovation requires creating an open environment for expressing ideas, encouraging creativity, and providing the necessary foundation for individual and organizational learning and growth. Managers should, by generating motivation, delivering specialized training, using reward and recognition systems, and offering opportunities for participation, encourage employees to accept change. In addition, clarifying objectives, explaining the benefits of change, and obtaining continuous feedback from employees play an important role in enhancing this capability. Organizations that institutionalize a culture of flexibility and innovation will perform better in the face of crises and environmental transformations."

- **Developing human capital and organizational culture:** Developing human capital means investing in the skills and abilities of individuals within the organization. When people receive better training and develop, the organization also becomes stronger. Organizational culture refers to the behaviors and values that prevail in the workplace. If the organizational culture is

positive, collaborative, and team-oriented, everyone will feel more comfortable and possess greater intrinsic motivation to work. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "When people are intrinsically interested in their work, they perform better and at higher quality. To strengthen this motivation, we must create openness and trust so that employees feel their ideas are valued, can express their opinions freely, and can grow." Attentive leadership, by recognizing each person's intrinsic motivations, can create conditions in which individuals engage in their work with interest and enthusiasm; this form of motivation improves team performance. Another interviewee noted, "When team members collaborate and trust one another, tasks proceed better and faster. A collaborative culture ensures that each person performs their role well and that, together, they achieve the organization's objectives. This culture reinforces a positive atmosphere and trust within the organization." These variables help leaders attend carefully to individuals' needs, build a positive and motivating environment, and form a strong and creative team; as a result, attentive leadership will be more successful and the organization will achieve its goals more effectively.

- **Emphasizing ethical values:** Ethical values are the foundation of any organization and of successful leadership. When leadership adheres to values, respect and trust form among managers and members of the organization. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "Attentive leadership must always adhere to ethical principles and use those principles to guide decisions and the behaviors of both the leader and the team, and—more importantly—the leader must be transparent in decisions and actions and personally committed to ethical values." A leader who adheres to ethical values and maintains transparency and honesty in communication can increase the team's trust, motivation, and cooperation.

- **Eliminating distractions:** Eliminating distractions plays a significant role in managing attention and increasing productivity. One interviewee stated, "The work environment should be arranged so that disturbing and distracting factors—such as mobile notifications, unnecessary emails, ambient noise, and nonessential meetings—are reduced or eliminated. This allows individuals to focus more on their core tasks and prevents mental fragmentation." Another interviewee added, "Dividing work time into specific, focused blocks (for example, using the Pomodoro technique, which consists of 25 minutes of focused work and 5 minutes of rest) enables the mind to conserve energy and maintain better concentration. Likewise, limiting unnecessary meetings and carefully scheduling time prevents mental fatigue and increases productivity."

- **Friendly and supportive behavior:** Friendly and supportive behavior leads teachers to feel valued and secure, thereby improving performance. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "When leaders and managers in the organization, through kindness, empathy, and understanding of problems, connect better with staff and create a safe work environment in which they can admit mistakes without fear of judgment or punishment and have their needs heard, self-confidence and work motivation increase." These factors are vital and practical for the success of any educational organization.

- **Flexibility in leader behavior:** Flexibility in leader behavior means the ability to adapt to changing conditions, accept feedback and suggestions, manage unexpected events, accept instantaneous changes, and maintain work–life balance. One interviewee stated, "Flexible leaders can quickly assess situations and adjust their behavior or strategy to the new conditions. This skill helps them make better decisions in uncertain and complex times and guide their team toward success." Another interviewee added, "Flexible leaders are open and listen to others' opinions; this helps them correct their behavior and find better solutions to problems. These leaders can cope well with sudden conditions and unexpected challenges, provide appropriate solutions, and prepare their team to accept change." This skill is considered vital for successful leadership in today's world, where rapid and unexpected changes are widespread.

- **Creating and sustaining positive working relationships:** Positive working relationships are not solely the responsibility of human resources; rather, they constitute a culture that starts at the top levels of management and spreads throughout all levels of the organization. Positive working relationships entail respect, trust, and empathy in the workplace, which directly influence team and organizational performance. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "Mutual respect emerges when all members of the

organization feel valued, and this starts at the top of the organization; it takes shape when managers respect their employees, listen to their ideas, and acknowledge their actions." Another interviewee remarked, "When employees know that their managers support them, make transparent decisions, and keep their promises, trust is established." Such an atmosphere forms when employees feel belonging, safety, and identity. By acting as supporters and coaches, celebrating achievements, and providing support, managers can permit mistakes and learning.

- **Open communication and feedback reception:** Open communication and feedback reception, as another component of attentive leadership, function as a managerial tool. When employees feel they can express their ideas and viewpoints without fear of punishment or blame, their motivation and organizational commitment increase. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "Managers should serve as role models by first accepting feedback themselves and then allowing others to express their ideas; this occurs through active listening, respecting different opinions, and non-defensive responses to criticism." Another interviewee added, "Managers' feedback is more effective when it is time-bound, focused on behavior rather than personality, and actionable—that is, when the individual knows what to change—and when it balances strengths and weaknesses." Therefore, open communication and constructive feedback are not merely managerial duties; they are a collective responsibility that requires the participation of all organizational members.

- **Empathy and attention to individual needs:** Today, employees in organizations seek a sense of belonging, respect, and meaning in their work, and this occurs through managerial empathy as a learnable behavior. Empathy helps managers recognize individuals as human beings with diverse needs, emotions, and circumstances. One interviewee stated, "To operationalize empathy in the organization, managers should listen actively without hasty judgment, strive to understand the other party's perspective and situation, and use body language and tone to ensure people feel heard." Empathy also emerges through professional personal growth and developmental support. One interviewee noted, "When a manager recognizes that an employee is going through a difficult personal period or needs a learning opportunity and helps them as much as possible, such support increases loyalty and commitment; this kind of support shows that the organization respects their individuality." Ultimately, empathy should expand not only as a skill but also as a culture in organizations, so that we can build environments in which individuals feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and feel valued.

- **Decision-making and problem-solving:** This component of attentive leadership is largely behavioral and managerial and is commonly used in performance appraisals, competency assessments, or 360-degree evaluations. One manager, as an interviewee, stated, "I always try to make decisions logically and systematically by using data and prior experience. When I encounter a problem, I first identify the influencing factors, then consider several different solutions, and select the best option." Another manager, as an interviewee, addressed ensuring rational decision-making as follows: "I set specific timelines for decisions and determine priorities clearly. I also use time- and attention-management tools such as task lists and daily reviews to reduce distractions." This finding can help organizations improve their decision-making and problem-solving processes and create a creative and dynamic environment.

- **Analytical and critical thinking:** Analytical and critical thinking are both essential skills for the precise, logical, and critical examination of information and data, which are employed by leveraging an individual's cognitive abilities. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "Before making decisions, I always collect and analyze all available information and then use critical thinking to identify existing weaknesses and opportunities." Another interviewee noted, "I seek not only to see the data but also to discover its true meaning, and to do so I use various methods such as comparing data over time, employing charts, and consulting with other specialists; this helps me avoid erroneous assumptions." In this context, in attentive leadership, a manager can possess strong skills in analytical and critical thinking, examine data, identify deficiencies, and make the best decision by utilizing their cognitive abilities.

- **Emotional and social intelligence:** Emotional and social intelligence include key abilities in perceiving, managing, and regulating one's own and others' emotions, which play a highly important role in individual and social success. In this regard, one interviewee stated, "When we feel anger or anxiety, we must be able to manage it so that it does not negatively affect our behavior and decisions." Another interviewee added, "To better understand others' emotions, we should pay attention to body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, since more than 80% of communication is nonverbal. Moreover, empathy and the effort to put ourselves in others' positions are very important. Managing others' emotions means that, in times of tension or conflict, we can help reduce discord and strengthen relationships by remaining calm and using communication skills." These skills enable individuals to perform better in various settings—especially work and social environments—build more effective relationships, and maintain their psychological and emotional well-being.

Therefore, developing emotional and social intelligence through training and practicing skills in emotion recognition, empathy, and emotion regulation constitutes an important asset for individual and organizational growth.

Determining the strategic path and future vision	• Identifying the path toward overarching goals; Long-term planning; Defining a clear and long-term vision; Guiding the organization in the right direction
Strategic thinking and future foresight	• Ability to analyze and forecast for informed decision-making; Identifying opportunities and threats; Possessing strategic thinking; Ability to analyze the internal and external environment; Systems thinking and a holistic view of the environment
Maintaining flexibility and change management	• Guiding the change process; Flexibility in facing environmental and organizational changes; Ability to embrace change and innovation
Developing human capital and organizational culture	• Cultivating a culture of continuous learning; Focusing on intrinsic motivation; Creating an open mindset and acceptance of new ideas; Establishing an effective collaborative and team-oriented culture; Creating a positive, trust-building organizational culture
Emphasizing ethical values	• Commitment to ethical values; Transparency and integrity; Honest, straightforward, and accurate information exchange
Eliminating distractions	• Scheduling focus blocks; Limiting unnecessary meetings
Friendly and supportive behavior	• Legal, educational, and financial support; Creating a safe and supportive environment; Acting compassionately and empathetically toward teachers; Providing material and spiritual support for teachers
Flexibility in leader's behavior	• Ability to adapt to changing conditions; Ability to accept feedback and suggestions; Managing unexpected situations; Acceptance of immediate changes and emerging issues; Balancing work and personal life
Creating and sustaining positive working relationships	• Ability to establish effective communication; Creating mutual respect; Building trust among employees; Creating a positive and supportive work environment
Open communication and feedback reception	• Providing an appropriate platform for dialogue and idea exchange; Strong communication skills
Empathy and attention to individual needs	• Empathy and attention to individual needs; Providing developmental support; Active and nonjudgmental listening
Decision-making and problem-solving	• Experimenting with innovative solutions without fear within the organization; Making rational and timely decisions to maintain focus and attention; Evaluating options to preserve focus and attention
Analytical and critical thinking	• Thorough, critical, and logical analysis of information and data; Utilizing one's own cognitive abilities
Emotional and social intelligence	• Applying adaptive strategies to regulate emotions; Managing mood and expressing emotions appropriately; Ability to understand and manage others' emotions; Ability to understand and manage one's own emotions

Figure 1. Components of attentive leadership among educational managers in Mazandaran Province

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to identify and organize the psychological, strategic, and behavioral components of *attentive leadership* among educational managers. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with experts and practitioners, fourteen core components emerged: determining the strategic path and future vision; strategic thinking and future forecasting; maintaining flexibility and change management; developing human capital and organizational culture; emphasizing ethical values; eliminating distractions; friendly and supportive behavior; flexibility in leader behavior; creating and sustaining positive working relationships; open communication and feedback reception; empathy and attention to individual needs; decision-

making and problem-solving; analytical and critical thinking; and emotional and social intelligence. These findings confirm that leading schools today requires far more than administrative coordination; it requires the ability to design an "attention system" that aligns vision, information flow, motivation, and adaptive capacity.

A key contribution of this study is confirming the centrality of *strategic direction and foresight*. The ability to chart a clear path and articulate a compelling long-term vision was repeatedly emphasized by participants. This aligns with long-standing scholarship on educational leadership which shows that clear, future-oriented direction enables schools to maintain coherence in times of turbulence (1, 6). Similar to findings from strategic leadership research, our participants described how long-term planning shields schools from short-termism and creates mental bandwidth for sustained instructional improvement (16). These results reinforce the theoretical proposition that attentive leadership requires vision to act as a "filter," focusing collective effort on what matters most (5).

Closely related is the dimension of *strategic thinking and future forecasting*. Leaders who scan the environment, model scenarios, and anticipate change can better position their organizations to respond to uncertainty. This resonates with the attention leadership perspective that prioritizes proactive environmental scanning and scenario planning (5, 7). Research in both corporate and educational sectors has shown that such foresight not only improves resilience but also fosters psychological safety by reducing ambiguity (18, 24). Our findings suggest that educational managers, much like business leaders, benefit from using tools such as trend analysis and predictive data to keep their teams cognitively prepared for disruption (8, 10).

Flexibility and change management also emerged as an essential attentional competency. Participants described how leaders who cultivate adaptive cultures and empower staff to embrace change can steer schools through continuous reform cycles. This echoes post-pandemic scholarship that frames resilience and adaptivity as essential survival skills for educational leaders (20, 21). It also complements findings in entrepreneurial and innovative organizations, where leaders enable exploration while preserving focus (18). Conceptually, this supports the idea of leaders as "attention architects," designing cultural norms that balance stability with agility (5).

Another major category—*developing human capital and organizational culture*—underscores that attention is sustained not merely by directives but by a motivational climate. Our participants highlighted the need for trust, collaboration, and empowerment, which are consistent with the evidence on capacity building and professional learning communities (3, 8). Research shows that supportive, team-oriented cultures conserve cognitive energy by reducing internal competition and threat responses (15, 17). Leaders who invest in growth opportunities and intrinsic motivation enable teachers to channel attention to instructional priorities rather than job insecurity or bureaucracy (19, 22).

The importance of *ethical values* in focusing attention also emerged clearly. Participants noted that transparency, honesty, and integrity anchor trust and reduce "hidden curriculum" distractions caused by ambiguity or perceived unfairness. This aligns with the view that moral leadership provides an attentional compass, helping staff prioritize long-term educational good over short-term political pressure (1, 5). Recent works on leader affect and psychological climate confirm that ethical consistency stabilizes team emotions and thus supports sustained engagement (13, 14).

The practical need to *eliminate distractions*—through meeting redesign, focused work blocks, and attention-friendly environments—links directly to attention management literature (25). Our participants' emphasis on structured time mirrors organizational behavior findings that leader-driven work design, such as temporal boundaries and cognitive off-loading systems, enhances deep work (17). Although underexplored in educational contexts, this suggests that schools can benefit from explicit attention hygiene protocols.

The softer, interpersonal dimensions—*friendly and supportive behavior, flexibility in leader behavior, positive relationships, and empathy*—also proved critical. These findings echo emotional intelligence research showing that leaders

who regulate affect, respond empathetically, and create safety free cognitive resources for complex teaching and learning (11, 12). Women's leadership and equity studies add that inclusive, relational climates reduce attentional tax for underrepresented staff (19). Our data confirm that teachers' willingness to innovate and persist is strongly tied to feeling psychologically safe and personally valued.

Finally, *decision-making and problem-solving* and *analytical and critical thinking* complete the attentional system by providing rational structure. Participants described evidence-informed analysis, scenario evaluation, and disciplined prioritization. These findings corroborate the push in educational improvement science for data-driven, reflective decision-making (8, 10). They also align with broader organizational evidence that cognitive complexity and structured decision protocols protect against reactive, scattershot attention (16, 18). Coupled with *emotional and social intelligence*, these skills create leaders capable of sustained, adaptive focus in demanding contexts (14, 15).

Overall, the findings position attentive leadership as an integrative, multi-level construct. It is simultaneously strategic (vision and foresight), structural (attention management and knowledge design), and human-centered (emotional intelligence, empathy, support). This synthesis supports the growing claim that effective educational leadership is less about positional authority and more about designing conditions under which collective attention and energy are productively channeled (4-6). By confirming and contextualizing these components within educational systems, the present study advances a pragmatic framework that school managers can adapt to sustain focus amid information overload and reform fatigue.

This study is qualitative and context-specific, relying on semi-structured interviews with a limited number of educational managers and policy experts from one province. While the sample reached theoretical saturation, its relatively small size and regional focus mean the identified components may not fully represent other educational systems with different policy environments, cultural dynamics, or governance structures. Additionally, the coding and categorization process, though supported by validation steps, is interpretive and could be influenced by researcher bias. Another limitation is that the study did not quantitatively test the relationships among identified components or their predictive power for outcomes such as teacher engagement or student learning, limiting generalizability.

Future studies should test this conceptual framework using mixed methods and larger, more diverse samples across multiple regions and educational levels. Quantitative studies could validate the identified components through confirmatory factor analysis and structural modeling, linking them to measurable outcomes such as instructional quality, innovation adoption, and organizational resilience. Longitudinal research could examine how attentional leadership practices evolve over time and during crises such as pandemics or policy shifts. Comparative and cross-cultural studies would be valuable to explore how cultural and systemic factors shape attentional demands and effective leadership responses.

Educational policymakers and training institutes should integrate the identified components into leadership development programs, focusing not only on strategy and administration but also on attention design, emotional intelligence, and focus management. School leaders can implement practical tools such as meeting redesign, structured feedback systems, and priority pruning to protect cognitive bandwidth for teaching and learning. Mentoring and coaching can help leaders cultivate empathy and resilience, while organizational routines can be restructured to support deep work and adaptive change. By applying this framework, schools can strengthen focus, coherence, and well-being, ultimately improving teacher capacity and student achievement.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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