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Elucidating the Role Conflicts of School Principals in a Field of Multiple Forces: A Qualitative Study on the Simultaneous Management of Festivals, University Entrance Exams, and Pedagogical Objectives

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study aimed to elucidate the lived experiences of secondary-school principals who simultaneously manage student festivals and extracurricular programs, pressure associated with the national university entrance examination (Konkour), and broader pedagogical and educational objectives. It also examined how principals interpret these competing demands, how they manage conflicts among them, and how such conflicts shape professional identity and educational decision-making.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was used. Seventeen secondary-school principals in Markazi Province, Iran, participated. Participants were selected through purposeful maximum-variation sampling with attention to gender, management experience, school type, and educational area. Twenty-four principals were invited and 17 participated. Data were collected through 60–90-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step approach. Reflexive attention to researcher assumptions, peer review by qualitative researchers, iterative coding, and member checking were used to strengthen credibility.

Results: Five interrelated themes were identified: (1) role duality and professional fragmentation; (2) examination-oriented pressures associated with the Konkour; (3) performative and symbolic functions of student festivals; (4) situated strategies of integration, negotiation, selective prioritization, and informal educational action; and (5) burnout accompanied by professional hope. The findings suggest that highly visible indicators such as examination outcomes and festival awards can acquire greater practical value than less visible, long-term educational outcomes. Principals nevertheless retain limited but meaningful room for agency through negotiation, program integration, and the creation of informal educational spaces.

Conclusion: The conflict experienced by principals is best understood as an interaction between structural pressures, competing role expectations, dominant definitions of educational success, and situated professional agency. The findings support the need for multidimensional school evaluation, stronger professional support for principals, and institutional arrangements that allow pedagogical objectives to coexist with accountability demands rather than remain dependent on informal workarounds.

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Introduction

School leadership in contemporary education involves more than administrative compliance. Principals are required to coordinate instructional processes, respond to families and communities, implement policies, manage staff and resources, and demonstrate evidence of school performance. In complex educational systems, these expectations may not point in the same direction. Mincu (2022) emphasizes that school leadership is shaped by structural and cultural conditions that influence the possibilities for educational transformation, while Harris (2020) highlights the complexity of school leadership under conditions of institutional crisis and competing demands. The central issue, therefore, is not simply whether principals possess appropriate leadership skills, but how their professional roles are constituted within a field of multiple and sometimes incompatible expectations.

The present study examines a particularly consequential configuration of these pressures in Iranian secondary education: the simultaneous management of student festivals and extracurricular programs, preparation for the national university entrance examination (Konkour), and pursuit of broader pedagogical objectives. These three domains are not necessarily incompatible in principle. Festivals can provide opportunities for creativity, talent development, collaboration, and authentic projects; examination preparation can support academic progression; and pedagogical objectives include deep learning, critical thinking, problem solving, social responsibility, ethical development, and other dimensions of whole-person education. The conflict emerges when institutional evaluation, parental expectations, competition among schools, and limited resources make one domain more immediately visible or valuable than another.

Student festivals and competitions, including scientific, cultural, artistic, Quranic, research, and Khwarizmi Youth Festival-related activities, are formally associated with positive educational purposes. Yet participants in the present study describe circumstances in which awards, rankings, photographs, reports, and visible achievements become important evidence of school performance. Under such conditions, festival participation can consume instructional time, staff attention, budget, and physical space. The pedagogical value of a project may consequently become secondary to its capacity to produce a visible outcome. This does not imply that festivals are inherently harmful; rather, it points to a tension between their educational purposes and the accountability practices through which their success may be judged.

The Konkour constitutes a second major source of pressure. High-stakes examination systems can influence curriculum, time allocation, family expectations, and definitions of academic success. Yadgarzadeh et al. (2021), in research involving upper-secondary teachers, reported effects of the national university entrance examination on curriculum and instructional priorities. Aksoy (2023) similarly examined the tension between teaching and testing in the Turkish educational context. Zhang (2026) described principals' experiences of pursuing whole-person education under high-stakes testing in China, while Huang et al. (2024) showed the relevance of instructional leadership to educational quality in an examination-oriented context. These studies indicate that the tension between measurable examination performance and broader educational aims is not unique to Iran, although its institutional expression is context dependent.

The third pole consists of pedagogical objectives that are often qualitative, cumulative, and difficult to capture through short-term indicators. Critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, ethical reasoning, communication, and responsible participation in society develop over time. Their effects may not be visible in the form of a ranking, a medal, or an immediately reportable statistic. The tension examined in this study therefore concerns not only competing tasks but competing definitions of what counts as educational success.

The problem is intensified when principals must allocate scarce resources among these domains. Time devoted to examination preparation may reduce opportunities for project-based learning; festival preparation may compete with classroom instruction; and attempts to protect broader pedagogical activities may require negotiation with parents, teachers, or educational authorities. The principal consequently occupies a position in which compliance, professional judgment, institutional accountability, and educational values intersect.

Problem Statement

The central problem of the present research is how school principals experience and manage a field in which three strong demands converge: visible performance through festivals and extracurricular achievements, examination-oriented accountability associated with the Konkour, and the less visible but enduring objectives of authentic education. The issue is not simply that principals have too many tasks. Rather, participants describe situations in which fulfilling one expectation can make it more difficult to fulfill another. This produces role conflict because principals must simultaneously act as academic managers, event and performance managers, organizational administrators, and educational leaders.

The practical consequences of this conflict may include competing uses of instructional time, pressure to prioritize measurable outcomes, professional frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a perceived distance between formal educational ideals and everyday organizational practice. At the same time, principals are not necessarily passive recipients of these pressures. They may negotiate with parents, combine festival activities with curriculum content, reorganize schedules, protect informal educational activities, or selectively prioritize competing demands. Understanding both constraint and agency is therefore necessary for explaining the phenomenon.

Significance of the Study

The study has theoretical significance because it connects several perspectives that are often examined separately. Bourdieu's field and capital concepts illuminate the distribution of value and power within the educational field; role-conflict theory explains the experience of incompatible expectations; discourse theory helps explain how particular definitions of success become normalized; and theories of everyday resistance and tactics provide a language for understanding how actors maneuver within structural constraints (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002; Foucault, 1972; Scott, 1985; de Certeau, 1984).

The study also has practical significance for principals and teachers. A detailed account of the strategies used by principals may clarify how educational objectives can be protected without denying the realities of examination and accountability pressures. The study has policy significance because it

identifies possible consequences of evaluating schools primarily through highly visible outcomes. Finally, the study is socially relevant because the quality of schooling cannot be reduced to examination performance or the accumulation of awards when educational systems also claim responsibility for developing broader competencies and dispositions.

Research Questions

1. How do secondary-school principals experience and interpret the simultaneous demands of student festivals, the Konkour, and broader pedagogical objectives?

2. What strategies do principals use to manage, negotiate, integrate, or reduce conflicts among these competing demands?

3. How do these conflicts influence principals' professional identity, educational decision-making, emotional experience, and perceived capacity to pursue pedagogical objectives?

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's Field and Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's field theory conceptualizes social settings as relational spaces in which actors occupy positions and compete over resources whose value is defined within the field. In the school field, principals, teachers, students, parents, and educational authorities participate in processes through which educational success is defined and recognized. Cultural capital may include knowledge, competencies, and educational dispositions; social capital refers to networks and relationships; and symbolic capital includes prestige, recognition, and legitimacy (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002).

This framework is useful for the present study because the three domains examined here are associated with different forms of value. Examination rankings and visible festival awards can generate symbolic recognition for schools and principals. Broader pedagogical outcomes may generate cultural capital that is educationally important but less immediately visible. The principal's resource-allocation decisions can therefore be interpreted as decisions made within a field in which different forms of capital do not necessarily have equal practical value.

Role Conflict and Professional Identity

Role conflict occurs when individuals encounter expectations that are difficult to fulfill simultaneously. In the present context, principals report expectations from educational authorities to demonstrate measurable performance, from parents to support examination success, and from their own professional values to maintain educational quality and holistic development. These expectations can create tension not only between tasks but within the principal's professional identity. The principal may experience a gap between the role that is institutionally rewarded and the role that is professionally meaningful.

Discourse, Habitus, and Symbolic Violence

Foucault's discourse perspective draws attention to the ways in which institutions produce and normalize particular definitions of knowledge, success, and legitimacy (Foucault, 1972). In the participants' accounts, the Konkour is not merely an examination. It functions as a powerful reference

point for deciding what deserves time, what parents value, and what constitutes evidence of school success. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic violence deepen this interpretation. Repeated exposure to examination-oriented evaluation may normalize the prioritization of ranking and measurable performance, while alternative educational achievements may gradually appear less legitimate even without direct coercion.

Everyday Agency and Resistance

Structural pressure does not eliminate agency. Scott (1985) describes everyday forms of resistance that can operate through small, indirect, and less visible practices. de Certeau (1984) similarly distinguishes institutional strategies from the tactics through which individuals appropriate available structures for their own purposes. In this study, negotiation with parents, integration of festival projects with curriculum content, selective scheduling, and the creation of informal educational spaces can be interpreted as situated forms of agency. These practices do not necessarily transform the structure, but they can create limited spaces in which principals pursue educational priorities that might otherwise be marginalized.

Integrated Analytical Model

The theoretical perspectives are treated as complementary. Field theory explains the structural distribution of power and value; role-conflict theory explains the experience of incompatible expectations; discourse theory explains the normalization of particular definitions of success; and resistance theory explains how principals respond through situated practices. Figure 1 integrates these dimensions into an analytical model centered on the principal as an actor positioned between external accountability, stakeholder expectations, institutional resources,

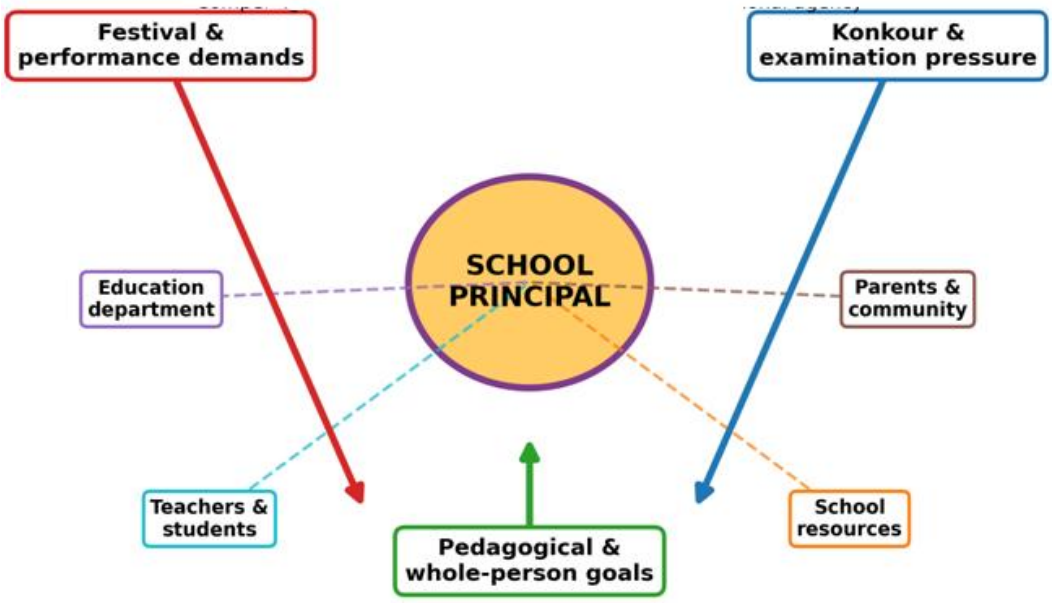

Figure 1. The Field of Contested Educational Leadership: competing demands, stakeholder pressures, and professional agency

Research Background and Literature Review

Literature Search Strategy

For the revised manuscript, targeted searches were conducted through Google Scholar, publisher and journal databases, and Persian academic search resources. Search terms were combined around school principals, educational leadership, high-stakes testing, Konkour, educational festivals, role conflict, accountability, instructional leadership, professional identity, discourse, power, and resistance. Priority was given to studies published from 2020 to 2026, while seminal theoretical works were retained where necessary for conceptual interpretation. Sources were included when they addressed school leadership, high-stakes assessment, competing educational demands, accountability, or principals' experiences of institutional pressure. This was a targeted narrative search rather than a systematic review; the strategy is reported to make the updating of the literature transparent without claiming systematic-review completeness.

Iranian Research on the Konkour and Curriculum

Yadgarzadeh et al. (2021) examined the effects of the national university entrance examination on the curriculum from the perspective of upper-secondary teachers. Their findings are relevant to the present study because they illustrate how examination pressure can shape instructional priorities and increase the salience of test-related content. The present research extends this concern from curriculum-level effects to the lived experience of principals who must allocate organizational resources across several competing domains.

Iranian Research on Schools, Diversity, and Result-Oriented Functions

Nourizadeh and Nazari (2014) investigated hidden functions of diversity and variety in schools and reported result-oriented patterns associated with meetings, festivals, and school activities. Their work provides a useful contextual basis for examining how activities intended to enrich schooling can acquire administrative and performative functions. The present study develops this issue by examining how principals themselves interpret the pressure to demonstrate visible results and how they respond to that pressure.

International Comparative Evidence

Recent international studies support the broader relevance of the problem. Erdağ and Yenipınar (2022) examined accountability relationships of Turkish school principals and highlighted the importance of institutional accountability in shaping principals' management environments. Aksoy (2023) explored the relationship between teaching and testing across educational transitions in Turkey, illustrating the tension between instructional purposes and examination-oriented demands. In China, Huang et al. (2024) examined principal instructional leadership and its relationship to instructional quality, while Zhang (2026) examined whole-person education reform from principals' perspectives under high-stakes testing. These studies do not establish that the institutional conditions are identical across countries; rather, they demonstrate that the relationship between accountability, examination pressure, school leadership, and broader educational aims is a recurring issue in different centralized or examination-oriented systems.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature indicates that examination pressure, extracurricular programs, accountability, and instructional leadership have each received attention. The distinctive gap addressed by the present study is the simultaneous examination of these forces within principals' everyday work. The study therefore focuses on the intersection rather than on any one domain in isolation: how principals allocate

time and resources when festival expectations, examination pressures, and pedagogical objectives compete; how they make sense of these contradictions; and how they preserve professional meaning while operating within institutional constraints.

Research Method

Design and Phenomenological Approach

The study employed a qualitative methodology with a descriptive phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was selected because the research question concerns the lived experience and meaning that principals attach to role conflict rather than the measurement of a predetermined set of variables. The phenomenon under investigation was the experience of managing within a field of competing demands involving festivals, the Konkour, and pedagogical objectives.

Research Context, Participants, and Sampling

The population consisted of secondary-school principals in public and non-public schools in Markazi Province during the 2023–2024 academic year. Seventeen principals participated: nine women and eight men. Purposeful maximum-variation sampling was used to include variation in gender, management experience, school type, and educational area. Participants had at least three years of secondary-school management experience and were willing to discuss their professional experiences in depth. Twenty-four principals were invited; 17 participated and seven declined or did not respond, producing a participation rate of 70.83%.

The sample was intentionally heterogeneous rather than statistically representative. The purpose of variation was to increase the range of experiences available for qualitative interpretation. The study therefore does not claim statistical generalization to all Iranian principals.

No.	Gender	Management experience	School type	Area
1	Female	15 years	Private	Urban
2	Male	10 years	Selective Public	Urban
3	Female	8 years	Public	Rural
4	Male	20 years	Shahed (Martyrs')	Urban
5	Female	12 years	Public	Urban
6	Male	7 years	Technical-Vocational	Urban
7	Female	18 years	Private	Urban
8	Male	11 years	Selective Public	Urban
9	Female	9 years	Public	Rural
10	Male	25 years	Shahed (Martyrs')	Urban
11	Female	6 years	Private	Urban
12	Male	12 years	Technical-Vocational	Urban
13	Female	10 years	Public	Rural
14	Male	15 years	Selective Public	Urban
15	Female	7 years	Private	Urban
16	Male	22 years	Shahed (Martyrs')	Urban
17	Female	11 years	Public	Rural

Table 1. Participant profile and maximum-variation sampling.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a setting selected by the participant, often in the principal's office after working hours. The interview guide addressed five broad areas: experiences of simultaneously

planning for festivals, preparing students for the Konkour, and pursuing educational objectives; decision-making when these demands conflict; responses to pressure from educational authorities and parents; strategies for creating balance; and the influence of these conflicts on professional identity.
The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to maintain common thematic coverage while following issues that emerged from participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological procedure. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to obtain a holistic understanding of the accounts. Second, significant statements related to the phenomenon were identified. Third, meanings were formulated from these statements while remaining close to participants' accounts. Fourth, formulated meanings were organized into thematic clusters. Fifth, these clusters were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Sixth, the essential structure of the experience was identified. Seventh, the synthesized descriptions were checked through participant feedback as a credibility procedure.
Coding was iterative. Initial codes were compared across interviews, related codes were merged or differentiated when warranted, and sub-themes were progressively organized into broader themes. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained. Because the underlying coding-frequency matrix is qualitative rather than a quantitative dataset, the present article does not assign numerical frequencies to themes.

Researcher Positionality and Bracketing

Because the researchers approached the phenomenon with prior knowledge of school leadership, examination pressure, festivals, and educational policy, reflexive attention was given to these assumptions during data collection and interpretation. Interpretations were repeatedly checked against the original narratives. The study does not claim complete elimination of researcher influence; instead, reflexivity was used to distinguish participants' meanings from researchers' preconceptions as far as possible.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the interview material, iterative coding, peer review by two researchers familiar with qualitative methods, and member checking. The analysis was also documented through an audit trail linking significant statements, formulated meanings, sub-themes, and final themes. Maximum-variation sampling and detailed description of the research context support transferability by allowing readers to judge the relevance of the findings to other settings.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and participant identities were protected through pseudonyms in the presentation of quotations. The research process was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles. No identifying information about individual principals is reported.

Findings

Analysis of the 17 interviews produced five interconnected themes. The themes describe a movement from structural and role pressures, through practical strategies of management, to emotional consequences and continuing professional hope. The themes should be understood as analytically distinct but empirically interconnected rather than as independent variables.

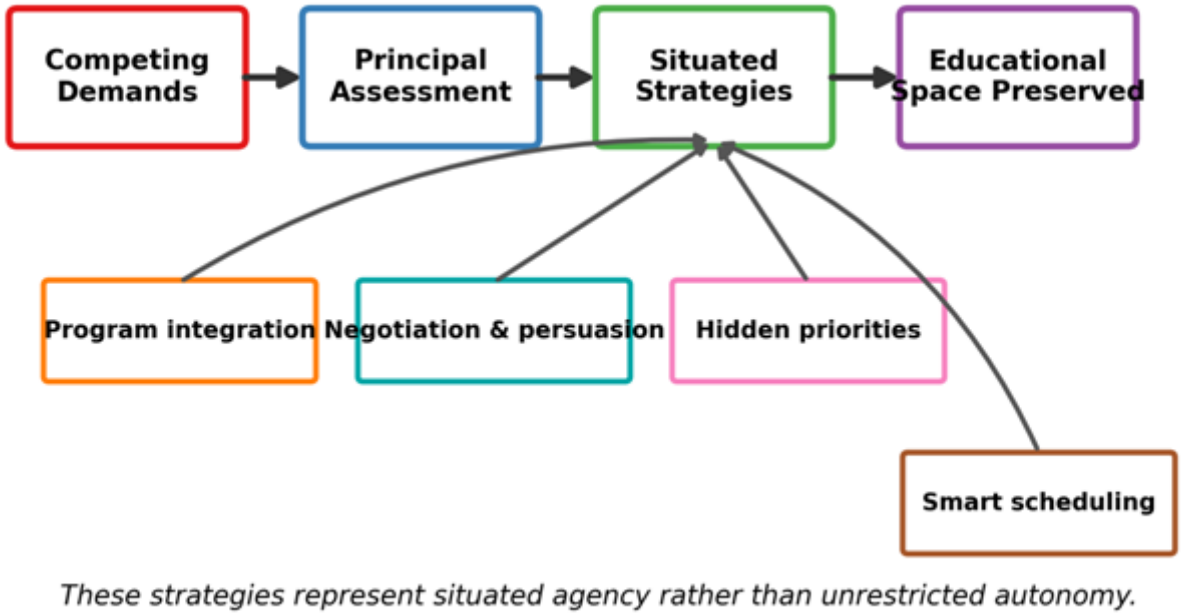

Figure 2. Principals' Strategy Pathway for Managing Role Conflict. The diagram represents qualitative patterns rather than numerical proportions.

Theme 1: Role Duality and Professional Fragmentation

A shared feature of participants' accounts was a persistent sense of divided professional identity. Principals described themselves as having to perform several roles at the same time: examination manager, event and performance manager, administrator, and educational leader. The tension was experienced not simply as a larger workload but as a conflict between different conceptions of what the principal should accomplish.

Principal A (15 years' experience) explained: "Every morning when I enter the school, I feel like I'm wearing two different hats. One is the 'Konkour Principal' hat; I constantly have to consult with advisors, monitor test results, and promise parents their child will get into a specific major. The other hat is the 'Educational Principal' who must report on holding dozens of events... In the middle, my teacher and mentor hat—the one I was motivated for—is lost. I'm no longer a 'teacher'; I'm a 'diplomat under pressure.'"

Principal B (10 years' experience) similarly described the contradiction as follows: "It's like pressing the gas pedal and pulling the handbrake at the same time! On one hand, the district office asks why we only won two awards in the Khwarizmi Youth Festival. On the other, parents ask why we reduced math hours for robotics class. I know robotics is more beneficial for the kids, but the brutal reality is the language of numbers; the language of Konkour ranks and award counts."

These accounts show that the conflict has a normative dimension. Participants are required to respond to indicators that may be institutionally important even when they do not regard those indicators as sufficient representations of educational quality. In Bourdieusian terms, different forms of capital are assigned unequal practical value. In role-conflict terms, incompatible expectations are activated simultaneously. The resulting professional fragmentation is therefore both structural and experiential.

Theme 2: Examination-Oriented Pressures

Participants consistently described the Konkour as a powerful organizing force in school decision-making. The issue was not merely the examination itself but the network of expectations surrounding

it: parental demands, competition among schools, perceptions of prestigious fields of study, and the belief that measurable examination outcomes provide the clearest evidence of school success.

Principal C (8 years' experience) stated: "The Konkour is a 'zero-sum game.' You either win or lose everything. This mindset has been instilled in everyone. Even to allocate an hour for a life skills workshop, I have to bargain with parents and promise to make up the time. The Konkour has turned the school environment into a barracks—a barracks for test-taking."

Principal D (20 years' experience) described the ethical tension more directly: "We are trapped in a 'reverse moral economy.' We don't do what is educationally right (focusing on creativity and physical education) because it has no value in the Konkour market. And we do what we know is wrong (eliminating non-test subjects, turning kids into test-solving machines) because the system and families demand it. This is the greatest harm; the harm of lying to our own professional conscience."

These narratives indicate that examination pressure operates as a field-level organizing principle. Principals may recognize the importance of broader educational development while still allocating time and attention toward examination preparation because the consequences of examination performance are more visible to families and institutions. Figure 3 represents this pattern as a qualitative pressure map rather than a quantitative ranking.

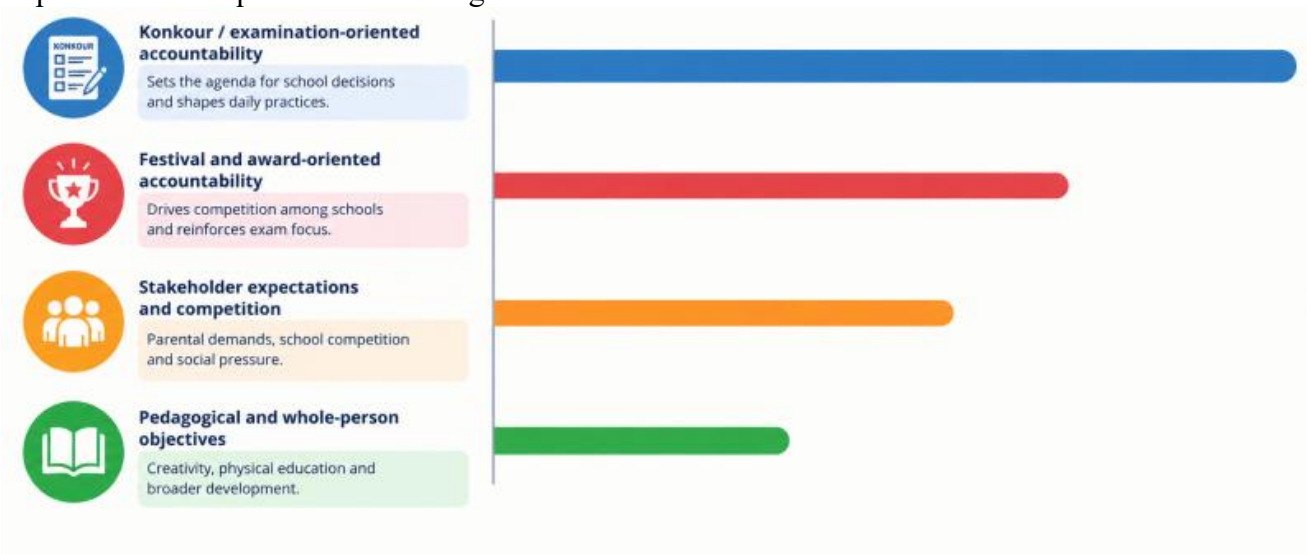

Figure 3. Qualitative Map of Pressures Described by Principals. Longer bars represent greater prominence in the reported narratives, not statistical effect sizes.

Theme 3: Performative and Symbolic Functions of Festivals

Participants did not reject festivals as such. Rather, they described a shift that occurs when festival outcomes become evidence used to display school effectiveness. Under these conditions, the organizational work required to produce visible success—photographs, reports, statistics, ceremonies, project preparation, and award counts—can compete with the learning processes that festivals were intended to support.

Principal E (12 years' experience) stated: "Festivals have become our 'showcase of success.' I constantly have to take photos of ceremonies, write reports, and provide statistics. Sometimes I feel like a 'theater director' who must create a scene for district representatives to see and approve. Content has been sacrificed for form. Our students are stressed about winning awards, not about the joy of learning."

Principal F (7 years' experience) highlighted the issue in technical-vocational education: "In technical-vocational schools where practical work and skills are important, this conflict is more terrible. I have to prepare students for the technical Konkour, create projects for skills festivals, and at the same time

teach them real skills for employment. Festivals are often artificial; a superficial project for the judges, while our workshop lacks basic equipment."

The analytical significance of these accounts lies in the mismatch between visible symbolic outcomes and underlying educational conditions. A successful project may generate recognition even when the broader learning environment lacks sufficient resources. Thus, festival performance can become a form of symbolic capital while the substantive conditions of learning remain comparatively invisible.

Theme 4: Situated Strategies—Integration, Negotiation, and Informal Priorities

Participants described several strategies for reducing conflict. These strategies did not eliminate structural pressures. Instead, they enabled principals to create temporary alignments among competing demands or protect limited spaces for educational activities.

Program integration was one such strategy. Principal G (18 years' experience) explained: "I try to put festivals in service of educational goals. For example, in the Khwarizmi Youth Festival Youth Festival, we choose a project related to the students' chemistry or physics lessons. Or, I ask high-achieving Konkour students to help others in review sessions, which strengthen collaborative learning and serves as review for them. It's a small victory."

Negotiation and persuasion formed a second strategy. Principal H (11 years' experience) stated: "I hold multiple meetings with parents and explain to them that a student with a healthy spirit and social skills will be more successful in the long run than a test-taking machine. Sometimes it works, sometimes not. But we must voice our perspective."

A third strategy involved protecting informal educational priorities. Principal I (9 years' experience) reported: "We have an 'official program' that we report to the district and an 'unofficial program.' In the unofficial program, we allocate hours to free discussion classes, life skills, and group projects that are not recorded in any report card. This is our way of appeasing our conscience."

The distinction between official and unofficial programming is analytically important. It allows principals to preserve practices they regard as educationally meaningful, but the need to keep some activities outside formal reporting also reveals a structural misalignment between accountability mechanisms and professional values. The practice can therefore be read simultaneously as adaptation and as evidence of institutional tension. In terms of everyday agency, it represents a limited tactic for creating space within a dominant structure.

Strategy	Purpose	Illustrative practice
Program integration	Align competing demands within one activity	Design a festival project that is directly linked to curricular content or use examination review to support peer learning.
Negotiation and persuasion	Reduce conflict through stakeholder dialogue	Discuss long-term educational development and life skills with parents.
Creating informal priorities	Protect educational activities that are weakly represented in formal evaluation	Use informal or non-reportable periods for discussion, life skills, or group projects.
Smart scheduling	Distribute attention across competing deadlines	Adjust the intensity of examination review, festival preparation, and broader activities across the academic cycle.

Table 2. Strategies described by principals for managing competing demands.

Theme 5: Burnout and Hope

The fifth theme concerns the emotional consequences of persistent role conflict. Participants described exhaustion, frustration, and thoughts of leaving the position, but they also described meaningful moments that sustained their commitment to education. Burnout and hope therefore appeared together rather than as mutually exclusive outcomes.

Principal J (25 years' experience) stated: "Some days I'm so tired I think about resigning. I feel like a boatman who is rowing while simultaneously plugging a hole in the boat with his hand to keep from sinking. This emotional exhaustion is the greatest damage to principals."

Principal K (6 years' experience), however, emphasized the continuing sources of professional meaning: "But what keeps me going? Those rare moments. When I see a student's creative spark ignite in that seemingly performative festival project. Or when a student visits me years later and says, 'Your talks in those unofficial sessions changed my life path.' These small hopes are the fuel to continue. We principals are resistant candles burning in the storm, hoping to provide a little light for the children."

These accounts suggest that professional commitment is maintained partly through small and often unmeasured experiences of educational impact. Such experiences may not alter the institutional evaluation system, but they help principals sustain a sense of professional purpose.

Cross-Case Patterns

The sample was deliberately heterogeneous across gender, management experience, school type, and educational area. The qualitative material does not support statistical subgroup comparisons, and the present study does not claim that one demographic group experiences the phenomenon more strongly than another. Across the reported accounts, however, principals with both shorter and longer management experience described the core tensions among examination pressure, festival expectations, and pedagogical objectives. The technical-vocational account additionally emphasized the distinctive challenge of reconciling examination preparation, festival projects, and authentic occupational skill development.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the five themes describe a field in which highly visible forms of achievement can acquire greater organizational value than slower and less measurable forms of educational development. Principals experience this imbalance as role duality, professional and moral tension, and emotional exhaustion. Yet they also use situated strategies to preserve educational priorities. The overall pattern is therefore neither complete structural domination nor unrestricted individual autonomy; it is a continuous process of constrained decision-making and negotiated agency.

Discussion

The findings provide an integrated account of how school principals experience and manage competing educational demands. The results are consistent with the theoretical proposition that educational leadership is shaped by the interaction of structure, role expectations, discourse, and agency. They also extend prior research by bringing the three domains—festivals, examination pressure, and pedagogical objectives—into a single analytical frame.

The Educational Field and the Unequal Visibility of Capital

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the central issue is the unequal practical valuation of different forms of capital. Examination rankings and festival awards are visible, comparable, and easily communicated. They can therefore operate as symbolic capital for schools, principals, and students. By contrast, critical thinking, social responsibility, creativity, and deep learning may be educationally consequential but are less easily condensed into a single indicator. Participants' accounts suggest that this asymmetry influences resource allocation.

The significance of the finding is not that symbolic outcomes are inherently illegitimate. Rather, the problem arises when a narrow set of visible outcomes becomes so dominant that other dimensions of educational value become difficult to protect. The principal is then required to manage not only educational activities but the symbolic representation of school success.

Role Conflict as an Organizational and Professional Experience

The accounts of wearing different 'hats,' pressing the accelerator while applying the handbrake, and being a 'diplomat under pressure' illustrate role conflict at the level of professional identity. The principal is simultaneously expected to satisfy external accountability, respond to parental expectations, maintain school reputation, and uphold educational principles. These expectations may be individually reasonable but collectively difficult to fulfill at the same time.

The result is not simply stress caused by workload. Participants describe moral tension because some organizationally rewarded practices are experienced as insufficiently aligned with professional educational values. This helps explain why the conflict is associated with emotional exhaustion and why the creation of informal educational spaces becomes meaningful.

The Konkour as a Dominant Discourse

The participants' descriptions of the Konkour as a 'zero-sum game' and a 'test-taking barracks' are consistent with a discourse perspective in which examination performance becomes a central criterion for defining success. The discourse operates through multiple actors rather than through a single directive source. Parents, school staff, educational authorities, and the broader competitive environment can all reproduce its importance.

The concept of habitus helps explain why such a system may persist even when principals recognize its limitations. Repeated evaluation through rankings and measurable outcomes can shape expectations about what is normal, responsible, or achievable. Symbolic violence is relevant insofar as dominant definitions of success can become taken for granted, making alternative definitions appear less legitimate or less practical.

Festivals and the Performative Dimension of Accountability

The festival findings show that extracurricular programs can acquire a performative dimension when their organizational value is linked to visible results. Participants' emphasis on reports, photographs, statistics, and award counts suggests that the activity is partly judged through its capacity to demonstrate institutional effectiveness. This finding is compatible with Nourizadeh and Nazari's (2014) discussion of result-oriented functions in schools, while the present study adds a leadership-level explanation of how principals experience and manage these demands.

Situated Agency and Everyday Resistance

The strategies described by participants complicate a purely structural interpretation. Principals are not presented as fully autonomous actors, but neither are they passive. Program integration, negotiation, selective scheduling, and informal educational activities create limited spaces for professional judgment. These practices are consistent with Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance and de Certeau's (1984) account of tactical action.

Importantly, the study does not interpret every informal practice as resistance in a strong political sense. In many cases, principals are simply attempting to preserve educational continuity within institutional constraints. The concept of situated agency is therefore more precise: principals use the resources, relationships, timing, and discretion available to them to pursue educational priorities without necessarily altering the larger structure.

Burnout and Professional Hope

The coexistence of exhaustion and hope is one of the more important findings. Persistent role conflict may deplete emotional and professional resources, yet participants also identify moments of student growth and meaningful interaction as reasons to continue. These experiences suggest that professional

identity remains connected to an educational mission that cannot be reduced to measurable performance indicators.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings align with Yadgarzadeh et al. (2021) in highlighting the influence of the national examination on curricular and instructional priorities. They are also consistent with Nourizadeh and Nazari (2014) regarding result-oriented functions associated with school activities. Internationally, the study resonates with Erdağ and Yenipınar (2022) on accountability pressures, Aksoy (2023) on teaching–testing tensions, Huang et al. (2024) on instructional leadership under examination-oriented conditions, and Zhang (2026) on the pursuit of whole-person education under high-stakes testing.
The distinctive contribution of the present study is the simultaneous and dynamic analysis of these forces at the level of principals' lived experience. The conflict is not represented as a single pressure but as a triadic allocation problem in which the principal must decide how to distribute time, attention, staff capacity, and organizational legitimacy across competing demands. The study also contributes by identifying situated agency as an important part of the phenomenon.

Analytical dimension	Empirical pattern	Interpretive meaning
Field and capital	Awards and examination outcomes are highly visible	Symbolic capital can receive greater practical value than less visible educational capital
Role conflict	Principals describe incompatible 'hats' and expectations	Professional identity is shaped by simultaneous and competing roles
Discourse and habitus	Konkour performance becomes a reference point for success	Examination-oriented definitions can become normalized in everyday decisions
Agency	Integration, negotiation, informal priorities, scheduling	Principals exercise situated agency within structural constraints
Emotional experience	Exhaustion coexists with professional hope	Role conflict has costs, but educational meaning remains a source of commitment

Table 3. Integrated interpretation of the five themes.

Policy and Practical Implications

Redesigning School Evaluation

The findings suggest that school evaluation should not rely excessively on a narrow set of highly visible outcomes. A multidimensional framework could combine examination-related indicators with evidence of instructional quality, student engagement, project-based learning, professional collaboration, inclusion, and other educational processes. The objective is not to remove accountability but to broaden the definition of accountable educational performance.

Supporting Principals in Conflict Management

Professional development should address negotiation, stakeholder communication, resource allocation, conflict management, and instructional leadership. Peer networks can provide principals with opportunities to exchange strategies for integrating educational objectives with institutional requirements. Professional support should also recognize the emotional burden associated with sustained role conflict.

Protecting Pedagogical Time

Schools need organizational mechanisms that protect time for learning activities that do not produce immediate measurable outcomes. Where festival projects are used, their design can be explicitly linked

to curricular learning, creativity, problem solving, and collaboration. Similarly, examination preparation can be scheduled in ways that reduce unnecessary displacement of broader educational activities.

Strengthening the Alignment between Policy and Practice

If policy documents emphasize holistic development while evaluation systems primarily reward examination outcomes and visible awards, principals may experience a persistent implementation contradiction. Greater alignment between stated educational aims and actual accountability criteria would reduce the need for principals to depend on informal or hidden practices to protect pedagogical priorities.

Prioritized Implementation Framework

Priority	Timeframe	Action	Required resources	Success indicator
Immediate	Within 1 year	Revise school-evaluation indicators to include educational processes and qualitative indicators	Policy coordination and indicator-development team	Reduced exclusive reliance on awards and examination outcomes in school evaluation
Short-term	1–3 years	Provide professional development and peer-support structures for principals	Training resources, facilitators, principal networks	Documented participation and improvement in conflict-management capacity
Long-term	3–5 years	Reform the school-performance and accountability framework toward multidimensional evaluation	System-level policy reform and monitoring	Routine use of multidimensional school-performance indicators

Table 4. Prioritized implementation framework derived from the findings.

Limitations and Transferability

First, the study was geographically limited to Markazi Province; therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all Iranian school principals. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported experiences, which may be affected by selective recall or social desirability. Third, the sensitive nature of discussing institutional pressures and professional compromises may have encouraged some participants to underreport experiences they considered professionally risky or controversial. Fourth, the study did not include systematic observation or documentary analysis to independently verify how reported practices were enacted. Fifth, the sample size and qualitative design do not support statistical comparison of subgroups by gender, school type, or management experience. Transferability should therefore be understood as analytic rather than statistical. The detailed description of the participants, institutional context, competing forces, and strategies allows readers to assess whether the findings may be relevant to other Iranian provinces or to educational systems characterized by centralized governance, high-stakes examinations, strong accountability mechanisms, and competing demands for measurable school performance.

Conclusion

This study examined how secondary-school principals experience the simultaneous demands of student festivals, the national university entrance examination, and broader pedagogical objectives. The findings indicate that the central challenge is not any single demand but the interaction among them. Examination performance and visible festival achievements can acquire substantial symbolic value because they are easily communicated and evaluated, while broader educational outcomes often require more time and are less readily captured by conventional indicators.

The five themes show the consequences of this configuration: role duality and professional fragmentation, examination-oriented pressure, performative and symbolic functions of festivals, situated strategies for managing competing demands, and the coexistence of burnout and hope. Principals respond through program integration, negotiation, selective prioritization, scheduling, and informal educational activities. These strategies demonstrate agency, but they remain bounded by the structure within which principals operate.

The study therefore suggests that sustainable improvement requires more than asking principals to cope better with contradictory demands. Evaluation systems, accountability mechanisms, and organizational arrangements must be aligned with the broader purposes of education. When institutional recognition encompasses both measurable performance and substantive educational processes, principals may have greater capacity to pursue their professional mission without relying primarily on informal workarounds.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no actual or potential conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles. Participation was voluntary, interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities.

Data Availability

The study is based on qualitative interview data. Because the transcripts contain potentially identifiable professional experiences, the underlying interview material is not reproduced in full in this article.

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