

Scientific Paradigms in Iran's Educational Administration: A Critical Exploration

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Abstract

Many educational administration (EA) experts have voiced their concern over the lack of scientific attitude in Iranian schools' leadership. However, what has not been taken into consideration is the precise knowledge of the science of EA of these experts. This study is meant to delve into Iranian EA experts' perceptions of the scientific foundations of this field through an interpretive phenomenological approach. To that end, this paper carefully selected 11 experts for this study through the use of convenience sampling, as well as being sensitive to theoretical data saturation. Using indirect questioning methods, we sought to elicit their complex views. The findings bear great importance within the field and in terms of broader social implications. From a disciplinary perspective, the findings indicate a consensus between specialists that converges with the principles espoused by the theoretical movement. Socially, such notions indicate a phenomenon known as Identification with the Aggressor (IWA). Notably, the concerns pointed out by the experts regarding EA—such as insistence on uniqueness, the adversarial nature of the external environment, and power dynamics as potential threats—echo the propaganda of the oligarchic management ideologies.

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These findings compete with the historical theory of nation-state conflict when defining the historical and political texture of Iranian society. According to this theory, people from all social classes, even intellectuals, naturally resist all administrative systems' ideologies and refuse integration. The deviation of the results of this research from the theory of nation-state conflict implies a change in the socio-economic environment of society.

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Introduction

The school environment is complex and dynamic, posing a myriad of issues with which the school principal must contend. Drawing on experience alone is no longer sufficient to manage such complexities. For instance, it has been estimated that school principals deal with approximately 150 issues daily (Day et al. 2011). Many of these issues are novel and require innovative solutions, while societies hold a high level of scrutiny of the educational system's performance, viewing any misstep as catastrophic. Consequently, school management and leadership cannot rely on trial-and-error methods. They always require a strong scientific foundation that is already available in the knowledge of the field. By looking at the history of EA, we find that the field of EA did not have this strong scientific foundation in the beginning, and it was after some movements became dominant, which will be discussed further, that it was able to achieve such a strong theoretical foundation. Critiques of the school administration can be



broadly categorized into two groups. One segment scrutinizes EA as a scientific discipline, while the other focuses on EA as a practical realm in which school principals operate daily. In the former, researchers have compared EA with other social science disciplines, highlighting its perceived lack of theoretical and scientific rigor (Culberston, 1981). Conversely, within the operational context, some scholars have criticized school management practices, asserting that the administration of schools lacks a scientific foundation (Mohammadi, 2019). Furthermore, certain researchers have deplored the underrepresentation of EA graduates in school leadership roles, deeming this practice an unsystematic approach to education (Bigdely, Keramati, and Bazargan, 2023). A common thread across these criticisms is the shared belief that EA lacks a solid scientific foundation.

Although in all these studies it has been claimed that there is no scientific approach to the management of Iranian schools, none of these studies have clearly stated their definition and meaning of science. Some implicitly considered scientific as synonymous with meritocracy (for example, Abdollahi, 2013). Implicitly, being scientific for these researchers means that the position of school management should be entrusted to graduates in the field of EA. Some of these researchers (for example, Mohammadi, 2019) have considered scientific administration as administration based on the use of existing knowledge and research on EA; on this basis, implicitly, decision-making based on research has considered the existing theories to be scientific. However, these are only implicit understandings of the researchers' meaning of being scientific. However, the meaning of science in EA for these researchers is still unclear. Thus, exploring what these researchers mean by the science of EA leads to the philosophy of science. Exploring the philosophy of science is important because, by understanding the

meaning that researchers, scientists, and specialists of a scientific field have of the science of that field, it is possible to identify the cultures of different scientific research. In other words, examining this common philosophy among the members of a scientific society allows us to know what kind of intellectual tradition has cast a shadow on society's scientific and research work (Wray and Bormann, 2015). This philosophy specifies the concerns of the scientific community, and such concerns place them in special and different psychological situations. Some social psychology scientists, such as Fromm (2022), have pointed out that by understanding the trends and tendencies of a society (in this case, a scientific society), it is possible to determine what kind of political and economic system this society is receptive to. Fromm (2022) recognized the tendencies of people in different eras and countries to show that the acceptance and popularity of a special personality or movement that is clearly against freedom must be consistent with the structure of the character in the society. In other words, the tendency towards freedom or escape from freedom can be understood by understanding the hidden psychological philosophies of special actors. Therefore, by understanding the hidden meaning of science researchers, it is possible to understand what alternatives they have for the existing situation.

This study addresses a critical gap in the understanding of EA in Iran, where evidence indicates that the scientific foundations of the field require substantial development. Despite the importance of this issue, existing studies show the prevailing dominance of positivist methodologies in Iranian EA studies. For instance, Nemati and Shirbagi (2022) found that 89% of educational leadership studies employ a positivist approach, highlighting the reluctance to embrace qualitative methods (Mohammadi and Nazarzadeh Zare, 2014). This



methodological stagnation is mirrored in academic literature, where traditional paradigms dominate the discourse, leaving little room for innovative topics and narratives in EA (Mohammadi, 2022). Moreover, systematic reviews of school leadership studies in Iran reveal that transformational leadership remains the most frequently studied model, while alternative approaches such as distributive, collaborative, democratic, and instructional leadership are underrepresented (Hosseingholizadeh, Sharif, and Taghizadeh-Kerman, 2021). This underdevelopment has taken a course whereby Moridi (2012), in his review, reported that less than one percent of the studies address the real challenges facing Iranian society and its education system. Against this backdrop, the meaning of EA remains undetermined by specialists in the field. In other words, our study assumes that the explanation of the concerns and views of EA practitioners can provide enlightening details on how they conceptualize science within the field. At the same time, this research also tries to fill a significant gap in the literature and tries to give school principals, who have to work amidst rapid societal changes and advances in technology, an Umwelt where decision-making can be founded on scientific grounds. This paper seeks to critically engage with how scientific methodologies interface with educational leadership practices in ways that position school leaders to tackle complex challenges effectively while creating enabling contexts for learning and development. Ultimately, this study has the potential to change the way people think about educational leadership by offering a framework that embeds rigorous scientific inquiry with ethical considerations crucial for the shaping of education's future.



Exploration of Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of the Study

Unveiling the Evolution of EA Science: A Triad of Paradigms and Perspectives

Examining practitioners' perspectives sheds light on the historical underpinnings of EA science. This exploration reveals inherent contradictions in the interpretation of science within the discipline, mirroring the historical evolution of EA. We will now present three quite different paradigms, with their respective concerns and foundational assumptions: a) the theory movement; b) the interpretive movement; and c) the critical movement.

In the early 1950s, a division surfaced in the EA camp. On the one hand, many scholars in the field believe that most of the literature on EA is based essentially upon the experiential insights of teachers and managers; hence, it constitutes a field defined by a compilation of advice and personal beliefs from seasoned educational leaders (Griffiths, 1983). In contrast, following World War II, the incursion of the social sciences into the realm of EA introduced a plethora of rational notions relating to organizational efficiency and effectiveness within its discourse. By the mid-1950s, influenced by the spirit of logical positivism inherent in these social sciences and fueled by a general dissatisfaction with the field's prescriptive nature, the 'theory movement' emerged, advocating for a more scientific approach to knowledge in EA, grounded in quantitative positivism (Oplatka, 2010). Central to the theory, the movement was the quest for scientific leadership methods that school administrators could effectively implement. This entailed a shift towards basing school management practices on theories informed by scientific management methods rather than solely on individuals' personal experiences. Consequently, proponents of the theory movement sought to establish an



administrative theory that was distinct from subjective experiences (Hyung, 2001). Methodologically, the theory movement adopted a positivist perspective on science, with knowledge generation predicated on meticulous observation and measurement of an objective reality external to the researcher (Creswell, 2014). 7). From an organizational standpoint, entities are viewed as continuously adapting to their external environments, a perspective sometimes referred to as the modern paradigm (Hatch 2018). Organizations are conceptualized as objectively real entities operating within the tangible world, functioning as systems of decision-making and action driven by norms of rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness aligned with predefined objectives (Hatch, 2018). 15). In terms of leadership, the primary function was the creation of a coherent and efficient entity through the coordination and unification of diverse organizational forces. As a result, politics and power dynamics were seen as possible threats because leaders basically wanted organizational integrity and thus viewed conflicts and tensions to be disreputable. Internal cohesion, therefore, was stressed, along with the harmonious exchange of ideas and perceptions, to be vital to the leadership process.

Since the 1970s, the theory of EA has faced criticism from various quarters, with challenges arising regarding advocacy for qualitative methodologies, arguments questioning the relevance of theories to practitioners and school improvement, and reservations regarding the development of highly generalized and value-neutral scientific propositions (Oplatka, 2010, p. 33). These criticisms have spurred the emergence of a new paradigm in the scientific evolution of EA, known as the interpretive paradigm. This shift was also dubbed the Greenfield Revolution, named after Greenfield, a prominent critic of the theory movement who highlighted that the emphasis on control within EA

science leads to a detrimental separation of administrative and educational concerns (Greenfield & Ribbins, 2005, p. 220). Greenfield and Ribbins (2005) contended that the theory movement neglected values, human perspectives, and socio-political contexts that shape individuals. Methodologically, the interpretive paradigm is grounded in social constructionism, positing that individuals construct subjective meanings from their experiences (Creswell 2014). These subjective meanings are diverse and manifold, prompting researchers to seek a range of interpretations rather than confining them to a limited set of themes or categories (Creswell, 2014). 8). This paradigm resonated with organizational theorists who found traditional objective framework constraints. They believed that a nuanced interpretive approach complemented positivistic explanations by shedding light on different facets of organizations, especially those involving symbols and meanings that are open to varied interpretations (Hatch, 2018). 33). From an organizational perspective, the interpretive paradigm views organizations as social constructs shaped by the identity of their participants (Jun, 2006). In this paradigm, leaders are tasked with understanding and interpreting the experiences of organizational members, sharing multiple realities, rather than asserting a singular truth. The primary role of leadership is to foster a dialectical environment for the cultural engagement of organizational actors, emphasizing diversity (Jun, 2006). This necessitates a shift towards horizontal relationships, reduction in hierarchical structures, and enhanced communication. In this scientific framework, organizational decisions are expected to be made through the involvement of various stakeholders (Greenfield and Ribbins, 2005).



The third phase in the evolution of scientific thought within EA was critical. The leading figures in this movement included Bate, Foster, Evers, Lakomski, and English. They contested the notion that EA knowledge is controlled by dominant groups. While the interpretive perspective raised questions about practicality, the critical paradigm, especially as articulated by Bate, challenged the idea of establishing a scientific knowledge base and underscored the significance of the critical paradigm in educational organization research (Oplatka, 2010). Critical theorists consistently aim to expose unequal power dynamics within educational systems by introducing concepts such as hegemony, dominance, exploitation, and discrimination (Smyth, 2005; Hatch, 2018; English, 2003). Methodologically, the critical paradigm posits that the positivistic approach imposes structural laws and theories unsuitable for marginalized individuals in society, failing to address issues of social justice and discrimination (Creswell, 2014). From an organizational perspective, proponents of the critical paradigm argue that organizational realities are inherently intertwined with political concerns (Smyth, 2005). Organizations are viewed as political arenas in which interest groups vie for influence, with some groups possessing more power to impose their will on marginalized populations. Consequently, leadership in this context involves an agenda for reform or revolution that can potentially transform the lives of participants and their institutions. Some scholars advocate transformational leadership (e.g., Foster, 2005), while others advocate pedagogical and educative leadership approaches (e.g., Smyth, 2005). An examination of these paradigms reveals that different conceptions of science give rise to distinct sets of concerns. The nature of concerns for those viewing EA science through an interpretive lens differs from those who approach it from a positivistic standpoint.

Looking at specialist's concerns allows us to examine their views of the role of science within the profession.

It has to be noted that these movements were tailored by the scholars based in the United States, whose relevance is very limited outside of that context, especially in the Global South. It is necessary, therefore, to review the current status of study in this area in Iran.

The current status of EA in Iran

In 1967, the field of EA was established for the first time in Iran at Tehran University of Teacher Training and expanded to other universities in the country. Mohammad Ali Toosi, the founder of this field in Iran, played a prominent role in its establishment and advancement and is recognized as the father of EA in Iran (Nemati et al., 2020). In 1969, the first master's degree in EA was awarded in Iran, and currently, more than 23 state universities in Iran offer master's programs, and almost 12 universities offer doctoral programs in this major (Hosseingholizadeh, Sharif and Taghizadeh-Kerman, 2021). However, EA in Iran has not yet been able to continue its growth and development as an independent major among other areas of social sciences; it is still recognized as a subset of educational sciences due to its conceptual and practical connections with educational issues. One model for the lack of independence in this major is the absence of independent faculties or departments in Iranian universities. Many active professors in this major have expertise in areas other than education management. Additionally, many graduates of EA work in various education majors that are not necessarily related to school administration. Many individuals working as school managers not only lack expertise in EA but have also transitioned from teaching to school administration. To date, a specific program for the formal



training of school administrators in Iran has not been clearly defined (Nemati et al., 2020).

Education in Iran is dominated by a highly centralized political and ideological system, with key policies and decisions made by the government's central authority (Hallinger et al., 2017). The responsibilities and roles of school principals are delineated in regulations and policy documents formulated and monitored by the Ministry of Education. In practice, school principals are considered supervisors responsible for maintaining discipline within schools (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2021). However, studies indicate that school principals in Iran do not effectively utilize the scientific knowledge available in the field of EA to fulfill their responsibilities; instead, their performance relies primarily on trial and error (Mohammadi, 2023).

In the realm of theory and research in EA, academic articles and texts often present a smooth and tension-free narrative of social, political, and organizational mechanisms, neglecting competition and conflicts among different power groups. Furthermore, the most popular and widely used school textbooks adopt a logical approach that overlooks the political dynamics and power struggles present in the school environment (Mohammadi, 2022). In this context, Rastehmoghadam (2019) observed a disconnect: on one hand, academic scholars possess limited awareness of the existing conditions and challenges of the educational system, while on the other hand, policymakers remain uninformed about research trends in the field of EA. It can be argued that the primary reasons for the existence of such disparities are the lack of dialogue between researchers and policymakers as well as the lack of critical examination of borrowed conceptual frameworks by scholars at universities.

Exploring the studies in EA

EA has experienced a diverse array of scholarly investigations in recent years, offering varied insights into leadership, epistemology, and contextual influences. A thorough examination of the literature reveals intriguing progress and ongoing discussions in this field. Ribbins and Gunter's (2002) seminal work sheds light on the multifaceted nature of EA, outlining five distinct domains: conceptual, critical, anthropological, axiological, and instrumental. This framework has provided researchers with a sturdy groundwork for exploring the complex interplay between leadership and epistemology in educational environments. Expanding on this foundation, Mokhtarian and Jahed (2013) propose that EA has advanced into a legitimate science capable of formulating theories with cross-cutting applicability across various scientific realms. Nevertheless, this field is not devoid of intricacies or contradictions. Hosseingholizadeh, Sharif, and Taghizadeh-Kerman (2021) challenged the idea of universal leadership principles and underscored the profound influence of cultural and contextual elements on school leadership approaches. This viewpoint emphasizes the significance of accounting for local subtleties when crafting and executing educational leadership strategies. Adding further complexity to the landscape, Hosseingholizadeh et al. (2017) illuminated emerging methodologies that question the established paradigms. Critical theory and feminism, in particular, have emerged as potent frameworks for scrutinizing and challenging traditional viewpoints in EA. These new perspectives have injected vibrancy into academic conversations, compelling scholars to reassess longstanding assumptions about educational leadership and administration.

Despite such developments, EA has been faced with major challenges. The theoretical fluctuation between the EA's diverse realms of EAs and



other management disciplines has produced a kind of ambiguity, and this may hinder the establishment of a coherent theoretical framework. This incoherence may induce a feeling of resistance to criticism and slow down efforts to work toward a resolution of theoretical discrepancies within the discipline. As EA continues to progress, it presents to the researcher a host of difficult challenges that must balance theoretical rigor with practical applicability. This dialogue between established frameworks and emerging viewpoints provides promise toward shaping the future of EA and, quite possibly, bringing in more nuanced and contextually sensitive approaches to educational leadership and management.

Method

In this study, our main purpose was to clarify the views of EA experts on the scientificity of this discipline. To that end, the authors used a qualitative methodology based on phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience of people and their perceptions and meanings of a phenomenon (Mertens, 2010, p. 235). It has two possible modes: descriptive and interpretive. In the descriptive mode, the researcher aims to give an in-depth description of the phenomenon and achieve a structural understanding; for this reason, the researcher needs to bracket their subjective assumptions (Tuohy et al., 2013). On the other hand, interpretive phenomenology focuses on analyzing and interpreting experiences while focusing on the lived experiences of research participants (Bazargan, 2012, p. 157). Here, the researcher's assumptions are part of the findings, and understanding the phenomenon must combine meanings between the researcher and participants (Tuohy et al., 2013). Consequently, the present study utilizes interpretive phenomenology and, by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of EA specialists, provides a thorough

analysis and evaluation of the concept of knowledge in the field of EA in Iran.

The participants in our study were EA specialists from Iran, selected through purposive and convenience sampling methods. As a result, we identified several specialists with educational, academic, and practical experience in the field of EA in Iran. These individuals had teaching experience at universities as well as practical experience in schools, and they had published various scientific works—including articles and books—on EA in Iran. Notably, they explicitly stated in their publications that a scientific approach to EA does not exist in the country. Based on these criteria, along with their convenient accessibility and the theoretical saturation of the data (evidenced by recurring themes in their interviews), we selected 11 EA specialists as participants for this study. Table (1) presents the demographic characteristics, professional backgrounds, and the number of scientific publications related to EA for each participant.

Table 1.
Demographical and academic backgrounds of the participants

Interviewee Number	Gender	Academic major of expertise	Experienced background in a university	Experienced background in a school	The number of scientific works in EA	Highest degree
1	Female	EA	6	4	7	PhD
2	Male	EA	25	7	23	PhD
3	Female	EA	18	6	12	PhD
4	Male	EA	28	3	19	PhD



5	Male	EA	14	8	9	PhD
6	Female	EA	9	3	8	PhD
7	Female	EA	14	4	11	PhD
8	Male	EA	15	6	10	PhD
9	Male	EA	7	5	8	PhD
10	Male	EA	18	12	17	PhD
11	Male	EA	7	5	9	PhD

To collect data, we employed interview tools. In designing the interview questions, we considered that the participating specialists were recognized authors in the field of EA in Iran, who had explicitly indicated in their scholarly works that a scientific approach is lacking in this area. Consequently, the researchers crafted the interview questions to encourage an open and in-depth dialogue regarding the participants' evidence and documentation supporting their claims about the absence of a scientific approach in EA in Iran, as well as their suggestions for improvement. The researchers posed several key questions, including:

- 1) What evidence exists to suggest a lack of a scientific approach to school management in Iran?
- 2) What are the primary reasons for this deficiency?
- 3) What strategies can be implemented to address this issue?

These questions aimed to elicit further evidence and provide solutions regarding the assertions about the unscientific nature of EA, thereby uncovering the philosophical meanings embedded in the participants' perspectives. For instance, if a specialist indicated that the selection process for educational managers in Iranian schools is not scientific,

they would be prompted to provide evidence supporting this claim (referring to the first interview question). Consequently, all participants in our study consistently articulated, in various ways, that the approach to school management in Iran is indeed unscientific. Moreover, to minimize potential bias, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. This approach allowed participants to fully express their viewpoints and, when appropriate, explore new topics that emerged during the discussions. For data analysis, we adhered to Creswell's methodology for analyzing phenomenological data (Creswell, 2007). Initially, we identified 122 significant statements from the interview data. These statements were subsequently segmented into semantic units through a bracketing process, leading to the identification of three distinct semantic units. These units were then condensed into a single overarching theme. Table 2 illustrates the analytical process undertaken. To ensure the validity of the data, we employed the member-checking technique. Member-checking involves presenting the findings to one or more participants for verification of accuracy (Creswell, 2012). We returned the results to the participants and solicited their feedback on the completeness and realism of the descriptions, as well as the accuracy of the identified themes.

Findings

Based on the findings from the analysis of the interviews, the specialists' perceptions of the nature of science in EA in Iran were categorized into one main theme and three semantic units. This theme and its associated semantic units are presented in Table (2), and we will further elaborate on them below.



Table 2.
Meaningful statements, semantic units, and main theme related to specialists' perception of the nature of science in EA in Iran

Theme	Semantic units	Meaningful statements
	The importance of elitism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School principals do not have an education related to EA • There are unscientific rules in the selection of principals • There isn't a scientific system for the professional training of managers • Educational qualifications should be considered in the selection of school principals • The syllabus of the field of EA should be revised • There isn't meritocracy in educational leadership • University education in the field of EA is not skill-oriented • There isn't scientific supervision on the work of school administrators
Oligarchic management ideology	The hostility of the surrounding environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are always political pressures from the outside of the organization • There are pressures from the outside environment to choose the wrong people • Education is influenced by the political pressures of the environment • Economic problems hurt the performance of educational administrators • In national policies, little attention is paid to education



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are conflicts between social classes which caused to destructive effect on education
Considering power relations as a threatening factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In organizational mechanisms, there is brokerage and transaction• From the point of view of the current managers, organizational positions are considered more political positions than organizational ones• Lobbying must be eliminated from the education• Organizational promotion is based on power relations

Oligarchic management ideology

The perceptions of EA specialists in Iran regarding the nature of science in their field, as well as the critiques and solutions presented in this study, closely align with the ideologies propagated by an oligarchic management system. Participants in the study emphasized several key findings, including the importance of elitism, the hostility of the environment, and the perception of power relations as threatening factors. These findings prompted us to consider Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy (2001). Michels' argument states that with the establishment of any organization, even those that are grassroots democratic, a small group of elite managers gradually consolidate control and prioritize their interests over the actual goals of the organization (Pugh & Hickson, 2007, p. 285). As a result, the organizational environment changes from a pluralistic to a one-sided environment in which democracy is replaced by oligarchy. According to Michels, oligarchic managers espouse ideologies that rationalize the gap between themselves and the rest of the workforce. These ideologies include the need for internal unity, the alignment of



perspectives and thoughts, the rejection of tensions and conflicts within the organization, the perception of the external environment as hostile, and the view that differences and diversity are a threat. Taken together, these ideologies are essential for the functioning of an oligarchic management system.

The importance of elitism

The study participants consistently emphasized the crucial role of expertise in the management of the education system. They argued that the management of educational institutions would not be successful without an elite approach to leadership. It was repeatedly reiterated in the interviews that only those with certain academic qualifications, such as a degree in EA, should be entrusted with the responsibility of leading others and making strategic decisions. Interviewee number 5 expressed this viewpoint with the comment:

The system of recruiting and preparing managers for school development is not scientific. Policies, legislation, and implementations are also not scientific. According to the principles of EA, gifted and talented individuals within the organization should be selected as the school's principal. Specifically, someone with a degree in EA and professional skills in school leadership. However, has this principle been implemented? I don't think so. Neither the foundational documents of education nor the program implementations are based on the principles of scientific management.

The emphasis on the scientific principles of EA is so pronounced that some interviewees see these principles as the only yardstick for evaluating the efficiency of the education system. In this context, interviewee 7:

The reason our educational system is ineffective is that principals have not graduated from management-related fields, especially EA. School principals must have an EA degree to be effective, but unfortunately, this is not the case.

Furthermore, the participants claimed that scientific supervision should be entrusted exclusively to persons of high standing. This belief emphasizes that only those with scientific expertise and professional competence are qualified to supervise others. This view is also evident in the comments of interviewee 8:

Without proper supervision, principals may not strive to improve their performance. Effective supervision requires a scientific approach, which can only be carried out by someone with a deep understanding of EA. Therefore, the supervisor should have a good knowledge of the subject matter. Without such expertise, competence and the ability to supervise cannot be guaranteed.

The hostility of the surrounding environment

Study participants have consistently emphasized that many challenges within the education system resulting from unscientific approaches to school leadership problems are primarily the result of political, cultural, and economic pressures outside of education. Consequently, they perceive the external environment as a hostile influence. This view was expressed by several participants. For example, interviewee 2 notes:

The selection of the wrong people is often influenced by external pressures. The external environment imposes its preferred individuals on the educational system, forcing them to select or hire them.



This quote is very indicative of the fact that the interviewees are very critical of the education system and attribute some of its failures to external factors. The term "external environment" refers to the political, economic, social, and cultural framework that surrounds the education system. Consequently, some interviewees criticized the interference of government officials in decision-making processes in education (Interviewee 3):

Governors frequently interfere in educational decisions, including staff selection and various educational policies. This interference makes it practically impossible to follow a scientific approach.

Some of the participants also believe that the importance of education in the country's politics has diminished (interviewee 8):

The value of education is often neglected in decision-making in Iran, leading to a shortage. Due to this lack of attention, the elite are reluctant to work in schools.

Some participants also identified class conflicts and ethical dilemmas as social problems that contribute to the failure of the education system (Interviewee 9):

Race and class conflicts affect the performance of the education system and lead to biases and prejudices that make a scientific approach impossible.

Others have highlighted economic pressures and deficits as detrimental factors (interviewee 1):

Insufficient funding has caused numerous problems in schools, making it difficult for school leaders to cover basic expenses.

Interestingly, some of the interviewees also proposed solutions to address the problem of environmental hostility, but these solutions are aimed at the external environment. Consequently, they view the education system as a passive entity whose fate is determined by its environment. In this context, some of these proposed solutions look to external institutions to solve the problem. Interviewee 6, for example, advocates institutionalizing the importance of education in the country's political decision-making processes and sees this task as the responsibility of institutions such as parliament. Similarly, interviewee 8 suggests reducing the dependence of the education system on external pressure, attributing this responsibility to economic institutions rather than schools.

Considering power relations as a threatening factor

The study participants see the power dynamics within the organization as a threatening element. They believe that one of the reasons for the lack of popularity of a scientific approach lies in the power relations within the organization. Their idea of an effective educational system involves a harmonious and cohesive unit in which conflicts within the organization are managed. So if not all members of the organization are oriented toward the organizational goals and set aside individual demands, the organization will be ineffective. Some participants pointed out that the attitude of managers is influenced by power relations.

What counts as a criterion in hiring is based on relationships rather than the scientific competence of individuals. Those who have managed to establish closer relationships with the powerful groups in the organization have a better chance of being hired than others, even if he or she does not have the necessary skills for the job (interviewee 3).



In addition, they mentioned that the promotion of managers is often based on personal relationships.

Many employees are promoted, but this promotion is due to the close relationship they have with a particular manager (Interviewee 3).

Many participants also noted that the decision-making processes are predominantly transactional.

Many employees are promoted based on relationships rather than merit. In our education system, some managers trade recommendations with each other and turn education into a bargaining market. It is disheartening that education management has become a marketplace for negotiation (Interviewee 2).

Discussion and conclusion

Our study aimed to understand specialists' perceptions of the nature of science in EA in Iran and comprised two types of findings. One type included findings with explicit meanings, while the other encompassed those with implicit meanings. The explicit findings indicate that three concepts—emphasis on the importance of elitism, the hostility of the surrounding environment, and the consideration of power relations as a threatening factor—are associated by EA specialists with the meaning of EA science, reflecting the first-generation of scientific development in EA, specifically the theory movement. In the theory movement, the prevailing state of school management was consistently criticized for being experience-based and unscientific. Proponents of this movement sought not only to establish a scientific approach in school management but also to liberate the field of EA from merely recounting the experiences of successful managers, advocating instead for the integration of

principles and teachings from the social sciences. Furthermore, within the theory movement, schools were envisioned as living systems that interact with their external environment. This interaction involves not only resources and inspirations but also external pressures that impact schools; based on the assumption of living systems, schools must adapt to these pressures. Ultimately, the theory movement largely disregarded power relations within organizations, often viewing them as unjust and detrimental. Consequently, the concepts of coordination and coherence consistently emerged in the literature of the theory movement. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning.

In the implicit findings, we discover that EA specialists consistently critique the current state of schools, implicitly highlighting that the primary issue arises from the discord between this state and the principles of oligarchic management. On one hand, this suggests that EA specialists censure educational administrators for their failure to implement oligarchic ideals. On the other hand, oligarchic managers acknowledge this failure but exploit it as a pretext to strengthen their power bases. This phenomenon draws attention to the theory of identification with the aggressor, a mechanism through which some victims of aggression cope with their helplessness by adopting an aggressive stance. Though initially advanced within psychoanalysis to explain the response of abused children, the theory of IWA has come to be gradually applied in several social contexts. Importantly, with the discovery of concepts like Stockholm syndrome and studies such as the one conducted by Zimbardo, it is postulated that IWA goes past childhood experiences to include adults (Frankel, 2020).

These research results also reveal that Iranian EA professionals are no exception in maintaining similar concerns perpetuated through the



oligarchic management system. This shows that they support analogous ideologies, therefore, indirectly joining forces with the aggressor. According to Burnham (1941), it is not only the managers who develop such ideologies; the intellectuals in society also share these ideas and shape an atmosphere that helps these ideologies reach the threshold of popular acceptance. All this is reflected in the university textbooks written by these authors, which are often devoid of tension, dispute, and contradiction across the textbooks' pages (Mohammadi, 2019). A fundamental question arises regarding why EA specialists, despite their familiarity with contemporary management approaches, continue to emphasize elitism rooted in the initial wave of EA theories. According to the assumptions of the IWA theory, EA specialists have been consistently marginalized in the decision-making and policymaking processes of the educational system, rendering their voices unheard. This marginalization has led them to seek validation in the belief that only the perspectives of elites and EA specialists should be acknowledged. Various studies conducted in Iran indicate that the lack of qualifications in the selection and appointment processes for educational managers has long been a significant issue. For instance, only 20% of school managers possess the appropriate qualifications for their positions, meaning that 80% hold degrees unrelated to management or EA (Shirazi, 1994). More recent research reveals that this statistic has escalated to 88% (Abdollahi, 2013). These figures suggest that many of the most qualified graduates in this field—those who have studied at prestigious universities in Iran—remain unemployed. Reports indicate that 55.2% of graduates from Tehran University are jobless (Ghayasvand, 2017), 53.4% from Allameh Tabatabai University are unemployed (Rahimian, Jahani, and Nouruzi, 2018), and 60.9% of graduates from the University of Tehran lack employment (Bigdely,

Karamati, and Bazarghan, 2012). Consequently, such neglect has led EA specialists to perceive themselves as the "Other." When this sense of being the becomes pronounced, it compels some individuals to believe that the only way to assert their voices is to position themselves as unique and distinct. As a result, EA specialists have consistently emphasized the notion of elitism, as this concept appears to provide a means of revitalizing their identity and offering a new sense of belonging to an overlooked group—even if this identity is inherently extreme and authoritarian. This IWA framework can also be examined in the leadership approaches prevalent within organizations. An approach that recognizes only senior organizational managers as the elite and deserving of leadership, while disregarding others, fosters an environment dominated by a singular voice.

Although this approach may prove successful in the short term, allowing leaders to maintain their positions of power, it ultimately leads to various factions of followers believing themselves more deserving of leadership within the organization due to their desire for recognition. Whether this perceived merit is based on educational qualifications and fields of study—as proposed by EA specialists—or on work experience claimed by other employees in unrelated fields, or on any other form of qualification, the insistence on elitism and the self-perception of being elite are consequences of the oligarchic leadership model. Such ideologies can pose a risk of elite dictatorship, as there is always the danger that any group of organizational or non-organizational actors, such as the participants in the present study who are not members of the educational organization, may consider themselves elite and deserving of leadership, thereby depriving others of such rights. This transformation shifts the organizational environment from a multi-voiced to a singularly voiced atmosphere.



The tendency toward IWA in EA in Iran contradicts the assumptions of state-nation conflict theory, which analyzes the historical and political context of Iranian society (Katouzian, 2003; Katouzian, 1981; Katouzian, 2010). According to this theory, Iranian governments have historically been autocratic and inherently despotic (Katouzian, 2010). The authoritarian nature of the political and administrative apparatus has rendered social classes largely insignificant, with all classes dependent on the ruling political figure—namely, the Iranian kings (Katouzian, 2003). This dependency fosters a perception of insecurity among social classes, leading them to justifiably believe that they lack control over their destinies, as well as their financial and physical safety (Katouzian, 2010). However, rather than acquiescing to the ideas of those in power, individuals actively oppose them, resulting in any thoughts emerging from the political and administrative system facing resistance from various societal classes (Katouzian, 2003; Katouzian, 1981; Katouzian, 2010). This opposition may stem from the fact that the king, as a representative of the power apparatus, despite wielding unrestricted authority, also lacks financial and physical security, making him vulnerable to losing power and influence at any moment due to aggression or intrigue. Consequently, there is an ongoing and evident conflict between the government and the populace across all social classes (Katouzian, 2010). Where the state-nation conflict theory stands in contrast, the results of this study point out that at least part of the population has accepted the ideologies of the political and administrative system and have aligned themselves with it. This may be due to oligarchic managers who maintain solid and secure power bases in organizations. The strength and depth of this foundation will make the EA elites believe that by joining the doctrines of the oligarchic system of management, they can become more secure and their voices louder. The given scenario indicates a change in the socio-economic

setup of Iranian society, stating that it is not despotic anymore. This change is evidenced by oligarchic managers gaining control over the means of production and establishing a secure economic and political foundation for themselves. In other words, at least one social class within Iranian society has successfully attained a robust and long-term base, creating stable conditions for its existence. Historically, no class, including administrative managers, has been able to secure long-term resources and stable conditions, remaining dependent on the ruler. However, today's managers in Iran have achieved a degree of independence and established a sustainable foundation. This development may lead us to anticipate a managerial revolution (Burnham, 1941). Burnham (1941) posits that during a managerial revolution, the class of managers dominating the country's bureaucratic apparatus gradually seizes economic, political, and cultural power, gaining control over the means of production. Consequently, the only dominant class in society, whose voice is heard, is the class of oligarchic managers responsible for overseeing and controlling organizations and administrative institutions. Such a situation creates a secure economic and political base for these managers (Burnham, 1941) and may lead to the identification of other social classes, particularly the middle class, with them.

Implications and limitations

These findings, related to the comprehension of specialists of the nature of EA science in Iran, have very important implications. The first implication underlines the need for a dominant scientific paradigm of EA in Iran, which can reduce reliance on personal experiences and improve theoretical and scientific coherence in this respect. The second implication concerns the interest in social and political dimensions regarding EA in Iran since the dominant



oligarchic ideology within the educational system prevents conditions of justice and efficiency for education managers. As a result, it should be underpinned with a more democratic management structure and social participation to increase general trust within the community and simplify education processes. This study finally focuses on the fact that the managers' confidence, through strengthening their power base and provisioning of appropriate conditions to express their voice, will contribute to an effective and sustainable management system in the EA in Iran. Note that this study is also bounded by several limitations, which affect generalisability and applicability.

First of all, the sample size restricts the scope of the investigation since it only includes 11 specialists. This sample size enables qualitative insights in great depth but might be insufficient to generalize to a greater population of EA specialists across Iran. It is thus quite conceivable that some aspects within the field could not have been portrayed by these results and therefore limit transferability to another context. The present study was based solely on the use of convenience sampling; such methods could yield a nonrepresentative sample of the targeted population. This might affect our conclusions and make findings not generalizable. Lastly, these results are situated in the specific social and cultural context of this study, and this may hence limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts or educational systems. Consequently, future research should be more comparative, reaching across different educational settings to establish a better understanding of the scientific bases of EA within diverse cultures and political contexts.

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