





Providing a Leadership Model Based on Sociology in Iran's Educational System

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in the educational system is one of the most influential factors affecting instructional quality and students' academic advancement. From a sociological perspective, schools are social institutions formed within the cultural, structural, and power dynamics of society. Therefore, leadership in education must consider not only managerial dimensions but also social and cultural aspects in order to foster broader and more effective stakeholder participation. The present qualitative research is exploratory in nature, applied in purpose, and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection. The dominant strategy of this study is a case study approach. Using purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants from Asan Pardakht Company, and after reviewing the available documents, thematic analysis—one of the qualitative methods—was applied. As a result, 5 main themes were identified: participatory leadership, social capital, social interactions within the school, social legitimacy of leadership, and cultural capital; and 29 subthemes were extracted. Participants included faculty members and experts, policy-makers at the Ministry of Education, directors of provincial education departments, and school principals. Among these individuals, 14 were men and 4 were women. Ultimately, it was found that participatory leadership based on sociological foundations provides the groundwork for an inclusive and democratic educational system in which all members feel responsible and connected. This model not only enhances educational quality but also strengthens the role of the school as a social institution. The final conclusion of the study indicates that, based on the findings, cultural capital is the most influential component in proposing a sociology-based leadership model for Iran's educational system.

Keywords: Leadership model, educational system, sociology, Iran

Introduction

Leadership has long been recognized as a central determinant of effectiveness, quality, and innovation within educational systems, particularly in environments experiencing rapid demographic, technological, and sociocultural change. As schools operate in increasingly complex contexts characterized by institutional pressures, accountability demands, digital transformation, and shifting learner needs, leadership practices must evolve to ensure coherence, responsiveness, and equity across educational processes (1-3). Contemporary educational leadership is no longer confined to administrative coordination; instead, it encompasses a broader set of relational, transformational, collaborative, and sociocultural capacities necessary for shaping the collective behavior of teachers, students, families, and communities (4, 5). These changing expectations reflect global recognition that leadership is



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fundamental to strengthening school culture, improving teacher professionalism, developing student engagement, and achieving sustainable institutional outcomes (6, 7).

Across diverse educational systems, scholars have emphasized that leadership must be aligned with contemporary organizational challenges such as digitalization, social equity, distributed responsibilities, and participatory engagement (8-10). In the context of rapid technological advancement, school leaders are expected to integrate digital infrastructures, encourage innovation, and cultivate readiness among teachers and students. This shift toward technology-enabling leadership is evident in new institutional models, such as Fourth Generation Universities and WEB3.0-based education spaces, which require leaders to possess advanced digital skills, strategic vision, and adaptability to manage new forms of knowledge production and collaboration (10, 11). In this regard, adaptive leadership has emerged as a compelling framework, emphasizing flexibility, collective problem-solving, and responsive decision-making—a set of attributes crucial in navigating the disruptions brought about by technological, social, and organizational transformations (12, 13).

Parallel to technological adaptation, leadership in education increasingly emphasizes social responsibility and moral authority. Theories of socially responsible leadership argue that leaders must integrate ethical principles, social justice commitments, and community-engaged decision-making into their leadership practices to ensure equitable and inclusive educational experiences (5, 14). This orientation is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by inequality, cultural diversity, and limited access to educational resources. Social justice leadership, for example, focuses on eliminating disparities, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting structural fairness—all of which require leaders to confront institutional constraints and exercise advocacy-oriented influence (7, 15).

Furthermore, organizational studies have underscored how leadership profoundly affects teachers' motivations, work ethics, professional development, and psychological experiences. Participatory leadership styles that emphasize shared decision-making, collaborative relationships, and mutual trust have been shown to strengthen teachers' engagement and professional identity (16, 17). These relational conditions improve school climate, facilitate knowledge sharing, and promote accountability among educational staff. Likewise, leadership practices grounded in emotional intelligence and socio-emotional competencies play a significant role in enhancing teacher well-being and career readiness, especially in environments where job demands are high and organizational support is limited (8, 18). When leaders demonstrate empathy, social awareness, and relational sensitivity, they are better equipped to develop trust-based organizational cultures that foster teacher retention and promote sustainable professional learning communities.

The critical role of leadership extends beyond internal school functions to broader systemic and policy-level considerations. Distributed leadership, for instance, has gained prominence as a structural mechanism that decentralizes authority, empowers teachers, and democratizes educational decision-making (19). This approach encourages leaders to develop networks of influence rather than rely solely on hierarchical authority. It also supports organizational resilience by distributing responsibilities across multiple actors, thereby enhancing capacity to cope with unpredictable challenges and external pressures. Similarly, competency-based leadership models, such as ambidextrous leadership, stress the importance of balancing innovation with organizational stability, enabling leaders to simultaneously explore new opportunities and exploit existing strengths (20). This dual capacity is essential in educational settings characterized by continuous reforms, performance evaluations, and competitive demands.

Leadership effectiveness is also tightly linked to institutional performance, student learning outcomes, and organizational trust. Studies highlight that leaders who demonstrate clear vision, motivational capacity, and ethical integrity contribute significantly to improving school performance and teacher morale (21, 22). Leadership 5.0 research further emphasizes integrative mindsets in which leaders harness cross-functional collaboration and team innovation to build dynamic educational environments that foster creativity and shared organizational purpose (6). Such leadership models are especially relevant in educational systems undergoing structural transitions, where leaders must cultivate cultures of collaboration and innovation to meet evolving societal expectations.

Another critical dimension relates to the sociocultural context in which leadership is enacted. Cultural values, community norms, and social interactions shape how leadership is perceived, accepted, and practiced in schools. Research across diverse sociocultural settings—ranging from rural South Africa to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia—illustrates that leadership effectiveness is deeply intertwined with the community's cultural capital, shared values, and normative expectations (3, 4, 23). In many cases, leadership legitimacy rests not only on formal authority but also on emotional, cultural, and communicative dimensions that strengthen stakeholder trust and engagement (24, 25). These insights underscore that leadership cannot be universally defined; instead, it must be contextualized within local social systems, cultural dynamics, and institutional histories.

School leadership is also central to issues of access, equity, and community engagement. Empirical evidence suggests that leadership plays a vital role in promoting student participation, strengthening students' sense of belonging, and enhancing their sense of community (26). Leaders influence not only the academic climate but also the social interactions, collective identities, and relational structures that shape students' educational experiences. Similarly, leadership that encourages family–school collaboration and community partnerships can significantly strengthen educational cohesion and reduce inequalities (14, 15). In this way, leadership becomes a lever for both institutional improvement and broader social transformation.

At the strategic level, leadership is also indispensable for managing educational reforms, implementing new technologies, and developing human capital. Research on talent management in educational organizations highlights that leadership practices determine how effectively institutions recruit, develop, and retain skilled personnel (25). Similarly, leadership influences the successful implementation of digital infrastructures and innovative learning models in modern school systems (9, 11). As schools integrate new technologies and adapt to emerging global demands, leaders must possess strategic foresight, technical proficiency, and the ability to inspire stakeholder confidence.

Given these interconnected dimensions—technological, organizational, social, cultural, and ethical—there is a growing need for models of leadership that transcend traditional administrative frameworks and incorporate sociological perspectives. Sociologically informed leadership integrates structural awareness, social capital, cultural capital, interpersonal relationships, and legitimacy-building mechanisms to create holistic and equitable educational environments. Such leadership models are particularly relevant in national contexts like Iran, where structural constraints, cultural expectations, and diverse community needs require leaders to adopt more inclusive, participatory, and culturally responsive approaches (11, 20, 27). The sociological lens enables leaders to understand how power relations, community structures, cultural identities, and social norms influence everyday educational practices.

Therefore, developing a comprehensive model of leadership grounded in sociological principles offers a valuable opportunity to conceptualize leadership as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon that

strengthens participation, equity, legitimacy, and cultural responsiveness across the educational system (5, 7, 22). Such a model can illuminate how leaders build trust, mobilize collective action, foster cultural inclusion, and support high-quality educational outcomes.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to develop a sociologically grounded leadership model for Iran's educational system based on the integration of social, cultural, relational, and organizational components.

Methods and Materials

The present study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the sociological foundations of leadership within Iran's educational system. The study design was shaped by an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing the subjective understanding of participants' experiences and expert insights. The research population consisted of specialists and key informants in the domains of educational management, sociology, psychology, and family counseling. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases, resulting in the participation of 18 experts who possessed substantial theoretical knowledge and practical experience related to educational leadership and sociological frameworks. Participants included university faculty members, senior policy-makers in the Ministry of Education, directors of provincial education departments, and school principals. The diversity of roles enabled the study to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives on the sociological dimensions influencing leadership in the educational system. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, allowing in-depth exploration while providing flexibility for further probing based on interviewees' responses. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Data collection relied on two primary qualitative tools: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from existing literature on sociological theories, leadership models, and educational governance. This guide contained broad, open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' views on leadership practices, social interactions within schools, cultural capital, legitimacy structures, and participatory mechanisms. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of responses. In parallel, a systematic review of relevant documents—including policy reports, organizational directives, educational plans, and previous scholarly works—was conducted to contextualize the qualitative data, triangulate findings, and ensure comprehensive coverage of the theoretical and practical dimensions of sociological leadership. The document review constituted the library-based method, which is foundational in qualitative inquiry, complementing the field-based method represented by interviews. This dual approach enhanced the credibility and depth of the collected data.

The data analysis process followed a thematic analysis approach to identify underlying patterns, extract meaningful categories, and construct a conceptual model of sociologically grounded leadership. The analysis began with open coding, where interview transcripts and documents were reviewed line by line to label significant concepts. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, allowing the researcher to establish relationships among the emerging themes. Selective coding was subsequently applied to integrate the major categories and form coherent core themes reflecting the study's central phenomenon. This iterative analytical process resulted in the identification of five main themes—participatory leadership, social capital, school social interactions, leadership legitimacy, and cultural capital—along with twenty-nine subthemes. Throughout the analysis, strategies such as constant comparison, member checking, and triangulation with documentary evidence were employed to enhance trustworthiness. The final thematic structure served as the basis

for developing a sociologically informed leadership model tailored to the specific cultural and structural context of Iran's educational system.

Findings and Results

The findings of this study emerged through a systematic thematic analysis that organized the qualitative data into coherent and analytically meaningful categories. After completing the rigorous process of theme refinement, all extracted themes were consolidated into twenty-nine subthemes nested within five main themes. Any unrelated or inconsistent themes were removed to ensure conceptual clarity and internal coherence. The final thematic structure captures the multidimensional sociological components that underlie leadership in Iran's educational system and reflects the interrelated nature of participatory leadership, social capital, school social interactions, leadership legitimacy, and cultural capital. Table 1 presents the complete set of main themes, subthemes, and final conceptual categories.

Table 1. Set of Components

Main Theme	No.	Final Conceptual Category
Participatory Leadership	1	Collective decision-making
	2	Member empowerment
	3	Open two-way communication
	4	Mutual trust and respect
	5	Collective motivation and commitment
	6	Group responsibility
Social Capital	7	Social trust in the school
	8	Participation and social interaction
	9	Educational social networks
	10	Social norms and cultural cohesion
	11	School leadership's role in developing social capital
	12	Impact of social capital on academic success and equity
School Social Interactions	13	Teacher–student relationships
	14	Student–student relationships
	15	Teacher and staff communication
	16	Family–school collaboration
	17	School culture
	18	School psycho-social environment
Leadership Social Legitimacy	19	Functional and professional legitimacy
	20	Ethical and behavioral legitimacy
	21	Legal and structural legitimacy
	22	Emotional and cultural legitimacy
	23	Collective participation and acceptance
	24	Communicative legitimacy
Cultural Capital	25	Transfer of cultural capital from family to school
	26	Cultural capital and academic achievement
	27	Reproduction of cultural inequality in school
	28	Teachers' role in managing cultural diversity
	29	Educational policies and cultural justice

The results summarized in Table 1 illustrate how the five main themes encapsulate a comprehensive and sociologically grounded understanding of educational leadership. Each subtheme represents a specific mechanism, behavior, or structural condition that contributes to the functioning of leadership within the educational environment. For instance, participatory leadership is expressed through collective decision-making, empowerment, and reciprocal communication, while social capital emerges through trust, networks, and shared norms that reinforce academic outcomes and equity. School social interactions highlight relational and cultural dynamics, and leadership

legitimacy encompasses functional, ethical, structural, and cultural dimensions that shape stakeholder acceptance. Finally, cultural capital reflects both the transmission and reproduction of cultural resources within schools as well as the role of policies and teachers in promoting cultural equity. Together, these components form a multidimensional framework for understanding sociologically informed leadership practices in Iran's educational system.

Table 2. Integrated Summary of Components, Conceptual Categories, Codes, and Themes

Main Theme	Conceptual Category	Number of Codes	Associated Theme
Participatory Leadership	Collective decision-making	15	Participatory leadership in the educational system
	Member empowerment	14	
	Open two-way communication	20	
	Mutual trust and respect	24	
	Collective motivation and commitment	9	
	Group responsibility	10	
	Total	68	
Social Capital	Social trust in the school	3	Social capital
	Participation and social interaction	18	
	Educational social networks	13	
	Social norms and cultural cohesion	7	
	School leadership's role in developing social capital	20	
	Impact of social capital on academic success and equity	13	
	Total	74	
School Social Interactions	Teacher–student relationships	8	School social interactions
	Student–student relationships	4	
	Teacher and staff communication	13	
	Family–school collaboration	15	
	School culture	15	
	Psycho-social school environment	36	
	Total	91	
Leadership Legitimacy in the Educational System	Legal and structural legitimacy	11	Leadership legitimacy in the educational system
	Ethical and behavioral legitimacy	10	
	Functional and professional legitimacy	15	
	Emotional and cultural legitimacy	5	
	Collective participation and acceptance	13	
	Communicative legitimacy	9	
	Total	52	
Cultural Capital	Transfer of cultural capital from family to school	27	Cultural capital
	Cultural capital and academic achievement	23	
	Reproduction of cultural inequality in school	13	
	Teachers' role in managing cultural diversity	35	
	Educational policies and cultural justice	23	
	Total	121	

The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate a comprehensive integration of all conceptual categories, corresponding code frequencies, and their placement within the five major sociological themes of the study. Participatory leadership includes 68 codes reflecting mechanisms of collective decision-making, empowerment, reciprocal communication, and shared responsibility within schools. Social capital comprises 74 codes emphasizing

trust, interaction, networks, norms, and educational equity. School social interactions constitute the most extensive theme with 91 codes, highlighting relational dynamics among teachers, students, families, and the school's psycho-social environment. Leadership legitimacy encompasses 52 codes spanning legal, ethical, functional, emotional, and communicative dimensions that shape stakeholder acceptance within the educational context. Finally, cultural capital represents the highest-coded theme with 121 codes, indicating its substantial influence on educational processes, cultural equity, and diversity management. Together, these integrated components illustrate the multifaceted sociological foundations of leadership in Iran's educational system.

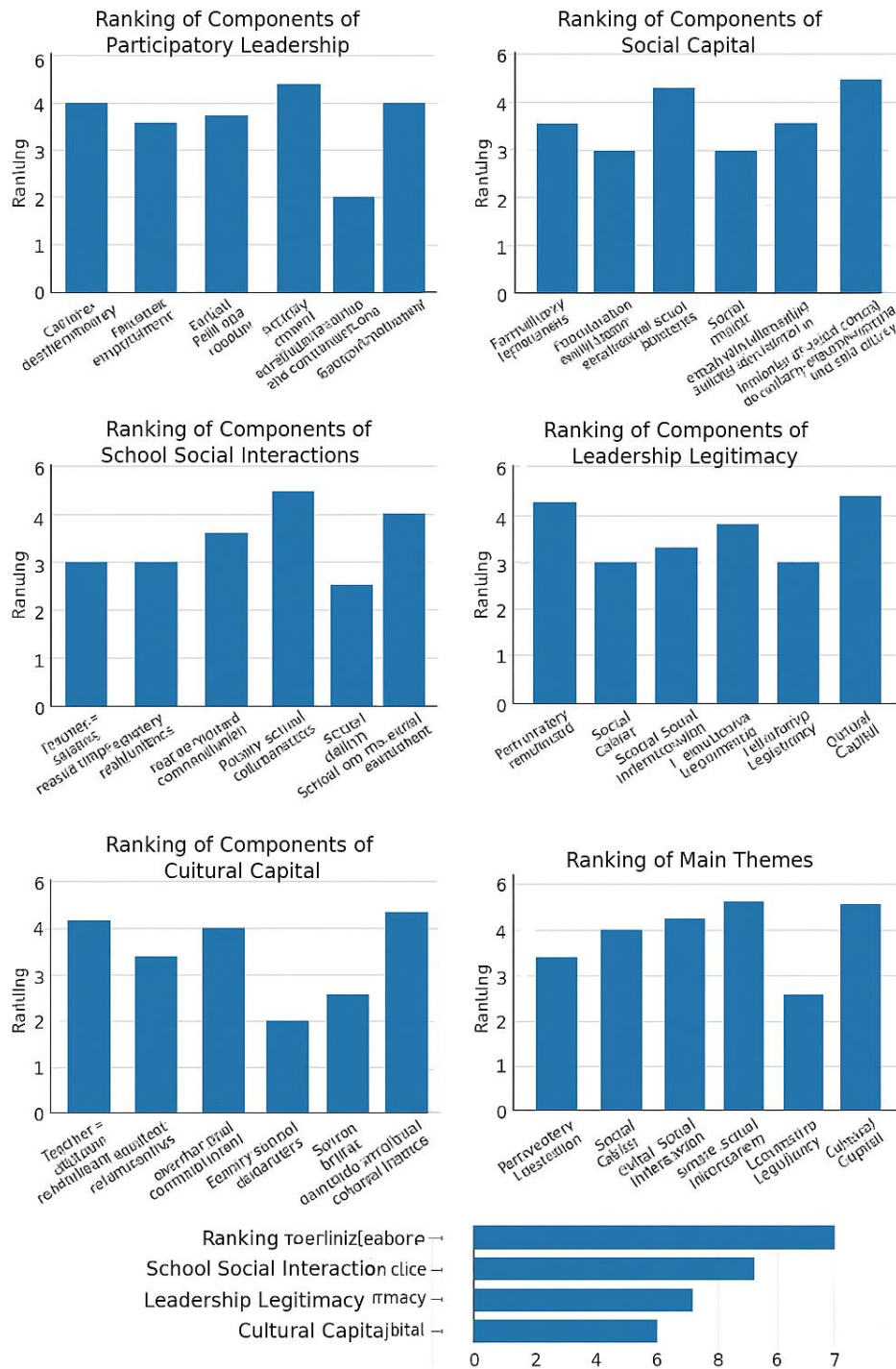


Figure 1. Final Rankings of Categories

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to develop a sociologically grounded leadership model for Iran's educational system by identifying and categorizing five fundamental themes—participatory leadership, social capital, school social interactions, leadership legitimacy, and cultural capital. The findings demonstrate that sociological constructs serve as powerful predictors of leadership quality, stakeholder engagement, and institutional coherence within the educational system. In particular, the dominance of cultural capital, with the highest number of conceptual codes, reflects the critical role that cultural transmission, diversity management, and socialization processes play in shaping the practices of educational leaders. These results confirm that leadership in education cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural, relational, and structural dynamics of the school as a social institution (6, 7). The centrality of cultural capital in the final model aligns with prior research indicating that educational outcomes are profoundly influenced by cultural norms, shared meanings, and patterns of interaction that mediate school functioning and student participation (4, 26).

The theme of participatory leadership, which emerged as one of the most substantial dimensions, underscores the importance of shared decision-making, mutual trust, two-way communication, and collective responsibility within school leadership. These findings are consistent with scholarly evidence demonstrating that participative, collaborative, and servant-leadership styles enhance teacher motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (3, 16). Research has repeatedly shown that when school leaders distribute authority, empower teachers, and foster open communication channels, the organizational climate becomes more conducive to innovation, professional learning, and effective instructional practices (19, 22). The strong presence of participatory leadership components in this study reinforces the argument that democratic organizational structures are critical for educational improvement and that leadership must be relational rather than authoritarian to meet the evolving needs of contemporary schools (2, 8). The findings confirm that participatory leadership is not merely a managerial preference but a sociological necessity rooted in the collective dynamics that shape teachers' and students' everyday experiences.

The theme of social capital, which included indicators such as trust, social networks, participation norms, and equity outcomes, further validates the argument that leadership is fundamentally social and relational. The study found that social capital strongly influences academic achievement, educational equity, and stakeholder collaboration. This aligns closely with research demonstrating that schools with high levels of trust, shared norms, and strong relational networks experience better organizational cohesion, improved student outcomes, and more effective change implementation (5, 14). Social capital is also a core element in theories of socially responsible leadership, which emphasize community welfare, ethical decision-making, and collective empowerment (21, 25). The present results highlight that leaders who successfully build trust-based environments not only strengthen the internal culture of schools but also bridge structural gaps that hinder educational equity. These findings echo earlier work showing that social capital helps reduce inequalities by enabling marginalized communities to participate more actively in school decision-making and benefit from institutional support structures (15, 23).

School social interactions, another major theme identified in the study, represent the interpersonal, affective, and communicative aspects of educational life. The analysis revealed that teacher–student relationships, student peer relations, teacher collaboration, family–school partnerships, and the psycho-social climate are central determinants of leadership effectiveness. These findings are consistent with research indicating that high-quality relationships within schools promote student belonging, engagement, and learning motivation (8, 26). They also support earlier

studies showing that strong teacher networks facilitate professional learning, emotional support, and organizational resilience (24, 27). Moreover, the prominence of the psycho-social climate in the results demonstrates that leadership must attend to emotional safety, cultural sensitivity, and relational harmony—conditions that directly influence both academic performance and well-being (11, 18). The findings reaffirm that school leadership cannot be reduced to administrative duties but must extend to nurturing human relationships and creating positive social environments.

Leadership legitimacy emerged as another critical theme grounded in sociological theory. The study identified six forms of legitimacy—legal, ethical, functional, cultural, emotional, and communicative—as key mechanisms through which leaders gain acceptance and authority. This emphasis aligns with global research indicating that leadership legitimacy shapes stakeholder trust, compliance, and institutional stability (6, 7). Leaders who demonstrate ethical integrity, professional competence, emotional intelligence, and cultural responsiveness are more successful in mobilizing collective support and sustaining reform initiatives (8, 12). The results corroborate evidence that legitimacy is relationally constructed and must be continually reinforced through transparent communication, shared governance, and culturally sensitive practices (15, 20). These insights reinforce the broader theoretical argument that leadership is embedded within social structures and cultural meanings rather than being a purely individual competency.

The final and strongest theme—cultural capital—demonstrated the most substantial influence within the emerging model. The findings revealed that cultural capital shapes student achievement, educational justice, teacher effectiveness, and organizational cohesion. This outcome is consistent with decades of sociological research emphasizing how cultural norms, family background, school practices, and symbolic resources reproduce educational inequalities (4, 23). However, the present study also highlights the proactive role that teachers and leaders can play in managing cultural diversity, fostering cultural justice, and mitigating inequalities through inclusive policies (9, 11). Cultural capital thus serves as both a challenge and an opportunity: while it may exacerbate disparities when left unchecked, it can also enhance educational experiences when leaders actively cultivate inclusive, culturally responsive school environments. The findings resonate with research demonstrating that culturally informed leadership fosters belonging, respect, and engagement among diverse student populations (5, 26).

Taken together, the study's results support the conclusion that sociological dimensions are indispensable for developing an effective leadership model in Iran's educational system. By integrating participatory leadership, social capital, interpersonal relations, legitimacy structures, and cultural capital, the proposed model reflects contemporary understandings of leadership as a multifaceted, context-dependent, and socially embedded phenomenon. The alignment of findings with previous international studies from Ethiopia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kenya, South Africa, and other diverse contexts further illustrates the universal relevance of sociologically grounded leadership practices (9, 13, 16, 22, 23). These global parallels highlight that educational leadership across different national systems shares common sociological properties even as cultural contexts shape the specific forms leadership takes.

Although the study provides a comprehensive sociological model of educational leadership, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative design, while rich in depth and contextual understanding, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader educational populations. The purposive sampling of experts, though appropriate for grounded conceptual model development, may not fully capture the experiences of frontline teachers, students, or parents whose perspectives could further enrich the analysis. The reliance on interview data

may also introduce interpretive bias despite efforts to enhance trustworthiness through triangulation and rigorous coding procedures. Additionally, the sociocultural specificity of the Iranian context means that some elements of the model may require adaptation before application in different educational systems.

Future research should expand the scope of empirical validation by employing mixed-methods or large-scale quantitative designs to test the predictive relationships among the themes identified in this study. Researchers may also explore comparative analyses across provinces or school types to examine how sociological leadership components differ by geographic, cultural, or institutional context. Longitudinal studies could be used to investigate how shifts in cultural capital, social networks, or legitimacy structures influence leadership effectiveness over time. Furthermore, future investigations may incorporate student and parent voices to ensure a more holistic representation of school social systems and leadership dynamics.

Practitioners should prioritize participatory leadership structures that amplify teacher voice and strengthen collective problem-solving. Training programs should emphasize sociological competencies such as cultural responsiveness, relational communication, legitimacy building, and community engagement. School leaders should cultivate environments that reinforce trust, shared norms, and strong interpersonal relationships. Policymakers should integrate sociological principles into leadership development frameworks to ensure that administrators are equipped to address cultural diversity, social inequality, and rapidly shifting educational demands.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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