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Designing a Change Management Model forthe Iranian Educational System

ABSTRACT

As a fundamental institution, the Iranian educational system requires fundamental transformations to respond to the requirements of the digital age and environmental shifts. This study was conducted to design a "Change Management Model for the Iranian Educational System" to provide a comprehensive and operational framework for guiding transformation processes within this organization. In terms of purpose, this study is applied, and in terms of data nature, it is qualitative, conducted using the "Grounded Theory" strategy. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 participants (including executive managers, school principals, teachers, and academic experts) selected via purposive sampling. The data analysis process was performed using open, axial, and selective coding based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin, and the model's validity was confirmed with a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.887. The findings revealed that the final model, with the central phenomenon of "Transformational Change Management," was designed within a systemic network including causal conditions (transformational leadership), contextual conditions (digital maturity and learner-centered environment), intervening conditions (managerial meritocracy and structural decentralization), and core strategies (participatory resistance reduction, teacher empowerment, and curriculum re-engineering). The final outcomes of this model were identified in the form of two components: "qualitative excellence" and "institutionalization of change" in the educational system. Ultimately, the research conclusion indicates that change management in Iranian education should not be considered merely an administrative action, but rather a dynamic and intertwined process of structural and human actions; therefore, policymakers can provide the ground for the sustainability and institutionalization of educational changes by relying on transformational leadership, structural reforms, and investment in smart infrastructures.

Keywords: Change management, design, education, model

Introduction

Education systems increasingly operate in environments shaped by rapid technological innovation, changing social expectations, labor-market transformations, demographic shifts, and growing demands for educational quality, equity, and accountability. Under such conditions, educational organizations cannot depend exclusively on stable administrative routines or incremental adjustments. They must be capable of recognizing emerging needs, redefining priorities, mobilizing human and technological resources, and embedding new practices into institutional routines. Change management has therefore become a central concern of educational administration because the success of reform depends not only on the content of policies but also on the processes through which individuals, structures, cultures, and organizational practices are prepared for transformation. The conceptual language of educational management itself is changing as digital transformation makes technological readiness, data-informed decision making, adaptive leadership, and organizational learning increasingly important components of institutional development [1]. At the sector level, educational reform has long been understood as

a change-management challenge requiring coordination between policy design, implementation capacity, stakeholders, and institutional conditions [2]. Thus, educational change is best approached as a systemic and continuing process rather than a temporary administrative project.

The systemic nature of educational change reflects the interdependence of ministries, district offices, schools, principals, teachers, students, curricula, assessment systems, technologies, and regulatory structures. Interventions in one part of an education system may generate consequences elsewhere, especially when organizational structures are hierarchical and reforms must pass through several administrative layers before reaching schools. For this reason, educational change management encompasses strategic direction, leadership, communication, staff participation, professional development, organizational culture, resource allocation, and mechanisms for sustaining new practices. In the Iranian context, the importance of organized change management has been emphasized in analyses of educational organizations confronting environmental and institutional pressures [3]. Moreover, research in Iranian education has linked change management with organizational effectiveness, suggesting that the manner in which transformation is managed is related to the capacity of educational organizations to achieve their goals [4]. These findings support an integrated perspective in which structural, behavioral, and operational dimensions of reform are considered simultaneously.

Leadership constitutes one of the most important elements of this process. Educational leaders interpret reform objectives, communicate the need for change, establish priorities, allocate resources, resolve conflicts, and influence whether staff perceive transformation as legitimate and achievable. Their role is particularly important because school principals and middle-level administrators function as intermediaries between macro-level policy and everyday educational practice. Research has shown that educational leadership is closely related to successful change management because leaders shape organizational readiness, staff motivation, and implementation behavior [5]. Studies of basic education administrators have likewise identified change-management competencies as important managerial capacities for responding to new demands and coordinating transformation [6]. In Iran, school principals' knowledge of and attitudes toward change management have been associated with creativity [7], while the characteristics required of administrators for successful change have been related to staff performance [8]. These findings indicate that leadership development and managerial competence should occupy a central position in any model of educational transformation.

Leadership, however, cannot produce sustainable change without the participation and commitment of teachers and other educational personnel. Teachers are not passive recipients of reform; they interpret policies, adapt them to classroom realities, and determine whether innovations become part of routine educational practice. When change is associated with ambiguity, insufficient communication, limited participation, or inadequate support, resistance may emerge. Evidence from public secondary schools indicates that change-management variables can predict teachers' commitment, demonstrating the importance of communication, leadership support, and human participation during transformation [9]. Research examining educational policy implementation from the teacher perspective similarly emphasizes the practical significance of change-management practices at the level of frontline actors [10]. Resistance should therefore be understood as a phenomenon to be diagnosed and managed rather than simply suppressed. It may arise from uncertainty, fear of altered roles, previous unsuccessful reforms, insufficient skills, or distrust of decision makers. Research on quality-management implementation in education has shown that resistance can hinder organizational change [11], while studies of public-school leaders demonstrate that the actual practice of change management varies across administrative settings [12].

A participatory approach to change is also closely related to the development of educational organizations as learning organizations. Institutions that learn systematically are better able to reflect on experience, share knowledge, revise routines, and improve continuously. Research on district education offices has identified change-management indicators as important to empowering such offices as learning organizations [13]. A related study of learning-organization practices in empowered district education offices similarly emphasizes institutional learning, adaptation, and coordinated change practices [14]. At the school level, change-management models developed for administrators in small basic education institutions also point to the need for an organized set of managerial practices rather than isolated leadership actions [15]. Taken together, these studies suggest that the capacity for change should become embedded within organizational processes, collective learning, and administrative routines so that transformation can continue beyond a single reform initiative or individual leader.

The digital era has made this organizational capacity even more important. Digital technologies now affect teaching, assessment, communication, administrative processes, professional development, data management, and relationships between schools and stakeholders. Yet the acquisition of technology does not by itself constitute digital transformation. New platforms and tools may have limited effects when infrastructure is unreliable, staff lack digital competencies, organizational processes remain incompatible with digital workflows, or leaders do not use information effectively. Research on educational institutions in the digital era emphasizes the role of change management in aligning technological adaptation with organizational goals and workforce readiness [16]. Integrated educational digital platforms have likewise been identified as potentially important components of change-management systems because they connect information, communication, and institutional processes [17]. In Iran, models of change management developed from a digital-transformation perspective further demonstrate that technological reform should be analyzed together with organizational and managerial conditions [18].

Digital transformation also changes the competencies expected of administrators and teachers. Educational leaders increasingly work in environments shaped by data systems, online platforms, smart monitoring, and rapidly evolving instructional technologies, while teachers are expected to update pedagogical knowledge and integrate technology into learning. Research on technological change management has emphasized that the effectiveness of pedagogical technologies depends partly on the psychological and organizational processes through which technological change is introduced [19]. Case research in vocational education has similarly shown how deliberate change management can support educational quality improvement in the digital era [20]. At the instructional level, the development of innovative media for climate-change management education illustrates the broader movement toward new, context-responsive learning tools that require curricular and pedagogical adaptation [21]. Digital maturity should therefore be understood not simply as technological access, but as an organizational capacity involving infrastructure, competencies, integration, readiness, and the intelligent use of information.

Curriculum reform represents another major area in which systematic change management is necessary. Curricula embody educational priorities, cultural values, pedagogical assumptions, and expectations concerning student learning; consequently, they must evolve as technologies, social needs, and educational goals change. A change-management framework for Islamic education curriculum development has demonstrated the relevance of structured change processes to curricular renewal [22]. Research on transformative change management in Islamic boarding schools has similarly shown that educational transformation involves coordinated changes in institutional values, organizational processes, and educational practices [23].

Studies focused on improving educational quality in Islamic boarding schools further indicate that planned change strategies are important when institutions seek to improve performance while maintaining contextual coherence [24]. Likewise, adaptive change-management strategies in madrasah education show that quality improvement must be responsive to institutional culture and local conditions [25]. Earlier work on change-management transformation in Islamic education also supports the principle that organizational development should remain connected to the specific mission and value system of educational institutions [26].

These findings underline the importance of contextualizing established change-management frameworks. Models such as Kotter's framework and ADKAR can provide structured guidance by organizing change around awareness, motivation, participation, capability development, communication, reinforcement, and institutionalization. Their use in educational settings suggests that formal models can help translate broad reform objectives into manageable actions, but they require adaptation to the organizational context. The application of Kotter's model in medical education has demonstrated its usefulness for organizing and consolidating institutional change [27]. Its application in high school education has also produced encouraging initial results when the model is adjusted to school conditions [28]. Similarly, the ADKAR model has been used to analyze change in an activator-school setting, illustrating the importance of linking organizational transformation with the transitions experienced by individuals [29]. Such evidence is valuable for model development, while also cautioning against transferring frameworks mechanically across national and institutional contexts.

For the Iranian educational system, contextualization is particularly important because transformation occurs within a complex interaction of centralized policymaking, administrative hierarchies, school-level implementation, professional capacities, and unequal technological and organizational conditions. Recent domestic research has moved toward the development and evaluation of models specifically concerned with change in the Iranian education system. An assessment of a change-management model within the structure of Iranian education has provided evidence supporting systematic attention to the mechanisms and effectiveness of change [30]. More recent work has presented a change-management model specifically tailored to the structure of the Iranian education system [31]. These contributions represent an important movement toward indigenous model building. Nevertheless, accelerating digital transformation, continuing expectations for higher educational quality, and persistent implementation problems make it necessary to examine more closely how leadership, technology, structure, curriculum, human resources, and organizational resistance interact within a coherent explanatory framework.

A further concern is the balance between central coordination and local capacity. Centralized systems can promote national consistency, but excessive centralization may slow decision making, constrain school-level innovation, and reduce responsiveness to regional needs. Conversely, decentralization without adequate accountability, competence, or resources may create fragmentation. Effective change therefore requires both strategic coherence and sufficient authority at operational levels. The literature on district-office empowerment and learning organizations suggests that intermediate educational units can play an important role in translating policy into adaptive local practice [13, 14]. This reinforces the relevance of managerial merit, structural flexibility, systems thinking, and organizational learning to educational change. In parallel, change should ultimately be evaluated in relation to educational quality and sustainability rather than novelty alone. Quality-oriented change requires standards, feedback, continuous improvement, professional empowerment, and

mechanisms through which successful practices become institutionalized. Without such institutionalization, reforms may remain temporary and vulnerable to leadership turnover or policy shifts.

Overall, the literature identifies several interdependent requirements for successful educational transformation: competent and change-oriented leadership, mechanisms for understanding and reducing resistance, teacher participation and empowerment, learning-organization capacity, digital maturity, curriculum adaptation, context-sensitive implementation, structural flexibility, and processes for sustaining quality improvement. Yet these domains have often been examined separately across different educational levels and national settings. Some studies prioritize leadership and administrative competencies [5, 6]; others emphasize resistance and teacher participation [10, 11]; and still others focus on digital transformation, technological change, curriculum development, or adaptive quality improvement [18, 19, 22, 25]. For Iran, an integrative model is therefore needed that explains not only what drives change, but also the contextual and intervening conditions that shape implementation, the strategies through which actors enact transformation, and the outcomes through which successful change becomes visible and sustainable. The present study aimed to design a contextually grounded change management model for the Iranian educational system.

Methodology

The present study is classified as applied research in terms of its purpose, as it aims to design a change management model for the Iranian educational system with an emphasis on applicability at both policy-making and implementation levels (Gast & Ledford, 2014). In terms of data collection, the study is descriptive, and regarding the nature of the data, it adopts a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory methodology. The selection of the Grounded Theory approach was motivated by the exploratory nature of the research topic and the necessity of developing a model grounded in the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of key actors within the educational domain. In this approach, theory is neither imposed a priori nor merely derived from existing literature; rather, it emerges from field data through a continuous interaction between data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

The participants in the qualitative phase of the study consisted of three main groups: mid-level and executive educational administrators, school principals and teachers as frontline actors, and experts in education and change management. These groups were selected to provide a comprehensive, multi-layered, and realistic understanding of the dimensions, requirements, barriers, and strategies associated with change management in the Iranian educational system. Mid-level and executive administrators possess close familiarity with structural constraints, decision-making processes, resource allocation, and implementation challenges due to their position within the policy–implementation chain. School principals and teachers, as direct implementers of reform initiatives, provide valuable lived experiences regarding organizational resistance, implementation capacities, and localization requirements. Furthermore, academic experts and specialists in change management contributed to the conceptual and theoretical interpretation of the data and strengthened the theoretical rigor of the final model.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. This sampling strategy is appropriate when the researcher seeks individuals who possess specialized knowledge, relevant experience, and the ability to provide rich and meaningful data concerning the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Accordingly, participants were selected based on both their professional and executive experience and their analytical understanding of change

management within the educational system. In total, 20 participants contributed to the qualitative phase, including 6 mid-level and executive administrators, 8 school principals and teachers, and 6 experts in education and change management. The sample size was determined not through a predetermined numerical estimation but according to the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no new concepts or categories emerged and conceptual patterns had been sufficiently developed (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Initial signs of saturation appeared during the seventeenth interview, while full theoretical saturation was achieved by the twentieth interview.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants in the Qualitative Phase

No.	Participant Group	Educational Degree	Area of Expertise	Occupational Position	Academic Rank	Relevant Professional Experience
1	Mid-level and executive administrators	PhD	Educational Management	Director General of Education	—	25 years of managerial experience
2	Mid-level and executive administrators	Master's degree	Educational Planning	Deputy Director of Planning	—	20 years of executive experience
3	Mid-level and executive administrators	PhD	Public Management	Head of District Education Office	—	18 years of managerial experience
4	Mid-level and executive administrators	Master's degree	Educational Management	Deputy Director of Management Development	—	22 years of executive experience
5	Mid-level and executive administrators	PhD	Public Policy	Head of Planning Department	—	19 years of specialized experience
6	Mid-level and executive administrators	Master's degree	Change Management	Head of Secondary Education Department	—	17 years of executive experience
7	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Management	High School Principal	—	15 years of educational experience
8	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Curriculum Planning	Teacher and Educational Group Leader	—	14 years of teaching experience
9	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Management	Technical School Principal	—	16 years of managerial experience
10	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Research	Secondary School Teacher	—	12 years of teaching experience
11	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Management	School Educational Deputy	—	13 years of educational experience
12	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Management	Elementary School Principal	—	18 years of executive experience
13	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Technology	Teacher and Educational Expert	—	11 years of specialized experience
14	School principals and teachers	Master's degree	Educational Planning	High School Principal	—	17 years of managerial experience
15	Education experts	PhD	Educational Management	University Faculty Member	Associate Professor	20 years of research experience
16	Education experts	PhD	Change Management	Change Management Consultant	—	18 years of specialized experience
17	Education experts	PhD	Public Policy	University Faculty Member	Full Professor	25 years of academic experience
18	Education experts	PhD	Human Resource Management	Change Management Specialist	—	16 years of professional experience
19	Education experts	PhD	Educational Management	University Faculty Member	Assistant Professor	15 years of academic experience
20	Education experts	PhD	Educational Management	Educational Researcher and Consultant	—	19 years of specialized experience

The inclusion criteria for participants consisted of having at least 10 years of professional experience in education or relevant academic and research experience, holding a professional or specialized position related to decision-making, implementation, or analysis of change, and demonstrating willingness to participate consciously and share analytical and lived experiences concerning organizational change. Conversely, individuals lacking practical experience in change processes, those newly appointed to managerial positions, or those unable to effectively participate in in-depth interviews were excluded from the study. This selection logic aligns with the principles of purposive sampling and the recruitment of information-rich participants (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

The primary data collection instrument was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Due to their flexibility and high capacity for exploring meaning, lived experiences, and participants' interpretations, semi-structured interviews are highly compatible with the Grounded Theory approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). The interview guide was developed based on a review of theoretical foundations and prior studies related to change management, organizational transformation, and educational systems. Nevertheless, the guide remained flexible so that questions could be revised and expanded in response to emerging concepts during the analysis process. To deepen the data, open-ended, probing, and exploratory questions were used to encourage participants to describe their concrete experiences and explain their perceptions of facilitators, barriers, strategies, and consequences of change within the educational system. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for analysis.

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework was employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, simultaneous data collection and analysis, member checking, and continuous comparison of data and interpretations. Transferability was ensured by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and the logic underlying category development. Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures, maintenance of research records, and the creation of an audit trail. Confirmability was established through analytical and reflective memo-writing and by preserving raw evidence and conceptual inference pathways to demonstrate that the findings were grounded in the data rather than shaped by researcher assumptions.

In addition, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to assess coding stability and inter-coder agreement (Cohen, 1960). For this purpose, 180 extracted concepts identified during the coding process were independently recoded by a second coder familiar with Grounded Theory methodology and the topic of change management. Subsequently, observed agreement and chance-corrected agreement were calculated. The resulting Kappa coefficient was 0.887, which, according to the interpretation proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), indicates a very high level of agreement between coders. This result demonstrates that the coding system possessed satisfactory consistency and coherence and that the process of extracting concepts and categories was highly reliable.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Within this approach, data analysis is not separate from data collection; rather, both processes occur simultaneously and iteratively. During the open coding stage, interview transcripts were analyzed line by line, and initial concepts were extracted directly from the data. At this stage, efforts were made to minimize the imposition of prior theoretical assumptions and to identify and label the main semantic units and

meanings expressed by participants. During axial coding, the initial concepts and categories were reorganized in relation to one another, and relationships between categories and subcategories were explored. This stage contributed to strengthening conceptual coherence and clarifying the dimensions of the phenomenon. Finally, during selective coding, all categories were integrated around the core category into a coherent theoretical narrative, resulting in the formulation of the final change management model for the Iranian educational system. Therefore, the resulting model was not merely a reflection of existing theoretical literature but rather an empirically grounded framework derived from the contextualized experiences and interpretations of participants within the real setting of the Iranian educational system.

Findings and Results

The qualitative data analysis of this study was conducted using the Grounded Theory approach based on the systematic model of Strauss and Corbin (1990). This approach was selected due to the exploratory and inductive nature of the research and the necessity of developing a localized model for change management within the Iranian educational system. The research data were gathered through 20 semi-structured interviews with managers, teachers, academic experts, and specialists in the field of education. Data analysis was performed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the open coding stage, initial concepts were extracted and organized into 30 major categories. In the axial coding stage, similar and conceptually linked categories were classified into 10 core categories, including: Transformational Leadership, Digital Maturity, Participatory Resistance Reduction, Qualitative Excellence, Teacher Empowerment, Curriculum Re-engineering, Managerial Meritocracy, Learner-Oriented Environment Creation, Structural Decentralization, and Process Institutionalization.

During the selective coding stage, efforts were made to establish logical links between the core categories to formulate a comprehensive theory for the phenomenon under study. The “Core Phenomenon” in this research was identified as “Transformational Change Management in Iranian Education.” The selection of this phenomenon emerged from the continuous analysis of data and the identification of the primary concerns of participants, such that all extracted categories revolved around this axis. The selection process involved using fragmenting and conceptualizing techniques, where “Transformational Leadership” was identified as the primary driver (Causal Conditions). It then interacted with existing contexts (Contextual Conditions, including Digital Maturity and Learner-Oriented Environment) and was influenced by structural and managerial requirements (Intervening Conditions, including Meritocracy and Decentralization). Consequently, primary strategies (including Resistance Reduction, Empowerment, and Curriculum Re-engineering) were adopted, eventually leading to desired outcomes such as “Qualitative Excellence” and “Process Institutionalization.” Table 2 presents the major categories extracted during the focused open coding stage, which served as the basis for subsequent classifications in the research.

Table 2

Major Categories in the Focused Open Coding Stage

Concepts	Major Categories
Transformative foresight; Strategic goal setting; Organizational alignment; Mission definition; Future visualization; Managerial consensus-building	Shared Vision
Transformation-oriented motivation; Managerial trust-building; Professional hope-inspiring; Charismatic influence; Inspirational communication; Collective commitment-building	Organizational Inspiration
Creativity support; Idea generation support; Error tolerance; Innovative opportunity creation; Encouraging experimentation; School-based support	Innovative Support
Stable network; Smart equipment; Digital access; Data security; Technical support; Hardware capacity	Technological Infrastructure

Concepts	Major Categories
Educational system; Learning management; Digital communications; Electronic records; Online services; Data integrity	Integrated Platform
Learning analytics; Artificial Intelligence; Managerial dashboard; Data-driven decision making; Progress monitoring; Early warning	Smart Monitoring
Job fear; Role ambiguity; Organizational mistrust; Psychological pressure; Unsuccessful experience; Value conflict	Resistance Root-finding
Change awareness-raising; Preliminary training; Professional justification; Ambiguity reduction; Psychological readiness; Initial acceptance	Mental Readiness
Organizational dialogue; Stakeholder participation; Continuous feedback; Collective trust-building; Professional persuasion; Conflict reduction	Participatory Persuasion
Quality indicators; National standards; International standards; Educational compliance; School accreditation; Quality assurance	Educational Standardization
Performance evaluation; Corrective feedback; Improvement cycle; Process correction; Executive learning; Quality monitoring	Continuous Improvement
Waste elimination; Process agility; Educational value; Operations simplification; Service productivity; Resource optimization	Lean Management
In-service training; Continuous learning; Teaching skill enhancement; Specialized knowledge; Educational coaching; Professional growth	Professional Development
Professional attachment; Job responsibility; Organizational loyalty; Intrinsic motivation; Transformative participation; Role sustainability	Organizational Commitment
Teaching idea generation; Creative methods; Classroom innovation; New content production; Educational experimentation; Problem solving	Educational Creativity
Local needs assessment; Cultural requirements; Social adaptation; Indigenous content; Educational contextuality; Curricular flexibility	Curriculum Localization
Interactive content; Supplementary resources; Learning activities; Educational media; Teaching scenarios; Evaluation tools	Learning Package
Participatory design; Curriculum revision; Content production; Pilot implementation; Teacher feedback; Curricular evaluation	Teacher Participation
Behavioral competency; Communication skills; Leadership ability; Managerial knowledge; Decision-making capability; Conflict management	Competency Assessment
Meritorious selection; Managerial experience; Educational expertise; Professional qualification; Transparent criteria; Appointment justice	Specialized Appointment
Holistic view; Relational analysis; Change impact assessment; Inter-sectoral coordination; Systemic problem solving; Organizational synergy	Systems Thinking
Environmental peace; Emotional needs; Psychological security; Learning focus; Spatial attractiveness; Developmental suitability	Psychological Design
Dialogue space; Group learning; Student interaction; Flexible classroom; Classroom participation; Creative environment	Interactive School
Optimal utilization; Workshop equipping; Flexible layout; Physical capacity; Equipment maintenance; Climatic adaptability	Spatial Productivity
Decision-making authority; Executive responsibility; Local accountability; Regional adaptation; Operational independence; Regional empowerment	Regional Delegation
Organizational agility; Bureaucracy reduction; Role redefinition; Structural adaptability; Horizontal coordination; Process reform	Flexible Structure
Collective learning; Experience sharing; Organizational memory; Regional learning; Continuous reform; Knowledge creation	Learning Organization
Implementation phasing; Transformation scheduling; Clear responsibility assignment; Action prioritization; Realization indicators; Phase monitoring	Change Roadmap
Lessons learned recording; Experience reporting; Knowledge bank; Successful patterns; Error analysis; Performance review	Experience Documentation
Experience acceptance; New value creation; Transformative learning; Innovative behavior; Change sustainability; Innovation normalization	Innovation Culture

Table 3 explains the final reconstruction of major and core categories within the research model and the logic of their interconnections across the three dimensions of conditions, strategies-interactions, and outcomes.

Table 3

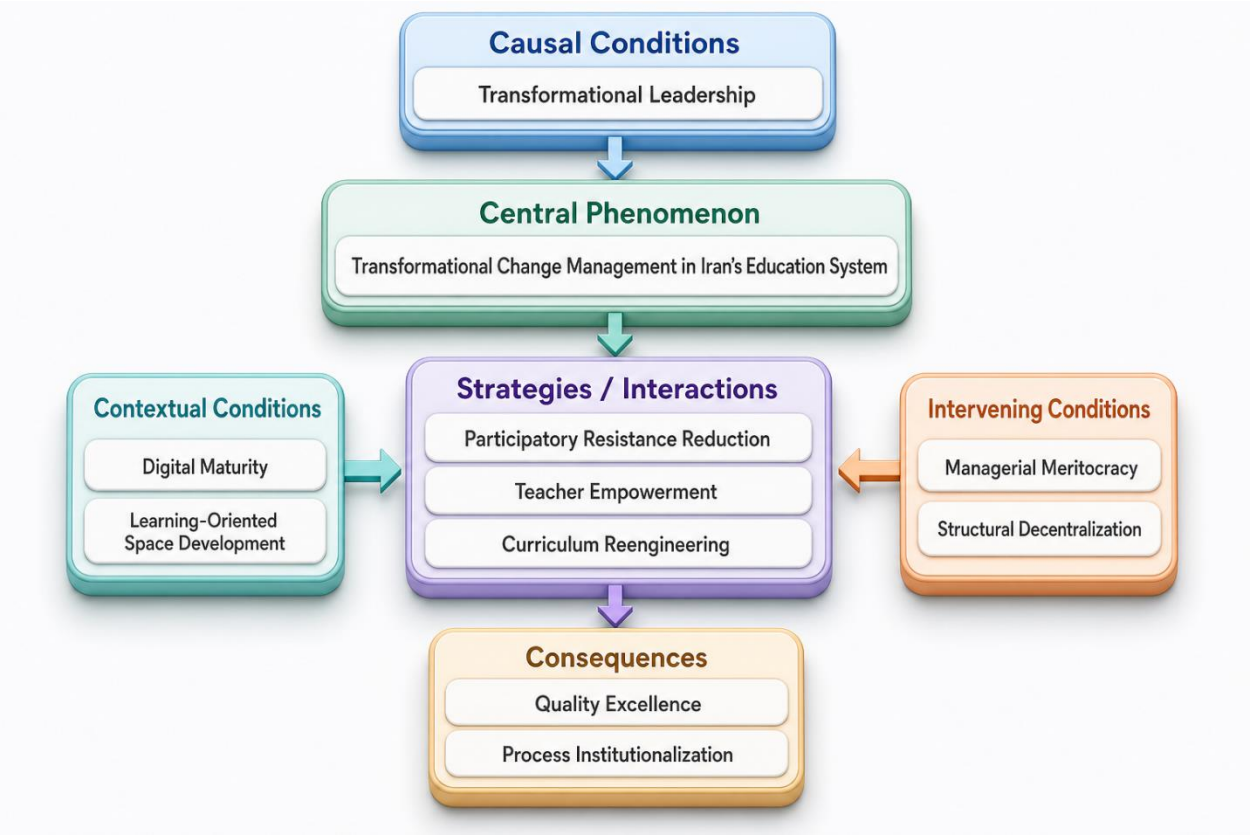
Reconstruction of Major and Core Categories in the Change Management Model

Reason for Selection	Category Type	Core Categories	Major Categories
Creating necessity, motivation, and initial direction for change	Causal Conditions	Transformational Leadership	Shared vision; Organizational inspiration; Innovative support
Providing the technological and informational platform for change	Contextual Conditions	Digital Maturity	Technological infrastructure; Integrated platform; Smart monitoring
Facilitating acceptance and reducing resistance to change	Strategic-Interactive	Participatory Resistance Reduction	Resistance root-finding; Mental readiness; Participatory persuasion
Improving the quality and effectiveness of the educational system	Outcome	Qualitative Excellence	Educational standardization; Continuous improvement; Lean management
Increasing professional and motivational capacity of teachers	Strategic-Interactive	Teacher Empowerment	Professional development; Organizational commitment; Educational creativity
Redesigning educational content and processes	Strategic-Interactive	Curriculum Re-engineering	Curriculum localization; Learning package; Teacher participation
Adjusting and facilitating the quality of change implementation	Intervening Conditions	Managerial Meritocracy	Competency assessment; Specialized appointment; Systems thinking
Creating a supportive environment for learning and transformation	Contextual Conditions	Learner-Oriented Environment Creation	Psychological design; Interactive school; Spatial productivity
Increasing structural flexibility and accountability	Intervening Conditions	Structural Decentralization	Regional delegation; Flexible structure; Learning organization
Stabilizing and sustaining change within the organization	Outcome	Process Institutionalization	Change roadmap; Experience documentation; Innovation culture

In accordance with the configuration presented in Table 3, the conceptual logic of the model is grounded in the systematic integration of categories. Transformational Leadership serves as the primary causal driver, initiating the change process. This leadership operates within the contextual framework of Digital Maturity and a Learner-Oriented Environment, while being moderated by intervening factors such as Managerial Meritocracy and Structural Decentralization. These conditions collectively shape the core strategies, including Participatory Resistance Reduction, Teacher Empowerment, and Curriculum Re-engineering. The ultimate realization of these strategic interactions leads to the attainment of key research outcomes: Qualitative Excellence and Process Institutionalization within the Iranian educational system. The synthesized relationships and the conceptual integration of the identified categories are visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the final research framework titled "Change Management Model for the Iranian Educational System as Transformational Change Management in Iranian Education."

Figure 1

Change Management Model for the Iranian Educational System as "Transformational Change Management in Iranian Education"



Based on Figure 1, the logic governing the proposed model is that Transformational Leadership serves as the "Causal Condition" and key driver, creating the necessity and direction for transformation within the educational system. For effectiveness, this leadership operates within "Contextual Conditions," including Digital Maturity (as the technological context) and Learner-Oriented Environment Creation (as the environmental context). Along this path, "Intervening Conditions," including Managerial Meritocracy and Structural Decentralization, act as moderating and facilitating factors, smoothing the path for change implementation. The output of these interactions manifests as the primary "Strategies and Interactions," namely Participatory Resistance Reduction, Teacher Empowerment, and Curriculum Re-engineering. Finally,

the successful implementation of these strategies leads to the achievement of the research's macro "Outcomes": Qualitative Excellence and Process Institutionalization. This systematic model demonstrates that change management in Iranian education is not a linear process but an intertwined network of transformative actions. When coordination and synergy exist between leadership, technology, structure, and human capital, it leads to the sustainability of change within the organization. In essence, this model views change not as a periodic administrative action but as a continuous, interactive, and transformative process that can provide the grounds for enhancing educational quality, developing organizational capacity, and increasing the Iranian educational system's adaptability to future developments.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to design a change management model for the Iranian educational system and identified Transformational Change Management as the central phenomenon around which the major dimensions of educational transformation were organized. The findings showed that transformational leadership constituted the principal causal condition, while digital maturity and the creation of a learner-oriented environment formed the contextual conditions necessary for effective change. Managerial meritocracy and structural decentralization emerged as intervening conditions influencing the implementation process. At the strategic level, participatory resistance reduction, teacher empowerment, and curriculum re-engineering were identified as the major mechanisms through which transformation could be translated into organizational practice. Finally, qualitative excellence and process institutionalization represented the principal outcomes of successful change management. Taken together, these findings indicate that educational change cannot be understood as a linear administrative intervention. Rather, it represents a systemic process involving leadership, organizational structure, technology, human resources, curriculum, participation, and organizational culture. This overall interpretation is consistent with the longstanding argument that educational reform constitutes a complex change-management challenge requiring alignment between policy intentions, organizational capacities, and implementation mechanisms [2]. It also corresponds with contemporary perspectives emphasizing that educational management itself is undergoing conceptual transformation under the influence of digitalization and new organizational demands [1].

One of the most important findings was the central role of transformational leadership as the primary causal condition initiating and directing change. In the proposed model, transformational leadership was reflected through shared vision, organizational inspiration, and support for innovation. This suggests that successful educational transformation begins when leaders are able to articulate a meaningful direction, develop collective commitment, encourage experimentation, and create confidence regarding the feasibility and desirability of change. This finding is consistent with research indicating that educational leadership significantly influences successful change management because leaders shape organizational readiness, motivate personnel, and connect institutional objectives with implementation processes [5]. Similarly, evaluations of school administrators' change-management competencies have demonstrated that leadership capacities are fundamental to managing uncertainty, communication, innovation, and stakeholder involvement during educational transformation [6]. Within the Iranian context, the finding is further supported by evidence that principals' knowledge and attitudes toward change management are associated with greater creativity [7], and that administrators possessing characteristics required for successful change management contribute positively to staff performance [8]. Therefore, transformational leadership

appears to function not merely as managerial authority but as the mechanism through which the psychological and organizational foundations of change are established.

The identification of digital maturity as a contextual condition is another significant finding. Digital maturity in the present model encompassed technological infrastructure, integrated platforms, and smart monitoring, suggesting that contemporary change management depends increasingly on the capacity of educational organizations to integrate technology into administrative and instructional processes. This result is strongly aligned with research demonstrating that digital transformation has altered the way educational institutions organize communication, decision making, learning, and institutional coordination. Sutarni and colleagues emphasized the importance of managing institutional change in the digital era and showed that technological transformation must be accompanied by organizational preparedness and suitable management practices [16]. Avdeeva and colleagues similarly identified integrated digital educational platforms as important elements of change-management systems because such platforms enable coordination, information exchange, and the integration of educational processes [17]. Within Iran, a change-management model developed from a digital-transformation perspective likewise emphasized that successful technological change requires the simultaneous consideration of organizational structures, managerial processes, and digital capacities [18]. The current findings therefore reinforce the view that purchasing technological equipment alone does not constitute meaningful digital transformation; technological resources must be integrated with organizational competencies and managerial processes.

The importance assigned to digital maturity is also compatible with evidence that successful adoption of educational technologies depends on the human and psychological management of technological change. Kosov and colleagues showed that enhancing pedagogical technologies requires careful attention to the psychological experience of change and to the conditions under which educational actors accept and apply new technologies [19]. Likewise, Nabilah and colleagues demonstrated that change management can contribute to educational quality improvement in digitally transforming educational institutions when technological adaptation is accompanied by coordinated managerial interventions [20]. The growing development of innovative educational media also indicates that educational systems must continually adapt curricula, teacher competencies, and institutional infrastructure to emerging forms of instruction [21]. Thus, the present finding regarding digital maturity should be interpreted as referring to an organizational capacity that integrates technological infrastructure, staff readiness, information systems, and data-informed decision making rather than merely access to digital devices.

Another contextual condition identified in the study was the creation of a learner-oriented environment, comprising psychological design, interactive schooling, and optimal use of physical space. This finding demonstrates that change management must ultimately remain connected to the educational mission of schools. Organizational transformation that does not improve the learning environment may remain administrative rather than educational. A learner-oriented environment provides psychological safety, encourages interaction, facilitates active learning, and allows institutional reforms to be experienced meaningfully by students and teachers. This finding is compatible with research on transformative educational change showing that organizational transformation should be connected to the educational values and pedagogical objectives of institutions [23]. Studies of adaptive change management in Islamic educational institutions likewise emphasize that quality improvement depends on adjusting organizational practices to learners' needs, institutional identity, and contextual conditions [25]. Similarly, change strategies used to enhance the quality of Islamic education have

demonstrated that improvements are more sustainable when educational processes, organizational management, and stakeholder needs are considered together [24]. The current study therefore extends these observations by positioning learner orientation as a contextual requirement within the broader architecture of change management.

The study further identified participatory resistance reduction as a core change strategy. This category included identifying the roots of resistance, developing psychological readiness, and using participatory persuasion. The finding is particularly important because resistance is one of the most persistent obstacles to educational reform. Individuals may resist transformation because they perceive uncertainty, increased workload, threats to professional identity, loss of authority, inadequate preparation, or lack of confidence in decision makers. The present model suggests that resistance should not be treated as irrational opposition; rather, its causes should be diagnosed and addressed through communication, participation, preparation, and trust-building. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that resistance to change can significantly impede implementation of quality-management initiatives in educational organizations [11]. Research from the teacher perspective similarly indicates that effective change-management practices during policy implementation require attention to those responsible for translating policies into everyday educational activities [10]. Moreover, variations in the degree to which school leaders practice change management demonstrate that the management of acceptance and participation remains a critical leadership responsibility [12].

The emphasis on participation is also supported by the finding that teacher empowerment constitutes a principal strategy of transformational change management. Teacher empowerment in the present model included professional development, organizational commitment, and educational creativity. Teachers are frontline implementers of educational reform; consequently, even technically sound policies may have little effect when teachers lack appropriate skills, motivation, autonomy, or professional commitment. Akpan and colleagues found that change-management variables predict teachers' commitment, illustrating the importance of leadership support, communication, and participation in strengthening professional attachment during organizational change [9]. Studies of district education offices as learning organizations likewise show that empowerment and organizational learning are important indicators of effective change management [13, 14]. These findings are closely aligned with the present study because teacher empowerment provides the human capacity necessary to transform formal reforms into classroom-level change. Professional development supplies new knowledge and competencies, organizational commitment encourages persistence during implementation, and educational creativity enables teachers to adapt reforms to diverse classroom realities.

The finding concerning curriculum re-engineering further demonstrates that organizational change must reach the core educational processes of the system. Curriculum localization, development of appropriate learning packages, and teacher participation were identified as the major components of this strategy. Curriculum is one of the main channels through which educational policy becomes actual learning experience; therefore, transformation cannot be considered complete when organizational structures change while curricular content and instructional practices remain unchanged. Atmojo and colleagues' change-management framework for curriculum development similarly indicates that curriculum reform requires deliberate planning, implementation, and adaptation [22]. Transformation in Islamic education has also been interpreted as a coordinated process that integrates educational objectives, organizational processes, and contextual adaptation [26]. The present findings additionally suggest that teacher participation in curriculum re-engineering is essential because teachers possess practical knowledge concerning students' needs, instructional constraints, and the feasibility of proposed curricular

changes. Teacher involvement may therefore increase both the relevance of curriculum innovation and commitment to its implementation.

The study also highlighted managerial meritocracy as an intervening condition, encompassing competency assessment, specialized appointment, and systems thinking. This result indicates that even when appropriate change strategies have been formulated, implementation may be weakened if individuals responsible for leading transformation have not been selected according to relevant professional competencies. Change management requires managers who can think systemically, communicate effectively, solve problems, manage conflict, analyze interdependencies, and make decisions under uncertainty. Previous research on models of change management among administrators of basic education institutions similarly underscores the importance of managerial capacities in directing educational change [15]. Evidence linking change management and organizational effectiveness further supports the proposition that managerial processes influence broader institutional outcomes [4]. Accordingly, meritocracy should be regarded as more than a human-resource practice: it is an implementation condition that influences the quality, consistency, and sustainability of educational reform.

A further intervening condition was structural decentralization, represented by regional delegation, flexible structures, and development of the education system as a learning organization. This finding implies that excessive administrative centralization may constrain the responsiveness necessary for effective educational change. Schools and regional education offices operate within different social, economic, technological, and cultural circumstances; therefore, a uniform implementation strategy may not adequately address local conditions. Empowering intermediate and local levels can increase responsiveness, accelerate problem solving, and permit context-sensitive adaptation while national policy continues to provide strategic direction. Findings concerning district education office empowerment support the importance of learning-organization practices in enabling educational units to respond to change [13, 14]. The broader Iranian literature has also emphasized the importance of systematically managing organizational change and addressing structural barriers within educational institutions [3]. The present model consequently suggests that decentralization should involve controlled delegation accompanied by accountability, managerial competence, organizational learning, and coordination rather than simply transferring responsibilities downward.

The relevance of structured change frameworks is also apparent in the overall configuration of the findings. Although the present model emerged from the Iranian educational context, its emphasis on staged preparation, participation, capability building, implementation, and institutionalization parallels established approaches such as Kotter and ADKAR. The successful use of Kotter's approach in educational settings demonstrates the importance of mobilizing stakeholders, creating momentum, and consolidating change into organizational practice [27]. Initial applications of Kotter's model in high-school education have similarly shown the usefulness of structured approaches when adapted to local educational conditions [28]. The ADKAR model has also demonstrated relevance in school-based change by emphasizing individual awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement [29]. However, the present findings suggest that the Iranian educational system requires a broader systemic configuration in which these implementation processes interact with centralized structures, meritocratic management, curriculum requirements, digital readiness, and regional conditions.

The two final outcomes of the model—qualitative excellence and process institutionalization—demonstrate that successful educational change should be evaluated both by immediate improvements and by its sustainability. Qualitative excellence included educational standardization, continuous improvement, and lean management, indicating that

transformation should produce demonstrable improvements in educational processes and organizational effectiveness. Process institutionalization, comprising a change roadmap, documentation of experience, and an innovation culture, represents the transition from temporary reform to routine organizational capability. This interpretation is consistent with recent Iranian studies evaluating and presenting change-management models for the national education system, which have emphasized the importance of establishing a coherent framework for managing organizational transformation [30, 31]. Taken together, the present findings indicate that sustainable change occurs when organizational learning converts implementation experience into institutional knowledge and when innovation becomes normalized rather than dependent on individual leaders or temporary programs. The resulting model therefore provides an integrated explanation of how leadership initiates transformation, contextual and intervening conditions shape its feasibility, strategic actions mobilize human and curricular change, and organizational mechanisms ultimately convert reform into sustained qualitative development.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study employed a qualitative grounded-theory design and relied on the perspectives of a purposively selected group of educational administrators, school principals, teachers, and academic experts. Although this composition enabled the collection of rich and diverse perspectives, the findings are interpretive and cannot be statistically generalized to all educational regions, schools, or stakeholder groups in Iran. Second, differences associated with geographic region, socioeconomic conditions, school type, educational level, technological infrastructure, and local organizational culture may not have been represented equally. Third, because the model was derived primarily from participants' experiences and perceptions, some categories may reflect perceived rather than objectively measured organizational conditions. Finally, students, parents, and community stakeholders were not represented as distinct participant groups, even though they may perceive the consequences and implementation requirements of educational change differently.

Future studies should quantitatively validate the proposed model using larger and geographically diverse samples from different provinces and levels of the Iranian educational system. Structural equation modeling could be used to examine the strength and direction of relationships among transformational leadership, digital maturity, learner-oriented environments, managerial meritocracy, decentralization, change strategies, and organizational outcomes. Comparative studies across public, private, urban, rural, vocational, and special education settings could determine whether the model operates similarly under different institutional conditions. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining whether the identified outcomes are sustained after implementation and whether institutionalization develops progressively over time. Future qualitative studies could include students, parents, technology specialists, regional policymakers, and other stakeholders to extend or refine the model. Intervention studies could additionally test specific components of the framework, such as leadership development, teacher empowerment, participatory resistance management, or decentralized decision-making, to determine their practical effects on change readiness and educational quality.

Educational policymakers and administrators should approach transformation as a coordinated system-wide process rather than as a collection of isolated reforms. Leadership appointments should emphasize competence, systems thinking, communication skills, and demonstrated capacity to manage organizational change. Schools and regional education offices should receive sufficient authority to adapt implementation strategies to local needs while remaining accountable to national educational objectives. Before introducing major reforms, administrators should assess the sources of resistance, communicate the rationale for change, involve teachers in planning, and provide sufficient preparation and professional

support. Teacher empowerment should include continuous professional development, coaching, opportunities for innovation, and meaningful participation in curriculum redesign. Investment in digital infrastructure should be accompanied by integrated information platforms, technical support, staff digital competence, and data-informed monitoring systems. Finally, each major reform should have a clear implementation roadmap, measurable quality indicators, mechanisms for documenting lessons learned, and procedures for incorporating successful practices into routine organizational processes so that change becomes sustainable rather than temporary.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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