



## **A Thematic Analysis of School Principals' at Different Educational Levels Lived Experience of the Impact of Student Behavior on Their Personality Orientation: A Qualitative Study**

**Iraj Nikpay<sup>1</sup>, Saeed Farahbakhsh<sup>2</sup>, Ali Moramazi<sup>\*3</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aimed to conduct a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of school principals at various educational levels regarding the impact of student behavior on their personality orientation. This research employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological strategy. A purposeful and criterion-based sampling method was used to select individuals with the most relevant information and experiences related to the research topic, and the criterion for continuing the research was based on theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and a total of 14 school principals from different educational levels in Susangerd were interviewed. The data were analyzed using a three-stage thematic content analysis method (open, axial, selective coding). The findings indicate that principals' interactions with students at different educational levels have varying impacts on their personal and professional orientation. Seven final categories (main categories) were extracted from the data analysis, which include: 1) Impact of Students' Age Maturity, 2) The Difference in Relationships in Academic Levels, 3) The Impact on Personality Dimensions, 4) Principals' Personal and Professional Development, 5) Job Satisfaction of Managers, 6) The Role of Internal and External Factors, and 7) Creativity of Elementary Managers. The research results demonstrate that principals' lived experiences of interacting with students influence their personality orientation. These effects vary across different educational levels (elementary, junior high, senior high) due to the developmental characteristics of students and the specific challenges of each level. This study can contribute to designing empowerment programs for principals, taking into account level-specific needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Educational Management, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor of Educational Management, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran..

<sup>3</sup> PhD student in Educational Management, Department of Educational Sciences, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran.

\*Corresponding Author

Email: ali.moramazi71@gmail.com

## Introduction

Educational management, as one of the main pillars of the education system, plays a fundamental role in achieving educational and developmental goals. School principals are not only responsible for organizing and guiding educational processes but also, as learning leaders, influence organizational culture, teachers' attitudes, and even students' behavior (Leithwood et al., 2020). By creating a shared vision, guiding teachers, and managing human and physical resources of the school, they pave the way for students' academic success and emotional growth. Numerous studies have shown that principals' leadership styles, whether transformational or distributed, can directly impact teacher effectiveness, the quality of educational relationships, and the school's psychological climate (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

The school principal, as the representative of the Ministry of Education, is responsible for the proper implementation of educational, nurturing, and administrative activities of the school and plays a significant role in the school's success. Over the past decade, attention to the quality of school management has been at the forefront of educational system issues (Sanati & Adli, 2024). Numerous studies indicate that the role of school principals in the successful performance of the educational system has been confirmed. Sabzianpour and Eslam panah (2019) state in their research that due to social changes and efforts to improve schools, the role of principals has changed over time. Cruickshank's (2017) research shows that school management significantly impacts students' learning and academic achievement by improving teachers' working conditions, school atmosphere, and environment. School principals, as educational leaders, play a crucial role in creating positive and motivating learning environments (Bahadori et al., 2024). Therefore, studying the role and experience of school principals is fundamentally important for understanding the dynamics of education.

The school environment, as the social and cultural context for administrators' performance, can be both a source of support and growth, and a source of pressure and burnout. Characteristics such as financial resources, parental involvement, the school's organizational culture, and relationships among staff directly affect the quality of administrators' performance and even their personal characteristics (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Administrators who work in supportive environments with positive interactions

exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and emotional stability, while environmental pressures, conflicting expectations, and lack of resources may lead to anxiety, burnout, and changes in their professional outlook (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). From this perspective, administrators are not only active agents in shaping the school environment but are also influenced by environmental conditions and social relationships within the school.

Among the environmental factors influencing managers, internal school human relations hold a special place. The interaction of managers with teachers and students not only affects the quality of educational processes but can also transform the personal, emotional, and professional dimensions of managers (Smith et al., 2020). These relationships at each educational level have their own specific characteristics and dynamics, stemming from age differences, developmental needs, and students' educational expectations. In elementary school, manager-student relationships often have a supportive and nurturing nature; in junior high school, due to the physiological and psychological changes of adolescence, these relationships become more complex and require greater managerial skills and emotional support from teachers and managers. This stage creates high sensitivity to social acceptance and peer approval, and positive relationships with teachers and managers can play an important role in reducing anxiety and improving students' self-efficacy. In high school, their relationships are more based on mutual respect, trust, and professional collaboration, and teachers and managers act as behavioral role models and sources of support (Thompson & Miller, 2023; Chen et al., 2021). In such contexts, student behavior can be a reflection of school norms and values, and in turn, influence the attitudes, management style, and personal orientation of managers.

The quality of these relationships significantly impacts various aspects of teachers' personalities and professional performance. In international studies, research has shown that positive teacher-student relationships can increase job satisfaction (Veldman et al., 2013), and meta-analytical studies have also found a significant correlation between both interactions and teachers' job satisfaction (Wartenberg, 2023). Furthermore, teacher self-efficacy acts as a protective factor against burnout; in a study on English language teaching, teacher self-efficacy explained about 20% of the variance in burnout (Bing, 2022). On the other hand, the concept of teachers' professional identity has

been recognized as a fundamental factor in the formation of self-efficacy; for example, research has shown that how teachers perceive their professional role can facilitate or limit the development of self-efficacy (Marschall, 2022). Regarding burnout, the literature on professional identity and related pressures indicates that a crisis in professional identity is associated with increased burnout (Byrne & Miller, 1999). Finally, studies have shown that positive teacher-student relationships not only help reduce burnout symptoms but may also strengthen teachers' professional motivation (Li, 2022). Research also exists in Iranian studies; for instance, a study in Lordegan County showed that self-efficacy is one of the effective factors influencing burnout, and psychological factors, including successful experiences, affect beliefs in competence (Rostami Tanha et al., 2023). Also, in another study among Iranian English language teachers, it was found that teacher self-efficacy and teacher resilience were able to explain a significant portion of the variance in job burnout, respectively (Fathi & Saeidian, 2020). Based on this evidence, it can be said that positive teacher-student interaction, by strengthening feelings of competence and emotional support, can lead to reduced burnout, increased satisfaction, and enhanced professional motivation among teachers. However, most conducted research has focused on teachers and has paid less attention to the impact of student behavior on the personality orientation of administrators.

This research gap, meanwhile, highlights the need for qualitative studies. This is because qualitative research can provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of school principals and show how principals reconstruct their personal and attitudinal dimensions by encountering various student behaviors. On the other hand, examining this issue at different educational levels (primary, junior high, and high school) can reveal how differences in students' age, emotions, and behavior affect interactions and, ultimately, the personal orientation of principals.

Therefore, the present study employs a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach to analyze school principals' lived experiences regarding the impact of student behavior on their personality orientation. The main innovation of this research lies in its focus on school principals instead of teachers, as principals are situated at a broader level of educational interactions, and their role in shaping human and cultural relations within the school is decisive. This

research endeavors to bridge the existing gap in theoretical literature and provide a deeper understanding of the reciprocal influence of student behavior and school principals' personalities. From this perspective, the main research question posed is: What key categories emerge from an analysis of school principals' lived experiences regarding the impact of student behavior on their personality orientation?

### **Background Research**

Given the importance of the teacher and administrator role in shaping students' personalities, examining the quality of reciprocal Their relationships across different educational levels is particularly important. This complex and multifaceted relationship is influenced by a variety of factors, including personality traits, teaching style, school culture, and broader societal influences. In this section, while reviewing previous studies, we explore the various dimensions of this relationship and its impact on teachers' and administrators personalities. Numerous studies have shown that the teacher-student relationship can significantly affect students' academic performance, motivation, behavior, and even mental health (Hattie, 2009). This relationship also influences teachers' and administrators personality development and professional growth. The current study aims to address this research gap by examining and analyzing the lived experiences of school principals regarding the impact of elementary, middle, and high school students' behavior on teachers' personality orientation. Various studies have identified different dimensions of the teacher-student relationship, including the following: A. Emotional Support: Creating a sense of security and emotional support in students is one of the most important aspects of the teacher-student relationship (Pianta, 2012). B. Effective Communication: Clear and effective communication between teacher and student helps to better understand students' needs and concerns and to deliver more effective instruction (Roehrig & Gold, 2016). C. Mutual Respect: Mutual respect between teacher and student fosters a positive, constructive learning environment (Marzano, 2003). D. High Expectations: Maintaining realistic yet high expectations for students can boost their motivation and performance (Brophy, 2014).

Bilateral relationships teachers' and administrators with students at various education levels play a vital role in both academic success and personal growth for

all parties involved. Recent research indicates that positive relationships not only positively affect academic performance but can also contribute to the professional and personal growth of teachers (Wilson et al., 2023). Other studies show that positive and supportive teacher-student relationships are associated with increased academic motivation, class participation, and student achievement (Li et al., 2020). Comparing these relationships across different educational levels can help deepen our understanding of classroom dynamics and improve educational quality. In short, a deeper understanding of these relationships can inform the development of effective strategies to enhance educational quality and promote teachers' and administrators professional growth.

The impact of these relationships on teachers' personality dimensions is also significant. Kim et al. (2023) found that teachers who have positive relationships with their students exhibit higher levels of empathy. Lee et al. (2021) showed that interacting with students of different ages strengthens teachers' communication skills. Smith & Johnson (2022) concluded that teachers learn to adapt to the diverse needs of students at different levels, which increases their personality flexibility. Additionally, Wilson et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between the quality of teacher-student relationships and teachers' emotional intelligence. Chen et al. (2023) reported that more experienced teachers show greater patience in the face of classroom challenges. These findings suggest that ongoing interaction with students can contribute to teachers' personal growth.

Several internal qualitative studies have examined the quality of the teacher-student relationship. For example, the study "Quality of Teacher-Student Relationship in the School Context: An Ethnographic Study" in Shiraz primary schools, using semi-participatory observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, found that teacher and student characteristics, their mental representations of each other, and external factors (such as school culture and family priorities) influence the quality of this relationship, and improving it yields transformative positive outcomes for both teacher and student (Lari et al., 2022). Another study in Tehran examined how teacher-student relationship quality and educational environment quality affect the academic enthusiasm of primary school students; results showed that a positive teacher-student relationship and a favorable educational environment are associated with higher academic enthusiasm (Mohammadi-Nejad &

Nikbakht, 2023). Also, in Hamedan, a study titled "Attachment to Teacher and Academic Engagement in Female and Male Students" demonstrated that the avoidant attachment style toward the teacher is significantly associated with lower academic engagement, and that secure attachment to the teacher is one of the predictors of high academic engagement among female students (Applied Psychological Research Quarterly, 2015).

Although numerous studies have explored various dimensions of teacher-student relationships and demonstrated their impact on academic performance, motivation, behavior, and even teachers' professional development, few studies have addressed the fundamental question of how student behavior can influence the personality orientation of school principals. This is despite the fact that principals, unlike teachers who primarily interact at the classroom level, face diverse student behaviors at a broader and more continuous level, and their lived experience can have profound consequences for their attitudes and professional identity. Therefore, the existence of such a research and methodological gap, particularly in the domestic research literature, highlights the necessity of conducting a qualitative study to shed light on the less explored dimensions of this topic by focusing on the lived experiences of school principals, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the reciprocal influence of student behavior and the personality of school principals.

### **Research Method**

**Research approach and strategy:** This study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is a type of research in which the researcher studies objects in their natural environment and tries to interpret and explain phenomena based on the meaning people ascribe to them (Mohammadpour, 2019). Considering the complex and multidimensional nature of human interactions, particularly the relationships between principals and students and their influence on principals' personality orientations, the qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study. The strategy adopted was interpretive phenomenology, which not only describes experiences but also emphasizes their interpretation and meaning-making. This approach enabled the researcher to uncover the lived experiences of school principals and interpret the underlying meanings of these experiences. Specifically, the study aimed to conduct a thematic analysis of principals' lived experiences

regarding the influence of students' behavior at different educational levels (elementary, middle, and high school) on their personality orientations.

**Potential participants and sampling method:**

The studied community consisted of 14 elementary, middle, and high school principals from Susangerd city. Purposive and criterion-based sampling was used to select individuals with the most relevant information and experience regarding the research topic. Selection criteria included: a minimum of 10 years of work experience, at least a master's degree or higher, recognition as an active and effective principal in the educational environment, and willingness to participate in interviews. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation interviews continued until no new themes emerged.

**Data collection method:** The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview, which maintained the coherence of the questions while allowing for flexibility and follow-up questions. The average duration of each interview was between 32 and 50 minutes, although in practice, some were shorter or longer depending on the circumstances. When necessary, supplementary questions and follow-ups were conducted to ensure the richness of the data. The interview questions focused on topics such as the quality of managers' relationships with students, managers' experiences with student behavior, perceived challenges, and how these experiences influenced students' personality dimensions.

**Method of data analysis:** In this study, thematic content analysis (thematic analysis) based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) model was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a systematic method for identifying, organizing, and analyzing patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. This method allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences through in-depth exploration of the data. In this study, thematic

analysis helped identify the patterns of meaning present in the lived experience of Principals and provided a deeper understanding of how interaction and communication with students influence their professional personality orientation. This approach is particularly suitable for qualitative research aimed at discovering and describing human experiences (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Validation of the data:** To ensure the credibility and accuracy of the present research findings, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria-credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability-were employed. To guarantee credibility, member checking strategies were utilized; findings were reviewed by a number of participants, who confirmed that these findings largely reflected their perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, the researcher's prolonged engagement and interaction with the study environment were considered. Transferability was achieved by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and data collection process. To enhance objectivity and dependability, the data coding process was not performed by a single individual, but by a group of three researchers through continuous discussion and exchange of ideas until agreement on uniform codes was reached. Additionally, all interviews were recorded and documented. Finally, confirmability was strengthened by peer review from experienced professors and by the researcher's self-reflection practice. The application of this strategic framework enhanced the trustworthiness and reliability of the qualitative analyses in this study. This research was conducted in full compliance with ethical principles. Participants were informed of the research objectives before the interviews began, and their informed consent was obtained. They were assured that confidentiality and privacy would be maintained at all stages of the research, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants

N	Gender	Work Experience	Management Level	Education Level	Interview Duration	Interview Type
1	F	23	High S.	Master's degree	43	Semi-S.
2	M	29	High S.	Master's degree	45	Semi-S.
3	F	33	High S.	B.Sc.	37	Semi-S.
4	F	21	High S.	Master's degree	44	Semi-S.
5	F	18	High S.	Master's degree	36	Semi-S.
6	M	25	High S.	PhD student	34	Semi-S.
7	F	26	High S.	B.Sc.	38	Semi-S.
8	M	29	High S.	PhD student	50	Semi-S.
9	M	13	Primary S.	Master's degree	34	Semi-S.
10	M	24	Primary S.	Master's degree	40	Semi-S.
11	M	13	Primary S.	Master's degree	38	Semi-S.
12	F	21	Primary S.	Master's degree	32	Semi-S.
13	F	17	Primary S.	Master's degree	33	Semi-S.
14	M	13	Primary S.	Master's degree	48	Semi-S.

### Findings

In the research findings section, thematic analysis and a three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective) were used to analyze data from semi-structured interviews. All three research questions were coded and examined based on the participants' interview transcripts and this analytical process. The analysis process began with repeated reading of the interviews. In the first stage, open coding led to the extraction of 260 initial codes (including repetitive and redundant codes). Subsequently, after refining and merging similar codes, this number was reduced to 110 codes, which formed the basis for the subsequent stages of analysis. In the axial coding stage, these codes were categorized into 30 final codes through continuous comparison and identification of conceptual relationships. Finally, through the selective coding process, focusing on integration and

determining main themes, 7 main categories (selective codes) were extracted. This analytical process was conducted with high theoretical sensitivity and continuous review to ensure the internal coherence of the themes and their inter-thematic distinction.

**RQ 1:** What age and behavioral characteristics of students influence the nature of their relationships with school administrators and their personality orientation?

To answer this research question, 23 initial codes (out of 110 codes after removing duplicates) were identified as relevant. After the integration process, these codes were reduced to 5 core codes and finally organized into 2 selective codes (impact of students' age maturity, the difference in relationships in academic levels). The details of these categories are presented in Table No. 2 related to the first question.

**Table 2.** Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes of Interview Data to Answer the First Research Question

Initial code	Axial codes	Optional code
The impact of students' age characteristics on Principals' relationships with students / The impact of age characteristics on Principals' relationships with students and Principals' susceptibility to students / The lack of a large age gap between the Principal and students and the impact of this characteristic on their relationships / The necessity of aligning the Principal's activities with the different ages of students in different grades / The different relationship between elementary and secondary school principals due to the age conditions of students / The difference in the personality and behavior of elementary and secondary school principals due to the different age characteristics of students / The greater susceptibility of high school principals compared to principals of other grades to their relationships with students / Second-level secondary school principals are more influenced by their relationships with students.	The impact of students' age characteristics on the relationship between principals and students, and the influence of students on principals / Principals at the second-secondary level are more influenced by their relationships with students compared to principals at other levels.	<b>Impact of Students' Age Maturity</b>
Differences in the relationships between principals and students at different levels / The possibility of general management rules; but with differences in details / Differences in the way principals interact with students in elementary, middle, and high school / Differences in the relationships between principals and students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels / Differences in principal behavior in theoretical schools and vocational schools due to interaction with different students in these two branches / The absence of a fixed framework for principals at each level / The differing relationships between principals and students at different levels / Differences in the relationship between principals and elementary school students and middle school students / Differences in the relationship between principals and students at different levels / More interaction between elementary school principals and students and less interaction between secondary school principals and students / More engagement of elementary school principals with students and considerably less in secondary school / More presence of elementary school principals in the schoolyard and considerably less in secondary school / Greater intimacy in elementary school compared to other levels.	The existence of differences in Principals' relationships with students in different grades / More communication between elementary school principals and students and less communication between secondary school principals and students / The existence of greater intimacy in elementary school compared to other grades.	<b>The Difference in Relationships in Academic Levels</b>

### **Core Categories (selective) of the First Research Question**

#### **Impact of Students' Age Maturity**

The first code extracted from the interviewees' statements in relation to the research question is the

core code: "The Impact of Students' Age of Maturity on Principals' Relationships and Influence." The growth and age of maturity of students is one of the key factors shaping the nature of relationships between Principals and students at different educational levels. In elementary school, due to the younger age and

greater emotional dependence of students, relationships are often based on affection and support. In contrast, in middle and high school, with increasing age of maturity and reasoning ability, relationships tend to become more logical and less emotionally driven. These differences demonstrate how students' age of maturity influences the behavioral and emotional patterns of Principals, which, according to Smith et al. (2021), can lead to changes in teachers' attitudes and communication styles when dealing with students.

Evidence from the interviews indicates that the impact of students' age maturity on Principals' relationships with them plays a fundamental role in shaping the type of interactions and management style. Students at each educational level have unique ages and developmental characteristics that affect their temperament, needs, and expectations. In elementary school, due to the youths' young age, Principals typically engage in more intimate, structured, and cautious communication, as children at this age are highly influenced by the behavior of Principals. In middle school, puberty and identity formation introduce more challenges for both students and Principals; this period requires greater sensitivity to behaviors and interactions. In high school, with increased student maturity, the nature of interactions often becomes different and less challenging. Overall, Principals, taking into account students' age and developmental differences, should tailor their communication approaches to suit the needs of each group to achieve not only effective management but also a positive impact on students' growth and behavior. For example, interviewees number (3) and (11) stated the following, respectively: "Depending on the educational level, considering the age that exists in each level, and each level has its own specific age. Overall, the communication should be different..." and "Certainly, age conditions are very influential. The manager's relationship with the elementary level is definitely different compared to the secondary level with their different age ranges. The type of communication is definitely different from each other. A student who is 6 to 12 years old is definitely different compared to a student who is 16 or 17 years old and studying in the second year of high school..."

#### **The Difference in Relationships in Academic Levels**

Regarding the second code extracted from the interviewees' statements, the findings indicate that

principals' relationships with students differ significantly across the three educational levels. At the elementary level, relationships are based on addressing students' emotional needs and guiding them toward fundamental learning. At the lower secondary level, students' psychological and social changes challenge the relationships, requiring principals to adopt more flexible approaches. In upper secondary school, relationships are more centered on specialized content and preparing students for their future careers or higher education. A study by Brown et al. (2022) has shown that teachers at these levels require different communication and teaching skills. Nonetheless, an analysis of the interviewees' viewpoints indicates that, at different educational levels, the principal-student relationship is affected by various factors. At the elementary level, due to the students' young age, the principal must communicate with more patience and adjust their behavior to fit their emotional and cognitive needs. During this period, students are more dependent on their families, so communicating with families requires attention to this dependency. At the lower secondary level, where students are in adolescence, significant physical and psychological changes occur, and the principal must adopt an approach different from the elementary level, recognizing these changes and the students' desire for independence. These students seek to gain identity and autonomy; therefore, interactions should be based on respect for these needs. In upper secondary school, students have reached a higher level of intellectual and social maturity, and relationships with them should resemble interactions with adults.

At this stage, principals' expectations of students are higher, and the relationship should be grounded in accountability and professional adult interactions. Consequently, the differences across educational levels lead to fundamental changes in the nature of principal-student relationships, with each level requiring its own specific approach. For example, interviewee 1 stated the following about the differences in relationships at different educational levels: "Certainly, these relationships differ because each student at each level has their own unique characteristics, and the principal must adjust their behavior accordingly. Elementary students have more energy and activity and are learning basic concepts and the alphabet, while in middle school, adolescents face emotional, psychological, and physical changes. In high school, the situation is also different..."



**RQ 2:** How do manager-student relationships affect managers' personality dimensions, personal and professional development, and job satisfaction?

To answer this question, 63 initial codes (out of 110) were identified. After refinement and integration, these codes were reduced to 17 core codes in the

second stage. Finally, these codes formed 3 main categories (selective codes) including the impact on personality dimensions, individual and professional development, and job satisfaction of managers. Details are shown in Table No. 3 related to the second question.

**Table 3.** Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes of Interview Data to Answer the Second Research Question

Initial code	Axial codes	Optional code
The impact of managers' personality dimensions through their relationships with students / The relationship between students and managers and the impact of these relationships on the manager's personality / The difference in activities at various educational levels and the impact of these differences on the manager's personality and behavior / The difference in personality and behavior of elementary and secondary school managers due to their interaction and communication with students / The high vocal tone of elementary school managers / The low vocal tone of secondary school managers / The impact on managers' vocal tone through their relationships with students / The low vocal tone of managers in junior high school / The very low vocal tone of managers in senior high school / The high vocal tone of managers in elementary school and its decrease in junior high school and even more so in senior high school / The difference in vocal tone at various educational levels / The higher tolerance threshold of managers in elementary school and the lower tolerance threshold of managers in secondary school / The impact on managers' patience, forbearance, and tolerance threshold through their relationships with students / The low tolerance threshold and patience of managers in junior high school and even lower in senior high school / Managers' need for patience and forbearance at all three levels / The greater patience, forbearance, and tolerance of managers in elementary school and its decrease in secondary school / Increased patience, forbearance, and tolerance of managers due to their interaction with students / The impact of students on managers' self-confidence and mental health through their relationships with managers / The necessity for managers to have self-confidence at all educational levels / The impact of social characteristics, including the breadth of the manager's empathy at work / The necessity of great empathy in elementary school compared to other levels / Increase in a manager's empathy, patience, and tolerance due to their interaction with students / The impact of a manager's empathy on the relationship between managers and students / The impact of students on managers' mental health through their relationship with managers /	The influence of Principals' personality dimensions through their relationships with students / The high pitch of voice of Principals in elementary school / The low pitch of voice of Principals in middle school and even lower in high school / Greater tolerance and patience of Principals in elementary school / Low tolerance and patience of Principals in middle school and even lower in high school / The impact of students on Principals' self-confidence through their relationship with Principals / The existence of great open-mindedness in elementary school compared to other grades (middle and high school) / Less impact and threat from elementary school students on the mental health of Principals / More impact and threat from middle and high school students on the mental health of Principals / The influence of Principals' dress and behavior due to their relationship with students / The necessity of having strong eloquence in high school compared to elementary school to persuade students.	<b>The Impact on Personality Dimensions</b>

<p>Greater impact and threat from middle school students and less impact and threat from elementary school students on managers' mental health / The impact of students from different levels on managers' mental health through their relationship with managers / Greater impact and threat from first and second secondary school students on managers' mental health / The impact on elementary school managers' attire and behavior due to their interaction with students / The impact on middle school managers' demeanor and type of attire through their relationships with students / The necessity of having strong rhetorical skills in middle school compared to elementary school to persuade students.</p>		
<p>The influence of students on the personal and professional development of principals through their relationship with principals / The greater influence of second-level secondary students on the personal and professional development of principals / The greater influence of secondary school students on the personal, professional, and career development of principals / Higher personal and career development of secondary school principals compared to elementary school principals / The greater influence of secondary school students on the personal development and academic level of principals / The greater influence of second-level secondary students on the personal and career development of principals / The influence of students' literacy and comprehension level on increasing principals' study habits / Increase in students' educational level along with an increase in principals' academic level / Variation in principals' academic level through their relationships with students / The necessity of increasing the awareness and knowledge of second-level principals compared to principals of other levels due to their relationships with students / The influence of the principal's academic level on the principals' relationships with students.</p>	<p>Lack of significant impact of elementary school students on the personal, career, and professional development of principals / Significant impact of middle school students on the personal, career, and professional development of principals, and a much greater impact in high school / The impact of the principal's academic level on their relationships with students.</p>	<p><b>Principals' Personal and Professional Development</b></p>
<p>The impact of students on managers' job satisfaction through their relationships with managers / Primary school managers feeling more job satisfaction than secondary school managers / The impact of students on managers' interest in teaching through their relationships with managers / The work process in secondary school being more difficult than in primary school / The more advanced needs of secondary school students compared to primary school students and the necessity for managers to address them / Managers benefiting from their relationship with students in solving personal problems and issues related to raising their own children / Managers aligning with the characteristics and challenges of students in secondary school.</p>	<p>The impact of students on principals' job satisfaction through their relationships with the principals / The greater difficulty of the work process in high school compared to elementary school / Principals benefiting from their interactions with students in solving personal problems and issues related to raising their own children.</p>	<p><b>Job Satisfaction of Managers</b></p>

## **Core Categories (selective) of the Second Research Question**

### **The Impact on Personality Dimensions**

The daily interactions between principals and students significantly shape principals' personality dimensions. In this study, dimensions such as tone of voice, tolerance threshold, patience, self-confidence, open-mindedness, and mental health play important roles in shaping these relationships. Elementary school principals, due to the need for patience and kindness when dealing with children, often develop greater empathy and flexibility. In contrast, principals of middle and high schools, who contend with the behavioral challenges of adolescents, strengthen skills such as stress management and critical thinking in their own personalities.

These findings are consistent with Johnson & Smith. (2020), who examined the impact of educational relationships on teachers' personality traits. Evidence from interviews suggests that principal–student relationships at different educational levels can significantly affect principals' personality dimensions and behavior. Examining these relationships shows that in elementary school, principals often display higher tolerance, greater endurance, and more patience due to interactions with younger students and the need for heightened empathy. At this level, the positive effects of principal–student relationships on principals' mental health and self-confidence are more evident. Because of the students' young age and specific behavioral characteristics, principals also tend to use a louder tone of voice.

In contrast, in middle and high school, where students face different challenges and age-related changes, principals encounter more complex issues that can reduce tolerance, lower self-confidence, and threaten their mental health. Moreover, at these levels, there is a clearer need for stronger communication skills and greater persuasive ability to manage interactions with students. Instead of relying on a louder voice, principals tend to favor more logical and consultative dialogue. Overall, principal–student relationships affect not only principals' management style but also directly influence their personality dimensions—such as self-confidence, patience, tolerance, and mental health. Therefore, it is essential to consider the differences across educational levels and the specific communication needs of each level

when designing educational and support programs for principals to reduce psychological pressures and improve performance. For example, interviewees (2), (4), and (5) stated the following, respectively: “A teacher or principal who works with elementary school students usually has a louder tone of voice, whereas this issue diminishes as the target population's age increases in higher grades. In terms of mental health, the most vulnerable period is high school, because we are dealing with young adults...” “And in elementary school, the principal should act like a child in the presence of the children. Their age—outwardly, though not actually—should align with the children's age range. Children really require patience and a great deal of forbearance. Forbearance is especially important in elementary school.” “And the principal and vice principals in elementary school may use a tone of voice that is higher and louder than in secondary school, because in elementary school the students are still in childhood. In childhood, children have more energy and movement, are more active, and joke around with each other. Therefore, the principal may need to raise their voice to maintain order and control behavior. This is different in middle and high school, where students are in adolescence and are developing pride, talents, and their personalities. As a result, principals can exercise greater restraint over their own temperament. Thus, the appropriate tone of voice varies at different educational levels.”

### **Principals' Personal and Professional Development**

The Second axial code related to the Second Research Question concerns the impact on the personal, occupational, and professional development of principals. The relationships between principals and students directly affect principals' professional, occupational, and personal growth. Principals in higher grades also strengthen their occupational and professional skills by managing more complex situations and delivering specialized content. Davis et al. (2021) emphasized that teacher–student relationships can significantly influence teachers' career development paths. The interview results likewise show that relationships between principals and students at different educational levels significantly impact principals' personal and professional development. Analysis of the interview data indicates that school principals, through ongoing interactions with students—especially in middle and high school—recognize the need to update their knowledge and skills and take steps to improve their

scientific and Principial capabilities. In elementary school, due to the relative simplicity of the educational content and the basic needs of the students, principals feel less pressure for individualized and professional development. However, at higher levels, the increasing complexity of students' needs, the ongoing changes in educational programs, and the necessity of meeting diverse expectations require administrators to engage in continuous learning, further study, and the acquisition of deeper knowledge in related fields. These demanding interactions push administrators not only to enhance their knowledge and skills but also to adopt innovative approaches to management and education. Consequently, Principal-student relationships at higher levels play a prominent role in the professional and personal development of Principals, acting as a catalyst for lifelong learning and strengthening Principial capabilities.

In this regard, interviewees No. 4 and No. 11 stated the following, respectively: "Yes, it definitely has an impact... I was previously in the first level of secondary school and was at the same level, but in the second level of secondary school, I tried to raise my studies to a higher level. For example, in the first level of secondary school, I was at the bachelor's level, and I also tried to take the exam again and study for a master's degree and raise my scientific level in proportion to the second level of secondary school..." and "In my opinion, elementary school students do not have much impact on a person's personal growth and development, but I think it becomes a little more difficult in secondary school... The Principal's knowledge and expertise must be much higher... because the needs of secondary school are more advanced than those of elementary school."

### **Job Satisfaction of Managers**

The third coded theme from interviewees highlights the influence of students on principals' job satisfaction. Positive and constructive relationships with students are among the most important factors affecting principals' job satisfaction. At the elementary level, successful experiences in communicating with students can lead to a greater sense of contentment and job satisfaction. In secondary grades, behavioral challenges can cause stress, but helping students progress academically reinforces a sense of meaningful work. A study by Lee et al. (2023) shows that supportive and positive relationships with students are among the strongest predictors of teachers' job satisfaction. Evidence from

the interview results indicates that principal-student relationships have a direct and significant impact on principals' job satisfaction. From the interviewees' perspective, these relationships relate not only to a sense of responsibility and commitment to students' progress and success, but also to a sense of usefulness, love of work, and overall job satisfaction. Principals, especially at the elementary level due to closer interactions and heavier responsibilities in guiding and nurturing students, experience higher job satisfaction. This satisfaction stems from witnessing progress and positive changes in students' behavior and performance, which gives principals a sense of achievement and attainment of educational goals. Moreover, the type of relationship and the way relationships are managed play a crucial role in making the school environment attractive to students and in achieving educational goals. Principals who can build engaging and effective relationships with students, while enhancing the educational environment, also personally feel greater satisfaction with their profession. These relationships not only affect principals' performance in the school but also help address disciplinary and even personal issues faced by principals themselves. Consequently, the principal-student relationship can be identified as one of the key determinants of principals' job satisfaction. In this regard, interviewee number (9) stated the following regarding the impact of students on the job satisfaction of principals: "This feeling of satisfaction is greater in elementary school... because a teacher and a principal simultaneously have a group of children for a year, and they must guide them towards a goal. There is a feeling that the responsibility for elementary school students is greater than in other grades. Because we are responsible for the children. Whereas, for example, in high school, students may have several teachers; it's true that there is a principal, but there are also several teachers, and perhaps we don't find that complete responsibility there. But in elementary school, because the children have not yet reached intellectual maturity and are placed in school, we, as principals, are the custodians of the people's children, and we feel responsible for these children and must guide them towards a goal. We think that if we succeed and can guide them to the ideal goals of education, we will find a relative sense of satisfaction."

**RQ 3:** What internal and external factors are effective in shaping manager-student relationships, and what differences do these relationships create in

the creativity of managers at different educational levels?

To answer this research question, 24 initial codes (out of 110 codes) were extracted. These codes were

reduced to 8 axial codes after integration and finally organized into 2 selective codes (the role of internal and external factors and the creativity of elementary managers). The details of each of these codifications are shown in Table No. 4, related to the third question.

**Table 4.** Initial, Axial, and Selective Codes of Interview Data to Answer the Third Research Question

Initial code	Axial codes	Optional code
Students influencing the manager / The manager being influenced by students through communication with them / Managers being influenced through their relationship with students / The manager being influenced by their relationships with students / The manager's behavior changing due to their communication with students / The manager and their decisions being influenced through their communication with students / The manager's planning and precision of action being influenced through their relationship with students at higher levels / The impact of cultural, economic, and regional conditions on managers' relationships with students / The impact of cultural and social conditions on managers' relationships with students / The impact of parents' educational level and the type of child-rearing on managers' relationships with students / The impact of student personality on managers' relationships with students / The impact of managers' job conditions on their relationships with students / The impact of the environment on managers' relationships with students.	The influence of students on principals through their interactions / Principals being influenced and changing their behavior due to their interactions with students / The impact of cultural, economic, and social conditions on principals' relationships with students / The impact of parents' education level and student personality on principals' relationships with students / The impact of principals' job conditions on their relationships with students / The impact of the environment on principals' relationships with students / Students' susceptibility to influence from principals due to their relationship with them.	<b>The Role of Internal and External Factors</b>
The presence of creativity in all three educational levels / The impact of principals' creativity due to their interactions with students / The impact of students on principals' creativity through their relationships with the principals / The presence of more creativity in various areas of elementary school / The presence of more creativity in elementary school compared to other levels / Greater creativity of elementary school principals compared to other principals at other levels.	Greater creativity among elementary school principals compared to principals at other levels (middle and high school).	<b>Creativity of Elementary Managers</b>

### Core Categories (selective) of the Third Research Question

#### The Role of Internal and External Factors

External factors—such as educational policies, curricula, parental support and literacy, cultural, economic, and social conditions, employment conditions, environmental influences—along with internal factors such as the Principals' and students' personality traits, academic levels, changes in Principals' behavior, and the influence of Principals' attire—play important roles in shaping these

relationships. The impact of external factors is especially pronounced in the first and second levels of secondary school, where social pressures and academic expectations are more visible. This finding is consistent with the research of Williams et al. (2022), which analyzed the impact of the social environment on educational relationships. Evidence from the analysis of interviews indicates that both internal and external factors shape principal–student relationships, a key aspect of educational interactions. This influence arises from a combination of principals' personality traits and environmental conditions.

Regarding internal factors, these directly affect how principals interact with students. For example, a principal with a background in psychology is more likely to understand students' behavior and needs, leading to more constructive interactions. External factors—such as the cultural, economic, and social conditions of the region, as well as the education and upbringing of parents—also significantly impact these relationships. In regions with rich cultural traditions, principals tend to interact with students in more constructive and balanced ways, whereas in more deprived communities these relationships may face greater challenges. Additionally, the educational environment and the type of school (urban vs. rural) influence how these relationships develop. Overall, principal–student relationships are shaped by multiple factors that require conscious recognition and management to improve the quality of interactions. In this regard, interviewees 9 and 10 stated the following, respectively: “Numerous factors can be influential, one of which is the environment itself, a significant factor. The cultural, economic, and regional conditions in which we serve can add to these factors. When you become the principal of a city school versus a village school, you notice the difference—the culture and the way parents interact, and especially students’ engagement and views, are more limited in the village than in the city. Naturally, each place and environment has its own specific effects, which depend on cultural and regional conditions.” And “In terms of academic level, for example, is the principal’s field of study related to the students’ level? For instance, a principal who studied psychology may interact more effectively than one who studied geography. The educational level and upbringing of parents can also be very influential.”

### **Creativity of Elementary Managers**

The findings indicate that elementary school principals demonstrate higher levels of creativity due to the creative and more dynamic nature of education at this level. Interactive and play-based teaching methods at this level enhance the creativity of principals compared to principals at higher levels. This

result is consistent with the research of Smith & Williams. (2023), which examined the impact of creativity-based teaching in elementary grades. Also, according to the interviews conducted and the analysis of the interviewees' viewpoints, it shows that the creativity of principals in elementary school is significantly higher than in secondary school, because this level, due to the age and emotional nature of the students, requires different and innovative approaches. Principals at this level must increase the attractiveness of learning and meet the emotional and cognitive needs of children by designing attractive educational environments, using visual and artistic tools, and providing diverse activities.

On the other hand, elementary school students rely more on their emotional memory, which leads administrators to use creativity in classroom decorations, incentive program design, and individual interactions. Furthermore, in this level, creativity serves as a factor to encourage students to learn and strengthen their social and religious interactions. Elementary school principals, due to their closer connection with students and the necessity of creating empathy with them, need to use innovative methods to create motivation every day. Therefore, creativity in elementary school principals is not only a necessity of their work, but also at the highest level due to the special needs of this educational level and emotional interactions with students. For example, in this regard, interviewees number (7) and (8) stated, respectively: “... We, elementary school principals and teachers, do a lot of artistic work. Because the student's mind is very coordinated and learns quickly by seeing the pictures and objects we make, we have to be more creative.” and “... Certainly, updating the manager's information throughout the day brings creativity and efficiency, and this makes creativity in elementary school, in my opinion, more than other levels. Students in elementary school use their emotional memory more. For example, when they see the school decorated, the elementary school student asks and shows more curiosity. Most of these appearances and classroom decorations display creativity.”

**Table 5.** Key categories extracted from the analysis of school principals' experiences

Row	main categories and selective
1	<b>Impact of Students' Age Maturity</b>
2	<b>The Difference in Relationships in Academic Levels</b>
3	<b>The Impact on Personality Dimensions</b>
4	<b>Principals' Personal and Professional Development</b>
5	<b>Job Satisfaction of Managers</b>
6	<b>The Role of Internal and External Factors</b>
7	<b>Creativity of Elementary Managers</b>

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present qualitative study aimed to explore and analyze the lived experiences of school principals in elementary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary schools regarding the impact of students' behaviors on their personality orientations. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, seven major themes emerged, including: (1) Impact of Students' Age Maturity, (2) The Difference in Relationships in Academic Levels, (3) The Impact on Personality Dimensions, (4) Principals' Personal and Professional Development, (5) Job Satisfaction of Managers, (6) The Role of Internal and External Factors, and (7) Creativity of Elementary Managers. Collectively, the findings of this research indicated that continuous interaction between principals and students at each educational level reflects students' developmental and social characteristics and influences the formation of principals' personality, attitudinal, and professional dimensions.

The results indicated that the age and developmental maturity of students is one of the fundamental factors in determining the pattern of principal-student relationships. This finding aligns with the research of Chen et al. (2021) and Thompson & Miller (2023), who stated that in lower grades, educational relationships are often based on emotional support and interdependence, whereas in higher grades, relationships are more founded on mutual respect and autonomy. Theoretically, this difference can be explained by referencing Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Bandura's social

learning theory; because during adolescence, the need for independence and identity formation leads to a change in the pattern of interaction with adults (including principals). Consequently, school principals are compelled to redefine their role in interacting with students to maintain a balance between professional authority and emotional support.

Another finding was the impact of manager-student relationships on the personal and professional dimensions of managers. This result aligns with the research of Bing (2022) and Marschall (2022) and Byrne & Miller (1999) and Li (2022) and Rostami Tanha et al. (2023) and Fathi & Saeidian (2020), which showed that positive human relationships in an educational environment can lead to the growth of empathy, patience, flexibility, and professional self-efficacy. In the present study, managers also stated that close interaction with students increases their broad-mindedness, emotional tolerance, and communication skills. These findings are theoretically explicable by the "transformational leadership" model; because managers who play a role model, inspiring, and supportive role in their relationships with students not only experience their personal growth but also bring about a transformation in the school culture.

Additionally, the results indicated that the quality of principal-student relationships plays a significant role in principals' job satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the results of Veldman et al. (2013) and Wartenberg (2023), which state that positive human relationships in the educational environment are one of the main predictors of job satisfaction and reduced

burnout. It seems that principals who establish more effective relationships with students feel a greater sense of meaning, effectiveness, and satisfaction in their jobs because they view student success as a reflection of their own efficiency and personal worth.

On the other hand, the findings showed that both internal factors (managers' personality traits, management styles, and communication skills) and external factors (school culture, social context, and support from educational institutions) influence how manager-student relationships are formed. This result aligns with the research of Lari et al. (2022), who emphasized that the quality of educational relationships is the product of multifactorial interaction between individual and contextual characteristics.

Finally, the finding that "primary school principals have higher creativity compared to those in secondary schools" is a novel and noteworthy discovery that has received less attention in domestic and international literature. It seems that the more emotional nature of interactions in primary schools provides a greater opportunity for creative and educational behaviors to emerge. This finding can offer a new framework for examining the relationship between leadership creativity and the type of educational interactions.

One innovative aspect of this research is that, unlike most previous studies that focused on teachers (e.g., Kim et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021), this study specifically addresses the lived experience of school principals. As educational leaders, principals are in a position where their relationships with students have not only an educational aspect but also managerial, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Therefore, the findings of this research play an effective role in filling the existing gap in the scientific literature, especially regarding the impact of student behavior on the personality orientation of principals.

#### **Theoretical and Practical Implications:**

Theoretically, the results of the present study offer a deeper understanding of the dynamics of manager-student relationships and can contribute to the

#### **Gratitude**

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#### **References**

development of theoretical frameworks related to educational leadership and professional development of managers. Furthermore, the findings implicitly support the assumption that human relationships in school impact not only student learning but also the professional self-transformation of managers. Practically, the results indicate that training and empowerment programs for managers should pay special attention to developing communication skills, emotional management, and creativity in interacting with students. Educational policymakers can use the findings of this research to design in-service courses, professional counseling programs, and effective feedback systems to enhance job satisfaction and the quality of human relationships in schools.

#### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research:**

Despite its scientific value, the current research also has limitations, including its focus on managers in a specific region (Susangerd City), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data was collected solely through qualitative interviews, and participants' subjective perceptions may have influenced the results. Therefore, it is suggested that future research utilize mixed methods (qualitative-quantitative) and examine a more diverse sample from various regions and educational cultures. Additionally, investigating the role of variables such as gender, length of service, and leadership style of managers in the quality of their relationships with students could open new horizons for subsequent research.

In summary, the results of this study indicated that the relationships between principals and students are a dynamic and multilayered phenomenon, shaped by age, cultural, emotional, and professional factors, while simultaneously influencing the principals' personal and professional development. By focusing on the lived experiences of school principals, this study takes a step towards filling a theoretical gap in the literature on educational relationships and can serve as a basis for educational policymaking and improving the quality of human resource management in schools.

#### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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**Name:** Iraj Nikpay

**Email:** [nikpay.i@lu.ac.ir](mailto:nikpay.i@lu.ac.ir)

Associate Professor of Educational Management,  
Department of Educational Sciences, University of  
Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran



**Name:** Saeed Farahbakhsh

**Email:** [farahbakhsh.s@lu.ac.ir](mailto:farahbakhsh.s@lu.ac.ir)

Associate Professor of Educational Management,  
Department of Educational Sciences, University of  
Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran



**Name:** Ali Moramazi

**Email:** [ali.moramazi@gmail.com](mailto:ali.moramazi@gmail.com)

PhD student in Educational Management, Department  
of Educational Sciences, Lorestan University,  
Khorramabad, Iran.

