

Article type:
Original Research



A Paradigmatic Model for the Development of Strategic Thinking among Primary School Principals with a Competitive Advantage Approach in the Indigenous Context of Khuzestan: A Grounded Theory Analysis

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How to cite this article:

Zare Sanjari, E., Omidian, F., & Senobari, M. (2025). A Paradigmatic Model for the Development of Strategic Thinking among Primary School Principals with a Competitive Advantage Approach in the Indigenous Context of Khuzestan: A Grounded Theory Analysis. *Foresight and Health Governance*, 2(4), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.61838/fhfg.43>



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ABSTRACT

The present study was applied–developmental in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of implementation. The statistical population (participants) consisted of a number of key informants from the Department of Education of Khuzestan Province. In the qualitative phase, the sample size reached theoretical saturation at eight participants through purposive sampling. The research instrument comprised semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was conducted using theoretical coding derived from the grounded theory approach with the aid of MAXQDA software. The findings indicated that the development of strategic thinking among primary school principals with a competitive advantage approach in the Department of Education of Khuzestan Province encompasses “the development of thinking based on principals’ intrinsic needs and motivation,” “analysis of the competitive advantage gap in comparison with leading schools,” and “possessing vision and future orientation.” Due to resource constraints and the necessity of reconfiguring educational policies, principals are compelled to employ strategic thinking in order to balance educational objectives with available resources and to guide schools along a transformative path. The quantitative results showed that the causal factors influencing the development of strategic thinking among primary school principals with a competitive advantage approach in the Department of Education of Khuzestan Province include the development of strategic thinking based on needs and motivation, analysis of competitive advantage in comparison with leading schools, vision and future orientation, and the reconfiguration of educational policies at the school level. Contextual factors include the climatic context affecting the strategic thinking of principals in Khuzestan Province, technology-oriented education as a facilitator of strategic thinking development, situation-based management under the crisis-prone and diverse conditions of Khuzestan, and the localization of educational directives in Khuzestan Province. Intervening factors include “institutional and organizational support” from education authorities and the degree of “structural pressures and administrative bureaucracy” as the most significant interventions. The strategies identified in the present study include “intelligent resource management,” “adaptive learning and educational innovation,” and “localization of mandated strategies.” Successful principals leverage “parents’ social capital” and act as “facilitative leaders.” The outcomes, which include “strengthening social capital and school branding,” represent the first major result, leading to increased family trust. At the internal level, this approach culminates in “teachers’ professional empowerment” and “innovation in teaching methods.” Ultimately, “enhanced organizational effectiveness” and the multidimensional growth of students in a joyful and dynamic environment constitute the most important outcomes, consolidating the school’s position within the educational system of Khuzestan Province.

Keywords: Strategic thinking; principals; competitive advantage; education.

Introduction

Strategic thinking has increasingly been recognized as a critical managerial capability in contemporary organizations, particularly in environments characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and intense competition. In the field of management, strategic thinking goes beyond formal strategic planning and encompasses a cognitive, analytical, and future-oriented

mindset that enables managers to interpret environmental signals, integrate diverse information, and formulate adaptive and innovative responses. Early theoretical foundations emphasized strategic decision-making as a dynamic and iterative process shaped by bounded rationality, power, and environmental uncertainty (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). Subsequent perspectives highlighted the role of cognitive content, strategic flexibility, and managerial sense-making in shaping strategic outcomes (Combe & Greenley, 2004). Within this broader evolution, strategic thinking has emerged as a central mechanism through which organizations develop sustainable competitive advantage and align internal capabilities with external opportunities (Lado et al., 1992; Zhou et al., 2009).

Competitive advantage, as a core concept in strategic management, refers to an organization's ability to create superior value relative to competitors through unique resources, capabilities, or positioning. Contemporary research increasingly views competitive advantage as dynamic rather than static, requiring continuous learning, innovation, and strategic renewal (Stoyanova, 2018). Strategic thinking plays a pivotal role in this process by enabling managers to anticipate change, challenge existing assumptions, and reconfigure organizational resources in response to evolving environmental conditions (Goldman & Casey, 2010). Empirical studies have consistently shown that organizations led by strategically minded managers demonstrate higher levels of adaptability, performance, and long-term sustainability (Hili et al., 2017; Lestari et al., 2020). As such, strategic thinking is not merely an abstract cognitive skill, but a practical managerial competence with tangible organizational outcomes.

In recent years, the scope of strategic thinking research has expanded beyond private-sector organizations to include public and non-profit institutions. Public organizations face unique strategic challenges arising from regulatory constraints, multiple stakeholders, limited resources, and heightened accountability. Strategic planning and strategic thinking in the public sector are therefore shaped by political, social, and institutional contexts that differ significantly from those of market-driven firms (Bryson, 2018). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that strategic thinking remains a vital capability for public managers, enabling them to balance competing demands, improve service quality, and enhance organizational legitimacy (George et al., 2025). User acceptance of strategic planning processes, in particular, has been identified as a key factor influencing the effectiveness of strategic initiatives in public institutions (George et al., 2025).

The education sector represents a particularly complex organizational context in which strategic thinking is both necessary and challenging. Schools operate within centralized administrative structures, yet they are expected to respond to diverse local needs, social expectations, and rapidly changing educational demands. School principals, as key organizational leaders, play a decisive role in translating macro-level educational policies into effective school-level practices. Research has shown that principals' strategic thinking skills are closely associated with school performance, organizational learning, and educational innovation (Hosseini Nasab & Razavi, 2021; Roshani & Mousavi, 2020). In this regard, strategic thinking enables school leaders to move beyond routine administrative tasks and adopt a proactive, future-oriented approach to school development.

Empirical studies in educational management have identified multiple dimensions of strategic thinking among school leaders, including systems thinking, reflective thinking, intent-focused thinking, and opportunity-oriented thinking (Nuntamanop et al., 2013; Pisapia et al., 2016). These dimensions collectively allow principals to interpret complex educational environments, align resources with long-term goals, and foster a culture of innovation within schools. Research conducted in different regional and national contexts has demonstrated that principals with higher levels of strategic thinking are more

capable of creating competitive advantages for their schools, such as improved educational quality, stronger stakeholder trust, and enhanced institutional reputation (Asadpour et al., 2018; Yaghoubi & Soltani, 2020).

Despite the growing body of research on strategic thinking in education, scholars have emphasized that the development of strategic thinking is highly context-dependent. Environmental, cultural, and institutional factors shape how strategic thinking emerges and is enacted in practice (Shaik & Dhir, 2020). In developing or regionally diverse contexts, such as different provinces within Iran, school leaders often face additional constraints related to resource scarcity, socio-economic disparities, and environmental challenges. Studies conducted in Iranian educational settings have highlighted obstacles to the development of strategic thinking among school principals, including bureaucratic rigidity, limited autonomy, and insufficient professional development opportunities (Mohammadi et al., 2020). These findings underscore the need for context-sensitive models that explain how strategic thinking develops under specific local conditions.

Human capital has been identified as a critical antecedent of strategic thinking and competitive advantage across organizational contexts. Managers' knowledge, skills, experience, and learning orientation significantly influence their capacity for strategic analysis and innovative decision-making (Alomari, 2020; Srivastava & D'Souza, 2019). In educational organizations, the strategic thinking of principals is closely linked to teachers' professional development, organizational learning, and collective capacity-building (Hosseini Nasab & Razavi, 2021). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that strategic innovation mediates the relationship between human capital and competitive advantage, highlighting the interactive nature of cognitive and organizational factors (Abbasi Saymareh & Moradi Niknam, 2021).

Strategic leadership is another key construct closely associated with strategic thinking. Strategic leaders influence organizational direction by articulating vision, fostering alignment, and creating conditions that support innovation and learning. Research indicates that strategic leadership affects competitive advantage indirectly through strategic thinking and strategic planning processes (Hunitie, 2018; Mahdi & Almsafir, 2014). In the context of schools, principals who adopt facilitative and participatory leadership styles are more likely to encourage collaboration, experimentation, and shared decision-making, thereby strengthening strategic thinking at both individual and organizational levels (Roshani & Mousavi, 2020).

Recent studies have also emphasized the role of innovation-oriented approaches, such as design thinking and digital transformation, in enhancing strategic thinking capabilities. Design thinking has been proposed as a strategic approach that enables organizations to address complex problems through user-centered, iterative, and creative processes (Mariani et al., 2025). Similarly, advances in digital technologies and artificial intelligence have reshaped the strategic landscape, offering first-mover advantages to organizations that effectively integrate data analytics and digital capabilities into strategic decision-making (Chui et al., 2019). These developments suggest that strategic thinking increasingly requires data literacy, technological awareness, and adaptive learning, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors such as education.

The relationship between strategic thinking and crisis management has gained renewed attention in light of global and regional crises. Studies have demonstrated that organizations with stronger strategic thinking and planning capabilities are better equipped to manage crises and maintain operational continuity (Saeed et al., 2025). In educational systems, crises related to environmental conditions, public health, or social instability place additional demands on school leaders to think strategically, allocate resources effectively, and sustain educational quality under adverse circumstances. These challenges

highlight the importance of understanding strategic thinking not only as a tool for competitive positioning, but also as a mechanism for resilience and long-term sustainability (Wickert & Muzio, 2025).

Within the Iranian context, several studies have sought to model the antecedents and components of strategic thinking among managers using qualitative and grounded theory approaches. These studies have identified factors such as organizational culture, learning orientation, leadership style, and environmental pressures as key determinants of strategic thinking development (Keikhanezhad et al., 2022; Nakhaei, 2023). Sector-specific research, including studies in municipal organizations and industrial settings, has further demonstrated that strategic thinking skills enhance readiness for competitive advantage and innovation (Lalehzari Mosalla et al., 2024; Sahraei, 2021). However, empirical research focusing specifically on primary school principals and their strategic thinking within distinct provincial contexts remains limited.

Khuzestan Province presents a unique educational and managerial context characterized by climatic challenges, socio-cultural diversity, and structural constraints. Schools in this region operate under conditions that differ markedly from those in more homogeneous or resource-rich areas. Prior research has indicated that competitive advantage in public schools of Khuzestan is influenced by contextual factors such as community engagement, resource management, and leadership practices (Yaghoubi & Soltani, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive, theory-driven models that explain how strategic thinking develops among school principals in this specific context and how it contributes to competitive advantage.

Moreover, existing literature often treats strategic thinking as an individual managerial trait, overlooking the interaction between individual cognition, organizational structures, and environmental conditions. Contemporary perspectives argue for integrative models that capture causal conditions, contextual factors, strategic actions, and outcomes in a coherent framework (Dixit et al., 2022). Such models are particularly valuable in educational settings, where strategic thinking is embedded in complex systems involving multiple stakeholders, policy constraints, and societal expectations. Meta-analytical reviews have further emphasized the need to synthesize diverse antecedents of strategic thinking into coherent explanatory frameworks (Shaik & Dhir, 2020).

In light of these theoretical and empirical gaps, there is a clear need for context-specific, empirically grounded research that examines the development of strategic thinking among primary school principals with a focus on competitive advantage. By adopting a qualitative, grounded theory approach, such research can uncover the underlying mechanisms, contextual influences, and strategic processes that shape principals' strategic thinking in practice. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to both theory development and practical interventions aimed at enhancing leadership capacity, organizational effectiveness, and educational quality.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to develop a paradigmatic model of the development of strategic thinking among primary school principals with a competitive advantage approach in the indigenous context of Khuzestan Province.

Methodology

The present study was applied–developmental in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of implementation. The statistical population of participants included a number of key informants and academic experts with advanced educational qualifications and extensive professional experience, working in the field of educational management and possessing expertise in strategic thinking with a competitive advantage approach within the education system of Khuzestan Province. In the preliminary stage, in order to obtain expert opinions on the subject, multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The interview process was designed in such a way that after each interview, the data were coded and analyzed so that, in addition to identifying the factors raised by the initial experts, these factors could be further explored in subsequent interviews. In the present study, after the repetition of components identified in the interviews, additional repetitions were carried out to ensure the frequency and robustness of the findings, and to achieve greater certainty, an additional supplementary interview was also conducted.

In the main stage of the study, initially five experts, academic scholars, and professors of educational management were interviewed; however, sufficient repetition of responses was not observed among these five participants. Therefore, in the next stage, two additional individuals were included in the interviews, and theoretical saturation was observed in some of the responses. Nevertheless, in order to ensure complete theoretical saturation, the researcher selected one more participant for interview. After analyzing their responses, theoretical saturation of the identified components and indicators was achieved, and in consultation with the supervisor and advisor, no further need for additional interviews was perceived. Accordingly, the final sample size of the study consisted of eight participants. Among the eight research participants, four individuals (50%) were female and four individuals (50%) were male. In terms of marital status, the majority of participants (87.5%) were married, and only one participant (12.5%) was single. With respect to educational attainment, an equal number of participants held master's and doctoral degrees (50% each). In terms of years of service, the highest frequency was related to the group with 15 to 25 years of experience (62.5%), indicating that most participants possessed relatively extensive managerial and educational experience. Data analysis was conducted through theoretical coding derived from the grounded theory methodology using MAXQDA software.

Findings and Results

In the present study, semi-structured interviews were used to identify the dimensions and indicators of the model for developing strategic thinking among principals. Accordingly, interviews were conducted with eight experts and senior managers from the Department of Education of Khuzestan Province who had valuable experience in the field of educational management. The data analysis process was carried out using qualitative content analysis (or a grounded theory strategy). In this process, following the transcription of interview texts, coding was conducted in three stages so that initial concepts were identified and ultimately classified into main and subcategories. To provide a more precise entry into the discussion, it can be stated that the identified codes were categorized within the six dimensions of the paradigmatic model (including causal conditions, the core phenomenon, strategies, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences). This categorization helps clarify that strategic thinking is not merely an individual trait of a manager, but rather an intelligent response to environmental challenges and a tool for gaining advantage within a dynamic educational system. In the following, the manner in which these open codes were linked and transformed into core categories based on data extracted from the interviews is explained.

Table 1. Contextual Categories

Core Category	Subcategory	Open Codes
Climatic context influencing the strategic thinking of principals in Khuzestan	Climatic challenges of Khuzestan Province	Unfavorable climatic conditions of Khuzestan Province Heat-related school closures Air pollution Dust storms, water and electricity outages
Situation-based (contingency) management under the crisis-prone and diverse conditions of Khuzestan	Management under complex conditions aligned with provincial challenges	Management of students' cultural and linguistic diversity

Localization of educational directives in Khuzestan Province	Localization of directives at the provincial level	Decision-making based on available resources Ability to make appropriate decisions under changing conditions Innovative decisions adapted to constrained conditions Regional differences (urban, rural, and nomadic) Student migration Diversity of educational needs Management aligned with current conditions Continuous updating of principals' knowledge Localization of educational directives in accordance with Khuzestan's challenges Adaptation of directives to the real conditions of schools
Indigenous development of teacher empowerment in Khuzestan Province	Professional empowerment of teachers and equal educational opportunities	Improvement of quality and establishment of educational equity Enhancement of teachers' academic level
Participation-oriented management in the education system of Khuzestan	Stakeholder participation in decision-making	Increased participation of teachers and parents in decision-making Parental participation in school-level decisions
Management of the cultural environment to promote joyful learning	Revitalization of the cultural atmosphere of schools	Creating a joyful cultural environment in schools Creating an active and participatory environment
Technology-oriented education as a facilitator of strategic thinking development	Application of experience, technology, and professional training in the growth of principals' strategic thinking	The effective role of practical experience compared to theoretical training Necessity of updating knowledge and continuous learning Importance of experience in goal-oriented strategic thinking Impact of training courses on the development of principals' strategic thinking Technological advancement and the importance of in-service training Impact of social crises on increased familiarity with technology
Multiplicity of environmental contexts and its implications for educational equity	Differences in school environments	Impact of school differences on managerial approaches Cultural diversity, regional differences, and harsh climatic conditions Localization of programs in line with provincial challenges

Table 2. Intervening Factors

Core Category	Subcategory	Open Codes
Contingency management	Contingency management aligned with climatic and cultural conditions	Program-oriented managerial approach adapted to climatic conditions Planning based on community needs assessment Adaptive learning for localization of strategies Challenges caused by disruptions in instructional hours in hot regions Impact of environmental crises on students' learning levels Impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on managerial complexity Utilizing diversity as an opportunity for development
Institutional support and social feedback	Managerial support for participation and enhancement of management through stakeholder social feedback	Feedback from teachers and parents to improve the quality of activities Institutional support as a driver of managerial focus on real needs Active stakeholder participation Teachers' feedback as a tool for improving managerial decisions Utilization of parents' social capital to develop strategic thinking
Institutional pressure	Organizational expectations as a driver of strategic thinking development	Participation of teachers and parents in achieving goals Supervision by the Department of Education over the implementation of directives Principals' inclination to enhance the school's status
Structural and cultural inhibiting factors	Institutional barriers and lack of support	Insufficient support from the Department of Education

Use of social influence to change community attitudes
 Leveraging officials' support to legitimize decisions
 Social transformation through awareness-raising and local participation
 Worn-out and inadequate educational environments
 Inequality among schools in terms of culture and facilities
 Negative attitudes of the Department of Education toward schools
 Cultural and gender barriers in bilingual regions affecting girls' education

Table 3. Causal Factors

Core Category	Subcategory	Open Codes
Development of strategic thinking based on needs and motivation	Principals' intrinsic and extrinsic needs and motivation as drivers of strategic thinking orientation	Impact of intrinsic needs and motivations on orientation toward strategic thinking Impact of personal motivation for professional advancement on the development of strategic thinking Simultaneous impact of needs and motivation on strengthening strategic thinking Motivation as a key factor in principals' inclination toward strategic thinking
Analysis of competitive advantage in comparison with leading schools	Competitive advantage and comparison with leading schools	Impact of the competitive environment among schools on the development of strategic thinking Creation of competitive advantage among peer schools Benchmarking from best practices Role of model public schools and non-governmental schools External comparisons by institutions and society Principals' efforts to reduce the gap with leading schools
Reconfiguration of educational policies at the school level as a driver of principals' strategic decisions, focusing on translating policies into localized and operational solutions	Role of educational policies in developing strategic thinking	Impact of mandatory initiatives of the Department of Education Role of educational policies in creating a sense of competition Role of the Fundamental Transformation Document in strengthening strategic thinking Impact of transformative initiatives of education authorities on developing strategic thinking
Constraints of Khuzestan Province	School resources and facilities	Importance of resources in orientation toward strategic thinking Impact of financial and human resources School facilities as a primary driver of competitive advantage in Khuzestan
Balance between centralized structure and managerial autonomy in Khuzestan Province	Structure, autonomy, and managerial discretion	Autonomy and independence in decision-making Importance of freedom of expression Principals' ability to transform formal environments into joyful and friendly spaces Support for innovative ideas of young teachers
Development of a purposeful learning culture to create a platform for innovation and long-term decisions	Development of a dynamic organizational culture within schools	Importance of organizational culture in developing strategic thinking Necessity of proper guidance of the cultural environment Foundational perspective toward directives Role of the cultural environment in the effectiveness of activities
Vision and future orientation	Long-term perspective	Possessing vision and long-term planning Use of data analysis for strategic decision-making Utilization of resources to achieve strategic objectives

Table 4. Strategic Factors

Core Category	Subcomponent	Open Codes
Intelligent resource management and data-driven planning in the education system of Khuzestan Province	Intelligent resource management and data-driven planning	Intelligent resource management Goal-oriented management of instruction Optimal allocation of personnel Performance analysis based on collected data Data analysis for decision-making Assessment of the gap between current and desired states
Localization of strategies and alignment of school goals with provincial educational policies	Localization of strategies	Adaptation of strategies to the local context Program design based on macro-level policies Alignment of daily objectives with the education system's vision Design of local solutions
Adaptive learning and innovation in schools of Khuzestan Province	Adaptive learning and innovation in schools	Learning from experiences of other schools Transfer of strategic experiences among principals Exchange of innovative methods Communication with successful schools Creation of constructive competition among classes
Strategic utilization of parents' social capital in decisions and programs of Khuzestan Province	Strategic utilization of parents' social capital	Strengthening a culture of collective effort Leveraging parents' capacities Encouraging students through cultural norms Collaborative deliberation in programs Family participation in school decisions
Role of the facilitative leader in innovation and performance improvement of schools in Khuzestan Province	Facilitative leadership	Creating a sense of responsibility among teachers Encouraging continuous learning Principals' role in modeling performance
Development of innovative collaboration among teachers, parents, and the local community in schools of Khuzestan Province	Innovative collaboration in schools	Creating a friendly and informal school environment Utilizing innovative ideas of young teachers Feedback from teachers and parents to improve activity quality Participation of teachers and parents to achieve goals
Establishment of a strategic mechanism to align school decisions with stakeholders' interests	Principals' engagement with stakeholders and operational coherence	Importance of parental collaboration in principals' decision-making Importance of close collegial communication Operational coherence among colleagues Necessity of forming participatory groups with parents Importance of stakeholder satisfaction

Table 5. Outcomes

Core Category	Subcomponent	Open Codes
Strengthening social capital and school credibility	Increased trust and satisfaction of educational stakeholders	Increased parental trust and inclination to enroll in successful schools Social transformation through awareness-raising and local participation Utilization of support from authorities Leveraging social influence to change community attitudes Professional branding and increased school credibility Increased parental satisfaction Families' sense of belonging to the school Transparency of programs as a driver of stakeholder trust and satisfaction Increased teachers' job satisfaction as a result of participation in decision-making Increased intrinsic motivation of principals and staff upon observing positive changes Encouraging teachers to collaborate with strategically minded principals
Professional empowerment and educational innovation	Increased creativity, educational innovation, and talent flourishing in a dynamic school environment	Growth of creativity and educational innovation within a strategic management framework Expansion of creativity and innovation in schools

Organizational effectiveness and coherence of the school	Alignment among stakeholders	Increased innovation in instructional methods by teachers
		Technological advancement and educational innovation within schools
		Transformation of schools into dynamic environments
		Creation of a platform for talent flourishing in non-traditional school settings
		Increased students' academic motivation in dynamic environments
		Multidimensional advancement of students at the provincial level
		Advancement of skills development within schools
		Alignment among stakeholders
		Collective decision-making as a driver of dynamism and enhanced self-esteem
		Institutionalization of dialogue and participatory decision-making
		Collaboration between principals and stakeholders
		Operational roadmaps for program implementation
		Operationalization of programs and reduction of the gap between planning and execution
		Possession of a long-term vision
		Principals' mastery of situational analysis for intelligent decision-making
		Increased efficiency and reduced dissatisfaction
		Improved educational performance
		Increased educational productivity and student performance
		Enhancement of educational quality
		Professional branding and increased school credibility
		Increased social expectations of strategic leaders
		Continuous benchmarking and improvement based on successful schools' experiences

Table 1 reports the contextual conditions that shape the development of strategic thinking among school principals in Khuzestan Province. The findings show that environmental and structural contexts play a decisive role in framing principals' strategic responses. Climatic conditions—such as extreme heat, air pollution, dust storms, and recurring disruptions to water and electricity—constitute a fundamental contextual pressure that directly affects school operations and necessitates adaptive and forward-looking management. In parallel, situation-based (contingency) management emerges as a dominant contextual requirement, reflecting principals' need to manage cultural and linguistic diversity among students, regional differences between urban, rural, and nomadic areas, migration patterns, and varied educational needs, all under conditions of limited and fluctuating resources. The localization of educational directives is another critical contextual factor, highlighting principals' efforts to adapt centrally issued regulations to the real and diverse conditions of schools in Khuzestan. Teacher empowerment within a localized framework, participation-oriented management involving teachers and parents, and active management of the cultural environment to promote joyful and participatory learning further illustrate how context shapes strategic thinking. Additionally, technology-oriented education is identified as a facilitating context for strategic thinking growth, emphasizing the role of practical experience, continuous learning, in-service training, and technological advancement. Finally, the multiplicity of environmental contexts and their implications for educational equity underline the need for context-sensitive managerial approaches that address cultural diversity, regional disparities, and harsh climatic conditions through localized program design.

Table 2 presents the intervening conditions that either facilitate or constrain the translation of contextual conditions into strategic action. Contingency management functions as a key intervening factor, requiring principals to align planning and decision-making with climatic, cultural, and social realities, including disruptions to instructional time in hot regions and the effects of environmental crises on student learning. Adaptive learning and localization of strategies are emphasized as

mechanisms that help principals cope with uncertainty and complexity while turning diversity into a developmental opportunity. Institutional support and social feedback constitute another major intervening condition, as feedback from teachers and parents enhances decision quality, focuses managerial attention on real needs, and enables principals to leverage parents' social capital in developing strategic thinking. At the same time, institutional pressure—manifested through organizational expectations and supervision by education authorities—acts as both a stimulus for improving school status and a constraint on managerial discretion. Finally, structural and cultural inhibiting factors, such as insufficient institutional support, negative attitudes toward schools, worn-out educational environments, inequalities in facilities and cultural capital, and cultural or gender barriers in bilingual regions, are identified as critical intervening conditions that can impede strategic initiatives unless actively managed through social influence, awareness-raising, and local participation.

Table 3 presents the causal factors underlying the development of strategic thinking among primary school principals with a competitive advantage orientation. The findings indicate that the core drivers originate from principals' intrinsic and extrinsic needs and motivations, which act as fundamental triggers for adopting strategic thinking. Personal motivation for professional advancement, combined with organizational needs, strengthens principals' strategic orientation. Another major causal factor is the analysis of competitive advantage through comparison with leading schools, including benchmarking best practices, responding to competitive pressures among peer schools, and striving to reduce performance gaps with exemplary public and non-governmental schools. The reconfiguration of educational policies at the school level also emerges as a key driver, as principals translate macro-level educational policies, such as mandatory initiatives and the Fundamental Transformation Document, into localized and actionable strategies. Context-specific constraints in Khuzestan Province, particularly limitations in financial, human, and infrastructural resources, further compel principals to think strategically in order to optimize scarce resources and enhance competitive positioning. In addition, maintaining a balance between centralized administrative structures and managerial autonomy is identified as a causal condition that enables independent decision-making, freedom of expression, and support for innovative ideas. Finally, the development of a purposeful learning culture and a long-term vision with future orientation—supported by data analysis and strategic use of resources—constitutes a critical causal foundation for sustained strategic thinking.

Table 4 outlines the strategic actions adopted by principals in response to the identified causal conditions. Central to these strategies is intelligent resource management combined with data-driven planning, which involves goal-oriented instructional management, optimal allocation of human resources, continuous performance analysis, and systematic evaluation of gaps between current and desired conditions. Localization of strategies represents another key strategic dimension, whereby school-level plans are aligned with provincial educational policies while being adapted to local cultural, social, and environmental contexts. Adaptive learning and innovation are also highlighted as essential strategies, encompassing learning from the experiences of other schools, exchanging innovative practices among principals, fostering constructive competition, and maintaining active communication with successful schools. The strategic use of parents' social capital plays a significant role, as principals leverage parental capacities, encourage collective effort, and promote family participation in decision-making processes. Moreover, the role of the principal as a facilitative leader is emphasized, particularly in fostering responsibility among teachers, encouraging continuous professional learning, and modeling effective performance. Finally, the establishment of strategic mechanisms for stakeholder alignment ensures coherence in decision-making through close collaboration, participatory groups, and sustained attention to stakeholder satisfaction.

Table 5 summarizes the key outcomes resulting from the implementation of strategic thinking and associated strategies in schools. One of the most prominent outcomes is the strengthening of social capital and school credibility, manifested through increased trust, satisfaction, and enrollment intentions among parents, as well as enhanced professional branding of schools. Transparency in programs, social awareness-raising, and effective use of institutional and social support further reinforce stakeholder confidence. Another major outcome is professional empowerment and educational innovation, reflected in increased creativity, innovative teaching methods, technological advancement, and the transformation of schools into dynamic and non-traditional learning environments that foster talent development and academic motivation among students. At a broader organizational level, strategic thinking leads to improved organizational effectiveness and coherence, characterized by alignment among stakeholders, institutionalization of participatory decision-making, and the development of clear operational roadmaps. These processes reduce the gap between planning and implementation, enhance efficiency, improve educational performance and productivity, and elevate overall educational quality. Ultimately, these outcomes consolidate the school's position within the provincial education system and raise societal expectations of principals as strategic leaders who continuously learn from and benchmark against successful schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a comprehensive and context-sensitive explanation of how strategic thinking develops among primary school principals in Khuzestan Province and how this development contributes to competitive advantage within the education system. The results indicate that strategic thinking is not a static cognitive trait, but rather a dynamic and process-oriented phenomenon shaped by causal conditions, contextual and intervening factors, strategic actions, and observable outcomes. This finding is consistent with contemporary views that conceptualize strategic thinking as an adaptive managerial capability emerging from continuous interaction between individuals and their environments (Dixit et al., 2022; Shaik & Dhir, 2020).

One of the central results of the study is the identification of principals' intrinsic and extrinsic needs and motivations as primary causal drivers of strategic thinking. The data show that professional aspirations, the desire for school improvement, and responsiveness to external expectations jointly stimulate principals' orientation toward strategic thinking. This result aligns with prior studies emphasizing the motivational foundations of strategic cognition and decision-making (Alomari, 2020; Srivastava & D'Souza, 2019). In educational contexts, motivation has been shown to influence not only individual managerial behavior but also broader organizational learning and innovation processes (Hosseini Nasab & Razavi, 2021). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that motivation operates simultaneously at personal and organizational levels, reinforcing principals' commitment to long-term, strategic perspectives.

Another key finding concerns the role of competitive comparison with leading schools as a catalyst for strategic thinking. The study shows that benchmarking, external evaluations, and societal comparisons motivate principals to analyze performance gaps and adopt innovative practices. This result is consistent with the competitive advantage literature, which highlights relative positioning and continuous comparison as essential mechanisms for strategic renewal (Lado et al., 1992; Zhou et al., 2009). Similar findings have been reported in studies of educational organizations, where exposure to successful peer institutions encourages school leaders to rethink existing practices and pursue differentiation strategies (Asadpour et

al., 2018; Yaghoubi & Soltani, 2020). The current study adds to this body of knowledge by illustrating how competitive pressures are internalized cognitively by principals and translated into strategic thinking within a public education context.

The reconfiguration of educational policies at the school level emerged as another significant causal factor influencing strategic thinking. Principals in Khuzestan are required to interpret centrally mandated policies and transform them into localized, actionable strategies. This finding resonates with public sector strategic management research, which emphasizes the importance of policy translation and managerial discretion in achieving effective implementation (Bryson, 2018; George et al., 2025). In line with Eisenhardt and Zbaracki's perspective on strategic decision-making under constraints, principals' strategic thinking appears to be shaped by their ability to navigate formal structures while exercising adaptive judgment (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). The present results suggest that policy-driven environments do not suppress strategic thinking; rather, they create conditions in which strategic thinking becomes essential for aligning formal requirements with local realities.

Contextual conditions specific to Khuzestan Province—particularly climatic challenges, socio-cultural diversity, and resource limitations—play a decisive role in shaping principals' strategic thinking. The findings indicate that extreme environmental conditions, such as heat-related disruptions and infrastructural instability, necessitate contingency-oriented and future-focused management. This supports arguments that strategic thinking is especially critical in volatile and uncertain environments (Combe & Greenley, 2004; Wickert & Muzio, 2025). Previous research has shown that managers operating in challenging contexts are more likely to develop flexible and innovative cognitive frameworks (Goldman & Casey, 2010). The present study contributes empirical evidence from the education sector, demonstrating that environmental adversity can function as a catalyst for strategic cognition rather than merely a constraint.

Intervening factors identified in the study—such as institutional support, social feedback from stakeholders, bureaucratic pressures, and structural barriers—further explain the variability in strategic thinking development. Institutional and social support were found to enhance principals' confidence, focus attention on real needs, and facilitate the use of parents' social capital. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the mediating role of human and social capital in translating strategic thinking into competitive advantage (Abbasi Saymarch & Moradi Niknam, 2021; Hili et al., 2017). Conversely, excessive bureaucratic pressure and insufficient institutional backing were shown to inhibit strategic initiatives, echoing earlier findings on the constraining effects of rigid administrative systems in educational management (Mohammadi et al., 2020). The coexistence of enabling and inhibiting intervening conditions underscores the complex, non-linear nature of strategic thinking development in public schools.

At the level of strategic actions, the results highlight intelligent resource management, data-driven planning, localization of strategies, adaptive learning, and innovation as core responses to contextual and causal conditions. These strategies reflect contemporary models of strategic thinking that emphasize evidence-based decision-making, learning from experience, and continuous adaptation (Nuntamanop et al., 2013; Pisapia et al., 2016). The emphasis on data analysis and performance evaluation aligns with recent literature on digital transformation and the strategic use of information for competitive advantage (Chui et al., 2019). Furthermore, the localization of strategies confirms arguments that effective strategic thinking in public organizations requires sensitivity to cultural and environmental contexts (Shaik & Dhir, 2020; Sudiyani et al., 2025).

The facilitative leadership role of principals, as identified in the findings, is particularly noteworthy. Acting as facilitators rather than controllers, strategically minded principals foster collaboration, encourage continuous learning, and model

innovative behavior. This result supports prior research demonstrating that strategic leadership influences competitive advantage indirectly through strategic thinking and planning processes (Hunitie, 2018; Mahdi & Almsafir, 2014). In educational settings, such leadership styles have been associated with higher levels of teacher engagement, organizational learning, and innovation (Roshani & Mousavi, 2020). The present study reinforces these conclusions by showing how facilitative leadership functions as a practical manifestation of strategic thinking in schools.

The outcomes identified in the study—strengthening social capital, enhancing school credibility, professional empowerment of teachers, educational innovation, and improved organizational effectiveness—provide strong empirical support for the strategic value of strategic thinking. Increased trust among parents, improved school reputation, and higher levels of stakeholder satisfaction reflect the competitive advantages achieved through strategic cognition and action. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that strategic thinking and innovation contribute to superior organizational performance and sustainable advantage (Fahmi et al., 2020; Lestari et al., 2020). In the educational context, the transformation of schools into dynamic, innovative environments aligns with studies linking strategic leadership to improved educational quality and student outcomes (Hosseini Nasab & Razavi, 2021; Saeed et al., 2025).

Overall, the results of this study support an integrative view of strategic thinking as a multidimensional and context-dependent process. By adopting a grounded theory approach, the study responds to calls for comprehensive models that capture the causal, contextual, strategic, and outcome dimensions of strategic thinking (Dixit et al., 2022; Nakhaei, 2023). The proposed paradigmatic model advances existing literature by situating strategic thinking within the specific environmental, institutional, and cultural conditions of Khuzestan Province, thereby extending the applicability of strategic management theories to public education systems in diverse contexts.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design and relatively small sample size, although appropriate for grounded theory research, limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational levels. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from principals and experts, which may be subject to perceptual bias. Third, the focus on a single province means that certain contextual factors identified in this study may not be equally relevant in other educational settings with different socio-economic or environmental conditions.

Future research could build on the findings of this study by testing the proposed paradigmatic model quantitatively across larger and more diverse samples. Comparative studies across different provinces or countries could help identify which aspects of strategic thinking development are context-specific and which are more universal. Longitudinal research designs would also be valuable in examining how strategic thinking evolves over time in response to changing environmental and institutional conditions. Additionally, future studies could explore the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students to gain a more holistic understanding of how principals' strategic thinking influences school outcomes.

From a practical perspective, educational policymakers and administrators should design professional development programs that explicitly focus on enhancing principals' strategic thinking skills, particularly in data-driven decision-making, adaptive learning, and facilitative leadership. Granting greater managerial autonomy while reducing unnecessary bureaucratic constraints can create conditions conducive to strategic thinking. Schools should also institutionalize mechanisms for stakeholder participation, feedback, and collaboration to strengthen social capital and support strategic initiatives. Finally, contextual factors such as environmental challenges and cultural diversity should be explicitly considered

in policy design and school-level planning to ensure that strategic thinking translates into sustainable educational improvement.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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