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Designing a paradigmatic model for overcoming bias to improve organizational performance

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Abstract

The present study aimed to design a paradigmatic model for overcoming bias to enhance organizational performance among secondary school principals. Philosophically, this research is based on the interpretivist paradigm and was conducted using an inductive approach. It is classified as an applicable-developmental study in terms of purpose, and descriptive in terms of method and data collection timeframe. To achieve the research objectives, a nest research design was employed. The participants included educational management professors and secondary school principals. Using theoretical sampling until reaching theoretical saturation, a total of 21 individuals participated in the study. Data collection tools consisted of semi-structured interviews and a decision matrix-based questionnaire. The validity of the interviews was confirmed through four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability, while the reliability of the qualitative section was evaluated using Holsti's coefficient (0.754) and Cohen's Kappa coefficient (0.692), indicating acceptable levels. Data analysis was performed using grounded theory for qualitative data and the SWARA method for quantitative data. The research model revealed that causal conditions (individual biases, social biases, and a culture of bias) affect the core phenomenon (organizational bias). This core component, along with contextual conditions (professionalism and empowerment of school principals) and intervening conditions (bureaucratic school structure), influences strategies and actions (strategies for overcoming bias). Ultimately, these factors lead to outcomes including improved individual performance of principals, enhanced school performance, and better student performance.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

One of the destructive organizational phenomena that requires a critical and problem-focused examination is organizational bias. Organizational bias, as an organizational dysfunction, can pose a serious obstacle to dynamism, innovation, and justice within work environments (McLaren et al., 2024). This phenomenon occurs when extreme attitudes and one-sided tendencies dominate decision-making, policymaking, and organizational interactions. Its negative consequences include reduced cognitive diversity, internal conflicts, resistance to change, weakening of organizational culture, and decreased employee motivation (Di Marzio, 2025). Organizational bias is also present in the educational system and represents one of the greatest threats within schools. Childhood and adolescence are formative periods when many behaviors become ingrained; therefore, managing this phenomenon within schools and the educational system is crucial and sensitive (Zembylas, 2022). In schools, such bias can lead to ignoring diverse viewpoints, reducing teacher and student participation in educational processes, and lowering management quality. Accordingly, identifying and controlling organizational bias is essential for maintaining organizational health and improving performance (Childs & Wooten, 2023). Given that Iran is a diverse country ethnically, racially, religiously, and politically, bias and related behaviors constitute a significant threat to organizations, especially schools. In this context, presenting a model for overcoming organizational bias by identifying its roots and proposing corrective strategies can contribute to better decision-making, enhancement of organizational culture, and increased productivity in educational settings. This model guides managers toward a more open mindset, acceptance of diverse perspectives, and participative management, thereby improving the quality of educational management and staff satisfaction. Overcoming bias is an effective tool to prevent negative behavioral consequences among managers and unlocks potential improvements in both behavioral and academic performance of students. Conversely, bias among secondary school managers can create closed environments, reduce creativity, undermine organizational justice, and foster resistance to necessary changes. Therefore, this study addresses the central question: "How can a paradigmatic model for overcoming bias be designed to improve the organizational performance of secondary school managers?"

Theoretical Framework

Organizational Bias:

The term "bias" refers to a state in which an individual exhibits emotional and affective reactions toward a subject without considering logical and rational criteria. This phenomenon stems from a deep attachment and intense feelings toward a particular issue (Akbarnejad et al., 2020). The first psychological study on bias was conducted in 1925, focusing on racism, and it gained increased attention during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1954, Gordon Allport linked bias to categorical thinking in his renowned book *The Nature of Prejudice*. During the 1990s and early 21st century, the concept of organizational bias expanded significantly within organizations and social sciences (Quaia & Vernuccio, 2022).

Organizational Performance:

Organizational performance is a key management indicator reflecting the extent to which goals are achieved, resources are utilized efficiently, and value is created for stakeholders. This performance is influenced by organizational structure, prevailing culture, leadership style, employee commitment, and the presence or absence of organizational bias. Prominent models such as the Open Systems Model, Denison's Model, and the EFQM Excellence Model examine factors affecting performance within different frameworks (Zhang et al., 2025).



Research Methodology

This study is classified as applicable-developmental in terms of purpose, and descriptive regarding data collection methods. The main part of the research was conducted qualitatively, and in the final phase, a quantitative method was applied to prioritize indicators as a supplementary component. Data were collected from 21 educational management professors and secondary school principals. Data analysis for developing the paradigmatic model was performed using grounded theory based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin in MaxQDA 20 software. Additionally, the SWARA method was employed in Excel software to rank the indicators.

Research Findings

Based on grounded theory analysis conducted through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding, a total of 6 dimensions, 11 main categories, and 71 subcategories were extracted. The prioritization results indicated that the most important indicator was strengthening the technical skills required for task performance; followed by career advancement based on employee creativity and innovation in second place; enhancing employees' cognitive abilities to deal with difficult situations in third; developing multi-skilling to manage diverse conditions in fourth; and the ability to act effectively and proactively during challenges ranked fifth.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that organizational bias is rooted in individual, social, and cultural biases. Individual biases stem from the unconscious beliefs and cognitive distortions of managers, often reinforced through mental mechanisms such as confirmation bias and personal heuristics. Social biases, shaped by collective norms and values, perpetuate stereotypical thinking and reinforce inequality in organizational interactions. Meanwhile, cultural biases are embedded in organizational culture through practices like unmeritocratic selection and resistance to change, sustaining a cycle of institutional bias. Organizational bias manifests as favoritism and discrimination in key decision-making processes, undermining social capital, trust, and perceived fairness, and thus limiting organizational dynamism.

In contrast, professionalism and the empowerment of school principals—through impartiality, meritocracy, and skills development—help reduce bias and promote participatory and effective behaviors in schools. The bureaucratic structure of schools is identified as a major barrier to organizational transformation. Its reliance on rigid hierarchies, centralized control, and inflexible regulations restricts innovation and creativity, leaving even reform-minded principals constrained in implementing foundational changes. This structure reproduces institutional bias and diminishes schools' adaptive capacity.

Counter-strategies to organizational bias include anti-bias training, development of fair evaluation systems, transparency in decision-making, strengthened accountability, and promotion of participative leadership. These measures not only reduce bias at both individual and collective levels but also transform schools into ethical and learning-centered institutions. The outcomes of these strategies are observed at three levels: improved individual performance of principals through heightened self-awareness and job satisfaction; enhanced school performance through reduced conflict and increased collaboration; and ultimately, improved student performance by fostering a safe, just, and motivating learning environment. These findings highlight the effectiveness of the proposed model in driving cultural, structural, and performance-based transformation in secondary schools.