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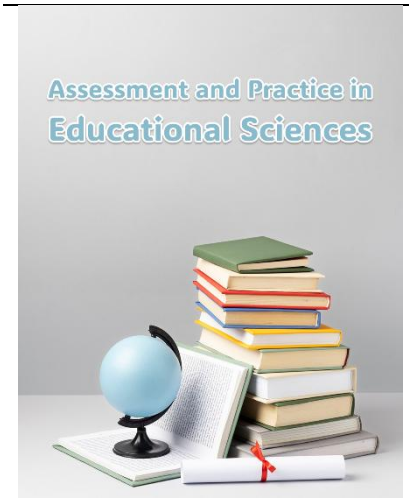

Validation of the Insightful Leadership Model Based on Organizational Excellence in the Educational System

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ABSTRACT

The educational system, as one of the key scientific institutions responsible for knowledge production and training individuals, must continually take steps to improve performance and achieve organizational excellence. One of the critical factors influencing organizational excellence within the educational system is the insightful leadership style. The present study aimed to validate the insightful leadership model based on organizational excellence in the educational system. This research was applied in purpose and descriptive-survey in method. The statistical population consisted of all principals of upper secondary schools (girls' and boys' schools) in the eight educational districts of Alborz Province, totaling 215 individuals. Based on Cochran's formula, a sample of 138 participants was determined and selected through simple random sampling. The data collection instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire comprising six components and 66 items, rated on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = very low to 5 = very high). Content and face validity of the questionnaire were confirmed using the opinions of academic supervisors and consultants. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients obtained as follows: outcomes = .75, contexts = .71, intervening conditions = .73, causal conditions = .81, strategies = .75, and core category = .80. Data analysis and hypothesis testing were conducted using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach with AMOS software. The findings indicated that causal conditions, intervening conditions, and contexts had positive and significant effects on the core category, with the strongest influence attributed to contexts followed by causal conditions. Moreover, the core category exerted a positive and significant effect on strategies, and strategies had a positive and significant effect on outcomes.

Keywords: Insightful leadership, organizational excellence, educational system

Introduction

In today's knowledge-driven and rapidly changing environment, educational systems are expected to go beyond their traditional mission of instruction and knowledge transfer and become dynamic learning organizations capable of innovation and sustained improvement. Organizational excellence, as a structured approach to achieving outstanding results for students, teachers, and the wider community, has gained increasing importance in the management of schools and educational institutions (1). In the face of global competition, technological disruptions, and evolving learner expectations, adopting leadership models

that promote transformation and continuous improvement is imperative (2). Among various leadership paradigms, visionary leadership has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for driving organizational excellence in education (3, 4).

Visionary leadership is broadly defined as the ability of leaders to articulate a compelling and shared vision of the future, inspire commitment, and align organizational resources to achieve long-term strategic goals (5, 6). Unlike transactional or purely administrative leadership, visionary leaders foster innovation, empower teachers, and cultivate a climate that encourages creativity and adaptability (7, 8). Such leadership is essential in education because schools function within complex sociocultural environments that demand forward-thinking strategies to remain relevant and effective (9, 10).

A growing body of research shows that visionary leadership is strongly linked to critical organizational outcomes such as teacher empowerment (11, 12), organizational trust and pride (13), organizational citizenship behavior (14), and psychological empowerment (15). In the educational context, visionary leaders influence not only internal processes but also the overall academic climate and professional development of teachers (16, 17). By setting a clear and inspiring direction, school leaders enable staff to navigate uncertainties, adapt to change, and pursue innovative practices (6, 18).

Organizational excellence models, such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), have been widely applied to guide educational institutions in achieving world-class performance (19, 20). These frameworks emphasize leadership as one of the main drivers of excellence by focusing on vision, people management, innovation, and sustainable results. Studies in Iran show that visionary leadership significantly supports the adoption of EFQM-based excellence criteria and improves managerial performance and service quality in schools (4, 19). Additionally, organizational maturity and excellence are directly influenced by the leadership approach of educational managers (2).

Leadership that is future-oriented and transformative is particularly important in addressing the systemic challenges faced by educational systems. These include rigid bureaucratic structures, limited resources, and resistance to change (21, 22). Visionary leaders overcome these obstacles by creating shared meaning and mobilizing organizational learning (3). Research also suggests that visionary leadership shapes organizational climate, which in turn enhances creativity and employee satisfaction (23, 24). Through promoting trust, openness, and empowerment, such leaders encourage teachers to innovate and adopt learner-centered pedagogies (25, 26).

The concept of digital and technology-oriented leadership has further expanded the scope of visionary leadership in modern education. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital platforms and reshaped educational delivery, requiring leaders to integrate technology while maintaining strategic direction (27, 28). Studies indicate that digital leadership capabilities complement visionary leadership by facilitating technology adoption and sustaining organizational excellence in turbulent times (18, 29). School principals who combine visionary thinking with digital competence are better positioned to lead transformational change (30).

Moreover, visionary leadership has been shown to influence teachers' readiness for change and willingness to innovate (3, 31). It fosters future orientation and enhances employees' identification with the leader's vision, which significantly increases proactive and change-oriented behaviors (7). Leaders with a compelling vision also build resilience within the organization, helping schools adapt to environmental shocks and maintain performance (30).

In Iranian educational contexts, the implementation of visionary leadership remains challenging due to structural and cultural barriers, including hierarchical decision-making and insufficient empowerment of teachers (32, 33). Nonetheless, empirical studies have shown that when applied effectively, visionary leadership can mediate organizational learning and creativity (9, 10). It also plays a vital role in aligning school objectives with national educational development plans and excellence standards (4, 34).

Recent scholarship highlights the importance of trust-building and empowerment as mechanisms through which visionary leaders influence teacher autonomy and instructional practices (11, 12). Studies also underline the significance of purposeful organizational forgetting—the capacity to discard outdated practices—in enabling visionary and distributed leadership to drive innovation (35). These findings suggest that visionary leadership is not static but evolves in response to organizational learning and change imperatives.

In addition, the interplay between visionary leadership and transformational leadership has been explored, showing that both share a future-oriented perspective but visionary leadership places stronger emphasis on long-term strategic foresight and coherent organizational narratives (33, 36). While transformational leaders inspire and motivate, visionary leaders go further by designing sustainable pathways toward excellence and embedding future orientation into organizational culture (29, 37).

Despite the growing body of research, there is still a need to contextualize visionary leadership models within specific cultural and educational systems. Iranian schools, for example, operate under unique policy frameworks and social expectations, requiring localized leadership frameworks that integrate global excellence models with indigenous values (16, 17). Validation of such models can provide school leaders and policymakers with practical tools to implement visionary strategies that drive performance, teacher engagement, and innovation (15, 34).

The present study addresses this gap by validating an insightful (visionary) leadership model grounded in organizational excellence for the educational system.

Methods and Materials

The present study was applied in purpose and descriptive-survey in design. The statistical population consisted of principals of upper secondary schools (girls' and boys' schools) in the eight educational districts of Alborz Province, totaling 215 individuals. Based on Cochran's formula, a sample of 138 participants was determined and selected using simple random sampling.

The data collection instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire containing six components and 66 items, rated on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = very low to 5 = very high). To establish the content and face validity of the questionnaire, the opinions of academic supervisors and advisors were used. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients obtained as follows: outcomes = .75, contexts = .71, intervening conditions = .73, causal conditions = .81, strategies = .75, and core category = .80. In addition, data analysis and hypothesis testing were performed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach with AMOS software.

Findings and Results

The demographic analysis showed that 51% of respondents were female and 49% were male. In terms of age, 6% were between 25 and 35 years old, 43% were between 35 and 45 years old, and 51% were over 45 years old. Regarding education level, 21% held a bachelor's degree, 71% a master's degree, and 8% a doctoral degree. In terms of work experience, 21% had 6 to 9 years of experience, and 79% had more than 9 years of experience.

Before presenting the model discussion, descriptive statistics of the study variables, including mean, variance, skewness, and kurtosis, were calculated. According to Table 1, all research variables followed a normal distribution; the mean of all variables exceeded 3. Since the variance values were less than 1, the dispersion of data around the mean was not high. Based on the Likert scale scoring, it can be concluded that the application of the insightful leadership model based on organizational excellence in the educational system largely achieves the strategies and outcomes identified in this study. The conditions and factors presented in this model are highly significant for achieving organizational excellence in the educational system.

In the intervening conditions, the mean score of human resource challenges was higher than that of internal–external organizational challenges. In the causal conditions, the factor quality management and evaluation obtained the highest mean. Among the strategies, systemic and decentralization strategies scored the highest mean. For the outcomes, individual outcomes showed the highest mean. Within the core category and contexts, the highest mean scores belonged respectively to attention to human resources and organizational structure and human resource development contexts.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Component	Indicator	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Intervening Conditions	Human resource challenges	3.69	0.532	-0.121	-0.118
	Internal–external organizational challenges	3.64	0.523	-0.069	-0.063
Causal Conditions	Vision recognition and foresight	3.77	0.771	-0.491	-0.625
	Attention to human resource development	3.71	0.564	-0.288	-0.232
	Participation development	3.77	0.627	-0.595	-0.821
	Quality management and evaluation	3.78	0.878	-0.711	-0.093
Core Category	Attention to human resources and organizational structure	3.62	0.412	0.214	-0.435
	Change management and organizational development	3.47	0.716	0.005	-0.373
	Vision and strategy transparency	3.61	0.484	0.048	-0.122
Strategies	Systemic and decentralization strategies	3.79	0.722	-0.620	-0.316
	Empowering human resources strategies	3.72	0.529	-0.241	-0.370
	Evaluation and monitoring strategies	3.78	0.624	-0.419	-0.322
Outcomes	Individual outcomes	3.67	0.542	-0.041	-0.242
	Organizational outcomes	3.55	0.570	-0.078	-0.131
Contexts	Human resource development contexts	3.74	0.553	-0.374	-0.457
	Organizational contexts	3.66	0.383	-0.086	-0.753

Next, the designed analytical model of the study was evaluated using AMOS software. After reviewing the output model, the goodness-of-fit indices were calculated based on the collected data. During the reliability testing of the questionnaire, some items were removed due to low reliability of certain variables. At this stage, factor loadings of the questionnaire items were assessed, and only items with a factor loading greater than 0.50 were retained; items with a factor loading below 0.50 were excluded from the confirmatory factor analysis, as such items can reduce the structural model fit indices.

Under these conditions, the final structural model of the study is shown in Figure 1, where all component factor loadings exceed 0.50. As observed in Figure 1, some correlations between measurement error terms were included to improve the model fit. Without these error correlations, the model's fit indices would not have reached an acceptable level. The detailed results of the model fit are provided in Table 2.

In Table 2, the values of the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Relative Fit Index (RFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) for the model presented in Figure 1 are reported.

Table 2. Model Fit Indices for the Measurement Model

Fit Index	Acceptable Range	Value Without Drawing Error Covariances	Value After Drawing Error Covariances	Result
GFI	GFI > 0.90	0.63	0.91	Model confirmed
NFI	NFI > 0.90	0.54	0.89	Acceptable
RFI	RFI > 0.90	0.72	0.92	Model confirmed
IFI	IFI > 0.90	0.71	0.91	Model confirmed
CFI	CFI > 0.90	0.66	0.88	Acceptable

According to Table 2, although not all indices fully reached the ideal acceptable thresholds, the values are close to the recommended range. Therefore, the model demonstrates an overall acceptable fit and can be considered reliable and valid for interpretation.

Based on the relationships among the variables in this model, as illustrated in Figure 1, the following results are presented:

Table 3. Path Coefficients among the Study Components

Relationship between Components	Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Test Statistic	Significance Level	Type of Effect
Causal conditions → Core category	0.54	0.12	4.50	< 0.001	Positive
Intervening conditions → Core category	0.51	0.09	5.67	< 0.001	Positive
Contexts → Core category	0.55	0.10	5.50	< 0.001	Positive
Core category → Strategies	0.60	0.11	5.45	< 0.001	Positive
Strategies → Outcomes	0.48	0.09	5.33	< 0.001	Positive

According to the results in Table 3, all the reported effects are statistically significant because the p-values are less than .05 (in fact, they are all below .001), and the test statistics exceed 1.96. Accordingly, causal conditions, intervening conditions, and contexts have a positive and significant effect on the core category, with the strongest influence from contexts followed by causal conditions. Additionally, the core category has a positive and significant impact on strategies, and strategies exert a positive and significant impact on outcomes.

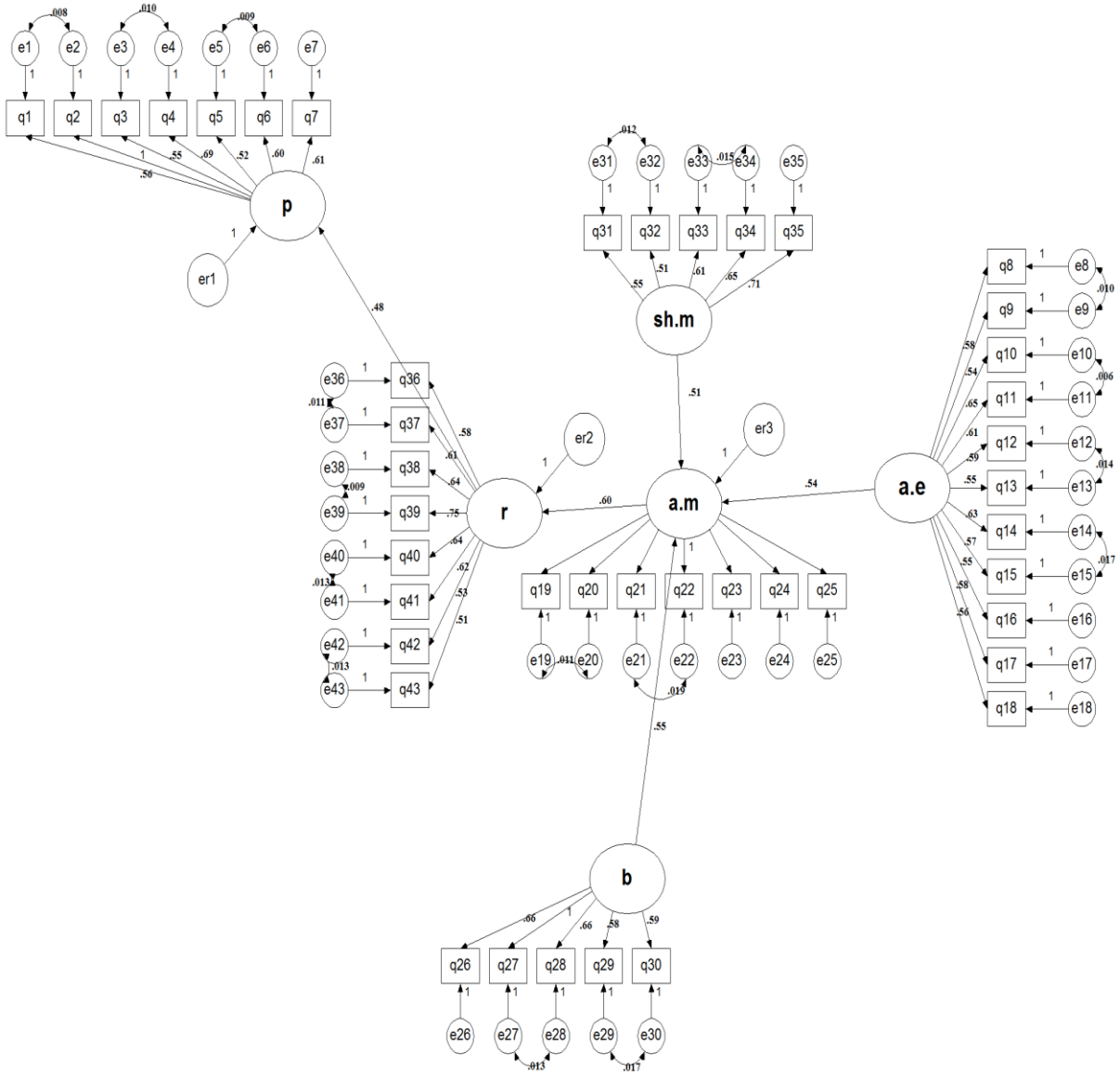

Figure 1. Structural Model of the Study

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to validate an insightful (visionary) leadership model grounded in the principles of organizational excellence in the educational system. The structural equation modeling results confirmed that causal conditions, intervening conditions, and contexts had a positive and significant effect on the core category, and the core category itself significantly influenced strategies, which in turn had a strong positive impact on outcomes. These findings support the theoretical assumption that visionary leadership in education is not a single-dimensional construct but emerges from an interactive system of antecedents, enabling conditions, and strategic practices that collectively lead to performance excellence.

The finding that contexts exerted the strongest effect on the core category highlights the foundational importance of organizational culture, structural support, and human resource development in enabling visionary leadership to manifest effectively. This is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that without robust organizational contexts—such as supportive culture, well-defined structures, and aligned developmental initiatives—leaders struggle to translate vision into sustainable organizational capacity (19, 20). The current results also reinforce the EFQM perspective, which regards contextual enablers and people development as essential precursors to excellence (1, 2).

Similarly, the positive and significant effect of causal conditions—including future-oriented thinking, quality management, and participatory decision-making—confirms that visionary leadership begins with strategic foresight and proactive planning. Leaders who invest in quality management and continuous evaluation create clarity and shared commitment among staff, an outcome supported by studies linking visionary leadership to proactive organizational learning and innovation (3, 23, 36). The high factor loading of quality management and evaluation also corresponds with research demonstrating that effective vision-driven leadership requires rigorous assessment systems to align practice with strategic goals (4, 34).

The results further showed that intervening conditions, such as human resource challenges and organizational complexities, positively influence the core leadership processes when effectively managed. Although such conditions might appear as barriers, this finding suggests that leaders who address and strategically respond to these challenges can use them as leverage points for improvement. Prior studies have emphasized that visionary leaders often transform barriers into opportunities by mobilizing collective learning and fostering resilience (21, 22). In line with (24) and (13), the present results indicate that navigating organizational complexities while promoting trust and open communication strengthens the visionary core of leadership models.

A crucial outcome of this research is the direct positive link between the core category and strategies, suggesting that visionary leadership processes anchored in clear vision, human-centered values, and organizational learning directly translate into actionable strategies. These strategies—such as systemic planning, decentralization, and teacher empowerment—represent the practical mechanisms by which visionary leadership drives organizational transformation. These findings are consistent with the work of (9) and (10), who found that visionary leaders in Iranian educational settings enhance creativity and innovation by designing empowering and participatory strategies. Additionally, research by (12) and (11) confirms that empowerment-oriented strategies create teacher autonomy and academic optimism, which are critical for long-term excellence.

Moreover, the study validated the strong influence of strategies on outcomes, affirming that carefully designed visionary strategies lead to tangible results such as improved individual performance, organizational effectiveness, and culture change. This aligns with (37), who argued that visionary leadership promotes innovation through clear goal alignment, and with (26), who linked leadership-driven strategies to teacher performance. The strong outcomes found here echo findings by (29) and (38) showing that visionary academic leaders can shape institutional culture and significantly enhance faculty productivity.

Another important insight is that human resources and organizational structure, as part of the core category, were particularly influential in this model. These results reaffirm the notion that visionary leadership is relational and capacity-building, rather than merely symbolic. Prior research shows that leaders who invest in staff development and organizational design create the conditions for creativity, resilience, and sustained excellence (32, 33). (35) further points to the role of purposeful organizational forgetting, suggesting that leaders must intentionally replace outdated practices with new, future-oriented systems to maintain adaptive excellence.

The results also resonate with emerging literature on digital and technology-enabled visionary leadership. As schools undergo rapid digital transformation, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders must integrate technological strategies into their visionary frameworks (27, 28). The present study's emphasis on strategic adaptation is in line with (18), who found that digital leadership capabilities reinforce organizational excellence by facilitating innovation and resilience. Integrating digital dimensions within visionary leadership could further strengthen strategies and outcomes, especially as education continues to evolve in technology-rich contexts (30).

Our findings contribute to the refinement of visionary leadership theory by demonstrating the interdependence of structural enablers, human development, and strategic processes. While previous models have often treated visionary leadership as primarily inspirational or symbolic (14, 31), the current research shows that its effectiveness depends on systematically aligning contextual supports with strategic actions. This integrative perspective bridges the gap between Western excellence models like EFQM and local cultural realities (16, 17).

From a practical standpoint, the validated model provides a roadmap for educational leaders to translate vision into practice. It clarifies that vision alone is insufficient; leaders must actively shape enabling contexts, anticipate and manage organizational challenges, and implement coherent strategies that empower teachers and optimize resources. This echoes (3) and (34), who emphasized the importance of coupling vision with organizational learning and quality improvement systems.

Finally, the present results reinforce the understanding that visionary leadership is culturally sensitive. Iranian schools face unique policy, structural, and social constraints (15, 32), making the validation of localized models essential. The strong predictive power of contextual enablers in this study underscores the need for leadership development programs that not only teach visionary skills but also address structural and cultural barriers to their implementation (4, 19).

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it was conducted within a specific cultural and educational context, focusing on upper secondary schools in Alborz Province. The findings may not fully generalize to other provinces, educational levels, or non-Iranian contexts where organizational structures and cultural factors differ. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from school principals, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or individual interpretation of leadership behaviors. Although measures were taken to ensure validity and reliability, perceptions might not perfectly reflect actual practices. Third, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; while the structural model suggests directional relationships, longitudinal or experimental designs would provide stronger evidence for causality. Finally, while the model incorporated key constructs such as contextual enablers and strategies, other potentially influential variables—such as political factors, external policy pressures, and community engagement—were not examined.

Future research could expand the scope of this model by testing it across diverse educational settings, including primary schools, vocational institutes, and higher education institutions. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would help evaluate the model's adaptability and highlight culturally specific dimensions of visionary leadership. Longitudinal research is recommended to track how visionary leadership evolves over time and how sustained strategies influence long-term excellence outcomes. Mixed-methods designs could provide richer insights by combining quantitative modeling with qualitative interviews or focus groups to understand how leaders enact vision in complex environments. Researchers might

also examine the integration of digital transformation and technological innovation into visionary leadership models, exploring how digital capabilities interact with human-centered strategies to drive excellence. Additionally, testing mediating and moderating variables—such as organizational resilience, teacher psychological safety, or purposeful organizational forgetting—could deepen understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

Educational policymakers and practitioners can use the validated model as a practical tool for leadership development and organizational planning. Leadership training programs should emphasize not only vision articulation but also the creation of supportive organizational contexts and strategic systems that enable transformation. Schools should invest in capacity building, especially in human resources and structural alignment, to strengthen the foundation for visionary initiatives. Empowering teachers through participatory decision-making and professional development will be essential to translating vision into action. Moreover, integrating digital leadership competencies into training can prepare school leaders to navigate technological change effectively while maintaining focus on organizational excellence. Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems aligned with the model's dimensions can guide continuous improvement and ensure that visionary efforts lead to measurable outcomes in teaching quality, innovation, and overall school performance.

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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.

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