

Identification and Explication of Approaches to Preschool Educational Program Grounded in Local Culture and Indigenous Values.

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Moemeni, M., Afrooz, G., Keramati, M. R., & Naghsh, Z. (2026). Identifying and Explaining Preschool Educational program Approaches Based on Indigenous Culture and Values. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, 9(4), 1-17.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijes.1479>



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aimed to identify and explain the approaches and core components of preschool educational programs grounded in indigenous culture and values and to develop a framework for designing an identity-oriented educational program appropriate to the cultural context of preschool education.

Methods and Materials: This applied qualitative study employed a qualitative content analysis approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 specialists and experienced practitioners in preschool education, educational program planning, educational psychology, and early childhood development who were selected through purposive sampling based on the principle of theoretical saturation. In addition to interviews, relevant policy documents, educational program guides, and educational resources were analyzed to enrich the data. The collected data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding procedures. To ensure trustworthiness, participant validation, peer review, and triangulation of interview and document data were used. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, were fully observed throughout the research process.

Findings: The findings revealed six major dimensions underlying indigenous preschool educational program approaches: overarching goals and philosophy of preschool education, teaching-learning methods, educational content and educational program planning, implementation challenges and barriers, the role and empowerment of educators, and environmental and supportive factors. The results indicated that holistic child development, play-based and child-centered learning, experiential activities, and the localization of educational content according to indigenous cultural values constituted the primary foundations of effective preschool education. The findings also identified four major categories of implementation barriers, including socio-cultural challenges, infrastructural and physical limitations, educators' professional challenges, and managerial-supportive constraints. Furthermore, the analysis led to the development of a comprehensive framework

consisting of psychological foundations of development and learning, play-based and experiential learning, cultural identity and content localization, family and community participation, educator empowerment, managerial and policy support, and holistic child development assessment as the key elements of an identity-oriented preschool educational program.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of preschool educational programs depends on the integration of developmental principles, cultural identity, family participation, educator competence, and institutional support. Designing culturally responsive and identity-oriented preschool educational programs requires a systematic approach that simultaneously addresses educational philosophy, educational program content, pedagogical practices, environmental conditions, and policy structures. Such an approach can strengthen children's holistic development while preserving and promoting indigenous cultural values and identity.

Keywords: *Preschool Educational program, Indigenous Culture, Cultural Values, Identity-Oriented Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational program Localization, Play-Based Learning*

1. Introduction

Preschool education is one of the most decisive stages in the formation of children's cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and cultural foundations. In this period, children enter a structured learning environment for the first time, experience systematic interaction with peers and educators, and begin to construct early meanings about self, family, society, values, and learning. Unlike later school stages, preschool education should not be reduced to formal academic preparation or early literacy instruction; rather, it should be understood as a developmental, cultural, and identity-forming process that supports the whole child. Contemporary educational psychology emphasizes that early learning is deeply connected with children's developmental characteristics, emotional security, self-regulation, curiosity, symbolic thinking, play, and social interaction (Smith & Wood, 2023). Therefore, any educational program designed for preschool children must be developmentally appropriate, culturally meaningful, and responsive to children's lived experiences. In societies with rich cultural and value-based traditions, such as Iran, the design of preschool educational programs requires special attention to indigenous culture, local values, national identity, family participation, and the social meanings embedded in educational content (Karimi & Mousavi, 2023; Karimi, 2022).

The importance of preschool education has increased in recent decades because early childhood is now widely recognized as a sensitive period for the development of executive functions, emotional regulation, social competence, and learning behaviors. Children's self-regulation, including both "hot" emotional control and

"cool" cognitive control, is strongly related to their participation in classroom activities, readiness for learning, and adaptation to educational environments (Wyatt, 2025). Emotional management is also a central component of preschool development, because children at this age gradually learn to identify, express, and regulate emotions in interaction with adults and peers (Yu & Ahmad, 2025). Accordingly, the preschool educational program should provide opportunities for children to experience emotional safety, cooperative play, problem solving, autonomy, and guided social interaction. A educational program focused solely on early academic skills may overlook these foundational dimensions and create pressure that is inconsistent with children's developmental needs. For this reason, preschool educational program design should move toward holistic development and should integrate cognitive, emotional, social, physical, moral, and cultural dimensions in a coherent framework.

From a developmental perspective, preschool learning is most effective when it is active, experiential, and play-based. Play is not a secondary or recreational activity; rather, it is the central medium through which preschool children explore the world, construct meanings, practice social roles, develop language, and strengthen motor and cognitive abilities. Indigenous and local games are particularly important because they simultaneously support children's motor, social, and cultural development. Such games can improve coordination, cooperation, social participation, and cultural belonging, while also familiarizing children with local traditions and collective experiences (Mohammadi & Soleimani, 2023). Similarly, digital interactive didactic games, when designed appropriately, can enhance preschool children's cognitive development and provide engaging

opportunities for learning, exploration, and feedback (Baikulova et al., 2026). However, the use of digital tools should not replace culturally grounded and embodied experiences; instead, it should be integrated into a balanced educational program that respects children's developmental needs and cultural context. Therefore, an effective preschool educational program should combine play, storytelling, artistic activities, movement, exploration, local games, and guided interaction.

Culture is not an external addition to the educational program; it is one of the main foundations through which educational goals, content, learning activities, and assessment practices gain meaning. Global perspectives on early childhood education show that cultural integration enables educational programs to become more relevant, inclusive, and identity-supportive for children (Garcia & Miller, 2022). In the Iranian context, the localization of preschool educational programs has particular significance because children's early educational experiences should be compatible with indigenous values, family expectations, national identity, religious-cultural traditions, language, stories, rituals, and social norms. Research on preschool children's programs with an emphasis on national identity indicates that educational content can play a major role in strengthening children's sense of belonging, cultural awareness, and identity formation (Karimi, 2022). Similarly, educational program models based on national transformation documents emphasize the need to align preschool education with broader educational, cultural, and value-based goals (Karimi & Mousavi, 2023). Therefore, designing a preschool educational program based on indigenous culture and values is not merely a matter of adding local stories or games; it requires a systematic rethinking of goals, content, pedagogy, educator roles, family participation, and evaluation.

The localization of preschool educational programs, however, is accompanied by several theoretical and practical challenges. One major challenge is the tension between global models of early childhood education and local cultural expectations. While international models may offer useful insights into child-centered learning, play-based pedagogy, and developmental assessment, their direct transfer without adaptation can lead to cultural mismatch. In Iran's educational system, challenges of localizing the preschool educational program include insufficient conceptual clarity, lack of appropriate educational resources, weak alignment between policy and implementation, and limited preparation of educators for culturally responsive

practice (Ahmadi et al., 2022). These challenges show that localization should not be understood as isolation from global knowledge; rather, it should involve critical adaptation, cultural interpretation, and integration of scientific principles with indigenous educational values. This requires a educational program framework that can connect developmental psychology, cultural identity, educational philosophy, and practical implementation.

Islamic education also provides important foundations for thinking about preschool educational program in value-based societies. A reconsideration of Islamic education highlights the need to understand education as a process of human development, moral formation, cultivation of meaning, and growth of individual and social capacities (Bagheri, 2021). In this view, education is not limited to the transfer of information; rather, it is concerned with nurturing the whole person and guiding learners toward responsible, meaningful, and value-oriented life. For preschool education, this implies that educational program content and learning environments should support kindness, cooperation, respect, responsibility, self-awareness, empathy, and cultural belonging in age-appropriate ways. Such an approach can be aligned with contemporary developmental principles when moral and cultural values are introduced indirectly through play, stories, modeling, interaction, and daily routines rather than through abstract instruction. Therefore, a culturally and value-based preschool educational program should integrate indigenous and Islamic educational principles with child-centered and developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Family is another central element in preschool educational program design. Children's development occurs not only inside educational centers but also within family systems, home environments, and broader social networks. Recent studies show that family socioeconomic status, social support, psychological capital, and parenting sense of competence are related to parents' capacity to support preschool children's development (Yuan et al., 2025). Household chaos and parent-child conflict can also affect preschool children's self-regulation, while mindful parenting may moderate these effects (Zhu et al., 2025). In addition, parent-grandparent coparenting relationships and caregivers' behaviors influence children's developmental patterns and daily habits (Zhao et al., 2025). These findings suggest that preschool educational programs cannot be effective if they ignore the family environment. In culturally grounded preschool education, cooperation between families and educational centers is essential for aligning

expectations, explaining the developmental role of play, reducing pressure for early formal instruction, and strengthening children's emotional and social growth.

Parenting intervention programs further demonstrate the importance of family participation in supporting preschool children's social-emotional development. Such programs can help parents understand children's developmental needs, improve family interactions, and support emotional regulation and social competence (Vatou et al., 2026). This is particularly relevant in contexts where some parents may equate preschool success with early reading, writing, and formal academic achievement. When families misunderstand the philosophy of preschool education, educators may face pressure to replace play-based and developmental activities with premature academic instruction. Therefore, an indigenous preschool educational program should include mechanisms for parent education, family involvement, and home-center communication. Family participation should not be limited to occasional meetings; rather, it should become an integral part of educational program implementation, cultural enrichment, and assessment of children's holistic development.

The role of preschool educators is equally important. Educators are the main mediators between educational program intentions and children's lived learning experiences. They interpret educational program goals, select activities, organize the learning environment, communicate with families, and respond to children's developmental differences. However, preschool educators may experience stressors, work pressure, lack of resources, and weak institutional support. Hindrance stressors can increase turnover intentions among preschool teachers, while work engagement and meaningful work play important roles in shaping professional persistence and motivation (Zhang et al., 2025). These issues are highly relevant to educational program implementation because even the most carefully designed educational program cannot succeed without competent, motivated, and supported educators. Therefore, the empowerment of preschool educators should include specialized training in developmental psychology, play-based pedagogy, cultural content design, family communication, observation-based assessment, and reflective practice.

New technologies and artificial intelligence have also created emerging possibilities for preschool teacher education and educational program development. Integrating artificial intelligence into preschool teacher education can influence educators' self-efficacy, especially

when technological proficiency is considered as a key factor in implementation (Wang et al., 2025). This suggests that future preschool educational programs may benefit from digital resources, adaptive tools, educational games, and teacher-support systems. Nevertheless, technology must be used in a culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate manner. In an indigenous educational program, digital tools should support rather than replace local stories, embodied play, social interaction, and culturally meaningful learning. The main issue is not whether technology should be used, but how it can be integrated into a educational program that maintains cultural identity, human interaction, and holistic development as its central principles.

Preschool educational program design also requires attention to creativity, problem solving, and interdisciplinary learning. STEAM activities can provide rich opportunities for children to engage in social problem solving, exploration, collaboration, and creative thinking (Zhan, 2025). Such activities are compatible with play-based and experiential learning because they allow children to investigate real-world phenomena, manipulate materials, communicate ideas, and learn through trial and error. When STEAM activities are culturally adapted, they can incorporate local materials, indigenous stories, environmental features, traditional crafts, and community experiences. In this way, creativity and cultural identity can reinforce one another. A preschool educational program based on indigenous culture should therefore avoid a narrow or static view of tradition; instead, it should use cultural resources as dynamic foundations for inquiry, creativity, and children's active meaning-making.

The issue of assessment is another essential dimension of preschool educational program design. Developmentally appropriate preschool assessment should be qualitative, continuous, descriptive, and process-oriented rather than test-centered. Since preschool children develop at different rates and express learning through play, movement, language, social interaction, art, and emotional responses, assessment should focus on holistic development and individual progress. This approach is consistent with psychological understandings of early childhood learning and self-regulation (Smith & Wood, 2023; Wyatt, 2025). In an identity-oriented educational program, assessment should also consider children's participation in cultural activities, sense of belonging, cooperation, respect for values, and ability to engage with local stories, games, and symbols. Therefore, assessment should help educators understand children more deeply, adapt learning experiences, and

communicate developmental progress to families without creating unnecessary academic pressure.

A review of recent literature indicates that preschool educational program design is increasingly shaped by several interconnected priorities: holistic development, play-based learning, family participation, educator empowerment, cultural integration, technological adaptation, and process-oriented assessment. Studies on emotional management, self-regulation, parenting, family environment, teacher education, indigenous-local games, national identity, and educational program localization all point to the need for a comprehensive framework that can connect developmental, cultural, social, and institutional dimensions (Ahmadi et al., 2022; Mohammadi & Soleimani, 2023; Yu & Ahmad, 2025; Zhu et al., 2025). In the Iranian context, the necessity of designing a preschool educational program compatible with indigenous culture and values is intensified by the importance of national identity, Islamic-Iranian educational foundations, family expectations, and the need to adapt global educational insights to local realities (Bagheri, 2021; Karimi & Mousavi, 2023; Karimi, 2022). Thus, the central challenge is to identify the main components, implementation barriers, and conceptual framework of a culturally grounded preschool educational program.

Based on the above considerations, the present study aimed to identify and explain preschool educational program approaches based on indigenous culture and values and to develop a framework for designing an identity-oriented educational program compatible with the cultural context of preschool education.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of approach, and it was conducted with the aim of identifying and explaining preschool educational program approaches within the context of indigenous culture and values. To achieve this objective, qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews were used in order to extract and analyze the views, experiences, and perceptions of specialists in the field of early childhood education regarding the components and approaches of an indigenous educational program. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to examine educational phenomena in their real context while considering the meanings and interpretations of the participants, and to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of educational programs. The research population consisted of specialists and experts in preschool education, educational program planning, educational psychology, and experienced educators in preschool centers who had scientific or practical experience in early childhood education and familiarity with educational programs at this level. The research sample was selected using purposive sampling based on the principle of theoretical saturation. This means that individuals were selected for interviews who could provide rich and relevant information related to the research topic. The process of selecting participants continued until new data reached saturation and the information became repetitive. In total, 15 preschool specialists and educators were selected as research participants (Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of the Research Participants

No.	Participant Code	Gender	Educational Degree	Field/Specialization	Position or Occupation	Work Experience	Area of Experience
1	Participant 1	Female	PhD	Educational program Planning	University faculty member	18 years	Educational program and preschool education
2	Participant 2	Male	PhD	Educational Psychology	University faculty member	20 years	Child development and learning
3	Participant 3	Female	Master's degree	Preschool Education	Preschool educator	12 years	Direct education of children
4	Participant 4	Female	PhD	Philosophy of Education	Educational researcher	15 years	Foundations of indigenous education
5	Participant 5	Male	Master's degree	Educational Planning	Education specialist	10 years	Educational policymaking
6	Participant 6	Female	Master's degree	Child Psychology	Child counselor	9 years	Social and emotional development
7	Participant 7	Female	Master's degree	Elementary Education	Director of preschool center	14 years	Program management and implementation
8	Participant 8	Male	PhD	Educational program Planning	University professor	17 years	Educational program design

9	Participant 9	Female	Master's degree	Preschool Education	Educator and content designer	11 years	Educational and cultural activities
10	Participant 10	Female	PhD	Educational program Studies	Researcher	13 years	Content analysis of educational programs
11	Participant 11	Male	Master's degree	Sociology of Education	Cultural specialist	8 years	Culture and education
12	Participant 12	Female	Master's degree	Educational Psychology	Educator and counselor	10 years	Assessment of child development
13	Participant 13	Female	PhD	Islamic Education	Faculty member	16 years	Educational values and identity
14	Participant 14	Male	Master's degree	Educational Management	Educational manager	12 years	Planning and supervision
15	Participant 15	Female	Master's degree	Preschool Education	Experienced educator	9 years	Indigenous games and activities

The main data collection instrument in this study was the semi-structured interview. For this purpose, an initial framework of open-ended questions was designed based on the objectives and research questions. These questions were formulated in such a way as to allow participants to freely express their views, experiences, and analyses regarding preschool educational program approaches, the role of indigenous culture and values in education, and existing challenges. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent, then fully transcribed. In addition to the interviews, document and text analysis related to preschool educational programs was used to enrich the data, including policy documents, educational programs, educational guides, and some scientific sources related to early childhood education. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The data analysis process was carried out in several stages:

Full transcription of the interviews and repeated reading of the texts to gain a general understanding of the data.

Extraction of meaning units from the interview and document texts.

Initial coding of the data and identification of key concepts.

Classification of similar codes into categories and subcategories.

Extraction of the main themes and explanation of preschool educational program approaches within the context of indigenous culture and values.

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection so that the questions could be revised and the interviews deepened in subsequent stages. Various strategies were used to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, including participant review to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of their views, peer review by academic colleagues to evaluate the coding and data classification process, and comparison of data from different sources, including interviews and documents. Efforts were also made to provide a precise description of the research stages so that the transferability and auditability of the results would be possible for other researchers. Ethical principles were observed in conducting the research. Participation in the interviews was completely voluntary, and before each interview, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants. They were also assured that the information provided would be used solely for research purposes and that their identity and personal information would remain confidential.

3. Findings and Results

First research question: What are the main components of indigenous approaches in preschool educational programs?

In response to the first research question, the interview texts were first analyzed through open coding using content analysis, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Open Coding of Interview Texts

Key Statement of Interviewee	Initial Code	Initial Concept
"The preschool educational program should prioritize children's emotional development more than formal literacy instruction."	Prioritizing emotional development over literacy instruction	Emphasis on whole-child development
"Our children show greater motivation and concentration when they participate in play-based activities."	Increased motivation in play-based activities	Play-based learning

“We should not merely copy global models; they should be localized according to Iranian-Islamic culture.”	Necessity of localizing global experiences	Cultural alignment of the educational program
“Parents strongly want children to learn reading and writing earlier, and this creates pressure on the educator.”	Parental pressure for early literacy instruction	Cultural challenges and parental expectations
“The educator should have a facilitative role, not be a traditional teacher who only provides direct instruction.”	Educator’s facilitative role	Change in the educator’s role
“Children at this age need structured social interaction so that their communication skills are strengthened.”	Strengthening social interactions	Social skills as a educational program goal
“The learning environment should be rich, safe, and stimulating; current rigid classrooms are not suitable for this age.”	Need for a rich learning environment	Age-appropriate learning environment
“In successful countries, assessments are mostly descriptive and process-oriented, not test-oriented.”	Process-oriented assessment	Non-test-based/descriptive assessment
“Children develop better mentally and emotionally through art, music, and movement activities.”	Role of art and movement in development	Multidimensional educational program
“Preschool educators have not received sufficient training in developmental psychology, and this is problematic.”	Lack of educators’ competence in developmental psychology	Need for educators’ professional development
“Local games and Iranian stories can transmit cultural values.”	Use of indigenous stories and games	Integration of cultural content
“When children have choices, their participation increases; we should provide opportunities for choice.”	Children’s right to choose	Child-centered learning
“Some imported activities do not correspond to the temperament and parenting style of Iranian families.”	Incompatibility of some global models	Necessity of cultural adaptation
“The child should have the opportunity to experiment; hands-on activity is the foundation of their learning.”	Experiential learning	Experience-centered learning
“In preschool, creating a sense of psychological safety is the most important basis for any type of learning.”	Children’s psychological safety	Fundamental learning needs
“The educational program should be flexible because children in the same classroom may be at different developmental levels.”	Individual differences	Educational program flexibility
“Our serious challenge is the lack of standardized educational tools for this age.”	Lack of age-appropriate tools and resources	Need for educational equipment
“Effective educator–parent communication can double the impact of the program.”	Importance of home–school communication	Parental participation
“The main goal of preschool should be to develop fundamental skills such as attention, self-regulation, and curiosity.”	Strengthening executive skills	Development of basic cognitive skills
“The experience of countries such as Finland shows that a later start to formal education produces better outcomes.”	Importance of delaying formal education	Global approaches supporting play-based learning

As shown in Table 2, the content analysis of the interview texts indicates a general consensus on prioritizing children’s holistic development, especially emotional and social dimensions, over formal and early learning. Repeated emphasis on play-based learning, experience-centered learning, and the necessity of localizing educational programs according to Iranian-Islamic culture and values, along with attention to the educator’s facilitative role and a rich and safe learning environment, were among the main themes highlighted by the interviewees. Moreover, challenges such as parental pressure for early literacy

instruction, insufficient specialized training for educators, and the need for age-appropriate educational tools were identified as barriers to implementing an effective preschool educational program. Finally, the importance of educational program flexibility in light of children’s individual differences and the key role of parental participation in the success of the educational process were among the other key findings of this analysis.

Next, using axial coding, the extracted concepts from the table above are presented in the axial coding table (Table 3).

Table 3

Axial Coding of Initial Concepts Extracted from Interview Texts

Initial Code	Category/Core Concept	Key Statement of Interviewee (Example)
Prioritizing emotional development over literacy instruction; necessity of an integrated and comprehensive approach	1. Overarching goals and philosophy of preschool education	“I think the first priority should be psychological and emotional, and then literacy.” / “Preschool education should cover all aspects of development.”
Importance of play in learning; learning through experience and activity; attention to children’s interests and needs; qualitative and continuous assessment instead of testing; importance of attention to children’s individual differences; indirect teaching of basic concepts such as numbers and letters	2. Teaching–learning methods	“The child learns through play, not by sitting behind a desk.” / “The child must experience it personally in order to understand.” / “Education should be based on the child’s own interests.” / “Children should not be tested; their behavior should be observed.” / “Every child learns differently; they should not all be treated the same.” / “Stories and games can also convey concepts.”

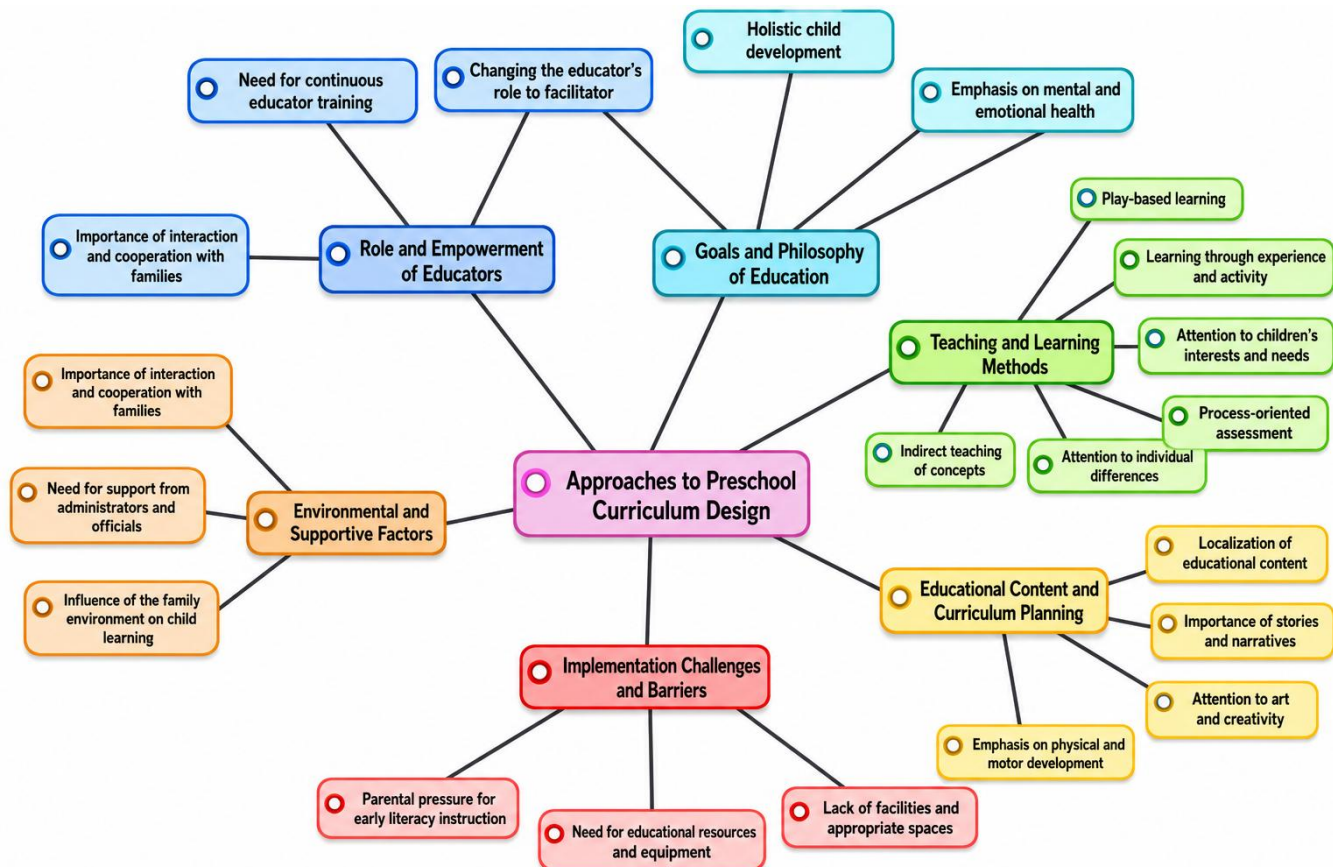
Need for localization of educational content; importance of stories and narratives in conveying concepts; attention to art and creativity; emphasis on motor and physical development	3. Educational content and educational program planning	"Books and games should be consistent with our culture." / "Stories are very important, both for language learning and for transmitting values." / "There should be space for painting, crafts, and creativity." / "Movement games are essential for children's development."
Parental pressure for earlier start of formal education; need to provide sufficient resources and equipment; lack of appropriate facilities and spaces Need for continuous training for educators; changing the educator's role from transmitter to facilitator	4. Implementation challenges and barriers 5. Role and empowerment of educators	"Parents insist a lot that their child learn letters earlier." / "If there are appropriate materials and toys, our work also becomes easier." / "Our space is limited and is not suitable for movement games." "More training courses should be held for us." / "Our duty is not only to teach; we must guide."
Importance of interaction and cooperation with families; need for support from administrators and officials; influence of the family environment on children's learning	6. Environmental and supportive factors	"We should be in contact with parents and explain the matter to them as well." / "The school principal's support is very important." / "If the family also follows up, the impact is greater."

In Table 3, the classification of the interviewees' key statements into six main core categories provides a comprehensive picture of the various dimensions of education at this level. These categories include: 1. overarching goals and philosophy of preschool education, which emphasizes holistic development; 2. teaching-learning methods, centered on active and child-centered learning; 3. educational content and educational program planning, considering localization and comprehensiveness; 4. implementation challenges and barriers, such as parental

pressure and lack of resources; 5. the role and empowerment of educators, emphasizing a paradigm shift in the educator's role toward facilitation; and 6. environmental and supportive factors, including families and administrators. Each core category includes a set of initial codes and, by presenting a sample key statement, contributes to a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perspectives and provides the basis for subsequent analyses and extraction of key themes in selective coding.

Figure 1

MAXQDA Software Output for Preschool Educational program Approaches



1. Overarching Goals and Philosophy of Preschool Education:

This category forms the core and general vision of the preschool period. Based on the data, the philosophy of education at this level should go beyond merely teaching literacy and numeracy. The main priority is the holistic development of the child, encompassing emotional, psychological, social, and cognitive dimensions. The emphasis is that this period serves as a foundation for the child's future psychological and social health and should not be limited merely to the early teaching of academic concepts. The approach should be integrated and comprehensive so as to cover all aspects of children's development and, instead of merely transmitting information, should cultivate children's fundamental competencies.

2. Teaching-Learning Approaches and Methods:

This category addresses how educational goals are realized. The data show that traditional and transmission-oriented methods do not have the necessary effectiveness. Instead, active and child-centered learning, based on play, experience, and practical activities, is introduced as an effective approach. These methods should be designed by considering children's interests and needs. Moreover, teaching basic concepts such as numbers and letters should be carried out indirectly through attractive content such as stories and games. Qualitative and continuous assessment of children's behavior and progress, rather than traditional tests, is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of these methods. Understanding and respecting children's individual differences is also considered one of the fundamental principles of this approach.

3. Educational Content and Educational Program Planning:

This category addresses what is taught and how it is structured. There is a strong emphasis on localizing educational content; that is, materials, stories, games, and activities should be consistent with the culture, values, and traditions of Iranian society. The importance of stories and narratives as powerful tools for conveying concepts and values and strengthening language learning is highlighted. In addition, attention to art, creativity, and motor and physical

development is emphasized as an inseparable part of the educational program. Educational program planning should be comprehensive and cover all these dimensions.

4. Implementation Challenges and Barriers:

This category refers to the problems and barriers that make the optimal implementation of programs difficult. Parental pressure for the early start of formal education, such as letters and numbers, and the lack of proper understanding of the philosophy of preschool education constitute one of the main challenges. Lack of facilities, inappropriate educational spaces, especially for movement activities, and the need to provide sufficient educational resources and equipment are other physical and infrastructural barriers that affect implementation quality.

5. Role and Empowerment of Educators:

Educators play a key role in the successful implementation of programs. The data show that educators need continuous training and updating of their knowledge and skills. More importantly, a paradigm shift in the educator's role is necessary; that is, the educator should move from being merely a transmitter of information to a facilitator of the child's learning process. This transformation requires support and specialized training.

6. Environmental and Supportive Factors:

This category addresses external factors that influence the educational process. Effective interaction and cooperation with families are essential for explaining the goals and philosophy of preschool education and gaining their participation. The influence of the family environment on children's learning and development should also not be overlooked. In addition, support from administrators and officials, such as the school principal, in providing resources, supporting programs, and creating a favorable working environment for educators plays an important role in overall success.

Second research question: What are the most important challenges and barriers to implementing indigenous approaches in preschool educational programs in Iran?

In response to the second research question, the interview texts were first analyzed through open coding using content analysis, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Open Coding of Implementation Challenges and Barriers in the Preschool Program

Key Statement from Interview	Initial Code	Initial Concept
Many parents expect children to learn reading and writing in preschool.	Parental pressure for teaching letters and numbers	Expectation for early formal education

Some families believe that if children only play, they do not learn anything.	Misunderstanding of educational play	Misunderstanding of the philosophy of preschool education
Parents usually evaluate children's progress based on their ability to read and write.	Valuing early literacy instruction	Instruction-oriented attitude of society
The space in many centers is not sufficient for movement activities.	Limitation of educational space	Inappropriateness of the physical environment
Some centers do not have sufficient facilities for diverse games.	Lack of play and educational equipment	Limitation of educational resources
Manipulative materials and art activity materials are very limited in some centers.	Lack of educational materials	Poverty of learning tools
Many educators need more specialized training.	Need for educators' professional training	Weakness in professional competence
Some educators do not have deep familiarity with the principles of developmental psychology.	Weak knowledge of child development	Lack of specialized knowledge
Refresher courses for educators are limited.	Lack of in-service training courses	Weakness of the educator empowerment system
Sometimes there is not enough managerial support for implementing new programs.	Lack of managerial support	Weakness of organizational support
Effective communication between families and the educational center is not always established.	Weak home-center interaction	Educational inconsistency
The financial resources of centers for preparing educational equipment are limited.	Limitation of educational budget	Weakness in resource provision

Next, using axial coding, the extracted concepts from the table above are presented in the axial coding table (Table 5).

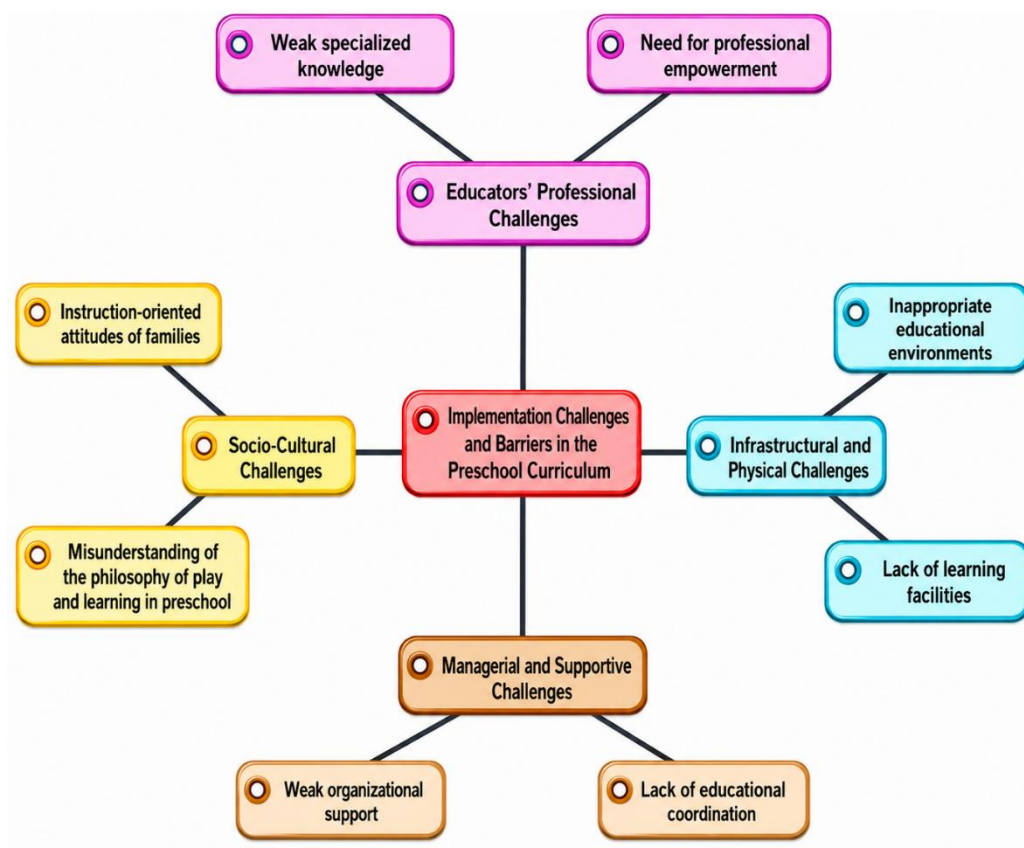
Table 5

Axial Coding of Implementation Challenges and Barriers in the Localized Preschool Program

Core Category	Related Concepts	Sample Initial Codes
Socio-cultural challenges	Instruction-oriented attitudes of families; misunderstanding of the philosophy of play and learning in preschool	Parental pressure for teaching letters and numbers; misunderstanding of educational play; valuing early literacy instruction
Infrastructural and physical challenges	Inappropriateness of educational environments and lack of learning facilities	Limitation of educational space; lack of play equipment; lack of educational materials
Educators' professional challenges	Weakness in specialized knowledge and need for professional empowerment	Need for educators' professional training; weak knowledge of child development; lack of in-service training courses
Managerial and supportive challenges	Weak organizational support and lack of educational coordination	Lack of managerial support; weak home-center interaction; limitation of educational budget

Figure 2

MAXQDA Software Output for Challenges and Implementation Barriers in the Preschool Educational program



Based on the findings, the challenges of implementing the preschool educational program have a multidimensional nature and arise from the interaction of socio-cultural, infrastructural, professional, and managerial factors. At the socio-cultural level, the instruction-oriented attitude of some families and society toward children's learning has led to less attention being paid to play-based, experiential, and holistic developmental activities and has strengthened the expectation for early formal education. In many cases, this creates pressure on educators to focus on early academic skills rather than on developing children's social and emotional skills and creativity.

At the infrastructural level, limitations in educational spaces, lack of play equipment and diverse learning tools, and the absence of educational materials suited to indigenous culture are among the other factors that make the optimal implementation of development-oriented and play-based programs difficult. On the other hand, in the professional dimension, weakness in educators' specialized training, the limited availability of refresher courses, and insufficient familiarity of some educators with the foundations of child developmental psychology constitute barriers to designing

and implementing educational activities appropriate to children's developmental characteristics.

Alongside these factors, managerial and supportive challenges also play an important role in shaping the current situation. Lack of institutional support, limited financial resources, weakness in specialized supervision and guidance, and inconsistency between families and preschool centers cause educational programs based on modern and indigenous approaches to face numerous barriers.

Overall, the results of the selective coding stage indicate that the challenges of implementing the preschool educational program are not limited to one specific dimension; rather, they result from the interaction of a set of cultural, structural, and professional factors. Therefore, improving the quality of educational programs at this level requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that simultaneously addresses the reform of cultural attitudes, the enhancement of educators' professional competence, the strengthening of educational infrastructures, and the expansion of managerial and policy support.

Third research question: What framework can contribute to designing an identity-oriented educational program compatible with indigenous culture?

Table 6

Proposed Framework for Designing an Identity-Oriented Educational program Compatible with Indigenous Culture

Main Axis	Components	Explanation of Application in the Educational program
Psychological foundations of development and learning	Child-centeredness, attention to individual differences, active and exploratory learning	The educational program should be designed according to children's developmental characteristics and should provide opportunities for experience, discovery, and interaction.
Play-based and experiential learning	Educational games, artistic activities, storytelling, creative drama	Play, as the most important learning tool in preschool education, contributes to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development.
Cultural identity and localization of content	Use of cultural stories and symbols, indigenous games, attention to local language and customs	Educational content should reflect the culture and values of society in order to strengthen children's sense of belonging and cultural identity.
Family and community participation	Family cooperation with educators, parental participation in activities, connection with local cultural institutions	Continuous communication between the family and the preschool center strengthens the educational process and coordinates children's learning experiences.
Educator empowerment	Specialized training of educators, in-service courses, development of skills for designing indigenous activities	Educators should be able to integrate scientific principles of education with the cultural elements of society.
Managerial and policy support	Flexible educational policies, provision of educational resources, institutional supervision and support	The implementation of identity-oriented programs requires structural and managerial support at the level of the educational system.
Assessment of children's holistic development	Process-oriented assessment, attention to social and emotional development, assessment of identity-related skills	Assessment should focus on children's holistic development and should not be limited to measuring cognitive skills.

Based on the qualitative findings, the central core of the framework is based on the "interaction among culture, identity, and child development." As Bronfenbrenner's ecological model also emphasizes, child development occurs through systematic interaction with family, school, culture, and social structure. Therefore, an effective educational program should be designed and implemented across all these levels:

At the microsystem level: children's daily experiences, play, and educator interactions play a role.

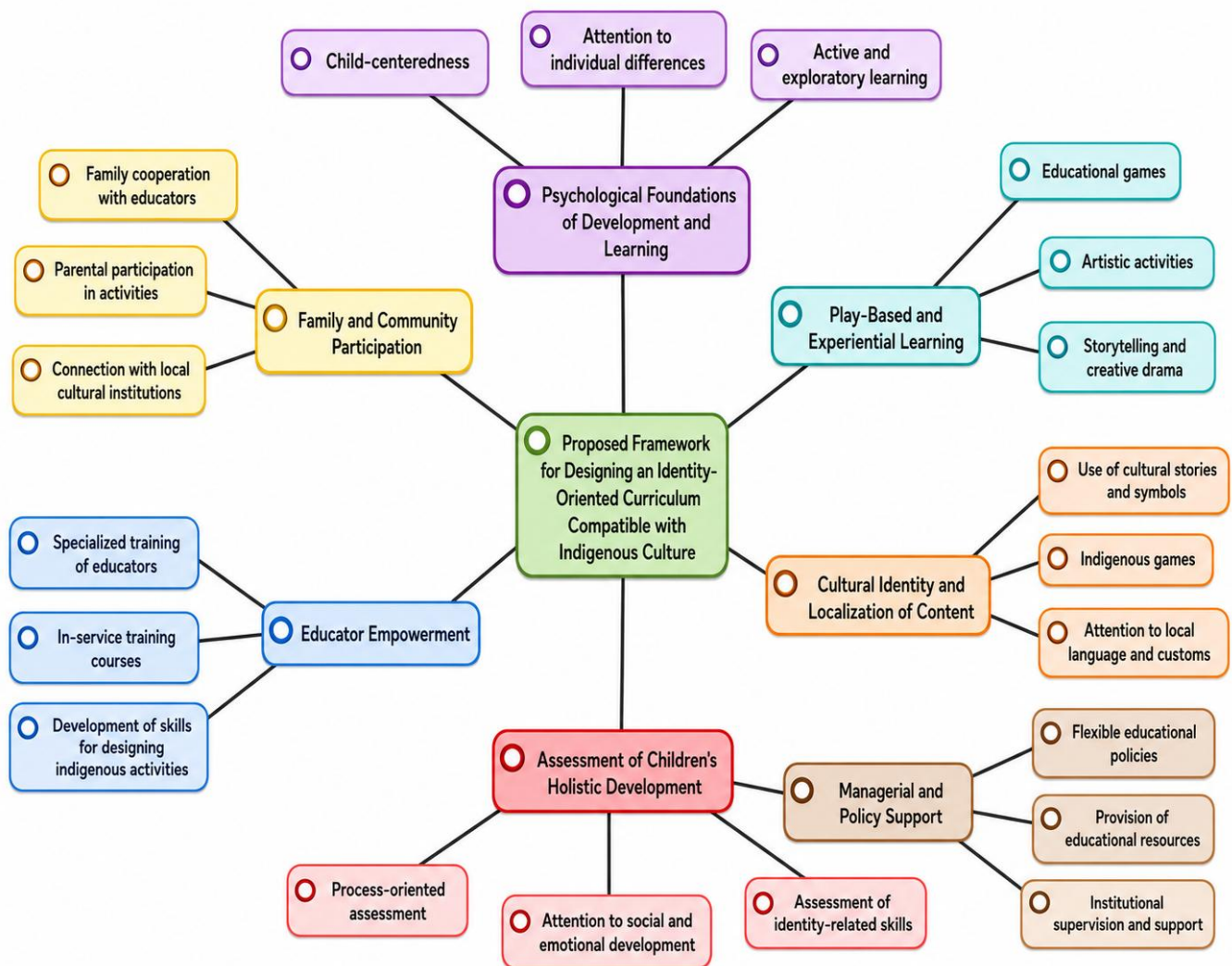
At the mesosystem level: the relationship between home and the educational center becomes important.

At the exosystem level: policies, supports, and cultural resources are influential.

At the macrosystem level: values, language, customs, and cultural heritage form the foundation of the approach.

Figure 3

MAXQDA Software Output for the Framework of Designing an Identity-Oriented Preschool Educational program



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that the main approaches to preschool educational program design based on indigenous culture and values can be organized into six central dimensions: overarching goals and philosophy of preschool education, teaching-learning methods, educational content and educational program planning, implementation challenges and barriers, the role and empowerment of educators, and environmental and supportive factors. The results further showed that the philosophy of preschool education should prioritize children's holistic development rather than premature academic instruction and formal literacy acquisition. Participants repeatedly emphasized emotional, psychological, social, cognitive, and moral development as the primary goals of preschool education. This finding is consistent with contemporary perspectives in educational psychology, which consider preschool education as a

multidimensional developmental process rather than merely preparation for academic schooling (Smith & Wood, 2023). Similarly, studies on preschool children's emotional management and self-regulation have shown that emotional competence, executive functioning, and social adaptation are foundational for later learning and adjustment (Wyatt, 2025; Yu & Ahmad, 2025). The emphasis on emotional well-being and holistic growth in the present study also aligns with parenting intervention research highlighting the significance of early social-emotional support in preschool years (Vatou et al., 2026). Therefore, the findings suggest that indigenous preschool educational programs should move beyond an academic-centered orientation and instead focus on nurturing children's comprehensive developmental capacities.

Another important finding of the study was the strong emphasis on play-based, child-centered, and experiential learning approaches. Participants considered play to be the

most effective medium for preschool learning and argued that children develop cognitive, emotional, social, and communicative skills through active participation in meaningful experiences. This finding supports developmental theories that emphasize active learning, exploration, and interaction as essential mechanisms of early childhood development (Smith & Wood, 2023). It is also consistent with research indicating that educational games and experiential activities can significantly enhance preschool children's cognitive engagement and developmental outcomes (Baikulova et al., 2026). In addition, findings related to the use of local games and cultural activities correspond with research showing that indigenous-local games improve children's motor, social, and participatory skills while strengthening cultural identity and social belonging (Mohammadi & Soleimani, 2023). The present study therefore reinforces the idea that play-based learning should not be treated as a supplementary activity but rather as the core pedagogical approach of preschool education. Moreover, integrating indigenous games, stories, music, movement, and creative activities can simultaneously support developmental learning and cultural continuity.

The findings also revealed the importance of localization and cultural adaptation in preschool educational program design. Participants emphasized that preschool educational content should reflect Iranian-Islamic culture, indigenous values, local stories, customs, language, and social traditions. This result is highly consistent with research emphasizing the importance of cultural integration in early childhood education (Garcia & Miller, 2022). Cultural alignment in educational programs increases children's sense of belonging, identity formation, and emotional connection to learning environments. Research on preschool programs with an emphasis on national identity similarly demonstrates that educational content can contribute significantly to strengthening children's cultural awareness and identity development (Karimi, 2022). In addition, educational program models based on national transformation documents stress that preschool education should be aligned with broader educational, moral, and cultural goals within society (Karimi & Mousavi, 2023). The current findings indicate that localization is not limited to superficial changes in educational materials; rather, it requires a deeper restructuring of educational program philosophy, teaching approaches, educational interactions, and value transmission processes. In this regard, the findings are also compatible with perspectives in Islamic education that regard education as a process of moral, social, and

identity formation rather than mere information transfer (Bagheri, 2021).

The study further identified several major implementation challenges and barriers affecting the realization of indigenous preschool educational program approaches. One of the most important barriers was parental pressure for early formal instruction, particularly reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Participants reported that many parents still equate educational quality with early academic achievement and may underestimate the importance of play, emotional development, and experiential learning. This finding reflects the broader social orientation toward instruction-centered education and confirms previous findings regarding challenges in localizing preschool educational programs within Iran's educational system (Ahmadi et al., 2022). Such parental expectations may create tension between developmentally appropriate educational approaches and socially dominant academic expectations. The findings also correspond with studies emphasizing the importance of parent education and family awareness programs in supporting children's social-emotional development and reducing unrealistic academic pressures (Vatou et al., 2026). Moreover, research on family socioeconomic status and parenting competence suggests that families' educational beliefs and support systems influence their understanding of children's developmental needs (Yuan et al., 2025). Therefore, improving preschool educational program implementation requires not only institutional reform but also cultural awareness and parent-centered educational interventions.

Another major challenge identified in the study was the lack of appropriate educational infrastructure, including insufficient physical space, limited educational equipment, and inadequate learning resources. Participants emphasized that many preschool centers lack suitable environments for movement activities, exploratory play, artistic engagement, and interactive learning. This issue is particularly important because effective preschool education depends heavily on environmental richness, sensory experiences, and opportunities for physical interaction. These findings are indirectly supported by research emphasizing the role of stimulating and supportive environments in promoting self-regulation, social competence, and active learning among preschool children (Wyatt, 2025; Yu & Ahmad, 2025). Similarly, the use of digital educational games and technological learning resources requires sufficient institutional support and educational infrastructure (Baikulova et al., 2026). The findings of the present study

therefore suggest that educational quality in preschool settings cannot be separated from environmental conditions, access to resources, and infrastructural investment. Without adequate facilities and educational tools, implementation of child-centered and play-based educational programs becomes highly difficult.

The professional role and empowerment of preschool educators also emerged as a critical theme in the findings. Participants highlighted the need for continuous professional development, greater familiarity with developmental psychology, and a shift from traditional teaching roles toward facilitative and interactive educational roles. This finding aligns with modern perspectives on preschool teacher education, which emphasize reflective practice, pedagogical flexibility, developmental understanding, and learner-centered interaction (Smith & Wood, 2023). Research on integrating artificial intelligence into preschool teacher education further demonstrates that educators' self-efficacy and technological competence significantly influence the implementation of innovative educational approaches (Wang et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on preschool teachers' work engagement and turnover intentions indicates that professional stressors, lack of institutional support, and limited meaningful engagement can negatively affect educational quality and teacher retention (Zhang et al., 2025). Therefore, educator empowerment should be considered one of the fundamental pillars of preschool educational program reform. The success of culturally grounded and identity-oriented educational programs depends largely on educators' competence, motivation, and professional support.

The findings additionally emphasized the significance of family and environmental support systems in preschool educational program implementation. Participants repeatedly referred to the importance of educator-parent communication, cooperation between educational centers and families, and supportive managerial structures. This result is highly compatible with ecological perspectives of child development, which emphasize that children's growth occurs within interconnected systems of family, school, community, and culture. Research on household environments and parent-child relationships similarly indicates that children's self-regulation and developmental adjustment are strongly affected by family interactions and environmental stability (Zhu et al., 2025). Likewise, research on parent-grandparent coparenting relationships demonstrates that children's developmental behaviors are influenced by broader caregiving systems and family

dynamics (Zhao et al., 2025). In the present study, participants argued that effective educational program implementation requires coordinated interaction among families, educators, administrators, and educational policymakers. Therefore, preschool education should not be viewed as an isolated institutional process but rather as a collaborative developmental ecosystem involving multiple social actors.

One of the most significant contributions of the present study was the development of a proposed framework for designing an identity-oriented preschool educational program compatible with indigenous culture. The framework extracted from the qualitative findings consisted of several interconnected dimensions, including psychological foundations of development and learning, play-based and experiential learning, cultural identity and localization of content, family and community participation, educator empowerment, managerial and policy support, and assessment of children's holistic development. This framework reflects an integrated and multidimensional understanding of preschool education and is consistent with both developmental and cultural perspectives in contemporary early childhood research. The emphasis on active and exploratory learning corresponds with findings regarding social problem-solving skills in preschool STEAM activities (Zhan, 2025). Similarly, the focus on social-emotional assessment and developmental evaluation is consistent with research on emotional management and executive functioning in preschool children (Wyatt, 2025; Yu & Ahmad, 2025). The framework also integrates cultural and identity-based dimensions emphasized in localization studies and national educational program models (Karimi & Mousavi, 2023; Karimi, 2022). Therefore, the proposed model may provide a comprehensive basis for future educational program development and policy planning in preschool education.

The findings of the study overall indicate that preschool educational program design based on indigenous culture and values requires a balance between developmental science, cultural identity, educational innovation, and contextual realities. The educational program should support children's holistic development while remaining responsive to cultural traditions, family expectations, and contemporary educational needs. The study also demonstrates that effective preschool education depends on the interaction of multiple dimensions, including educational philosophy, pedagogy, content design, educator competence, institutional support, and family participation.

Consequently, any attempt to reform preschool education without considering these interconnected dimensions is likely to encounter serious limitations. The results further suggest that localization and identity-oriented educational program design should not be understood as resistance to global educational knowledge; rather, they should involve the critical adaptation and integration of international insights with indigenous cultural and educational foundations.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted using a qualitative approach and a relatively limited number of participants; therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all preschool educational contexts. Second, the data were collected primarily through interviews with specialists and educators, and the direct perspectives of children and parents were not included in the analysis. Third, because educational policies and preschool practices may differ across regions and institutions, the identified challenges and proposed framework may vary in different educational and cultural settings. In addition, some participants may have interpreted indigenous culture and localization differently based on their professional backgrounds and personal experiences.

Future studies are recommended to examine the proposed educational program framework using mixed-methods or quantitative approaches in larger and more diverse populations. Comparative studies between different provinces, educational systems, or cultural groups may also provide a deeper understanding of how indigenous values influence preschool educational program implementation. Researchers are further encouraged to investigate the perspectives of parents, children, and policymakers regarding culturally grounded preschool education. Experimental studies examining the effectiveness of indigenous games, storytelling, play-based approaches, and culturally localized educational content on children's developmental outcomes would also contribute significantly to the literature. Finally, future research may explore the role of technology and artificial intelligence in supporting culturally responsive preschool educational programs.

Educational policymakers should design preschool educational programs that prioritize holistic child development, play-based learning, and cultural identity rather than early formal academic instruction. Preschool centers should strengthen collaboration with families and provide educational workshops that increase parents' awareness regarding developmental learning approaches. It

is also necessary to improve educational infrastructure by providing appropriate physical spaces, diverse learning resources, and culturally relevant educational materials. Continuous professional development programs should be organized for preschool educators to strengthen their knowledge of developmental psychology, child-centered pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. Finally, institutional and managerial support systems should be enhanced to ensure that preschool educational reforms can be implemented effectively and sustainably.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We hereby thank all participants for agreeing to record the interview and participate in the research.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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