



Evolving Towards Efficiency: A Narrative inquiry of a School Principal's Experiences in a High-poverty Environment

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Abstract

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This study aims to represent how a primary school principal evolved into an effective educational leadership, focusing on their personal and professional background along with the distinctive features of the school and local community. A qualitative approach and narrative inquiry method were used. Initially, in-depth and semi-structured interviews lasting 12 hours were conducted with the principal. Data analysis was performed using Lichman's model (2013). To validate the narratives, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers who had worked under the principal's management and were selected through purposive (criterion-based) sampling. Additionally, self-reflection notes were prepared during the research process. The principal's journey towards efficiency was divided into four episodes: the character formation period, facing discrimination, conflicts and grief, building professional identity, and role modeling. According to the data analysis results, themes of encountering discrimination, economic poverty, and the local community's perception of disadvantaged schools were continuously repeated in the principal's narratives. Based on the narratives, three strategies - managing interactions, continuous professional development, and vision setting - played a crucial role in the principal's evolution towards efficiency. According to the findings, it is recommended that principals of high-poverty schools address teachers' educational deficiencies in the form of suggestions and gradually increase delegation of authority and trust in their measures to ensure improved performance quality. In addition, the principal, by requiring teachers to daily note the challenges and issues faced by students and to identify major and common challenges, aimed to prioritize these challenges and take necessary actions.

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Introduction

The way a school is managed is one of the most important factors in the educational system for achieving educational goals. Teaching and management processes in the school are closely interrelated and progress together (Das & Chetia, 2022; Keramati, 2023). This matter is of such significance that school leadership and management are stated to be the second most influential factor on student learning, following classroom instruction delivered by teachers (Leithwood et al., 2020). This means that school management significantly impacts the quality of education, especially teaching methods (Rostini et al., 2022; Polatcan et al, 2023). In general, principals can play a significant role in enhancing educational quality and student academic achievement by influencing the structures and organizational culture of the school (Kilag et al, 2023). The management of primary schools in high-poverty areas, where students face the challenge of poverty, becomes more critical.

Evidence clearly indicates that managing schools with high-poverty in urban fringe areas is very challenging. Some reports suggest that one of the biggest challenges for principals of schools with severe poverty is high teacher turnover (Kamrath & Bradford, 2020; Nguyen et al, 2023; DeMatthews et al, 2022). Klar et al (2020) emphasize that school principals should be encouraged to be aware of contextual factors and their impacts on teaching, learning, and leadership. Furthermore, Bores (2018) states that the role of the principal has shifted from managerial to instructional leadership over the past few decades. This is especially significant in schools with high-poverty. In this regard, Woods & Martin (2016) have stated that in such schools, principals, instead of adopting multiple programs, can improve student academic achievement by exhibiting behaviors as change agents, creating vision, and providing necessary support and strategies.

According to research evidence, principals of primary schools in areas with high-poverty have strived to enhance educational quality by adopting strategies such as strengthening teacher autonomy and morale (Jacobson, 2008), grouping students by homogeneous abilities, creating culturally relevant guidelines, and implementing a high-expectation curriculum (Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2020), fostering parental collaboration (Robinson, 2017), providing professional development opportunities for teachers (Suber, 2012; Cox & Mullen, 2023), and involving teachers in decision-making (Ingersoll et al, 2018). As previously

stated, the role of instructional leadership is even more crucial in schools facing high-poverty challenges, and the cited evidence further underscores the importance of this role.

Numerous studies have been conducted on primary schools in areas of high-poverty. Analyzing these studies revealed that they can largely be categorized into four groups. The first group addresses the issues and challenges faced by principals of these schools (Bettini & Park, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023; Kamrath & Bradford, 2020). The second group highlights the characteristics of successful principals for optimal management of such schools (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Grissom et al, 2021; Porter, 2015). The third group discusses the strategies principals employ to improve educational quality (Tan, 2024; Gordon & Hart, 2022; Afzal-Tajik and Wali, 2020). The fourth group focuses on the empowerment strategies for these principals (Mestry, 2017; Naidoo, 2019). No research was found that explores how to evolve into a successful and effective educational leader in the context of a high-poverty environment. In addition, evolving into an effective educational leader depends on the personal and professional background of school principals, indicating a lack of sufficient research in this area (Camarero-Figuerola et al, 2020). While current studies provide valuable insights into the challenges and strategies faced by leaders in high-poverty schools, there is a clear need for more extensive context-sensitive research (Fusarelli et al, 2018; Szeto et al, 2019; Hirsh et al, 2023). Therefore, this study examines the process of becoming an effective leader, taking into account the personal and professional background of the principal in question.

Regarding the importance of the present Study, it should be noted that evidence clearly indicates the numerous challenges faced by principals of such schools and the psychological-emotional burdens they endure. Therefore, representing the lived experiences of successful leadership in these schools can provide insights and guidelines for other primary school principals, particularly those working in conditions of high-poverty. It is important to mention that today, in the peripheries of large cities and metropolitan areas, schools have been established that, due to their environment and factors such as low-income jobs of parents, lack of infrastructure, and inadequate policies, are facing increasing economic, cultural, and educational poverty. In Iran, according to statistics reported by the head of the School Renovation Organization of the country, 64% of schools are built in

underprivileged areas (Vista¹, 2025). In this context, managing primary schools in less advantaged areas where students face severe poverty becomes even more critical. This importance arises from the fact that poverty not only affects access to educational resources but can also negatively impact students' motivation and performance. Additionally, some evidence suggests that many efforts made by school principals in marginalized areas to improve educational quality have often faced failure (Johnson et al, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to examine the lived experiences of effective administrators in marginalized schools regarding how they address the unique issues faced by these institutions. Furthermore, reflecting on the narratives of such principals can shed light on how their practical knowledge is formed to overcome the challenges in these types of schools.

In this research, a qualitative approach based on narrative inquiry is adopted to explore the lived experiences of a school principal working in a primary school facing severe poverty. In other words, this study aims to represent the process through which one primary school principal evolved into an effective educational leadership, considering their personal and professional background as well as the unique characteristics of the school environment and local community. The principal in question is a prominent figure in Hormozgan province, whose efforts in activities such as promoting reading have gained national recognition (Ministry of Education², 2024; Ibna³, 2024). Thus, this study aims to answer the question: Based on the lived experiences of a school principal in a high-poverty environment, what factors and strategies have contributed to their evolving as an effective leader?

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach and narrative inquiry method. Narrative inquiry is employed as an effective method for exploring individuals' experiences in the form of stories that have shaped their lives (Clandinin et al, 1999). In other words, narratives allow for a deeper examination of changes and transformations in individuals' emotions, identities, and actions over time and space, considering intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors. Therefore, due to the unique capability of narrative inquiry, the researchers used this method to achieve a deep

understanding of how the participant in this study became an efficient principal by organizing the events that occurred in different periods of their life with respect to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors.

The principal selected for this study, whose narratives have been explored, is Ali Ahmadnejad Kongi, a graduate with a bachelor's degree in Educational Sciences from Pardis Shahid Beheshti in Bandar Abbas, whose name is mentioned with consent. He completed his primary education at Montazeri primary school, now known as Meraj primary school, in the outskirts and deprived areas of Bandar Kong. Regarding Meraj primary school, it should be noted that this school was established in 2001 by the government and officials on a land area of 2,830 square meters and a building area of 694 square meters with 12 classrooms on Ayatollah Khamenei Street in the Abuzar neighborhood of Bandar Kong. Currently, it has 334 students (IBNA⁴, 2024). Meraj primary school has 12 classes, with an average of 26 to 27 students per grade.

The data collection tool in this study consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the selected principal. These interviews were conducted in person over six two-hour sessions. To deeply understand the principal's journey towards efficiency and interpret his managerial behaviors, in the first and second sessions, he was asked to describe events and experiences from his primary, middle, and high school years, such as interactions with teachers, principals, peers, and prevailing school conditions. In the third session, he discussed his teaching career, covering topics like classroom management, application of various teaching methods, and interactions with colleagues. In the fourth session, he elaborated on his role as an assistant principal, addressing tasks like handling school administrative matters, guiding and supervising teachers. In the fifth and sixth sessions, he spoke about his tenure as a principal, discussing essential qualities needed for principals in underprivileged areas, managerial challenges in high-poverty schools, and how he addressed them. Additionally, the researchers allowed the principal the freedom to bring up other relevant issues. Considering that recalling past events entirely can be challenging, the principal was asked to describe events he considered turning points in his personal and professional life during the mentioned periods. The sessions were recorded with the

¹ <https://vista.ir/n/yjc-0r46j>

² <https://medu.ir/fa/node/175601>

³ <https://www.ibna.ir/news/510915/>

⁴ www.ibna.ir/news/510915/

participant's permission and transcribed immediately. Furthermore, the researchers noted his ideas and impressions after each interview. This approach aimed to prevent bias and its adverse effects on the analysis process and to enrich the analysis by coherently organizing ideas on how events are related and impactful.

The data were analyzed using Lichtman's model (2013), and the findings were presented narratively and interpretatively. Lichtman's model (2013) for qualitative data analysis offers a structured and systematic approach to coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing qualitative data, making it a valuable method for researchers aiming to derive meaningful insights and theoretical contributions from their data (Ruth et al, 2023). In the first stage of narrative data analysis, codes were extracted after reading the text, and each code was assigned a label. In the second stage, the codes generated from the first stage were reviewed, with some codes being deleted and others having their labels changed. To facilitate the appropriate deletion and relabeling of codes, a table was prepared to allow for optimal comparison of the codes. In the third stage, the codes were categorized. This categorization was based on the

various life stages of the principal, including primary, middle, and high school periods, teaching, assistantship, and principalship, and was organized into four episodes. The purpose of categorizing the narratives based on different life stages was to illustrate how the principal's character was shaped by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors, and to identify key elements in his journey towards efficiency. Additionally, the different life stages of the principal were compared horizontally with each other. This allowed researchers to identify implicitly and repeatedly recurring themes within the narratives.

To validate the narratives, five teachers from Meraj primary school were selected using purposive and criterion-based sampling. These teachers were currently teaching at Meraj primary school. To achieve a deeper understanding and diversify the narratives, the following criteria were considered by researchers for selecting teachers, who must possess at least one of the following criteria: 1 Teaching experience in various schools, 2 Novice teachers, and 3 Excellence in research activities.

Table 1. Information of research participants

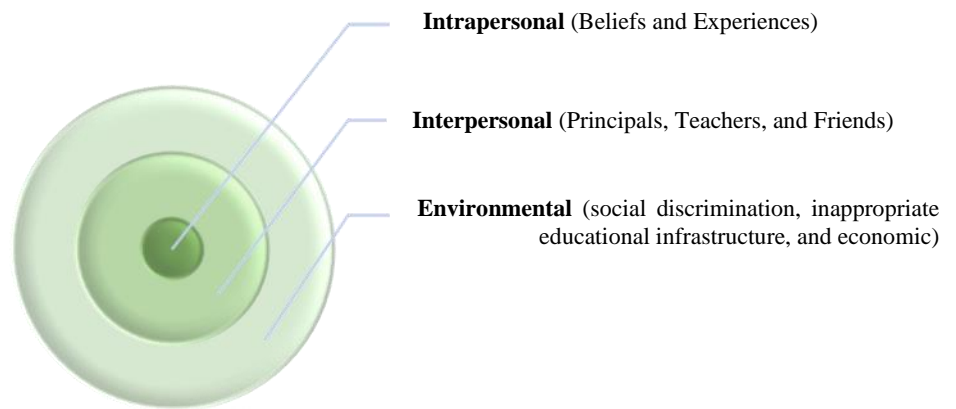
No	Participants	Work Experience (year)	Position
1	Mrs. Azizi	3	Teacher
2	Mr. Rad	4	Teacher
3	Mrs. Moradi	4	Teacher
4	Mr. Nadari	2	Teacher
5	Mr. Javadian	20	Teacher

Findings

The findings of this study are presented according to the various stages of the principal's life. In each episode, environmental, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors have been effectively represented. To depict the

principal's journey towards efficiency, the narratives have been presented in such a way that the changes occurring in these factors during each period and the interactions between them are illustrated.

Fig. 1. Types of factors examined in the present narrative inquiry and their interactions with each other



Episode One: The Character Formation Period

Ali was born in the Abuzar neighborhood of Bandar Kong, one of the high-poverty areas. He is the eleventh and youngest child. One of Ali's sisters, along with her husband and two nephews who are older than Ali, are teachers. Despite some family members' opposition, Ali attended Montazeri primary school (later renamed Meraj primary school) for his primary education. Although during those years some students' parents in the Abuzar neighborhood enrolled their children in schools in other neighborhoods, Ali's parents decided to enroll him in Montazeri primary school. This decision was influenced by the close relationships Ali had developed with his peers in his neighborhood due to family visits and playtime before starting school. In contrast, Ali's brothers, who had studied in schools outside their neighborhood, faced challenges adapting to students from different areas. Consequently, Ali's parents were concerned about his ability to integrate and interact effectively with other students.

Montazeri primary school is located in the Abuzar neighborhood, which has faced physical, cultural, and social challenges for years. Students were not immune to consequence of this challenges, with some falling victim to the devastating scourge of addiction during their primary education. Moreover, due to the relatively high ethnic and religious diversity in the Abuzar neighborhood, and as Ali mentioned, because of certain prejudices and concerns that this diversity would negatively affect their children, some parents refrained from enrolling their children in Montazeri primary school. This ethnic and religious diversity was also

present among the school teachers, most of whom were not native to Bandar Kong.

During his primary school years, Ali was always among the top students academically. His communication skills made him extremely popular among his peers, and he had many friends. Evidence suggests that individuals born into large families tend to have better communication skills due to increased opportunities for interaction with siblings (Samek & Rueter, 2011). Despite his young age, Ali realized that some residents of Bandar Kong did not have a favorable view of his school. He even heard from people around him that some teachers avoided teaching at Montazeri primary school. Montazeri students were considered among the most disorganized and academically weakest in Bandar Kong. However, Ali's actual experience at this school was quite different from these perceptions. The students, despite being from diverse ethnic backgrounds, interacted with each other warmly. All of Ali's primary school teachers, except his fifth-grade teacher, were women.

Montazeri primary school was severely deprived in terms of educational facilities and infrastructure. In the southern heat, the classrooms lacked adequate cooling equipment, making being in class a grueling and excruciating experience. However, in reality, it did not seem that way. Perhaps this is part of the art of teaching, where deprivations appear insignificant. Ali learned an important lesson from his elementary school teachers: when a teacher is caring and this compassion is evident to all, it reduces the sensitivity of students and parents to the deprivations, and they handle the challenges more effectively.

In fifth grade, Ali encountered a male teacher for the first time. Mr. Khoobiyari, the fifth-grade teacher, was incredibly compassionate and kind, serving as an exemplary devoted teacher for Ali. Ali realized that Mr. Khoobiyari was struggling with issues related to being a loan guarantor for a relative. Although in class, Mr. Khoobiyari acted in a way that prevented students from noticing his deep distress. During recess, through Mr. Khoobiyari's long conversations with the school principal and the worry lines etched on his forehead, Ali understood that his teacher was suffering from problems. The important lesson Ali learned from his fifth-grade teacher was that teaching goes beyond imparting better educational and welfare facilities. This integration opened a window for Ali to the bittersweet realities of society. With curious eyes and a heart full of hope, he observed the clash between the two groups of students. During this period, he deeply encountered the issue of discrimination and society's unfavorable view of students from high-poverty neighborhoods. The first day of middle school was one of the bitterest days for him as a student.

"On the first day, the Motahari kids came back, stood in front of us, and said, 'Watch out, this's our school! You must do whatever we say.' One of our friends standing next to us told the student to say it again. The student repeated his words, and our friend punched him in the nose. "

Ali frequently witnessed discriminatory behaviors from some teachers and students, which, like sparks in the furnace of anger and despair, led to increased aggressive behaviors among students from marginalized neighborhoods. Although academically, students from the Abuzar neighborhood often ranked among the top in the school, he observed that the perceptions of other students, teachers, and parents towards them did not significantly change. Ali clearly saw that this discriminatory attitude cast a shadow over education, like a blight. As a result, some students from poor neighborhoods, influenced by discrimination and economic and social poverty, dropped out of school and fell into addiction.

Lower secondary school was also a period of contradictions. The science teacher was highly skilled and proficient in teaching. He explained the material so simply, clearly, and understandably that students found science lessons to be a sweet and easy subject to learn. His straightforward teaching style boosted students' confidence in learning science. But that was not the whole story! Despite his excellent teaching, the science teacher was very strict. He made students write down

knowledge; a teacher is responsible for creating a safe and positive environment for students' learning and growth. Mr. Khoobiyari demonstrated that even in the toughest circumstances, it is crucial to strive to pass on positivity to the students.

Episode Two: The Period of Facing Discrimination, Conflicts, and Grief

After completing his primary education, Ali stepped into a new world by entering lower secondary school. His new school served as a bridge between two distinct worlds, merging students from the Abuzar neighborhood and those from a relatively affluent neighborhood with chapter-by-chapter questions in their notebooks and always checked them thoroughly. If a student misspelled a word, left something out, or even forgot a dot, points were deducted from their score. Additionally, the science teacher occasionally used corporal punishment, severely punishing students who were disruptive in class or performed poorly in class questions and exams. Another peculiar aspect was that all students were required to buy him a gift for Teacher's Day, otherwise, even if they scored a perfect 20 on the exam, they would not receive a 20 on their report card!

In the second year of upper secondary school, amid the joyful and lively days of adolescence, Ali suddenly lost his sister in a car accident. This tragic event cast a heavy shadow over his life, trapping him in grief and sorrow for seven years. Despite their best efforts, his family and friends could not provide the support he needed to cope with this immense loss. The impact of this event was clearly reflected in his academic decline. After the incident, Ali found that he no longer had any enthusiasm for attending school; everything seemed colorless and devoid of value and meaning to him. In the third year of upper secondary school, he tried to make up for his academic decline, but his efforts were in vain. His mind involuntarily replayed that painful incident over and over, enclosing him in a world of agonizing memories. During this time, Ali searched for meaning in life, but every time he went to school, he felt as if he was walking in an empty and soulless world.

After completing his high school diploma, Ali decided to drop out, but at the insistence of his friends, he enrolled in the pre-university course. Even after completing the pre-university course, he still did not intend to continue his education and entered the open job market. However, influenced by his friends' insistence, he registered for the university entrance exam (Konkur). The first and second attempts at Konkur were unsuccessful due to his involvement in open work and

lack of study planning. He achieved relatively satisfactory success in his open job, to the extent that his employer granted him full power of attorney. Nonetheless, after two years, Ali realized that he had no interest in his current job and constantly felt a sense of lack. Even though he was invited for a teaching interview at Farhangian University during his third attempt at Konkur, he was not accepted in the interview. This time, he felt that he had found his goal. Therefore, he decided to take the Konkur for the fourth time, quit his open job to dedicate himself to studying, and finally saw the results of his efforts by being accepted into Farhangian University.

Episode Three: The Period of Building Professional Identity

It was September, and Ali entered the school with a heart full of excitement. That day, he felt a strange sensation as if he had returned to 1998. But this time, he was not stepping into Meraj primary school as a student, but as a newly-appointed teacher. The school principal, who had treated him like his son in the 1990s, now greeted him respectfully as a colleague. The school had 12 classes, and besides Ali, all the other teachers were women. Ali was assigned to teach the grade 6 A. Interestingly, Mrs. Namdar, who had once been Ali's teacher, was now teaching the grade 6 B. Ali was delighted to be entrusted with the responsibility of teaching sixth grade, as Mrs. Namdar, who had once inspired him as a student, was now sharing her experiences with him as a colleague.

From the very beginning of his teaching career, Ali placed great importance on his professional development. With remarkable enthusiasm, he studied new topics daily and carefully watched educational videos of top national teachers. During this time, some parents, due to Ali's inexperience, insisted that the principal transfer their children to Mrs. Namdar's class. However, the principal refused their requests, recognizing Ali's dedication to his work. Within two months, parents also noticed Ali's tireless efforts and ceased their requests. Despite his deep care and attention to the students, Ali was a relatively strict teacher. While this strictness might have caused problems for some teachers, it was not an issue for Ali.

"The important thing is for parents to see that you genuinely care about their child. If they see that, they won't object and will view all your actions as well-intentioned."

Ali was a hardworking and diligent teacher. He occasionally held supplementary classes for students in the afternoons and on Thursdays. He even conducted supplementary classes for students who intended to enroll in SAMPAD schools for middle school to help them succeed in the entrance exams. Due to his social skills, Ali was extremely popular among his colleagues, who frequently consulted him on teaching matters. The principal and the assistant principal paid a lot of attention to Ali for his high skills in working with computers and software. Furthermore, Ali was highly active in research activities, achieving top ranks at the county, provincial, and national levels in action research and lesson study.

Finally, in his third year at Meraj primary school, Ali continued his job as the assistant principal. Unfortunately, in his first year in this role, seven teachers transferred from Meraj primary school due to some tensions and conflicts, and in his second year as the assistant principal, three more teachers left the school. The school principal, who viewed Ali as his successor and the next principal of Meraj primary school, involved him more than ever in the school's management, essentially preparing Ali to take on the principal role. New teachers, experiencing their first year of teaching and feeling extremely anxious and confused, frequently turned to Ali for help, and he eagerly assisted them with empathy and enthusiasm. Because of his constant supervision and guidance of new teachers, Ali often could not complete the school's administrative and system-related tasks during working hours. Therefore, after school hours, and after taking a short break, he would return to the school at 1 PM and work on organizing the school's administrative and system-related tasks until 11 PM.

Meraj primary school had always been a leader in research activities such as action research and lesson study among the county's primary schools. However, the school's standing was now jeopardized due to the transfer of the majority of its teachers. Thus, Ali decided to restore Meraj primary school to its former glory in the field of research. As a result, during his off-hours, in addition to handling the school's administrative and system tasks, he trained new teachers in action research and lesson study. But these endless efforts came at a heavy price. Ali became extremely fatigued, and the long hours of standing caused significant pain in his legs.

"Because of the intense pain, I had to put my feet in ice water. When I went to the doctor, they told me either to get injections or to rest, which wasn't an option for me."

Ali finally saw the results of his relentless efforts. The new teachers achieved remarkable successes in research activities, much like previous teachers, which astonished everyone. It was believed that with the departure of the previous teachers, Meraj primary school would no longer be able to achieve its past successes in research. On the other hand, the new teachers also attained significant success in teaching, as evidenced by the high level of satisfaction among most parents with their performance. During this period, Ali ambitiously outlined a vision and roadmap for the future path of Meraj primary school. First, to change the perception of Meraj primary school as a disadvantaged school. Second, to engage parents' participation and cooperation, paving the way for cultural change in the neighborhood.

Episode Four: The Period of Role Modeling

Finally, after 35 years of serving as the principal at Meraj primary school, Mr. Moradi retired, and on September 18, 2022, Ali was appointed as the new principal. He was both shocked to be chosen for the position and concerned about the lack of teachers just a few days before the start of the school year. He recalls those days as very tough and anxiety-inducing.

"It's your first year as principal, and from the two sixth-grade classes, one teacher became an assistant principal, and the other transferred to Rah-Anbia primary school as an assistant principal, leaving two sixth-grade classes vacant. One of the third-grade teachers also transferred to become the principal of Dar al-Quran. Where was I supposed to find teachers on September 14? They sent me three student teachers. Now imagine not having two assistant principals and being given three student teachers in your first year as principal!"

Ali knew it was going to be a challenging year ahead. However, he later realized that challenges could be seen as hidden opportunities if viewed through a different lens. Drawing on his experiences as a teacher and assistant principal, he decided to establish order and discipline in school affairs and design a framework for teachers to follow to overcome the upcoming difficulties. Therefore, he held a meeting on September 20 to outline the educational path for the school with his colleagues.

As the school principal, Ali followed specific guidelines in interacting with teachers. He believed that all school staff should treat each other like members of a family. Therefore, at the beginning of each workday, he first assessed the psychological and emotional state of

the teachers. If he noticed any issues, he would inquire about their well-being and try to help them as much as possible. Ali believed that listening to teachers' problems and concerns made them feel valued and brought a sense of calm to the school and classroom environment.

Ali is a highly disciplined, strict yet flexible principal. He believing that order and discipline are fundamental pillars of success in any educational environment. Additionally, he expects teachers to maintain daily records of students' academic and behavioral status to effectively track their progress. Ali regularly visits teachers' class to provide feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. In giving feedback, he always uses a positive and constructive approach. Instead of merely criticizing, he identifies and praises teachers' strengths, then gently and carefully points out their weaknesses and offers suggestions for improvement. This approach makes teachers feel that he is not just a principal but also a supporter and advisor who cares about their growth and development. Ali always acts deliberately in his interactions with teachers in the workplace. This measured approach not only demonstrates his deep understanding of the importance of these interactions but also stands as one of the key factors in his success.

With a deep understanding of the school's conditions, Ali was well aware that gaining parents' support would greatly enhance his efforts. Therefore, he meticulously and intelligently utilized every opportunity to involve parents in the school environment. For instance, he invited parents skilled in arts and crafts to teach these skills to the teachers and students in the class. This initiative was so impressive that when education department officials visited the classes and saw the active involvement of parents in teaching, they were astonished as if stepping into a new world, as such a phenomenon was rare and unconventional in that local community. Moreover, Ali worked to create conditions that allowed parents to participate in festivals and celebrations held at the school. He believed that active parental involvement in school affairs not only enhances the quality of education but can also lead to a fundamental cultural shift in the neighborhood over the long term.

Ali, who places great importance on teachers' professional development, not only encouraged them to participate in in-service training courses and workshops held at the county level, but also organized monthly brainstorming sessions among colleagues. In these sessions, teachers of each grade would select a topic or challenge they faced and discuss it based on new

research findings and colleagues' opinions. The aim of such meetings was twofold: first, to update teachers' knowledge, and second, to equip them with deeper awareness and understanding to better dealing with challenges than before.

In addition to the brainstorming sessions, Ali believes that school problems must be deeply analyzed and solutions found. Therefore, action research is of great importance to him. He divided the teachers into two groups for action research, just as he did during his tenure as assistant principal, and he made concerted efforts to effectively use the findings from these research projects.

"We have a five-year plan for action research. The projects carried out in the school are all part of the first, second, and third rounds of action research, and they have cost approximately seven to eight hundred million. This includes replacing air conditioners, painting the school environment, bringing in artificial grass, and smartening the classrooms. We have progressed step by step with action research."

It's clear that this workload was very exhausting and could potentially lead to resistance from the teachers. Therefore, Ali always avoided imposing requirements and allowed teachers complete freedom to choose action research, lesson study, or other activities based on their interests. However, merely giving teachers the freedom to choose was not enough. A principal who encourages teachers to engage in such activities must not only possess educational and research competencies but also have a deep commitment to these pursuits and actively participate in all educational and research activities. This approach greatly motivated the teachers to engage in their activities with renewed enthusiasm.

Teachers' Narratives

What stands out most in the teachers' narratives is the moral and professional character of our successful principal. As evident from their accounts, all the teachers experienced significant stress during their first year, with female teachers feeling this stress even more due to gender issues and teaching in a boys' school. Based on what they had heard from teachers at other schools, they expected cold and harsh behavior from the principal, but this was not the case. Our successful principal was well aware of the problems faced by new teachers and supported them step by step in all situations. As a result, teachers felt calm and confident at Meraj primary school and did not hesitate to seek guidance from the principal.

"At that time, he was the educational assistant and helped us a lot. We were complete beginners, and we

benefited greatly from Mr. Ahmadnejad's assistance." (Mrs. Moradi)

Teachers who had transferred from other schools to Meraj primary school had a more tangible understanding of the importance of the principal's behavior. Mr. Nadari recalls that at his previous school, he once requested leave from the principal due to heavy rain and difficult road conditions. However, the principal denied his request and reported his absence to the county education department without any valid reason. After that day, the principal began to mistreat Mr. Nadari for various reasons daily. Upon joining Meraj primary school and witnessing the behavior of our successful principal, Mr. Nadari realized the significant impact of a principal's behavior. Despite having a heavier workload at Meraj primary school compared to his previous school, Mr. Nadari never hesitated to take on any additional tasks.

Mr. Javadian was always amazed by the hard work and work ethic of our successful principal. Many times, when passing by the school at night, he would see the lights in the principal's office still on, indicating his ongoing activities outside regular hours. Inspired by this dedication, Mr. Javadian, despite his increasing workload, never hesitated to put in extra effort for the students and Meraj primary school. The teachers at Meraj primary school always witnessed that our successful principal was a symbol of diligence. Therefore, they also put forth their utmost effort. Additionally, according to the narratives, our successful principal never operated in a commanding manner.

Our successful principal's trust in the teachers' educational decisions and his support for them was another aspect that greatly pleased the teachers. For instance, once parents strongly objected to the teaching methods of sixth-grade teacher who was actually a student-teacher. Our successful principal defended the sixth-grade teacher in front of the parents and assured them that he was performing his job correctly and they had no reason to worry. The principal was right because six of the sixth-grade students ranked among the top 10 out of 400 participants in the Bandar Lengeh County's academic competition!

"Parents had come and were strongly protesting, but Mr. Ahmadnejad said it's not as you think, and this teacher has his own method because I always monitor his class, and by the end of the year, it was proven as Mr. Ahmadnejad said! Six or seven of his students ranked among the top in the academic competition out of 400 students!" (Mr. Rad).

Upon reflecting on the teachers' narratives, it became clear that they were very pleased to work in an environment founded on order, respect, and dialogue with colleagues. At the start of each academic year, our successful principal held meetings with them to inform them about the activities planned for the school year. He clearly communicated their duties and the activities expected of them. He supported the teachers in activities such as action research, lesson study, and various educational projects. To foster dialogue, the principal organized monthly brainstorming sessions where teachers discussed their problems and how to address them with one another.

" Teachers of each grade choose a topic; we chose the topic of anger management. We identified our topic two weeks in advance, posted it on the school board, and colleagues gave their opinions on whether it was a good topic or not. Then, we gathered information and presented it in a conference format, sharing suggestions and opinions." (Mrs. Azizi)

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the narratives of a primary school principal in a high-poverty environment regarding his evolution towards efficiency. Based on the analysis of the findings, the following themes were consistently repeated in the narratives of the principal in question: facing discrimination, economic poverty and its consequences, and the local community's perception of disadvantaged schools. Additionally, three strategies including managing interactions, continuous professional development, and creating a vision played a crucial role in the principal's path toward effectiveness.

The narratives of our principal's student days reveals instances of discrimination, deprivation, and conflicts between societal beliefs and experienced realities. According to the accounts, facing these factors had a profound impact on our principal's character as an educational leader. Our principal realized how the community's beliefs influenced interpersonal relationships and pushed disadvantaged students towards fulfilling those beliefs. Additionally, he through the understanding gained during his student years about the underlying conditions in disadvantaged schools, the principal acquired deep insights into handling the unique challenges of these schools, which proved beneficial during their tenure. In his vision, He sought to change the local community's perception of disadvantaged schools by leading in educational and research activities and showcasing achievements.

Despite the numerous studies conducted in recent years on the characteristics of effective and efficient principals, the specific behaviors of successful principals remain somewhat of a mystery (Pardosi & Utari, 2022). In the case of our principal, one of the most important managerial behaviors in guiding teachers was the avoidance of compulsion and the delegation of authority to teachers. As González-Falcón and et al (2020) similarly indicated, this type of managerial behavior is one of the most important strategies for principals in disadvantaged schools. Our principal, based on his lived experiences, understood that teachers, given the workload pressures they face, would never follow a principal who merely gives orders. He believed that principals who exhibit authoritarian behavior are perceived as individuals who have no knowledge or understanding of the complexities of educational and pedagogical matters.

Our principal in question made efforts to reduce the difficulties and stress associated with teaching for the teachers by trusting their educational decisions, considering their educational ideas and concerns, establishing fair and respectful relationships, and enhancing their participation in school affairs. At the same time, he aimed to create a supportive psychological and emotional environment for them. A crucial aspect of achieving these objectives was that the principal always acted in a measured and calculated manner. For example, in trusting the teachers' educational measures, he continuously evaluated the quality of their teaching and provided feedback, demonstrating his trust in their effective teaching strategies. In establishing fair relationships, he worked to prevent discrimination among teachers and treated all of them equally. He addressed teachers' concerns and sometimes secretly helped them without other teachers knowing. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) used the metaphor of "lubricating the human machinery" for such managerial behaviors, suggesting that these actions make teachers feel valued and continue their work with increased motivation. Furthermore, the principal believed that enhancing the quality of education first required attending to the psychological and emotional well-being of teachers. Therefore, at the start of each workday, he assessed the teachers' psychological and emotional states.

Kilag et al (2023) and Mombourquette (2017) have stated that vision setting is one of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of principals, in line with the present research. For our principal vision setting was important for two reasons. First, with the set vision in mind, he placed great emphasis on the professional development

of teachers, viewing it as a means to achieve the vision. Accordingly, he repeatedly encouraged teachers to attend training courses and organized monthly brainstorming and discussion sessions. McConnell & Lyon (2020) suggest that organizing such sessions in disadvantaged schools is of double importance because teachers in this schools face a wider range of challenges compared to other schools' teachers and need to continuously exchange experiences with colleagues and review their knowledge to effectively address these challenges.

Second, our principal believed that achieving his vision depended on changing the prevailing culture of the school and the local community. As Leithwood (2021) states, in disadvantaged schools with ethnic diversity, principals must have a deep understanding of the cultures, norms, values, and expectations of students' families and be able to establish links between the school and families. In this regard, although the principal set a precedent by creating an environment for parental involvement in teaching, he successfully achieved his primary goal of creating a deep connection between the school and parents. It is evident that the principal saw achieving his vision as the result of the efforts of both internal and external stakeholders. As Garza et al. (2014) indicate, effective principals understand that they will never succeed alone. Therefore, they strive to involve all individuals within the school and parents in school affairs (Kilag et al, 2023).

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Based on the results of the present study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Conducting training workshops for school principals in the periphery to enhance communication skills and interaction with teachers and the local community.
- Organizing training courses on how to address the specific challenges faced by marginalized schools.
- Organizing training courses for principals on understanding local cultures and norms to improve communication with the community.
- Establishing think tanks among school principals in the periphery to exchange experiences and strategies for addressing common challenges.

Disadvantaged schools constantly face challenges related to educational infrastructure in their efforts to improve educational quality. The importance of this issue is such that some studies have identified the ability to improve facilities and educational infrastructure as one of the key competencies of school principals (Sunaengsih et al, 2019). Therefore, our principal in this study worked to overcome infrastructure problems by attracting support from benefactors and officials from institutions like the municipality. As a result of his efforts, the progress of the school in this regard was tangible for both teachers and students.

This study shows effective management in disadvantaged schools primarily depends on the principal's ability to establish friendly and respectful relationships with teachers. According to the findings, the principal's friendly and respectful relationships with teachers act as a protective umbrella, under which strict discipline and a heavy workload are accepted by the teachers and seen as opportunities for their own growth and development. Additionally, by leading all educational activities and participating alongside teachers, principals are accepted as educational leaders by the teachers and achieve greater success in implementing educational programs. This study also showed that if school principals can create a vision for the future of the school and annually evaluate the extent to which it has been achieved, they will be able to perform their duties with increased motivation and confidence.

- Creating participatory programs that engage parents in the educational process and school decision-making.
- Examining how the culture, norms, and values of the local community influence managerial behaviors and the performance of marginalized schools.
- Analyzing the successful experiences of school principals in the periphery to extract effective leadership patterns.

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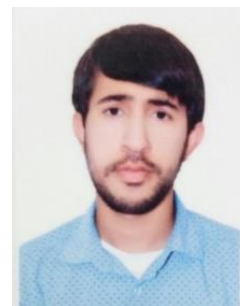
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