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A Qualitative Exploration of Value-Oriented Layers in School Leadership in Iraq: A Thematic-Network Representation of Themes Derived from Expert Interviews

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore, conceptualize, and develop a value-oriented framework of occupational values among Iraqi primary school principals by identifying the underlying dimensions of value-based school leadership through expert perspectives. The study employed a qualitative design grounded in thematic network analysis. Participants consisted of 15 experts in educational management, school leadership, educational policy, and primary school administration in Iraq, selected through purposive and theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews based on 10 open-ended questions. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the Attride-Stirling thematic network approach with the support of MAXQDA 24 software. The analytical process involved open coding, identification of basic themes, development of organizing themes, and construction of global themes. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation, member checking, independent coding by multiple researchers, and audit trail procedures were applied. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient, yielding a value of 0.81, indicating substantial agreement and analytical consistency. The analysis revealed that occupational values of Iraqi primary school principals constitute a multidimensional, context-sensitive, and interconnected construct. Seven overarching themes emerged from the thematic network: (1) personal values and professional ethics, (2) socio-cultural values, (3) social responsibility and justice, (4) educational leadership and school management, (5) economic and institutional values, (6) authority and transformational influence, and (7) contextual and indigenous values. The findings demonstrated that principals' occupational values are shaped not only by individual ethical commitments but also by social relationships, institutional support systems, leadership responsibilities, and the unique socio-political realities of Iraq. The thematic structure further indicated dynamic interactions among personal, organizational, and contextual dimensions, suggesting that value-based leadership is a holistic phenomenon embedded within broader educational and societal environments. The study concludes that value-based school leadership in Iraqi primary education is founded upon a complex network of ethical, social, professional, institutional, and contextual values. Effective school leadership extends beyond administrative competence and depends on the integration of personal integrity, social commitment, educational stewardship, institutional support, and adaptive responses to local conditions.

Keywords: Occupational Values; School Leadership; Primary School Principals; Educational Leadership; Professional Ethics; Value-Based Leadership.

Introduction

Values constitute one of the most fundamental constructs in the behavioral and social sciences because they provide enduring standards through which individuals evaluate situations, establish priorities, and guide their actions. Unlike transient attitudes or preferences, values are relatively stable beliefs regarding desirable goals and modes of conduct that influence decision-making across a wide range of personal and professional contexts (1). According to the theory of basic human values, values form an organized system that shapes individuals' motivations, perceptions, and behavioral choices. This theoretical perspective suggests that people differ not only in the values they hold but also in the relative importance they assign to those values, resulting in variations in attitudes, judgments, and professional behaviors (1). Subsequent cross-cultural research has further demonstrated that although value systems may be universally recognizable, their expression and prioritization are profoundly influenced by social, cultural, and institutional environments (2). In contemporary societies characterized by rapid technological, economic, and social transformations, values remain a central mechanism through which individuals navigate complexity and maintain coherence in their personal and professional lives. Recent studies have highlighted the continuing significance of personal values in shaping engagement, achievement-related behaviors, social participation, and professional aspirations, emphasizing that values serve as powerful predictors of human behavior across educational and organizational settings (3-5).

Within organizational contexts, the concept of values has evolved into the more specific construct of work or occupational values. Occupational values refer to the set of beliefs, preferences, and priorities that individuals associate with their professional roles and work environments. These values influence what employees consider important in their occupations, including meaningful work, social contribution, autonomy, professional growth, recognition, economic security, and opportunities for influence (6). Occupational values have attracted growing scholarly attention because they provide a framework for understanding employee motivation, job satisfaction, career choices, organizational commitment, and leadership behavior. Contemporary research indicates that occupational values are multidimensional constructs encompassing intrinsic dimensions such as personal fulfillment and learning, relational dimensions such as collaboration and social contribution, and extrinsic dimensions such as compensation, status, and job security (7, 8). Recent developments in occupational value measurement have further expanded the understanding of how values interact with occupational roles and organizational expectations. The development of comprehensive instruments such as the Occupational Values Inventory demonstrates that occupational values are not merely abstract concepts but empirically measurable constructs capable of explaining substantial variation in professional behavior and career outcomes (8). Similarly, the Work Values Scale has shown that occupational values provide a meaningful lens through which professional priorities and workplace decisions can be understood and evaluated (6). Consequently, occupational values are increasingly recognized as a critical component of organizational effectiveness and leadership performance.

The relevance of occupational values becomes particularly pronounced in educational organizations, where leadership responsibilities extend beyond administrative management to encompass ethical guidance, educational improvement, social responsibility, and cultural influence. Schools are unique institutions because their primary mission involves the development of human potential, requiring leaders who can balance managerial efficiency with educational and moral responsibilities. In this context, school principals occupy a pivotal position in shaping organizational culture, facilitating teaching and learning processes, supporting teachers, engaging families, and promoting student success. Research in educational leadership consistently demonstrates that the values and beliefs held by school leaders influence their leadership practices, strategic priorities, and interactions with stakeholders (9). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that transformational leadership behaviors

contribute significantly to school effectiveness through mechanisms such as vision building, teacher motivation, professional collaboration, and organizational commitment (9). Likewise, direction-setting leadership practices have been shown to influence educational outcomes by establishing shared goals, fostering collective purpose, and aligning organizational efforts toward school improvement (10). These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness is deeply rooted in the value systems that guide principals' decisions and actions. Therefore, understanding the occupational values of school principals is essential for explaining how leadership practices emerge and how educational organizations achieve their goals.

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward ethical dimensions of educational leadership. The growing complexity of educational environments, technological transformation, and societal expectations have intensified the demand for leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, accountability, and moral responsibility. Ethical leadership is now widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective school administration because it shapes organizational trust, professional relationships, and the overall moral climate of schools (11). Educational leaders are frequently required to make decisions involving competing interests, limited resources, and diverse stakeholder expectations. In such circumstances, occupational values provide the normative foundation that enables principals to balance organizational objectives with ethical considerations. Studies examining principals' ethical leadership have shown that values such as justice, care, transparency, and responsibility contribute significantly to positive educational outcomes and stronger school communities (11). Moreover, the influence of personal values on engagement and commitment has been observed across educational settings, suggesting that values function not only as moral guides but also as motivational forces that sustain professional effort and resilience (3). Consequently, the investigation of occupational values offers important insights into the mechanisms through which school leaders interpret their roles, establish priorities, and navigate professional challenges.

The significance of occupational values is further amplified when educational leadership is examined within specific cultural and institutional contexts. Contemporary value research emphasizes that values cannot be fully understood outside the environments in which they are enacted. While universal value structures may exist, the meanings attached to occupational roles and leadership responsibilities vary across societies and institutions (2). Cultural norms, historical experiences, social expectations, and institutional arrangements all contribute to shaping occupational value systems. Research on cultural values and social participation demonstrates that values are continuously negotiated within broader social contexts and are influenced by collective identities and societal transformations (5). Similarly, studies examining entrepreneurial intentions and organizational behavior indicate that personal and professional values are often embedded within complex social systems rather than functioning as isolated psychological traits (4). These observations are particularly relevant in educational settings, where school leaders must simultaneously respond to institutional requirements, community expectations, and cultural traditions. Therefore, efforts to understand school leadership values require context-sensitive approaches capable of capturing the dynamic interactions between individual beliefs and environmental conditions.

The Iraqi educational system presents a particularly important context for examining occupational values among school principals. Over the past decades, Iraq has experienced substantial political, social, and institutional transformations that have affected educational structures, school governance, and leadership practices. Educational leaders in Iraq often operate within environments characterized by administrative complexity, resource limitations, evolving policy frameworks, and diverse community expectations. In such circumstances, principals are expected not only to manage schools effectively but also to serve as educational leaders, community representatives, problem-solvers, and agents of organizational stability. These multifaceted responsibilities suggest that occupational values play a critical role in shaping how principals interpret their professional obligations and respond to contextual challenges. However, despite the practical importance of occupational values, empirical investigations focusing specifically on the value systems of Iraqi primary school principals remain limited.

Existing educational leadership studies have frequently concentrated on leadership styles, organizational performance, or administrative competencies while paying comparatively less attention to the underlying values that guide leadership behavior. As a result, there is a limited understanding of how occupational values are conceptualized, prioritized, and enacted within the Iraqi educational context.

Another important limitation in the existing literature concerns the predominance of quantitative approaches based on predefined conceptual frameworks. Although quantitative instruments have contributed significantly to measuring work values and leadership characteristics, they may not fully capture the contextual nuances and culturally embedded meanings associated with occupational values in specific educational environments. Scholars have increasingly emphasized the need for exploratory and qualitative methodologies when investigating complex and context-dependent constructs such as values (12). Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to explore participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and professional realities, thereby revealing dimensions that may remain invisible within standardized measurement frameworks. Semi-structured interviewing, in particular, provides an effective means of accessing participants' perspectives while maintaining sufficient flexibility to explore emerging themes and contextual influences (13). Furthermore, thematic analysis has become one of the most widely used approaches for identifying and organizing patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Through systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation, thematic analysis facilitates the development of rich conceptual frameworks grounded in participants' experiences (12). Such approaches are especially valuable when the objective is to construct contextually relevant models capable of informing policy, practice, and future research.

Recent efforts to conceptualize occupational values among Iraqi school leaders have highlighted the potential value of contextually grounded frameworks. Preliminary evidence suggests that occupational values among Iraqi primary school principals encompass a wide range of ethical, social, educational, institutional, and contextual considerations that cannot be adequately represented through traditional leadership models alone (14). These findings indicate that occupational values may function as an integrative structure linking personal beliefs, professional responsibilities, organizational expectations, and environmental realities. Understanding this structure is important not only for theoretical advancement but also for practical applications related to leadership development, principal selection, professional evaluation, and educational reform. A clearer understanding of principals' occupational values can provide educational policymakers and administrators with valuable insights into the factors that influence leadership effectiveness and organizational improvement. Moreover, identifying the value dimensions that characterize successful school leadership may contribute to the design of targeted professional development programs and more contextually responsive leadership preparation initiatives.

Given the theoretical significance of occupational values, the central role of school principals in educational improvement, the growing emphasis on ethical and value-based leadership, and the limited empirical knowledge regarding occupational values within the Iraqi educational system, a comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon is both timely and necessary. Therefore, the present study aimed to qualitatively explore and conceptualize the occupational values of Iraqi primary school principals through thematic network analysis in order to develop a contextually grounded model of value-oriented school leadership.

Methods and Materials

The present study was conducted using a qualitative research design aimed at exploring and conceptualizing the occupational values underlying value-oriented school leadership among Iraqi primary school principals. Given the exploratory nature of the research objective and the limited availability of context-specific theoretical models addressing occupational values within the Iraqi educational system, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate methodological framework. The study

was grounded in an interpretive paradigm that sought to understand participants' perceptions, experiences, and professional meanings regarding leadership values within their natural educational and organizational contexts. More specifically, the study employed thematic network analysis as an analytical strategy to identify, organize, and conceptualize patterns of meaning emerging from expert narratives.

The study population consisted of experts in educational management, experienced primary school principals, educational policymakers, senior educational administrators, and university faculty members specializing in educational leadership and school administration in Iraq. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise, professional experience, and familiarity with leadership practices in Iraqi primary schools. To ensure the richness and relevance of the collected data, inclusion criteria required participants to possess substantial professional experience in educational administration, school leadership, policy development, or educational research. Particular attention was given to recruiting individuals capable of providing reflective and analytical insights into the values that shape principals' professional behaviors and decision-making processes.

Sampling followed the principles of theoretical sampling, whereby participant selection was guided by the emerging needs of the analysis rather than predetermined numerical targets. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated new concepts, categories, or thematic insights. Saturation was reached after interviewing fifteen participants. The final sample included university professors of educational management, senior educational officials, policymakers, and highly experienced school principals representing different educational and geographical contexts within Iraq. The diversity of participants contributed to the comprehensiveness of the findings by incorporating perspectives from multiple levels of the educational system. Prior to participation, all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed specifically to explore participants' perceptions and experiences regarding occupational values in school leadership. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it allows researchers to investigate predetermined topics while maintaining sufficient flexibility to pursue emerging themes and probe participants' responses in greater depth. This method facilitates the collection of rich and detailed data by encouraging participants to articulate their experiences, beliefs, and interpretations in their own words.

An interview guide consisting of ten open-ended questions was developed based on an extensive review of the literature related to occupational values, educational leadership, ethical leadership, school management, and value-based decision-making. The interview questions were designed to elicit participants' views regarding the personal, ethical, social, organizational, and contextual values that influence the professional behavior of primary school principals. In addition to the primary questions, follow-up and probing questions were used when necessary to clarify responses, explore examples, and deepen understanding of specific issues raised during the interviews.

The interviews were conducted individually in locations and settings convenient for participants. Depending on participants' preferences and accessibility, interviews were held either face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for detailed discussion of the topics under investigation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. The transcription process preserved participants' original expressions and meanings, thereby facilitating a rigorous and faithful interpretation of their perspectives.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data collection process, the interview protocol was reviewed by experts in educational management and qualitative research prior to implementation. Feedback from these experts was used to refine the wording,

clarity, and relevance of the interview questions. Throughout the data collection phase, the researcher maintained reflective notes documenting contextual observations, emerging ideas, and methodological decisions. These notes served as supplementary data sources and contributed to the transparency and rigor of the research process.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the thematic network framework proposed by Attride-Stirling. This analytical approach was selected because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data while simultaneously illustrating the relationships among themes through a network structure. Thematic network analysis is particularly useful for exploring complex and multidimensional constructs such as occupational values because it enables researchers to move from detailed textual data toward broader conceptual interpretations.

The analysis began with repeated reading and familiarization with the interview transcripts. During this stage, the researcher immersed themselves in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives and identify preliminary patterns of meaning. Subsequently, open coding was performed by systematically examining the transcripts and assigning labels to meaningful segments of text. The initial coding process generated a large number of codes representing participants' descriptions of values, beliefs, behaviors, responsibilities, and contextual experiences related to school leadership.

Following the initial coding phase, similar and conceptually related codes were grouped together to form basic themes. These basic themes represented recurring patterns identified across multiple interviews. Through a process of constant comparison and iterative refinement, related basic themes were subsequently integrated into broader organizing themes that captured higher-level conceptual categories. Finally, the organizing themes were synthesized into global themes representing the overarching dimensions of occupational values among Iraqi primary school principals. The final thematic network provided a comprehensive representation of the relationships among themes and illustrated the conceptual structure underlying value-oriented school leadership.

All coding and data management procedures were facilitated using MAXQDA 24 qualitative data analysis software. The software enabled systematic organization of interview transcripts, coding processes, theme development, retrieval of coded segments, and visualization of thematic relationships. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher continuously compared emerging interpretations with the original interview data to ensure consistency and conceptual accuracy.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to confirm their accuracy and consistency with their experiences. Triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across participants representing different professional roles and by involving multiple researchers in reviewing and discussing the coding process. Dependability was enhanced through detailed documentation of analytical decisions and maintenance of an audit trail. To evaluate coding consistency, a portion of the data was independently coded by a second researcher, and inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The resulting kappa value of 0.81 indicated a high level of agreement and demonstrated satisfactory reliability of the coding procedure. Together, these procedures contributed to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and overall trustworthiness of the study findings.

Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of the study involved 15 experts purposefully selected from among educational management specialists, experienced primary school principals, educational policymakers, university faculty members in educational administration, and senior educational administrators in Iraq. Participant selection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds and administrative experiences, ensuring

comprehensive coverage of perspectives related to school leadership and occupational values. Of the 15 participants, 6 were university faculty members specializing in educational administration and leadership, 5 were experienced primary school principals with more than 15 years of managerial experience, and 4 were educational policymakers and senior administrators within the Iraqi educational system. Participants' professional experience ranged from 10 to 32 years, with a mean professional experience of approximately 19 years. The inclusion of experts from different provinces and institutional contexts contributed to the richness of the data and enhanced the transferability of the findings.

Table 1. Thematic Network of Occupational Values among Iraqi Primary School Principals

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes (Codes)
1. Personal Values and Professional Ethics	Self-awareness and Personal Readiness	Meaningfulness of work; professional purpose; continuous learning; personal growth; intrinsic satisfaction; self-development
	Professional Ethics and Spirituality	Ethical commitment; integrity; accountability; autonomy; spiritual motivation; responsibility toward students
2. Socio-Cultural Values	Internal School Relationships	Respect; collaboration; teamwork; trust-building; interpersonal communication; professional solidarity
	External School Relationships	Parent engagement; community participation; social status of principals; role modeling; cultural development; social representation
3. Social Responsibility and Justice	Service Orientation	Supporting student development; talent cultivation; helping disadvantaged students; community service; student-centered leadership
	Justice and Social Responsibility	Educational equity; equal opportunities; student welfare; citizenship values; social participation; contribution to community development
4. Educational Leadership and School Management	Educational Leadership	Instructional supervision; guidance of teaching and learning; teacher empowerment; educational improvement; academic monitoring
	School Administration	School discipline; adherence to regulations; transparency in decision-making; effectiveness; strategic planning; problem-solving
5. Economic and Institutional Values	Job Security and Professional Welfare	Employment security; stable income; professional benefits; safe working conditions; work-life balance
	Rewards and Motivation	Career advancement opportunities; formal recognition; fair evaluation; incentives; access to educational resources
6. Authority and Transformational Influence	Administrative Authority and Control	Decision-making authority; professional autonomy; resource management; supervision; vision setting
	Influence and Transformational Impact	Social influence; change leadership; policy influence; professional prestige; educational guidance
7. Contextual and Indigenous Values	Environmental Challenges	Political pressures; administrative bureaucracy; insecurity; instability; resource constraints
	Dynamic Adaptation	Obtaining external support; crisis management; school reconstruction; responding to parental expectations; contextual responsiveness

The thematic analysis resulted in a highly integrated conceptual structure composed of seven global themes, fourteen organizing themes, and numerous interconnected basic themes. Examination of the extracted thematic network demonstrated that occupational values among Iraqi primary school principals are not confined to individual ethical dispositions but rather emerge from the interaction between personal beliefs, professional responsibilities, institutional structures, social expectations, and contextual realities. The first global theme highlighted the importance of internal motivational resources, ethical commitments, and professional purpose as the foundation of managerial behavior. Participants consistently emphasized that effective school leadership begins with self-awareness, professional responsibility, and moral integrity. The second global theme revealed the central role of social and cultural relationships in shaping leadership practices. Respect, collaboration, trust, and community engagement were repeatedly identified as critical components of successful school administration. The third global theme demonstrated that participants viewed educational leadership as inherently connected to social justice, equity, and service to students and society. Educational leaders were expected not only to manage schools efficiently but also to contribute to social welfare and community development.

The fourth global theme focused on the instructional and administrative dimensions of leadership. Participants stressed the importance of balancing educational leadership functions, such as teacher empowerment and instructional improvement, with

administrative responsibilities including planning, discipline, transparency, and organizational effectiveness. The fifth global theme indicated that occupational values are also influenced by institutional support systems. Job security, fair compensation, recognition, and access to resources were considered essential conditions for sustaining motivation and professional commitment. The sixth global theme reflected the significance of authority and transformational influence, emphasizing that school leaders require sufficient autonomy, decision-making power, and capacity to influence educational change both within and beyond their schools. Finally, the seventh global theme revealed the unique contextual characteristics of the Iraqi educational environment. Participants described how political pressures, bureaucratic constraints, instability, and post-crisis reconstruction efforts influence their professional values and leadership priorities. Collectively, these findings illustrate that occupational values are embedded within a complex and dynamic system that combines personal, organizational, social, and contextual dimensions.



Figure 1. Conceptual Thematic Network of Occupational Values among Iraqi Primary School Principals

The thematic network presented in Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual architecture of occupational values identified in this study. At the center of the model lies the construct of occupational values, which is connected to seven interdependent global themes. The figure demonstrates that personal values and professional ethics function as the internal core of leadership behavior, while socio-cultural values and social responsibility provide the relational and societal foundations of professional practice. Educational leadership and school management constitute the operational dimension through which values are translated into everyday actions and organizational processes. Economic and institutional values provide the structural support necessary for sustaining professional commitment and effectiveness. Authority and transformational influence represent the strategic dimension of leadership, enabling principals to guide change and shape educational outcomes. Finally, contextual and indigenous values form the environmental layer surrounding the model, reflecting the influence of Iraq’s specific political,

cultural, and institutional conditions. The figure highlights the dynamic relationships among all dimensions and demonstrates that occupational values are not isolated characteristics but interconnected elements within a comprehensive system of value-based school leadership. The network further suggests that effective leadership emerges when these dimensions operate in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner, creating a coherent framework that guides decision-making, professional conduct, and educational improvement.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explore and conceptualize the occupational values of Iraqi primary school principals through a qualitative thematic-network approach. The findings revealed that occupational values constitute a multidimensional and contextually embedded construct organized around seven global themes: personal values and professional ethics, socio-cultural values, social responsibility and justice, educational leadership and school management, economic and institutional values, authority and transformational influence, and contextual and indigenous values. Collectively, these findings suggest that occupational values among school leaders are not limited to individual moral characteristics but emerge through the interaction of personal beliefs, professional responsibilities, organizational structures, and environmental conditions. This multidimensional perspective is consistent with contemporary value theories, which conceptualize values as interconnected systems of priorities that guide behavior across different domains of life and work (1, 2). The findings further support the proposition that occupational values are not static traits but dynamic frameworks through which professionals interpret their roles, make decisions, and establish priorities within complex organizational environments (6, 8).

One of the most prominent findings of the study was the centrality of personal values and professional ethics as the foundational layer of occupational values. Participants consistently emphasized meaningful work, professional purpose, self-development, ethical commitment, integrity, and responsibility toward students. This finding suggests that effective school leadership in Iraq begins with an internal value system that provides direction and coherence to managerial behavior. Such a finding aligns closely with Schwartz's theory of basic values, which proposes that values function as guiding principles that influence choices and actions across contexts (1). Similarly, cross-cultural investigations have demonstrated that personal values remain powerful determinants of behavior despite variations in social and institutional environments (2). The importance of ethical commitment observed in the present study is also consistent with recent literature emphasizing the role of ethical leadership in educational settings. Ho argued that ethical leadership has become increasingly important in contemporary schools because it promotes trust, transparency, accountability, and organizational legitimacy (11). The findings therefore reinforce the notion that occupational values are deeply rooted in moral principles and that educational leadership cannot be fully understood without considering the ethical foundations that guide professional conduct.

The second major finding concerned the importance of socio-cultural values, including respect, trust, collaboration, teamwork, community engagement, and positive relationships with parents and local communities. Participants viewed school leadership as a fundamentally relational activity that extends beyond formal administrative duties. This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that occupational values are not solely individual attributes but are enacted through social interactions and collective relationships. Previous research has shown that values are continuously shaped and reinforced through social participation and cultural engagement (5). In educational organizations, leadership effectiveness is strongly associated with the ability to establish trust, facilitate collaboration, and build social capital among stakeholders. Meta-analytic evidence has shown that school leaders who foster shared goals and collaborative cultures contribute positively to school improvement and organizational effectiveness (10). Likewise, transformational leadership research highlights the importance of interpersonal influence, collective purpose, and relationship-building as mechanisms through which leaders affect

organizational outcomes (9). Therefore, the prominence of socio-cultural values in the present study supports existing evidence that effective school leadership depends substantially on leaders' ability to cultivate meaningful relationships both within and beyond the school environment.

Another important finding was the emergence of social responsibility and justice as a distinct dimension of occupational values. Participants consistently referred to educational equity, support for disadvantaged students, student welfare, citizenship development, and service to society. These findings indicate that Iraqi primary school principals perceive schools not merely as institutions for academic instruction but as social organizations responsible for promoting fairness, inclusion, and community development. Such perspectives are consistent with contemporary understandings of educational leadership that emphasize social justice, equity, and the broader societal purposes of schooling. Ethical leadership frameworks similarly argue that educational leaders have responsibilities that extend beyond organizational performance to include moral obligations toward students and communities (11). Moreover, research examining the relationship between values and social engagement suggests that individuals whose values prioritize collective welfare and social contribution are more likely to engage in behaviors that support community development and social cohesion (4). The findings of the present study therefore suggest that occupational values among Iraqi principals encompass a strong orientation toward service and social responsibility, reflecting the broader educational mission of fostering individual and societal development.

The findings also highlighted the significance of educational leadership and school management as a major occupational value domain. Participants emphasized instructional supervision, teacher empowerment, learning improvement, strategic planning, transparency, discipline, and problem-solving. This result underscores the dual nature of school leadership, which requires principals to balance instructional responsibilities with administrative effectiveness. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that school leadership influences educational outcomes through both pedagogical and organizational pathways (9). Transformational leadership studies have shown that principals contribute to school effectiveness by motivating teachers, developing professional capacity, and creating supportive learning environments (9). Similarly, direction-setting leadership practices influence organizational performance by establishing clear goals, fostering shared vision, and aligning school activities with educational priorities (10). The present findings extend this literature by suggesting that such leadership behaviors are grounded in occupational values rather than merely technical competencies. Principals who value learning, transparency, accountability, and professional development are more likely to engage in leadership practices that enhance educational quality and organizational effectiveness.

A further noteworthy finding was the identification of economic and institutional values as an integral component of principals' occupational value systems. Participants highlighted job security, professional welfare, fair evaluation, recognition, career advancement, and access to resources as important aspects of their occupational experiences. This finding is consistent with contemporary models of occupational values, which recognize that professional motivation is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic considerations (6, 8). Research on work values has repeatedly demonstrated that individuals seek a balance between meaningful work and adequate institutional support (7). Occupational satisfaction and commitment are strengthened when organizations provide fair rewards, professional recognition, and opportunities for growth (6). The prominence of these themes in the present study indicates that principals' occupational values are not restricted to moral and educational ideals but also encompass expectations regarding institutional fairness and professional sustainability. These findings suggest that educational systems seeking to strengthen school leadership must consider not only leadership training but also the organizational conditions that support professional commitment and effectiveness.

The study further revealed that authority and transformational influence constitute a distinct dimension of occupational values. Participants emphasized decision-making authority, professional autonomy, resource control, change leadership, policy

influence, and social impact. These findings indicate that principals view influence and leadership capacity as important professional values rather than merely formal administrative responsibilities. This perspective aligns closely with transformational leadership theory, which conceptualizes leadership as a process of influencing organizational members toward shared goals and meaningful change (9). School leaders who possess a strong sense of professional autonomy and influence are more likely to initiate innovation, guide organizational development, and respond effectively to emerging challenges. The findings are also consistent with evidence demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is enhanced when principals are empowered to make decisions, allocate resources, and shape educational practices within their institutions (10). Consequently, the present study suggests that occupational values related to authority and influence serve as important drivers of proactive and transformational leadership behavior.

Perhaps the most distinctive finding of the study was the emergence of contextual and indigenous values as a separate global theme. Participants described how political pressures, bureaucratic constraints, instability, resource limitations, crisis management responsibilities, and community expectations shape their professional values and leadership priorities. This finding provides strong evidence for the contextual nature of occupational values and supports arguments that values cannot be fully understood independently of the environments in which they are enacted (2). Cultural and institutional contexts influence how individuals interpret professional responsibilities and determine which values become most salient in specific situations (5). The contextual challenges described by participants suggest that Iraqi school principals must continuously adapt their leadership practices to changing environmental conditions while maintaining commitment to educational goals. This finding also aligns with the context-sensitive model of occupational values proposed in recent research on Iraqi educational leadership, which emphasizes the interaction between individual values and institutional realities (14). Consequently, the study contributes to the growing recognition that occupational values should be understood as culturally and institutionally embedded phenomena rather than universal and context-free constructs.

Overall, the findings indicate that occupational values among Iraqi primary school principals constitute a comprehensive framework integrating ethical, social, educational, institutional, transformational, and contextual dimensions. The thematic network developed in this study extends existing theories of occupational values by demonstrating how value systems operate within the specific context of educational leadership. The findings also provide empirical support for contemporary value theories and educational leadership models while highlighting the importance of contextual adaptation in understanding leadership behavior. By revealing the interconnected nature of occupational values, the study offers a more holistic understanding of school leadership and contributes to the development of contextually grounded approaches to educational management and leadership development.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research employed a qualitative design involving a relatively small group of experts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to all school principals across Iraq. Second, although participants represented diverse professional backgrounds, the findings reflect perceptions and experiences within specific educational and institutional contexts. Third, the study relied on self-reported perspectives obtained through interviews, which may have been influenced by social desirability or personal interpretations. Finally, because the study focused on the qualitative exploration of occupational values, it did not examine the direct relationships between identified values and measurable educational outcomes such as school effectiveness, teacher performance, or student achievement.

Future studies should investigate the occupational values identified in this research using larger and more diverse samples of school principals across different Iraqi provinces and educational settings. Quantitative research could be conducted to test the structural validity of the proposed thematic model and examine relationships between occupational values and leadership

effectiveness. Comparative studies involving principals from different educational levels or countries would provide valuable insights into the cultural specificity of occupational values. Longitudinal investigations may also help determine how occupational values evolve over time in response to professional experience, policy changes, and social transformations. Additionally, future research should explore the potential effects of occupational values on organizational outcomes, including teacher engagement, school climate, educational quality, and student development.

The findings of this study have important implications for educational policy and leadership development. Educational authorities should incorporate occupational values into principal selection, evaluation, and professional development processes. Leadership preparation programs should emphasize ethical leadership, social responsibility, community engagement, and transformational influence alongside administrative competencies. Schools and educational systems should create supportive institutional environments that provide principals with adequate resources, fair evaluation systems, professional recognition, and opportunities for growth. Policies that strengthen professional autonomy and decision-making authority may further enhance principals' capacity to lead educational improvement. Finally, leadership development initiatives should be designed with sensitivity to local cultural and contextual realities, ensuring that professional values remain aligned with the specific needs and challenges of Iraqi educational institutions.

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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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