

Original Article (Qualitative)

Formulating and presenting a theory to analyze the performance gap in managers

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop an analytical framework to identify the gap between theory and practice in the actions of secondary school managers in Ahvaz. The present study is a qualitative case study in terms of method, and a developmental one in terms of purpose. The target population included educational experts, secondary school principals, and staff managers with lived experience in the research field, selected using purposive sampling and based on the principle of theoretical saturation. The data were analyzed through content analysis at three levels of basic, organizing, and comprehensive themes. The research findings showed that the theory-practice gap in the actions of managers can be explained in the form of a five-dimensional framework with twenty components. The dimensions of this framework included: 1- organizational development (conceptual, structural, and functional components), 2- human capital development (knowledge enhancement, motivation, employee empowerment, welfare development), 3- basic management skills (organizational improvement, systems thinking, management capital, legal skills, management tasks, creativity and innovation), 4- personal development (self-regulation, efficiency, knowledge sharing, science and expertise), and 5- environment-centric (technological action, climate and culture management, environmental factor management). These dimensions and components were organized around the central theme of the theory-practice gap in school administrators' actions. After discovering and explaining the dimensions and components of the framework, the network of themes was fully drawn, analyzed, and presented. The final research framework, with its systematic organization of themes, provided a comprehensive model for analyzing the theory-practice gap in school management.

Keywords:

Theory-practice gap,
Management actions,
Secondary school
administrators,
Content analysis,
Educational
management

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Educational organizations; Schools, in particular, are faced with the phenomenon of the “theory-practice gap” in today’s complex and dynamic world, which indicates a discrepancy between accepted theoretical principles and implemented practical actions. This phenomenon arises from the distinction between “declared theory” (what organizations claim) and “used theory” (what is implemented in practice). Issues such as the mismatch between the macro-goals of educational programs and micro-actions, communication problems between different levels of the educational system, and the lack of resources and structural support in these organizations are examples of this distinction, which, along with cultural, social, and economic factors, have deepened this gap and expanded its consequences (Aven, 2024). Although the consequences of this gap are very important, identifying the gap itself as an independent issue requires more special attention. Many educational organizations are either unaware of the existence of such a gap or, due to a misunderstanding, consider it a natural phenomenon. This fact shows that eliminating this gap is not possible simply through the implementation of new guidelines, and requires a deep understanding of its roots through applicable research, the development of indigenous frameworks, and a comprehensive understanding of structural and cultural factors. Otherwise, any corrective action may exacerbate this problem (Ramazan et al, 2024; Rashidi et al, 2024).

Accordingly, the development of an analytical framework to explain the theory-practice gap in the actions of managers is determined as the goal of this research and the main question of the research is: what is the framework of the theory-practice gap in the actions of managers (case study: Ahvaz secondary schools)? And does the developed framework have the necessary validity?

Theoretical Framework

Theory-Practice Gap in Management: In today's complex management environment, we are witnessing an increasing gap between theoretical knowledge and managerial practice. This phenomenon, which has become a structural crisis, has shaken the foundation of management decision-making. While management theories can provide a guiding framework for practical actions, this deep gap has prevented the effective use of this knowledge. The increasing complexity of organizational and management environments has made the need for intelligent use of theories more urgent than ever (Habibzadeh et al., 2024). However, numerous and intertwined obstacles have made the application of management theories in practice difficult. The traditional system of training managers, which relies on outdated paradigms, has created fundamental challenges, along with the inability to adapt theories to practical realities. The formation of many theories in different cultural contexts and sometimes alien to local conditions, along with the knowledge limitations of managers and the weakness of the research culture in organizations, have all contributed to the deepening of this gap. (Ghaznavi et al., 2018).

Conceptual Dimensions of the Theory-Practice Gap: In management literature, this phenomenon has been referred to with various definitions and titles. From the distance between theory and practice to the disconnection between academia and practical environments, all of them express different dimensions of this problem. It is important to note that despite the multitude of definitions, there is still no clear consensus about the dimensions and limits of this gap. It seems that the difference in language, logic, and way of dealing with issues between the academic community and practical management practitioners are among the main factors in the formation of this gap (Pfeffer et al., 2020).



The emergence and persistence of the gap: Historical tracing of this phenomenon shows that in the early stages of the development of scientific management, there was a closer connection between theory and practice. However, as time passed and fields of knowledge became more specialized, this gap has deepened. While some researchers believe that recent efforts have reduced this gap to some extent, others emphasize its persistence. What is certain is that solving this problem requires the participation of all stakeholders at all stages, from problem design to solution implementation (Sackett et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

Mohammadkhani et al., (2024) in a study of 20 schools in Tehran, examined the barriers to implementing the Fundamental Education Transformation Document. The findings showed that only 38% of the objectives of this document had been achieved. The most important barriers identified included teachers' cultural resistance to changing traditional methods (65%) and the lack of specialized human resources (53%). This study clearly shows the impact of cultural and structural factors in creating a gap between macro policies and practical implementation.

Kısa et al., (2020) conducted a study titled Reasons for the Theory-Practice Gap in the Field of Educational Management in Turkey with the aim of investigating the structural, professional and cultural factors that prevent school administrators from implementing theories in practice. The results of their research showed that the most important weakness is in the communication between the university and practical environments such as schools. Research is often written in a language and structure that is incomprehensible to administrators. Theories are usually general and abstract and do not respond to the specific, local and situational needs of school administrators. The education system values the use of practical experiences more than relying on theories. Administrators who act based on intuition and experience are considered more successful. The lack of formal incentives for the use of research and scientific results in schools has contributed to the neglect of theories.

Research Methodology:

This research was conducted with a developmental approach and a qualitative case study method. The target population was selected from among experts and knowledgeable experts with the criteria of having lived experience in management in the research field and at least 15 years of job experience. The purposive sampling method was of the criterion type and the sample size was determined to be 10 people by observing the theoretical saturation rule. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data, and finally a thematic network was compiled and drawn.

Research findings

The present study, focusing on the issue of the gap between theory and practice in the actions of educational managers, has examined this challenge among secondary school managers in Ahvaz. The research findings, which were collected through in-depth interviews with experts in the field of research, show that analyzing this gap requires attention to five interconnected and systematic dimensions: the organizational development dimension consisting of conceptual, structural, and functional components; the human capital development dimension consisting of knowledge enhancement, motivation, employee empowerment, and welfare development; the basic skills dimension consisting of organizational improvement, systems thinking, management capital, legal skills, management tasks, creativity, and innovation; the personal development dimension consisting of self-regulation, efficiency, knowledge sharing, science, and expertise; and the environment-oriented dimension consisting of technological action, climate and culture management, and environmental factor management. These dimensions form an integrated system in dynamic interaction with each other.

Conclusion

The analytical framework presented in this study shows that reducing the theory-practice gap in the actions of educational managers requires a comprehensive, systematic, and multilevel view that simultaneously covers the organizational macro dimensions (including the environment-oriented, organizational development, and human capital) and the individual and group micro dimensions (including basic management skills and personal development). This integrated framework not only provides a precise analytical tool for assessing the current state of managers' actions, but also creates a suitable scientific basis for designing manager empowerment programs by mapping the path to achieving the desired state. Dynamic and systematic interaction between these five dimensions can lead to a significant reduction in the gap between theory and practice in managers' actions. The results are consistent with many studies, including Daft (2018), Kotter (2018), Torkzadeh & Momeni (2018), Rezaei & Hosseini (2021), Alizadeh and Nouri (2022), Bagley (2018), Rahimi & Ghaffari (2021), Rezaei & Hosseini (2021), Taghavi & Zimmerman (2015), Bandura (2016), Nonaka & Takeuchi (2019), Grant (2016), Rezaei & Hosseini (2021), Porter & Kramer (2019), and Karimi & Mohammadi (2021). The significant concordance of the findings of this study with reputable domestic and foreign studies in each of these areas confirms the scientific and practical validity of the proposed framework.

In line with the results and findings, the following suggestions were made:

In order to reduce the theory-practice gap in the actions of school administrators and establish organizational justice, it was necessary to improve the dimensions of the framework and their components. Therefore, it was suggested that school administrators and education should take action on the organizational development of schools, the development of human capital and the improvement of the basic skills of administrators, as well as strengthening the environment-oriented and ultimately the development of the basic skills of administrators based on the presented framework. In the meantime, reviewing the macro-structure of education and training, meritocracy in appointments, coordinating educational policies with the needs of the labor market, and paying attention to the promotion of administrators and their training are among the requirements for implementing the presented suggestions.