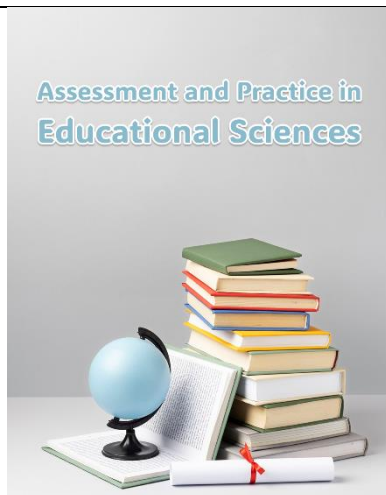




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Presenting a Paradigm Model of Instructional Leadership in Elementary Education in Kerman Province: A Qualitative Approach

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to develop a model of instructional leadership for elementary education in Kerman Province. In terms of purpose, this research was applied, and in terms of the type of data, it was qualitative. With respect to the nature and type of the study, it falls within the category of qualitative research. The study population consisted of experts in the field of educational management who held doctoral degrees and had authored books, articles, and research studies in this area, in addition to possessing relevant practical experience. Based on purposive theoretical sampling, 15 experts were selected for interviews. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview through which the dimensions, components, and indicators of the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province were developed. To prepare the interview form, an initial review and in-depth interviews with experts were conducted. Subsequently, indicators were extracted through open coding and classified into dimensions, components, and indicators through axial coding. The interview form was then sent to 15 experts, and through selective coding and the Delphi technique, the dimensions, components, and indicators were identified and finalized. Consequently, 6 dimensions, 24 components, and 129 indicators were identified for the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province. Following final approval and prioritization by the experts, the dimensions, components, and indicators constituting the model were depicted, and the model was subsequently validated again by the experts.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Evaluation, Leadership Performance, Strategic Vision, Analytical Leadership Skills, Human Skills, Technological Skills

Introduction

Educational systems are increasingly expected to respond simultaneously to rapid technological change, evolving social expectations, demands for educational equity, accountability pressures, and the need to prepare students for complex and uncertain futures. Within this environment, the quality of school leadership has become a central concern in educational management because leadership influences how educational policies are interpreted, how teachers are supported, how

organizational resources are mobilized, and how instructional priorities are translated into everyday school practices. Schools are not merely administrative organizations; they are professional learning environments in which instructional processes, human relationships, strategic decisions, ethical commitments, and organizational structures interact continuously. Accordingly, contemporary educational leadership requires more than routine administrative competence and increasingly encompasses strategic thinking, instructional guidance, human-resource development, technological capability, ethical responsibility, and organizational learning (1-3).

The significance of leadership becomes especially pronounced at the elementary level. Elementary schools establish the foundations of students' cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development, while also shaping their early perceptions of learning, participation, collaboration, discipline, creativity, and school belonging. Leadership at this level therefore extends beyond managing organizational procedures and encompasses the creation of conditions under which teachers can deliver developmentally appropriate, inclusive, engaging, and high-quality instruction. The growing emphasis on creativity, innovation, life skills, and twenty-first-century competencies further increases the responsibility of elementary-school leaders to create learning environments that support both academic development and broader student competencies (4-6). Consequently, the effectiveness of elementary schools is closely connected to the capacity of their leaders to integrate educational, managerial, developmental, and strategic responsibilities within a coherent leadership framework.

Instructional leadership has emerged as one of the most influential approaches to understanding school leadership because it places teaching and learning at the center of leadership practice. Unlike leadership models that focus predominantly on administrative control, instructional leadership emphasizes the principal's role in defining educational goals, supervising and improving instruction, supporting teachers' professional development, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student learning, and developing a school climate conducive to teaching and learning. Contemporary research indicates that instructional leadership should not be reduced to direct classroom supervision; rather, it represents a broader set of leadership behaviors through which school leaders influence instructional quality by establishing priorities, developing organizational capacity, supporting teachers, and coordinating school processes around learning outcomes (7). As educational environments have become more complex, instructional leadership has also evolved from a narrow supervisory model toward a multidimensional conception that incorporates strategic, relational, distributed, ethical, and developmental functions (8).

This expanded understanding is important because the work of school principals now involves multiple leadership orientations. A principal may simultaneously be expected to provide instructional direction, promote collaboration, initiate organizational change, distribute responsibility, strengthen teacher motivation, and maintain institutional stability. Leadership-style research demonstrates that different approaches generate different organizational consequences and that leadership effectiveness depends substantially on the compatibility between leadership behavior, organizational conditions, and employee needs (9). In educational settings, no single leadership style can adequately address all situations. Traditional leadership may provide structure and role clarity, participative leadership can increase involvement and shared ownership, transformational leadership can stimulate organizational change and commitment, while distributed leadership can mobilize expertise beyond the formal position of the principal. Therefore, the development of a comprehensive instructional leadership model requires attention to the complementary roles of different leadership styles rather than reliance on one isolated theoretical perspective (10).

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant in contemporary schools because educational organizations frequently confront changing curricula, technological developments, teacher-learning requirements, new accountability mechanisms, and evolving community expectations. Transformational school leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and the development of organizational commitment. Its relevance lies in its ability to encourage school members

to move beyond routine compliance and participate actively in educational improvement (11). Research on elementary-school principals has likewise shown that transformational leadership can be conceptualized as a multidimensional competency through which principals influence teachers, educational processes, school culture, and organizational development (12). Nevertheless, transformational leadership alone does not fully capture the instructional, ethical, technological, and analytical demands placed on today's school leaders, thereby reinforcing the need for integrated models.

Authenticity and ethical orientation also constitute important dimensions of educational leadership. School leaders exercise authority in contexts involving children, families, teachers, public resources, professional norms, and sensitive personal information. Their decisions therefore possess significant ethical implications. Authentic leadership emphasizes transparency, self-awareness, consistency between values and behavior, and trustworthy relationships, all of which can strengthen organizational legitimacy and interpersonal confidence (13). From this perspective, effective instructional leadership should incorporate a clear values-based dimension encompassing justice, equality, professional ethics, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility. Such commitments are particularly consequential in elementary schools, where leadership practices contribute to the norms and values students encounter during formative years. A leadership model that focuses exclusively on performance while disregarding ethical responsibility may therefore be administratively efficient yet educationally incomplete.

Strategic vision represents another essential requirement of contemporary educational leadership. School principals are increasingly expected not only to address immediate administrative demands but also to formulate long-term goals, anticipate environmental change, align school priorities with broader educational policies, and allocate financial and human resources in accordance with strategic objectives. Strategic planning enables educational organizations to connect mission, environmental analysis, resource allocation, implementation, and evaluation within an integrated management process (14). In this regard, effective educational leadership requires school principals to understand both the internal characteristics of their schools and the external environment in which they operate. They must be able to interpret policy priorities, demographic developments, technological trends, community expectations, institutional constraints, and organizational resources and subsequently translate this information into realistic strategic choices. Strategic vision therefore functions as a bridge between educational aspirations and operational decision-making.

The strategic dimension of school leadership is closely connected to leaders' analytical competencies. Educational management frequently involves complex problems for which solutions cannot be generated through routine procedures alone. Principals must evaluate information, identify causal relationships, compare alternatives, anticipate risks, assess consequences, and understand interactions among organizational subsystems. Critical thinking, problem solving, risk management, systems thinking, and executive management are thus central competencies for educational leaders. Competency-based approaches to educational management emphasize that leadership performance should be understood in terms of identifiable capabilities that can be assessed, developed, and aligned with organizational responsibilities (15). Recent competency-oriented perspectives similarly suggest that successful primary-school leaders need integrated analytical, interpersonal, instructional, and strategic capacities if they are to respond effectively to contemporary educational challenges (8). Such competencies are particularly important when school leaders must make decisions under conditions of limited resources, conflicting expectations, and incomplete information.

The human dimension of leadership is equally important because schools are fundamentally professional and social organizations. Principals work through teachers, administrative personnel, students, families, and external stakeholders; consequently, their effectiveness depends strongly on communication, collaboration, emotional understanding, motivation, and relationship management. Effective communication allows leaders to clarify expectations, reduce ambiguity, facilitate

participation, and strengthen organizational coordination. Teamwork enables schools to distribute expertise and establish collective responsibility, while emotional intelligence and empathy support constructive responses to interpersonal tensions and individual needs. Motivation, meanwhile, influences teachers' willingness to engage in professional learning, innovation, collaboration, and discretionary effort. Educational leadership texts consistently emphasize that successful management of schools depends not only on formal authority but also on interpersonal influence and the capacity to build productive professional relationships (1, 2).

Empowering leadership provides an especially useful perspective for understanding the relationship between school leadership and teacher development. When principals create opportunities for participation, professional autonomy, shared decision-making, competence development, and recognition, teachers may become more willing to experiment with new ideas and contribute to organizational improvement. Empirical evidence indicates that principals' empowering leadership can contribute to teachers' innovative work behavior, with professional development serving as an important mechanism linking leadership to innovation (16). This finding highlights the necessity of conceptualizing instructional leadership as a process that develops professional capacity rather than merely monitors teachers' performance. The instructional leader should therefore create conditions in which teachers are supported, challenged, trusted, and provided with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and practice.

Professional development is also critical because improvements in student learning depend substantially on the quality of classroom instruction. Principals who seek to improve educational outcomes must therefore attend to teachers' instructional needs and create mechanisms for continuous learning, peer interaction, professional feedback, experimentation, and reflective practice. This concern is particularly important at the elementary level, where instructional strategies must respond to students' developmental differences and foster creativity, engagement, and active learning. Research on creative classrooms emphasizes the importance of classroom environments that provide flexibility, participation, supportive interaction, innovation, and opportunities for exploration (4). School leadership can either facilitate or constrain such environments by determining how teachers are supported, what resources are available, how innovation is treated, and whether professional experimentation is encouraged.

Technology constitutes another increasingly indispensable component of educational leadership. Digital technologies are now integrated into instruction, communication, information management, assessment, professional development, and organizational administration. Consequently, school leaders require competencies not only in the use of educational technologies but also in the management of school information systems and responsible use of digital and social media. Twenty-first-century competency frameworks emphasize digital literacy, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptive learning as important capabilities for contemporary education (6). These expectations apply not only to students and teachers but also to school leaders, who must create organizational conditions for effective technology integration. Technological leadership therefore involves informed selection and use of digital resources, support for teachers' technological capabilities, responsible information management, protection of privacy, and alignment between technological tools and educational goals.

The international literature also demonstrates that educational leadership cannot be separated from the cultural and institutional context in which schools operate. Educational systems differ in governance structures, social expectations, professional norms, accountability mechanisms, conceptions of authority, and understandings of successful schooling. Comparative educational scholarship has emphasized that educational models are embedded in particular social and cultural arrangements and that reciprocal learning across systems requires sensitivity to contextual differences rather than direct transplantation of practices (17). This observation is highly relevant to leadership-model development. Although international

theories can provide valuable conceptual foundations, leadership models need to reflect the organizational, cultural, administrative, and professional realities of the context in which they are intended to operate.

In Iran, research has increasingly sought to identify leadership models appropriate to the characteristics of schools and the national educational environment. Studies of successful elementary schools have demonstrated the usefulness of grounded and qualitative approaches for identifying locally meaningful dimensions of school leadership (18). Research focusing specifically on elementary schools in Tehran has likewise identified instructional leadership as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring attention to contextual features of school administration and educational practice (19). Other studies have examined models of effective leadership for school principals and highlighted the importance of combining multiple competencies and behavioral dimensions rather than treating leadership as a single managerial function (20). Together, these studies suggest that contextualized model development can reveal dimensions that may remain underrepresented in imported or highly generalized leadership frameworks.

Recent Iranian research also reflects a movement toward multidimensional and hybrid conceptions of educational leadership. The design and evaluation of hybrid leadership models suggest that leadership effectiveness may depend on the integration of organizational, human, structural, strategic, and contextual elements rather than adherence to a single leadership theory (21). This orientation corresponds with the growing complexity of school management, in which leaders must simultaneously maintain organizational stability, improve instruction, develop staff capacity, respond to environmental changes, and promote ethical and strategic coherence. Educational management scholarship increasingly recognizes that principals' effectiveness depends on the interaction of knowledge, managerial skills, leadership behaviors, professional values, and contextual judgment (3).

Despite the development of numerous leadership theories and competency frameworks, an important challenge remains in translating these concepts into an integrated model appropriate to elementary schools in specific provincial contexts. Existing studies have examined transformational leadership, authentic leadership, successful-school leadership, instructional leadership, school-principal typologies, effective leadership, and managerial competencies, yet these dimensions are often investigated independently (10, 12, 13, 20). Such fragmentation can limit the practical usefulness of research for principal selection, training, evaluation, professional development, and policy formulation. A comprehensive model should clarify not only what instructional leaders do but also the values that guide them, the leadership styles they employ, the strategic competencies they require, the analytical capabilities they use in decision-making, the interpersonal skills through which they mobilize school members, and the technological competencies necessary for contemporary educational environments.

This need is particularly relevant in Kerman Province, where the development of a contextually grounded model may provide a more precise basis for understanding the requirements of instructional leadership in elementary schools. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable for this purpose because it allows leadership dimensions to emerge from expert knowledge and professional experience rather than imposing predetermined categories. The use of expert interviews, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the Delphi technique provides a systematic means of identifying, organizing, refining, and validating the dimensions and indicators of the phenomenon. Such an approach is consistent with previous efforts to develop educational leadership models through contextual and expert-based methods (18, 21). Moreover, by integrating values, leadership performance, strategic vision, analytical leadership skills, human skills, and technological competencies, a paradigm model can offer both conceptual and practical value for educational management.

Accordingly, the development of a comprehensive instructional leadership model can contribute to several areas of educational practice. It can provide a conceptual framework for selecting and evaluating school principals, identifying professional-development priorities, designing leadership-training programs, developing assessment-center criteria, and

aligning leadership competencies with educational objectives (15). It can also clarify how instructional leadership interacts with professional development and innovative teacher behavior (16), how leadership practices can support educational creativity (4), and how strategic and technological competencies can be incorporated into contemporary school management (6, 14). Most importantly, such a model can help move the conception of the school principal from that of a primarily administrative manager toward that of an instructional, strategic, ethical, analytical, relational, and technologically competent educational leader.

Therefore, the present study aimed to develop and validate a paradigm model of instructional leadership for elementary education in Kerman Province using a qualitative approach.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design. The study population consisted of experts in educational management who held doctoral degrees and had publications, articles, research experience, and practical experience in this field. Using snowball sampling and based on theoretical saturation, 15 experts were selected. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview developed on the basis of open and axial coding. Subsequently, selective coding was conducted through literature review, interviews, and implementation of the Delphi technique. At this stage, the dimensions, components, and indicators were finalized and prioritized by the experts. The model was then redrawn based on the identified dimensions, components, and indicators and was subsequently confirmed and validated by the experts. The validity and reliability of the measurement instrument were established through triangulation. Data were collected through literature review and in-depth interviews with experts, which continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis was conducted in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding.

The most important part of the research data analysis was coding—open, axial, and selective—which was conducted as follows:

Open coding: The reviewed materials and interviews were transcribed, and the data were standardized. Scientific terms consistent with the theoretical literature of the study were assigned to the data, resulting in a list of concepts. The resulting concepts were then categorized.

Axial coding: The resulting categories were linked to one another. In this way, relationships were established among the codes generated during open coding.

Selective coding: At this stage, the processes of integration, refinement, and purification of the categories were undertaken. By establishing a particular pattern and arrangement among the categories, the researcher organized them in a manner suitable for presenting and developing a theory. This process was made possible through the identification of the core category.

Findings and Results

In response to the research questions, the following findings were obtained and are described below:

1. What is the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province?

Based on the findings of the study, the instructional leadership model is presented as follows:

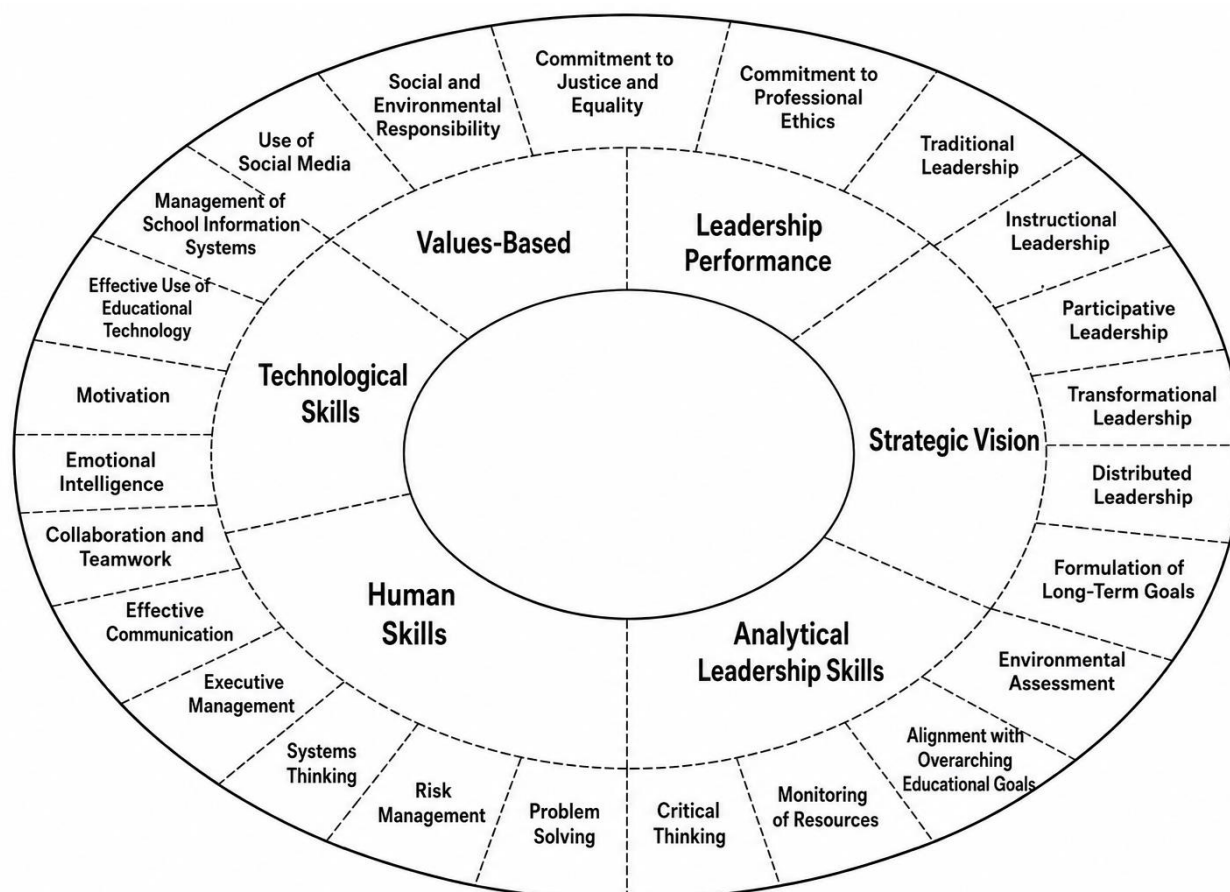


Figure 1. Instructional Leadership Model for Elementary Education in Kerman Province

2. What are the dimensions, components, and indicators constituting each component of the proposed model, in order of priority from the experts' perspective?

To answer this question, the researcher identified instances and concepts related to instructional leadership. First, an interview checklist was prepared, and the experts' opinions were subsequently obtained. Interviews with the experts yielded numerous instances, indicating that instructional leadership at the elementary level may differ from that at other educational levels. The semi-structured interviews with experts resulted in the identification of 120 initial codes (key concepts). Table 1 presents several examples of the initial codes identified from the interview transcripts.

Table 1. Examples of Initial Codes Identified from the Interview Transcripts

Interviewee Code	Extracted Indicator	Interview Excerpt
P1.013.p4.p7	Creating a discrimination-free school environment	"Principals should create an environment in which no form of discrimination exists, because every student has the right to a fair educational experience."
P11.p10.p6.p12	Accountability for performance	"An instructional leader should be accountable and take responsibility for both their own performance and that of their team."
P2.p6.p9.15	Supporting school environmental projects	"Environmental projects can have a significant impact on shaping responsible behaviors within the school."
P1.p4.p8.p14.p9	Protecting privacy and personal information	"Protecting the privacy of students and staff is an essential principle in today's world."
P5.p9.p8.p11	Emphasizing productivity and performance as primary criteria	"Productivity should be the primary criterion for assessing performance, and no opportunity for improvement should be overlooked."
P2.p5.p9.p11.p13	Focusing on improving teaching processes	"To improve teaching, leaders should continuously seek to introduce new methods and tools."
P3.p7.p8.p10.p11	Transparency in communication	"Leaders should be able to establish transparency and trust at all levels of the school so that members can readily participate in school affairs."

Based on the analysis and the interview coding process, the initial codes were standardized, and some were deleted or revised. Ultimately, 107 codes were identified as open codes, as shown in Table 2.

What are the components constituting the instructional leadership model for elementary schools in Kerman Province?

Following the identification of open codes (indicators) related to the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province from the interview transcripts, the researcher categorized the indicators. Because concepts constitute the primary unit of analysis in open and axial coding, during the analysis the concepts were generated through labels assigned by the researcher, directly from the participants' interview transcripts, or according to commonalities in their application. The transcribed interviews were systematically examined to identify indicators and components. Based on this process, 23 components were identified as factors contributing to the development of the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province. Accordingly, several concepts (indicators) were grouped into broader categories, which were referred to as axial codes. The identified axial codes, together with the open codes (indicators), are presented in Table 2. To avoid excessive detail, only the number of indicators identified for each component is reported.

Table 2. Dimensions, Components, and Number of Indicators of the Instructional Leadership Model for Elementary Education in Kerman Province at the Axial Coding Stage

Number of Indicators	Components	Dimensions
5	Commitment to justice and equality	Values-Based
5	Commitment to professional ethics	Values-Based
5	Commitment to sustainable development	Values-Based
9	Traditional leadership	Leadership Style
11	Instructional leadership	Leadership Style
7	Participative leadership	Leadership Style
7	Transformational leadership	Leadership Style
5	Formulation of long-term goals	Strategic Vision
5	Environmental assessment	Strategic Vision
5	Alignment with overarching educational goals	Strategic Vision
10	Monitoring resources (financial and human)	Strategic Vision
5	Critical thinking	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Problem solving	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Risk management	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Systems thinking	Analytical Leadership Skills
8	Executive management	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Effective communication	Human Skills
5	Collaboration and teamwork	Human Skills
5	Emotional intelligence and empathy	Human Skills
10	Motivation	Human Skills
5	Effective use of educational technology	Technological Skills
5	Management of school information systems	Technological Skills
5	Proficiency in the use of social media	Technological Skills

Subsequently, during the selective coding stage, the identified components were placed into more abstract categories. Following implementation of the Delphi technique with the experts, these categories formed the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province (Figure 1). Accordingly, 129 open codes (indicators) were classified into 24 axial codes (components), and the components were further classified into 6 selective codes (dimensions). The resulting dimensions, components, and indicators are presented in Table 3. To avoid excessive detail, only the number of indicators identified for each component is reported.

Table 3. Dimensions, Components, and Number of Indicators of the Instructional Leadership Model for Elementary Education in Kerman Province at the Selective Coding Stage

Number of Indicators	Components	Dimensions
4	Commitment to justice and equality	Values-Based
5	Commitment to professional ethics	Values-Based
4	Commitment to social and environmental responsibility	Values-Based
7	Traditional leadership	Leadership Performance
11	Instructional leadership and professional development	Leadership Performance
6	Participative leadership	Leadership Performance
7	Transformational leadership	Leadership Performance
5	Distributed leadership	Leadership Performance
4	Formulation of long-term goals	Strategic Vision
5	Environmental assessment	Strategic Vision
4	Alignment with overarching educational goals	Strategic Vision
7	Monitoring resources (financial and human)	Strategic Vision
4	Critical thinking	Analytical Leadership Skills
4	Problem solving	Analytical Leadership Skills
4	Risk management	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Systems thinking	Analytical Leadership Skills
6	Executive management	Analytical Leadership Skills
5	Effective communication	Human Skills
3	Collaboration and teamwork	Human Skills
5	Emotional intelligence and empathy	Human Skills
9	Motivation	Human Skills
5	Effective use of educational technology	Technological Skills
5	Management of school information systems	Technological Skills
5	Proficiency in the use of social media	Technological Skills

At the final stage, all identified dimensions, components, and indicators were examined and analyzed through implementation of the Delphi technique. Initially, the identified dimensions, components, and indicators were sent to 15 experts, and their opinions were collected. The collected feedback was incorporated into the identified factors, after which the revised results were resent to the experts and their final approval was obtained.

Theoretical validation of the model: At this stage, the dimensions, components, and indicators of the instructional leadership model for elementary education in Kerman Province were organized into a coherent model and validated by the experts. The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated, and the factors constituting the model were confirmed.

Subsequently, to further establish the validity of the findings, a brainstorming session was held with five university experts to review the identified components and indicators. After incorporating the experts' opinions, they were also asked to prioritize the components and indicators. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Prioritization of the Dimensions and Components of the Instructional Leadership Model for Elementary Education in Kerman Province

Component Priority	Components	Dimension No.	Dimensions
1	Commitment to justice and equality	1	Values-Based
2	Commitment to professional ethics		
3	Commitment to social and environmental responsibility		
1	Traditional leadership	2	Leadership Performance
2	Instructional leadership and professional development		
3	Participative leadership		
4	Transformational leadership		
5	Distributed leadership		
1	Formulation of long-term goals	3	Strategic Vision
2	Environmental assessment		

3	Alignment with overarching educational goals		
4	Monitoring resources (financial and human)		
1	Critical thinking	4	Analytical Leadership Skills
2	Problem solving		
3	Risk management		
4	Systems thinking		
5	Executive management		
1	Effective communication	5	Human Skills
2	Collaboration and teamwork		
3	Emotional intelligence and empathy		
4	Motivation		
1	Effective use of educational technology	6	Technological Skills
2	Management of school information systems		
3	Proficiency in the use of social media		

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to develop and validate a paradigm model of instructional leadership for elementary education in Kerman Province through a qualitative approach. The findings resulted in a comprehensive model comprising six major dimensions, 24 components, and 129 indicators. The six dimensions were values-based leadership, leadership performance, strategic vision, analytical leadership skills, human skills, and technological skills. The Delphi process and expert validation further confirmed the relevance and conceptual adequacy of these dimensions and their constituent components. The findings indicate that instructional leadership in elementary education should not be conceptualized merely as supervision of classroom teaching or implementation of administrative procedures. Rather, it represents a multidimensional leadership construct in which ethical values, leadership behaviors, strategic orientation, analytical competence, interpersonal capabilities, and technological competencies interact to improve school functioning and instructional quality. This comprehensive conceptualization is consistent with contemporary perspectives that regard educational leadership as a complex set of competencies extending beyond traditional administrative functions (3, 8, 21).

The first identified dimension was values-based leadership, comprising commitment to justice and equality, commitment to professional ethics, and commitment to social and environmental responsibility. Among these components, commitment to justice and equality received the highest priority. This finding suggests that experts regard ethical legitimacy and fairness as foundational to effective instructional leadership in elementary schools. Principals operate in environments in which decisions affect students, teachers, families, and broader communities; therefore, equitable treatment, impartial decision-making, and respect for individual rights are essential components of leadership effectiveness. At the elementary level, these values are particularly important because students' first sustained experiences with formal institutions are shaped within schools. The result is compatible with the broader conception of educational leadership presented by Mirkamali and Khorshidi, who emphasize the ethical and social dimensions of school management alongside formal managerial responsibilities (1, 2). It also corresponds with authentic leadership perspectives emphasizing transparency, consistency between values and actions, accountability, and trustworthiness in educational organizations (13). The inclusion of social and environmental responsibility further demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is increasingly connected to wider societal responsibilities rather than being restricted to internal organizational efficiency.

The second dimension, leadership performance, consisted of traditional leadership, instructional leadership and professional development, participative leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership. The presence of several leadership approaches within one dimension is particularly important because it indicates that effective school leadership cannot be reduced to a single leadership style. Instead, principals may need to employ different patterns of leadership according

to organizational demands, staff characteristics, instructional challenges, and situational requirements. This finding agrees with Demir and Durmaz's argument that leadership styles have different effects on organizational effectiveness and that appropriate leadership behavior depends on organizational circumstances (9). Similarly, the typology developed by Shabani and colleagues underscores the plurality of leadership styles in school settings and supports the idea that principals may require flexibility in adopting leadership behaviors (10).

The identification of instructional leadership and professional development within the leadership-performance dimension is directly aligned with the central orientation of the study. Instructional leadership places improvement of teaching and learning at the core of the principal's role. Principals are expected to provide educational direction, monitor instructional quality, create conditions for professional learning, and support teachers in improving classroom practice. The finding is strongly supported by Al Sharafat et al., who demonstrated the importance of principals' instructional leadership practices from teachers' perspectives using the Hallinger framework (7). Hallinger likewise emphasizes that contemporary primary-school leadership requires competencies that connect educational goals, professional learning, organizational management, and instructional improvement (8). The inclusion of professional development is also consistent with the findings of Ghanbari and Norouzi, who showed that empowering leadership can enhance teachers' innovative work behavior partly through professional development (16). Thus, instructional leadership appears to be effective when principals not only evaluate teachers but also build their professional capacity.

Transformational and participative leadership were also identified as essential aspects of leadership performance. Transformational leadership is particularly relevant when schools need to respond to curricular reforms, technological change, new student needs, or expectations for innovation. By articulating a compelling vision, encouraging intellectual stimulation, and strengthening organizational commitment, transformational leaders can support educational change and teacher engagement. This finding is consistent with Tourani's discussion of transformational leadership in schools and with the conceptual model developed for elementary-school principals by Bagheri et al. (11, 12). Participative leadership, meanwhile, reflects the need to involve teachers and other school members in decision-making. Such participation can strengthen ownership of decisions and facilitate implementation because teachers are more likely to support initiatives in which they have meaningful involvement. Distributed leadership extends this logic by recognizing that leadership expertise does not reside exclusively in the principal. The coexistence of instructional, participative, transformational, distributed, and traditional components therefore suggests that instructional leadership in Kerman's elementary schools should be understood as adaptive and integrative rather than theoretically uniform.

The third dimension was strategic vision, consisting of formulation of long-term goals, environmental assessment, alignment with overarching educational goals, and monitoring financial and human resources. The prioritization of long-term goal formulation indicates that experts consider future orientation to be a fundamental leadership competency. Schools cannot achieve sustained improvement solely through short-term responses to daily problems; principals need a clear understanding of where the school should progress and how available resources can be mobilized toward desired outcomes. This finding is consistent with Ashrafian and Ghaffari, who emphasize strategic planning as a major requirement for successful educational management and argue that schools require explicit goals, environmental analysis, and coordinated implementation processes (14). It also corresponds with contemporary educational-management perspectives that highlight the need for leaders to integrate planning, organization, implementation, supervision, and evaluation (3).

Environmental assessment and alignment with broader educational goals further show that school leadership is embedded within a larger institutional system. School principals need to interpret educational policies, community expectations, demographic characteristics, technological developments, and organizational constraints before making strategic decisions.

The finding also resonates with Zhu's comparative argument that educational practices must be understood within their cultural and institutional contexts rather than transferred mechanically between systems (17). Accordingly, effective strategic leadership in Kerman Province requires responsiveness to both national educational priorities and local school conditions. Monitoring financial and human resources additionally indicates that instructional leadership cannot be separated from resource management. Educational goals can be translated into practice only when leaders allocate staff, time, financial resources, and facilities in ways that support instructional priorities.

The fourth dimension was analytical leadership skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, risk management, systems thinking, and executive management. Critical thinking received the highest priority within this dimension. This result suggests that school principals are increasingly required to move beyond rule-based administrative responses and engage in evidence-informed judgment. Educational leaders routinely encounter ambiguous problems involving student performance, teacher needs, parent expectations, personnel issues, resource constraints, and organizational change. Effective responses require leaders to evaluate information, identify assumptions, compare alternatives, anticipate consequences, and select solutions based on contextual evidence. This result aligns with the competency-based framework of Khanifar et al., who emphasized the need to identify measurable managerial competencies that can be used in assessment and development centers for educational managers (15).

Problem solving, risk management, and systems thinking complement critical thinking by enabling principals to understand the interconnected nature of school processes. A decision regarding teacher allocation, technology, curriculum, or professional development may influence several other aspects of school functioning. Systems thinking therefore helps leaders recognize relationships among instructional, human, structural, and environmental factors. Such an integrated orientation is consistent with the hybrid educational leadership model developed by Hosseinzadeh and Saremi, in which effective leadership emerges from the integration of multiple organizational pillars rather than from isolated managerial actions (21). The inclusion of executive management further demonstrates that analytical capability must ultimately be translated into coordinated action. Leaders need not only to understand problems but also to implement solutions, monitor outcomes, and revise actions when necessary.

The fifth dimension, human skills, comprised effective communication, collaboration and teamwork, emotional intelligence and empathy, and motivation. Effective communication received the highest priority. This result is theoretically meaningful because instructional leadership is fundamentally relational. Principals cannot improve instruction independently; they must influence teachers, coordinate teams, communicate expectations, provide feedback, resolve misunderstandings, and establish trust. Effective communication therefore functions as a mechanism through which other leadership competencies are translated into organizational practice. This finding is consistent with the human-relations emphasis in educational leadership and management literature, where communication, motivation, group processes, and interpersonal competence are treated as essential managerial capabilities (1, 2).

Collaboration and teamwork similarly reflect the increasingly collective nature of educational improvement. Modern schools require teachers and administrators to exchange knowledge, coordinate instructional activities, and solve problems collaboratively. Ghanbari and Norouzi's findings regarding empowering leadership and innovative teacher behavior support this result by illustrating how leadership that increases professional involvement can strengthen innovative work through professional development (16). Emotional intelligence and empathy further allow principals to recognize staff needs, respond appropriately to emotional situations, and build supportive relationships. Motivation, in turn, is crucial for encouraging teachers to participate in school improvement and professional learning. These competencies may be especially important in elementary

education, where teachers' enthusiasm and interpersonal engagement directly shape the emotional and instructional climate experienced by young learners.

The importance of human skills can also be linked to the need for creative and developmentally supportive educational environments. Bagherianfar et al. identified characteristics of creative elementary classrooms and emphasized conditions that promote participation, innovation, and active engagement (4). Such classroom conditions are unlikely to develop without school leaders who support teachers, encourage experimentation, and create psychologically safe professional environments. Similarly, Zahirabadi et al.'s work on life-skills education demonstrates that elementary education increasingly extends beyond academic knowledge to interpersonal, social, and adaptive development (5). Leadership practices that model empathy, communication, teamwork, and motivation may therefore indirectly support these broader educational objectives.

The sixth dimension was technological skills, which consisted of effective use of educational technology, management of school information systems, and proficiency in social-media use. Effective use of educational technology was ranked as the highest priority within this dimension. This result reflects the increasing digitization of educational environments and suggests that technological competence has become an essential component of instructional leadership rather than an optional administrative skill. Contemporary school leaders are expected to support digital instruction, facilitate teachers' use of educational technologies, manage school data, communicate through digital channels, and ensure that technological investments serve educational objectives. The finding is consistent with twenty-first-century competency frameworks emphasizing digital literacy, communication, collaboration, creativity, and technological adaptability (6).

The technological dimension should also be interpreted in connection with strategic and instructional leadership. Technology becomes educationally meaningful only when it is aligned with pedagogical objectives, teacher capabilities, school resources, and student needs. Thus, technology leadership involves more than purchasing hardware or using social media; it requires informed decision-making concerning integration, professional support, information management, privacy, and evaluation of educational benefits. The growing prominence of technological competencies further supports Hallinger's view that educational leadership competencies must evolve in response to changing school environments (8). It also reinforces the need for contemporary educational-management models that integrate traditional managerial knowledge with new competencies required by digitally mediated schooling (3).

Taken together, the six dimensions identified in this study demonstrate that instructional leadership in elementary education is an integrated and context-sensitive construct. The resulting model is broadly compatible with previous Iranian efforts to develop leadership frameworks for elementary schools. Mashayekhi et al. used grounded theory to develop a leadership model for successful elementary schools, demonstrating the value of contextually grounded qualitative approaches (18). Shahrabi Farahani et al. similarly identified a model of educational leadership among elementary-school principals, supporting the multidimensional character of effective leadership (19). Salgi et al.'s work on effective school-principal leadership further reinforces the importance of integrating multiple dimensions in leadership-model development (20). The present study extends these lines of research by organizing leadership requirements into six interconnected domains and validating them through expert judgment and the Delphi process.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective instructional leadership in elementary schools requires a balance among ethical orientation, flexible leadership behavior, strategic direction, analytical reasoning, human relations, and technological capability. The model therefore moves beyond a narrow understanding of the principal as an administrator or instructional supervisor and presents the principal as an educational leader who simultaneously acts as an ethical role model, strategist, decision-maker, collaborator, professional developer, and technology facilitator. Such an integrated conception is consistent with the broader evolution of educational leadership toward competency-based, adaptive, and contextually responsive approaches (8, 15, 21).

The validated model may consequently provide a useful conceptual foundation for selecting, evaluating, training, and professionally developing elementary-school principals in Kerman Province.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study was conducted within the specific educational, administrative, and cultural context of elementary schools in Kerman Province; consequently, the identified dimensions and components may not be directly generalizable to other provinces, educational levels, or national contexts. Second, the qualitative findings were primarily based on expert judgments and professional experiences, which, although valuable for model development, may be influenced by participants' individual perceptions and professional backgrounds. Third, the sample consisted of 15 experts, and although data collection continued until theoretical saturation, inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders such as practicing principals, teachers, parents, and educational policymakers might have revealed additional perspectives. Finally, the study focused on conceptual development and expert validation of the model and did not empirically examine the predictive relationships between the identified leadership dimensions and measurable outcomes such as teacher performance, school climate, instructional quality, or student achievement.

Future studies are recommended to quantitatively examine and validate the proposed model using larger and more diverse samples of elementary-school principals and teachers. Researchers could develop a standardized measurement instrument based on the 129 identified indicators and evaluate its factorial structure through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Comparative studies across different provinces, urban and rural schools, public and private institutions, and different educational levels could determine the extent to which the model is context-dependent or transferable. Longitudinal research could also investigate whether improvements in the identified leadership competencies produce changes in teacher motivation, professional development, innovation, organizational commitment, instructional quality, and student outcomes over time. Future mixed-method studies may additionally incorporate the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and policymakers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of effective instructional leadership and to identify possible differences between expert expectations and leadership practices observed in schools.

Educational authorities are advised to use the proposed model as a framework for the selection, appointment, evaluation, and professional development of elementary-school principals. Leadership-development programs should address all six dimensions rather than focusing primarily on administrative regulations and routine management. Training should therefore include ethical decision-making and educational equity, instructional supervision and teacher development, strategic planning and resource management, critical and systems thinking, communication and emotional intelligence, teamwork, motivation, and effective educational-technology use. Assessment centers for prospective and current principals could incorporate behavioral indicators derived from the model to identify strengths and developmental needs. School districts may also establish mentoring, coaching, peer-learning, and professional-learning networks through which principals can strengthen these competencies in authentic school contexts. Finally, periodic evaluation of principals based on the model should be developmental rather than merely punitive, with results used to design individualized professional-development plans and improve the overall quality of instructional leadership in elementary schools.

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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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