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Identifying and Ranking Factors Influencing Visionary Educational Leadership: A Mixed-Method Study of Tehran's Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of the current research is to identify and rank the factors affecting Visionary leadership in elementary schools.

Methods: Adopting a mixed-methods design within an inductive-comparative paradigm, the research combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative phase, the participants consisted of 18 experts in educational management, human resource management, and educational sciences, selected through purposive sampling. In the quantitative phase, the population included school principals in Tehran, from which 149 principals were chosen using a non-probability sampling method. Data were collected through interviews (qualitative) and questionnaires (quantitative). The validity and reliability of the instruments were verified using the CVR index, Cohen's kappa test, and test–retest method. Qualitative data were analyzed through coding with MAXQDA software, while the quantitative phase employed the fuzzy Delphi method for final analysis.

Results: The qualitative phase identified 14 factors influencing visionary leadership. These factors were subsequently prioritized through quantitative analysis.

Conclusions: Findings revealed that a strategic perspective, effective communication with key stakeholders, self-esteem, and a holographic view represent the most critical factors shaping visionary leadership in elementary schools.

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Introduction

Effective educational leadership requires a broad set of skills and competencies, including strategic planning, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and collaboration (Barton, 2013). Educational leaders are also expected to be knowledgeable about curriculum development, instructional design, assessment, and evaluation (McGreal & Olcott Jr, 2022). As a vital component of the educational system, educational leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of education. Leaders are responsible for creating positive learning environments, promoting diversity and inclusion, fostering innovation and creativity, and ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all students. To achieve this, they must remain informed about emerging trends and developments in education and adapt their strategies accordingly. Effective leaders are capable of inspiring and motivating both teachers and students to reach their full potential, thereby cultivating a culture of excellence in education (James et al., 2020).

Educational leaders also play a crucial role in ensuring that the education system responds to the evolving needs of society and prepares students to meet future challenges. They must serve as advocates for education by seeking funding and institutional support, as well as by promoting the value of education in the wider community (Connolly & James, 2024). Becoming an effective educational leader requires a deep understanding of the education system and its challenges, coupled with strong leadership skills such as the ability to inspire, communicate effectively, and make sound decisions (Prieto, 2013). Continuous learning and professional development are also essential, as leaders must remain up to date with the latest research and best practices in education (Daučianskaitė & Žydžiūnaitė, 2020). Ultimately, effective leaders can have a profound impact on the success of educational institutions and the academic achievement of students. As the educational landscape continues to evolve globally, the demand for strong educational leadership has become increasingly critical (Na'imah & Muhibbin, 2020).

Visionary educational leadership refers to a leadership style characterized by a clear vision for the future of education and the ability to inspire and motivate others to work toward that vision. This style involves thinking beyond conventional boundaries, embracing innovation, and taking calculated risks to drive positive change in the education system (Keramati et al., 2022; Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). A visionary educational leader is able to transcend current challenges and limitations, envisioning a future where all students have access to quality education that prepares

them for success in an ever-changing world (Candrasari et al., 2023). Such leaders adopt a forward-looking and proactive stance, identifying and implementing new strategies, technologies, and teaching methods to enhance student learning outcomes. They are not afraid to challenge the status quo and advocate for necessary reforms in policies, curricula, and instructional practices. By deeply understanding the needs and aspirations of students, teachers, and communities, visionary leaders actively engage stakeholders in decision-making processes ((Khoiri, 2020).

Moreover, visionary educational leaders prioritize equity and inclusion, ensuring that all students—regardless of background or ability—have equal opportunities to succeed. They foster diversity and create inclusive learning environments in which every student feels valued and supported. In addition, such leaders are effective communicators and collaborators, articulating their vision clearly to stakeholders, building consensus, and garnering support for their initiatives. By promoting a culture of collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, they recognize that collective efforts are essential to achieving educational goals (Ubaidillah et al., 2019).

Recent research supports the critical role of visionary leadership in education. Handayani (2023) found that visionary leadership equips educational institutions to adapt and respond effectively to disruptive changes in the technological era. Similarly, Kusumawati (2023) highlighted that one of the most significant factors influencing teachers' performance is the leadership services provided by school principals. Kadir et al. (2020) concluded that empowering leadership, intellectual stimulation, and adaptability are positively and significantly correlated with employees' innovative behaviors, which in turn can be shaped by visionary academic leaders. Consequently, it is recommended that academic leaders continue to strengthen empowerment strategies, intellectual stimulation, and adaptability to foster innovation among staff. Ubaidillah et al. (2019) further emphasized that educational institutions require clearer guidelines and leaders who can chart the path forward, communicate goals effectively, motivate staff, build networks with external organizations, and reward excellence. Similarly, Hemmatyar et al. (2019) reported that visionary educational leaders tend to adopt approaches aligned with long-term objectives, suggesting that through appropriate selection processes and empowerment strategies, current routine school management can be transformed into visionary leadership.

Visionary educational leadership, therefore, is fundamentally about inspiring and empowering others to pursue a shared vision of educational excellence. It combines strategic thinking, creativity, empathy, and strong interpersonal skills to generate meaningful and sustainable change in education. As a dynamic and future-oriented approach, it emphasizes clear vision, innovation, equity, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Visionary leaders inspire and empower stakeholders to work collectively toward a common vision of educational excellence, ultimately benefiting students, teachers, and society as a whole (Karwan et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2024; M. Taylor et al., 2014).

Given that elementary school represents a crucial stage in students' lives for character formation and the development of innate abilities, visionary leadership has the potential to provide strategic direction in schools and contribute significantly to achieving educational aspirations. Considering the critical role of school principals and the necessity of adopting intelligent leadership strategies, the present study seeks to identify and rank the factors influencing visionary leadership in elementary schools. Drawing on expert insights, the study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches, utilizing triangulated fuzzy methods for ranking. By addressing existing research gaps, this study contributes to advancing the literature on visionary educational leadership.

Material and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design (qualitative–quantitative). In terms of purpose, it is applied research, and in terms of data collection, it follows a descriptive–survey approach.

In the qualitative phase, the statistical population consisted of faculty members specializing in educational management, human resource management, and educational sciences. Using purposive sampling with the snowball technique, 18 experts were selected. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation. Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, which allowed participants to elaborate freely on their perspectives. The collected data were then analyzed using a systematic coding process to identify the factors influencing visionary leadership.

In the quantitative phase, the statistical population comprised school principals in Tehran. Using a non-probability, convenience sampling method, 149 principals participated in the study. The data

collection instruments included interviews in the qualitative phase and a structured questionnaire in the quantitative phase.

The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were confirmed through several methods. Content validity was assessed using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR), where experts evaluated the necessity of each item. All CVR values exceeded 0.74, indicating acceptable content validity. Reliability was examined through Cohen's Kappa coefficient and a test–retest procedure. The Kappa value exceeded 0.60, confirming adequate reliability. Additionally, the content validity of the questionnaire was further verified by six subject-matter experts in the field.

For data analysis, qualitative interview data were coded and processed using *MAXQDA 2020*. In the quantitative phase, the extracted factors were further examined and ranked using the fuzzy Delphi method. This sequential process allowed for the identification of key factors through qualitative exploration and their prioritization through quantitative analysis.

Results

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with open-ended questions. The collected responses were analyzed using a coding process, through which the key influencing factors were identified. To ensure the accuracy of coding and the extraction of concepts, the identified codes were returned to the interviewees for verification and confirmation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. The goal was to capture the core ideas expressed by participants. As a result, 14 categories and 51 codes representing the factors influencing visionary leadership were identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors Influencing Visionary Leadership of School Principals

Category	Code
Strategic Vision	Planning and developing strategies to achieve long-term goals Analyzing the internal and external environment Determining operational strategies Choosing appropriate methods
Psychological Empowerment	Motivational measures Planning to enrich the meaning of assigned responsibilities Emotional support Correct perception of attitudes
Understanding Value Systems	Personal perception of governing values Value-based decisions
Mindfulness	Complete observation of events without judgment Improving the quality of environmental awareness Immediate exploration Avoiding past events and focusing on the present and future

	A deep and realistic relationship with life flows Self-regulation Time management Coping with distractions
Ideology	Generating and developing innovative and creative ideas Research and creative thinking Research and development
Dominance	Full involvement of subordinates Controlling events Awareness Mastery of tasks
Employee Motivation	Providing training opportunities Transparency and participation Giving responsibility Providing opportunities for advancement Balance between work and personal life
Emotional Intelligence	Ability to monitor and control emotions Separation and recognition Interventions Emotion regulation
Holographic Perspective	Holistic philosophy Systems thinking
Creative Thinking	Creating new, innovative and implementable ideas Strategy for solving problems Independent and creative look at problems Visualization and communication Changing perspective
Connecting with Key Stakeholders	Knowing stakeholders Establishing continuous communication Collaboration and interaction
Foresight	Predictability Scenario-making ability Using the SWOT matrix
Self-Esteem	Assessing mental states Job value Dealing with unproductive behaviors
Risk-Taking	Readiness to accept and manage risks or associated hazards Desiring positive and innovative developments and changes

Following the qualitative phase, the identified factors were incorporated into a questionnaire designed to gather expert opinions regarding the degree of agreement with each factor. Experts evaluated the factors using five linguistic variables: *very low, low, moderate, high,* and *very high*. Given that individuals' interpretations of linguistic variables may differ, these qualitative terms were converted into triangular fuzzy numbers to ensure consistency in responses. The transformation of linguistic variables into triangular and de-fuzzified fuzzy numbers is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Conversion of Linguistic Variables into Triangular and De-fuzzified Fuzzy Numbers

Verbal variables	Triangular fuzzy number	Determined fuzzy number
Very high	(0.75, 1, 1)	0.75
High	(0.5, 0.75, 1)	0.5625
Moderate	(0.25, 0.5, 0.75)	0.3125
low	(0, 0.25, 0.5)	0.0625
Very low	(0, 0, 0.25)	0.0625

De-fuzzified fuzzy numbers were calculated using the Minkowski formula, expressed as follows:

Equation (1):

x=m+(β−α)4x = m + \frac (\beta - \alpha)}x=m+4(β−α)

where mmm represents the lower bound of the triangular fuzzy number, α\alphaα the midpoint, and β\betaβ the upper bound.

First Round of Expert Survey

In the first Delphi round, the factors identified through qualitative interviews were presented in the form of a questionnaire to experts, who indicated their level of agreement using the predefined linguistic variables. The collected responses were then converted into triangular fuzzy numbers, and the fuzzy mean for each factor was calculated using the following relations:

Ai=(a1(i),a2(i),a3(i)),i=1,2,3,…,nA_i = (a_1^ (i), a_2^{(i)}, a_3^{(i)}), \quad i=1,2,3,…,nAi =(a1(i),a2(i),a3(i)),i=1,2,3,…,n

Aave=(m1,m2,m3)=(1n∑i=1na1(i),1n∑i=1na2(i),1n∑i=1na3(i))A_{ave} = (m_1,m_2,m_3) = \left(\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^n a_1^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^n a_2^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^n a_3^{(i)}\right)Aave=(m1,m2,m3)=(n1i=1∑na1(i),n1i=1∑na2(i),n1i=1∑na3(i))

where AiA_iAi represents the opinion of the *i-th* expert, and AaveA_{ave}Aave indicates the average opinion across all experts. The frequency of responses for each factor in the first round is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Expert Responses in the First Round

Factors affecting visionary leadership					
Variable	Very high	High	Moderate	Low	Very low
Strategic Vision	52	7	0	0	0
Psychological Empowerment	50	4	5	0	0
Understanding Value Systems	49	8	2	0	0
Mindfulness	50	4	2	3	0
Ideology	52	6	2	0	0
Dominance	47	4	5	3	0
Employee Motivation	53	3	2	1	0
Emotional Intelligence	46	8	3	2	0
Holographic Perspective	50	2	4	1	0
Creative Thinking	51	4	2	2	0
Connecting with Key Stakeholders	56	1	2	0	0
Foresight	47	6	2	4	0
Self-Esteem	53	2	4	0	0
Risk-Taking	50	2	3	2	0

After calculating the triangular fuzzy means, de-fuzzified numbers were obtained using the Minkowski method. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean Expert Opinions after Defuzzification (First Round)

Variable	Fuzzy Triangular Average (m, α, β)	de-fuzzified values	Variable	Fuzzy Triangular Average (m, α, β)	de-fuzzified values
Strategic Vision	(0.708, 0.968, 1.04)	0.726	Emotional Intelligence	(0.541, 0.791, 0.927)	0.575
Psychological Empowerment	(0.604, 0.854, 0.947)	0.627	Holographic Perspective	(0.614, 0.864, 0.937)	0.632
Understanding Value Systems	(0.625, 0.875, 0.979)	0.651	Creative Thinking	(0.604, 0.854, 0.947)	0.627
Mindfulness	(0.572, 0.822, 0.916)	0.595	Connecting with Key Stakeholders	(0.697, 0.947, 0.979)	0.705
Ideology	(0.645, 0.895, 0.979)	0.666	Foresight	(0.520, 0.770, 0.895)	0.551
Dominance	(0.510, 0.760, 0.885)	0.541	Self-Esteem	(0.645, 0.895, 0.958)	0.660
Employee Motivation	(0.645, 0.895, 0.958)	0.660	Risk-Taking	(0.562, 0.854, 0.927)	0.580

Second Round of Expert Survey

To ensure stability of expert consensus, a second round of the Delphi survey was conducted. The frequency of responses for each factor in this round is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Expert Responses in the Second Round

Factors affecting visionary leadership					
Variable	Very high	High	Moderate	Low	Very low
Strategic Vision	54	5	0	0	0
Psychological Empowerment	52	6	1	0	0
Understanding Value Systems	53	5	1	0	0
Mindfulness	53	6	2	0	0
Ideology	53	5	1	0	0
Dominance	50	7	1	1	0
Employee Motivation	53	5	1	0	0
Emotional Intelligence	50	6	2	1	0
Holographic Perspective	56	3	0	0	0
Creative Thinking	51	8	0	0	0
Connecting with Key Stakeholders	57	2	0	0	0
Foresight	50	4	5	0	0
Self-Esteem	55	3	1	0	0
Risk-Taking	55	2	1	1	0

Triangular fuzzy means and de-fuzzified values were again calculated using the Minkowski method. The results of the second round are reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Mean Expert Opinions after Defuzzification (Second Round)

Variable	Fuzzy Triangular Average (m, α, β)	de-fuzzified values	Variable	Fuzzy Triangular Average (m, α, β)	de-fuzzified values
Strategic Vision	(0.729, 0.989, 1.04)	0.741	Emotional Intelligence	(0.552, 0.781, 0.875)	0.575
Psychological Empowerment	(0.666, 0.916, 0.989)	0.684	Holographic Perspective	(0.718, 0.968, 1)	0.726
Understanding Value Systems	(0.670, 0.920, 0.988)	0.687	Creative Thinking	(0.666, 0.916, 1)	0.687
Mindfulness	(0.645, 0.895, 0.979)	0.666	Connecting with Key Stakeholders	(0.729, 0.979, 1)	0.734
Ideology	(0.677, 0.927, 0.989)	0.692	Foresight	(0.604, 0.854, 0.947)	0.627
Dominance	(0.625, 0.885, 0.968)	0.635	Self-Esteem	(0.697, 0.947, 0.989)	0.707
Employee Motivation	(0.677, 0.927, 0.989)	0.692	Risk-Taking	(0.645, 0.895, 0.968)	0.663

Comparison of Rounds and Consensus

Finally, the differences between the de-fuzzified mean values from the first and second rounds were analyzed (Table 7).

Table 7. Differences in De-fuzzified Means between Round One and Round Two

Variable	De-fuzzified average of the first round	De-fuzzified average of the second round	Difference of the de-fuzzified mean of the first and second rounds	Variable	De-fuzzified average of the first round	De-fuzzified average of the second round	Difference of the de-fuzzified mean of the first and second rounds
Strategic Vision	0.726	0.741	0.015	Emotional Intelligence	0.575	0.575	0
Psychological Empowerment	0.627	0.684	0.057	Holographic Perspective	0.632	0.726	0.094
Understanding Value Systems	0.651	0.687	0.036	Creative Thinking	0.627	0.687	0.06
Mindfulness	0.595	0.666	0.071	Connecting with Key Stakeholders	0.705	0.734	0.029
Ideology	0.666	0.692	0.026	Foresight	0.551	0.627	0.076
Dominance	0.541	0.635	0.094	Self-Esteem	0.66	0.707	0.047
Employee Motivation	0.66	0.692	0.032	Risk-Taking	0.580	0.663	0.083

According to the stopping criterion of the Delphi process, when the difference between the de-fuzzified means of two rounds is less than 0.1, consensus among experts is assumed and the process is concluded. In this study, the differences between the first and second rounds were below the 0.1 threshold, indicating that experts had reached consensus regarding the factors influencing visionary leadership. This outcome suggests a shared understanding among experts of the identified factors. The final prioritization of all factors is illustrated in Figure 1.

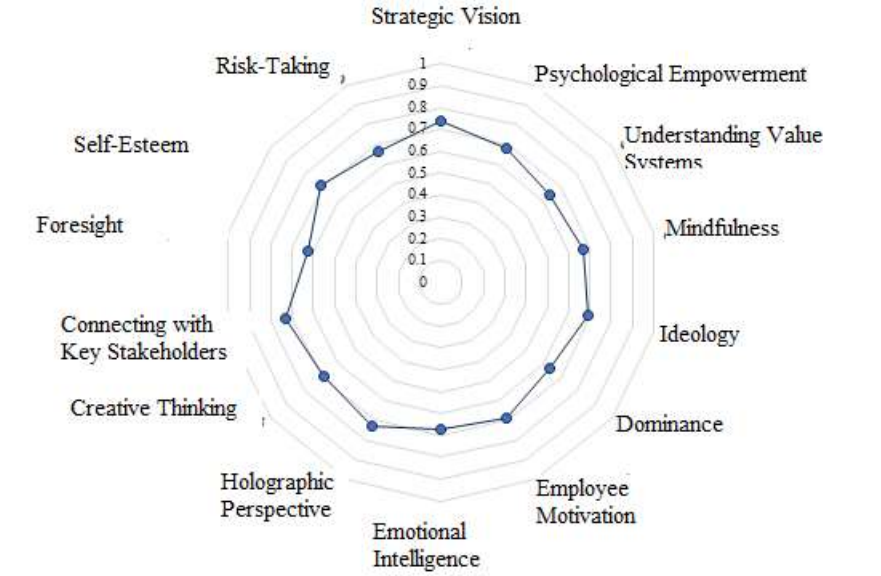

Figure 1. Prioritization of Factors Influencing Visionary Leadership

Discussion

Visionary leadership in the educational system refers to leaders who adopt a future-oriented perspective and articulate a clear vision for the future of education. Such leaders emphasize innovation, creativity, and long-term planning to foster positive change and improvement within the education sector. Visionary leadership is essential for promoting innovation, ensuring access to high-quality education for all students, and guiding schools toward sustainable development (Khan et al., 2024).

The present study sought to identify and rank the factors influencing visionary leadership in elementary schools using the fuzzy Delphi method. Initially, factors were identified through expert interviews, after which a structured questionnaire was designed to capture the views of school principals. The data were then analyzed through fuzzy logic, and the identified factors were prioritized accordingly.

The findings revealed fourteen key factors influencing visionary leadership: strategic vision, psychological empowerment, value system awareness, mindfulness, ideation, integrity, staff motivation, emotional intelligence, holographic perspective, creative thinking, communication with key stakeholders, foresight, self-esteem, and risk-taking. Among these, strategic vision, communication with key stakeholders, self-esteem, and a holographic perspective emerged as the most influential. These results align with previous findings reported by Kusumawati (2023) and Ubaidillah et al. (2019). In terms of research novelty, to the best of our knowledge, no prior study had comprehensively identified and ranked the factors affecting visionary leadership in elementary schools, making this study a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

The findings suggest that school principals, by adopting a clear strategic vision, can effectively implement long-term educational goals and guide their institutions using the principles of visionary leadership. By integrating these elements into daily practice, principals are better positioned to establish coherent directions for their schools, thereby promoting innovation, equity, and sustainable educational progress.

This study faced several limitations. The most notable was the limited availability of prior research on visionary leadership, which made it difficult to compare findings across a broader body of literature. As a result, the present study serves as one of the few contributions toward developing the theoretical and empirical foundations of visionary leadership in education. Another limitation

concerns the study sample. Due to the study design and objectives, participants were restricted to experts and principals within Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or educational systems. Future research should address these limitations by including broader samples across different regions and by integrating additional perspectives, such as teachers, students, and parents.

Based on the results, several practical recommendations can be made for school leadership:

- Establish a long-term strategic vision for the school in collaboration with stakeholders, ensuring that all parties are informed of the school's goals and actively engaged in providing feedback.
- Prioritize psychological empowerment by delegating responsibilities and creating opportunities for professional growth and leadership development among teachers and staff.
- Encourage innovation and creativity by motivating staff to think beyond conventional boundaries and generate new ideas for improving instructional practices.
- Demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning, openness to change, and continuous improvement, thereby modeling these qualities for others in the school community.
- Promote equity and inclusion by ensuring that all students, regardless of background or circumstances, have access to high-quality education.

For future research, it is recommended that scholars examine the impact of visionary leadership on related educational variables, such as teacher performance, student achievement, organizational culture, and school innovation capacity. Such studies would deepen the understanding of visionary leadership and extend its implications within diverse educational contexts.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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