

Exploring the Dimensions and Components of Educational Governance Affecting Adolescent Identity Formation: A Qualitative Study Using Thematic Analysis

Malihe. Zoodbin¹, Nader. Motie Haghshenas^{2*}, Valiollah. Rostamalizadeh³

¹ PhD Student, Department of Sociology, SR.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Population Economics and Human Capital, Population Research Institute, Tehran, Iran

³ Associate Professor, Department of Migration and Urbanization, National Population Research Institute, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: nader.haghshenas@nipr.ac.ir

E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
Thseen Nazir ¹ Professor of Psychology and Counseling Department, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Turkey thseen.nazir@ihu.edu.tr	Reviewer 1: Mohammadreza Zarbakhsh Bahri ¹ Associate Professor ‘Department of Psychology, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran. Email: M.Zarbakhsh@Toniau.ac.ir Reviewer 2: Seyed Ali Darbani ¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology and Counseling, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Email: Ali.darbani@iau.ac.ir

1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The Introduction states that “governance provides an important analytical framework for understanding how educational systems address complex developmental issues that cannot be managed effectively by a single institution or through purely hierarchical mechanisms.” This proposition is central to the manuscript, yet the theoretical mechanism linking governance characteristics to adolescent identity formation remains insufficiently developed. The authors should explain more explicitly how governance affects identity—for example, through consistency or inconsistency of normative messages, opportunities for participation, institutional trust, perceived legitimacy, social belonging, role-modeling, and access to culturally meaningful identity resources. Developing these mediating mechanisms would substantially strengthen the theoretical contribution and prevent the governance–identity relationship from appearing merely associative.

In the paragraph discussing “the digital transformation of society,” the manuscript appropriately introduces artificial intelligence, data infrastructures, social media, and digital platforms; however, the relationship between digital governance and

the five-part educational network identified in the findings should be established more explicitly. The manuscript later treats “cyberspace” as one of the five educational institutions, yet cyberspace is analytically different from family, school, mosque, and national media because it is an environment, infrastructure, and collection of actors rather than a single institution. The authors should justify this categorization and clarify whether “cyberspace” refers to social media platforms, online communities, digital content ecosystems, platform companies, or adolescents’ broader digital environment.

The final portion of the Introduction states that “there remains a need for an integrative framework that conceptualizes adolescent identity formation as an outcome influenced by the quality of interactions among educational governance actors.” This research gap is promising but needs to be formulated more systematically. The authors should distinguish between the empirical gap (limited qualitative evidence from Iran/Alborz), the theoretical gap (insufficient integration of governance and identity-development literatures), and the methodological gap (limited multilevel investigation involving family, school, and policymaking actors). A more explicit three-part gap statement would clarify the manuscript’s originality and strengthen the justification for the qualitative design.

In the Methodology section, the sentence “Given the exploratory, multilevel, and context-dependent nature of the phenomenon of educational governance and its relationship with adolescent identity formation, a qualitative approach and thematic analysis method were employed” is reasonable, but the type of thematic analysis should be specified more precisely. Braun and Clarke’s framework encompasses different epistemological and analytical orientations, including reflexive thematic analysis. The authors should clarify whether the analysis was inductive, deductive, or hybrid; semantic or latent; realist, constructionist, or contextualist; and whether coding was conducted primarily at the explicit-content level or included interpretive latent meanings. This is particularly important because the manuscript reports both participant-language codes and more abstract governance constructs.

The study reports that “participants were selected using purposive sampling and, in specific cases, snowball sampling,” but the eligibility criteria for each actor group are not provided. The authors should explicitly state inclusion and exclusion criteria for family-level participants, school-level participants, and policymakers. For example, it should be clear whether family participants had to be parents of adolescents within a specified age range, whether school participants included teachers, counselors, principals, or educational deputies, and what professional position qualified an individual as a policymaking participant. Without these criteria, the reproducibility and transferability of the sampling strategy are difficult to assess.

The sentence “The initial codes were categorized into 28 subthemes... [which] were subsequently organized into three main themes” conflicts with the Findings section, where the 28 units are referred to as “subcategories,” and the tables refer to “Category No.” The authors should establish a single hierarchical nomenclature and apply it consistently. For example, the analytic hierarchy could be defined as initial codes → concepts → subthemes → main themes → overarching theme. If this structure is adopted, every table and narrative paragraph should use precisely these labels. This revision is necessary because inconsistent qualitative terminology makes it difficult to reconstruct the analytical pathway.

The trustworthiness paragraph appropriately mentions “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability,” but the operationalization of these criteria is incomplete. Member checking and peer review are described, yet transferability is not directly addressed despite being identified as one of the four criteria. The authors should explain how transferability was supported, for example through thick description of the research setting, participant characteristics, organizational context, and sociocultural features of Alborz Province. Similarly, for dependability and confirmability, the authors should describe the audit process more concretely and indicate whether an external reviewer examined coding decisions or whether reflexive memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and researcher assumptions.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

Table 1 requires substantive clarification regarding the operational meaning of the column “Level of Involvement.” The categories “Family,” “School,” and “Policymaking” are too broad to evaluate the diversity of perspectives represented. For

example, participants S1–S9 could potentially occupy very different professional roles, such as teacher, counselor, principal, or educational administrator, while policymakers P1–P7 may work at municipal, provincial, or national levels. The authors should add a column indicating each participant’s precise role or position while preserving confidentiality. This information is essential because role-specific authority and experience could strongly influence perceptions of educational governance.

The demographic paragraph reports that “seven participants held doctoral degrees, eight held master’s degrees, and seven held bachelor’s degrees or high school diplomas.” This statement does not appear to correspond to the information presented in Table 1. Based on the table, the number of doctoral-degree holders appears lower than seven. The authors should carefully recalculate all demographic frequencies and percentages and ensure complete consistency between the narrative and the table. Such discrepancies, even when minor, raise concerns about data-management accuracy and should be corrected throughout the manuscript.

The manuscript states that “theoretical saturation was considered the criterion for terminating the sampling process.” Because the analysis is described as thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke, the use of theoretical saturation requires methodological justification, as this terminology is more traditionally associated with grounded theory. The authors should either explain why theoretical saturation was considered appropriate for their particular thematic-analysis design or employ a more compatible concept such as data sufficiency, information power, meaning saturation, or thematic sufficiency. Furthermore, the manuscript should describe how saturation was operationally assessed—for example, whether a saturation table or sequential review of newly emerging codes was used.

The data-collection paragraph states that the interview guide was “developed on the basis of the theoretical foundations and research questions,” but the manuscript does not provide sufficient information regarding the interview protocol. The authors should report the major interview domains and provide several representative questions, either in the Methodology section or as supplementary material. Questions should demonstrate how the interviews elicited experiences concerning governance structures, institutional coordination, adolescent participation, identity-related messages, value conflicts, digital environments, and local contextual factors. This would enable readers to evaluate whether the data-collection instrument adequately addressed the stated research objective without excessively directing participants toward predetermined themes.

The manuscript reports that “all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission and were transcribed immediately afterward,” but several procedural details needed for qualitative rigor are absent. The authors should specify the approximate data-collection period, whether interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, who conducted them, whether the interviewer had prior relationships with participants, whether field notes were taken, and whether transcripts were returned to participants for verification. The manuscript should also report the range and mean interview duration; Table 1 contains individual durations, but a summary statistic would make the data-collection intensity easier to evaluate.

In Phase Two, the authors state that “the analysis of 387 pages of transcribed interview data yielded 1,892 initial codes,” followed by the claim that these were “reduced to 116 abstract concepts.” The manuscript should explain more clearly the analytic operations involved in this reduction. In particular, the terms code, concept, subcategory, subtheme, category, and theme are currently used in ways that risk methodological inconsistency. Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis generally emphasizes codes and themes rather than a hierarchical coding structure resembling grounded theory. The authors should standardize terminology throughout the manuscript and explain precisely how initial codes were clustered into concepts, how concepts became subthemes/categories, and how these were organized into the three major dimensions.

Authors uploaded the revised manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.