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Experiences of Families in a Border Region Regarding Their Children's Educational Challenges: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of families regarding their children's educational challenges in a rural border region of eastern Iran. The study sought to understand how parents perceive educational opportunities, barriers, and the factors influencing their children's learning and development. A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed. Thirteen mothers and fathers from rural border villages in Darmian County, South Khorasan Province, Iran, participated during the 2025–2026 academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1969) seven-step phenomenological method. Trustworthiness was ensured according to Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Analysis identified six interconnected themes: education as a pathway to children's holistic development and future success; supportive relationships fostering school belonging; structural and contextual barriers in border schools; active parental involvement in children's learning; integration of academic, moral, and cultural values; and aspirations for equitable educational opportunities. Although parents described challenges such as limited facilities, multi-grade classrooms, and insufficient educational resources, they consistently emphasized the positive roles of committed teachers, supportive family–school relationships, and strong educational aspirations in promoting children's motivation, resilience, and sense of belonging. Families perceived children's educational experiences as shaped by the interaction between structural disadvantages and relational strengths. Despite persistent educational inequalities in border communities, supportive teachers, engaged families, and positive school relationships emerged as important protective factors that enhanced children's educational experiences. These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive educational policies that improve educational resources while strengthening collaboration between families and schools.

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Introduction

Education, as one of the most fundamental social institutions, plays a pivotal role in individual growth, cultural continuity, and the sustainable development of societies (Ganjbakhsh Zamani et al., 2023). Educational systems are not only responsible for transmitting knowledge and skills to new generations but also play a decisive role in shaping learners' identity, values, attitudes, and social capabilities (Sharlovych & Mykhalchenkova, 2024). In this regard, the process of students' learning and nurturing is by no means merely school-centered (Delen et al., 2026); rather, it results from a complex, multi-layered interaction among individual, familial, social, and cultural factors (Hikmat, 2025; Marah et al., 2025; Mahmoudi et al., 2020; Jokar & Behrouzi, 2024).

Consequently, in recent decades researchers have paid increasing attention to the role of context and setting in education and learning (Asadpour et al., 2021; Brown et al., 1989; Maxwell, 2018). One of the most significant contexts possessing distinctive characteristics is the rural context. Rural areas, owing to specific conditions such as limited educational resources (Song, 2023), cultural differences (Kalantari et al., 2013), traditional social structures (Bahadori & Hatami Khanghahi, 2024), geographical distance from educational centers, and fewer opportunities (Shakouri et al., 2022), face different educational challenges. These features render the learning and nurturing experiences of students in rural areas qualitatively different from those in urban settings (Jashireh et al., 2025). In the rural context, the family and parents often play a more prominent role in the process of raising and socializing children (Leng et al., 2025). Social structures based on close relationships, traditional values (Morina et al., 2025), type of livelihood, and parents' educational level (Umatgerieva, 2025) can all influence parents' attitudes toward education and the ways in which they support their children's learning. Students' learning processes do not occur in a vacuum (Maglasang & Galigao, 2026); rather, they take shape within a social and cultural context at whose center stands the family (Sitoe, 2025).

The family, and parents in particular, constitute the primary and most enduring educational influence, exerting a profound impact on children's learning experiences and development (Pibooltaew & Chantarakamol, 2025). As children's first teachers, parents provide the initial foundation for their cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Omarkhanova et al., 2024). Parents' attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and child-rearing practices can affect students' motivation, self-efficacy, academic achievement, and even their attitudes toward learning (Alborzi et al., 2021). For instance, some parents may regard education as a means of social and economic advancement (Enock & Living, 2025), whereas others, due to economic conditions or cultural beliefs, may assign lower priority to formal education. These differences create divergent experiences for students (Zareian & Hamidian, 2019; Umatgerieva, 2025). At times, parents' unintended behaviors and attitudes can hinder learning. Such barriers may appear in the form of excessive pressure, unrealistic expectations, direct interference in educational processes, or the creation of a stressful environment, leading to reduced motivation, anxiety, and weakened academic performance. Identifying these factors and examining the reasons for their emergence plays a key role in improving family–school collaboration and enhancing the quality of learning (Sadeghi et al., 2025).

Border regions represent a distinctive educational context in which geographical isolation, socioeconomic disparities, limited public services, and cross-border dynamics often intersect to influence children's educational opportunities (da Silva, 2023). Compared with other rural areas, schools in border communities frequently encounter additional challenges, including shortages of qualified teachers, insufficient educational infrastructure, restricted access to digital technologies, multi-grade classrooms, and limited opportunities for extracurricular learning and professional support (Carvalho et al., 2023). These structural inequalities may contribute to lower educational attainment, reduced academic aspirations, and disparities in access to high-quality education. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that families living in border communities often develop adaptive strategies and strong educational aspirations despite these constraints, highlighting the importance of family resilience, community solidarity, and collaborative relationships with schools (Roulston et al., 2024). Although previous research published since 2021 has examined rural education, parental involvement, and educational inequalities, relatively few qualitative studies have explored how parents themselves interpret and experience their children's educational challenges within border settings, particularly in the Middle East (Riwu & Shareef, 2026). Understanding these lived experiences is essential because parents' perceptions shape their educational expectations, interactions with schools, and decisions regarding

children's learning, thereby providing valuable evidence for designing context-sensitive educational policies and interventions.

Therefore, understanding the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of parents living in border regions regarding their children's learning and educational development can provide profound insights into the quality and characteristics of education within these geographically and socially unique contexts (Pantzi & Stamatoglou, 2025). As one of the principal stakeholders in the educational system, parents possess valuable knowledge and lived experiences that can contribute to improving educational quality and informing context-sensitive educational policies and interventions (Mirzaei Kalar et al., 2022). Ignoring the voices of families residing in border communities may lead to educational programs that fail to address the realities, priorities, and challenges of their everyday lives (Jahanbakhshi & Chatarsimin, 2023). Rural border areas have historically received insufficient attention relative to their strategic importance and developmental needs, and the neglect of geographical, social, and economic factors has contributed to persistent instability and educational inequalities in many rural regions of Iran despite considerable development efforts, particularly after the Revolution (Seydaei et al., 2016). Consequently, hearing the voices of parents living in rural border communities is essential for understanding how these contextual conditions influence children's educational experiences. Moreover, the border rural context is not merely a geographical location (Karimzadeh & Khaleghi, 2023); rather, it represents a distinct social and cultural world in which families interpret education through their lived experiences, values, and everyday realities (Smolnitska & Baryshpolets, 2025). Parents' beliefs and understandings of education shape their interactions with schools and the ways in which they support their children's learning (Safari & Haghighi Ashtiani, 2025). Therefore, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of children's educational challenges in border regions, it is essential to explore parents lived experiences from their own perspectives.

Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore families lived experiences regarding their children's educational challenges in a border region. A phenomenological approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive and interpret their everyday experiences within a specific social and cultural context. The study focused on capturing parents' subjective meanings and interpretations of their children's educational experiences rather than measuring predetermined variables.

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year in Darmian County, South Khorasan Province, eastern Iran, a rural border region adjacent to Afghanistan. This area is characterized by geographical remoteness, limited educational resources, and socioeconomic constraints that distinguish it from urban settings. Participants consisted of 13 parents (mothers and fathers) whose children attended rural primary schools located near the Iran–Afghanistan border. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure they possessed firsthand experience of raising school-aged children within the border-region educational context. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, whereby no substantially new meanings or themes emerged from subsequent interviews. In Table 1, Demographic Characteristics of Participants is presented.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age (years)	Parent Gender	Educational Level of Parent	Child's Grade
A1	41	Female	Primary School	Grade 2
A2	36	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Grade 3
A3	42	Female	Primary School	Grade 3
A4	39	Female	High School Diploma	Grade 3
A5	34	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Grade 4
A6	51	Female	Primary School	Grade 6
A7	42	Female	High School Diploma	Grade 4
A8	45	Male	High School Diploma	Grade 5
A9	38	Male	Primary School	Grade 4
A10	47	Male	High School Diploma	Grade 6
A11	35	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Grade 2
A12	44	Male	Primary School	Grade 5

A13	40	Female	High School Diploma	Grade 3

Participants were coded anonymously from A1 to A13 to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in Persian. An interview guide consisting of ten open-ended questions was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature. The questions explored parents' perceptions of their children's educational experiences, school engagement, family–school relationships, educational resources, challenges, aspirations, and suggestions for improving educational conditions. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet location selected by the participants. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes documenting contextual observations and researchers' reflections were also maintained throughout the data collection process to facilitate interpretation.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method (1969), which provides a systematic procedure for identifying and interpreting the essential structure of lived experiences. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of participants' experiences. Second, significant statements directly related to the phenomenon under investigation were extracted. Third, meanings were formulated from these significant statements while remaining faithful to participants' intended meanings. Fourth, similar meanings were organized into clusters of themes. Fifth, these thematic clusters were integrated into comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon. Sixth, the exhaustive descriptions were synthesized to identify the fundamental structure (essence) of families lived experiences. Finally, the findings were reviewed against the interview data to ensure that the identified themes accurately represented participants' perspectives and reflected the phenomenon comprehensively.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the findings was established according to the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated reading of interview transcripts, and member checking with several participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent audit trail documenting each stage of data collection and analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo writing, peer review of the coding process, and continuous comparison between the original interview transcripts and emerging themes. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant characteristics, sampling procedures, and analytic process, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with internationally accepted ethical principles for research involving human participants. Before participation, all parents received a clear explanation of the study objectives, interview procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and anonymous, and pseudonymous participant codes (A1–A13) were used throughout the analysis and reporting of findings. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes. Throughout the study, researchers respected participants' privacy, cultural values, and personal dignity while ensuring that no identifiable information was disclosed in the published findings

Results

A phenomenological analysis was conducted to explore families lived experiences regarding their children's educational challenges in a border region. Following repeated reading of the interview transcripts, significant statements were identified and transformed into meaning units and initial codes. Similar codes were subsequently clustered into broader subthemes and overarching themes that reflected the essence of participants' experiences. The analysis yielded six interrelated themes describing how parents understood their children's schooling, educational

barriers, and future aspirations. Table 2 presents examples of the analytical process from significant statements to initial codes.

Table 2: Examples of Meaning Units and Initial Codes Derived from the Interviews

Participant	Meaning Unit	Initial Code
A1	The school provides a safe and supportive learning environment.	Positive perception of school climate
A2	Teachers work hard despite limited resources.	Teacher commitment
A3	Modern teaching methods increase children's motivation.	Innovative teaching enhances engagement
A4	Multi-grade classrooms reduce learning opportunities.	Multi-grade classroom challenge
A5	Rewards encourage my child to attend school.	Extrinsic motivation
A6	I worry that my child may lose concentration in class.	Academic concern
A7	Friendly teachers help children feel secure.	Emotional support from teachers
A8	Parents should cooperate with teachers.	Family–school collaboration
A9	Educational facilities are insufficient compared with urban schools.	Educational inequality
A10	Religious education is an important part of schooling.	Moral and religious education
A11	School helps shape children's personality.	School as developmental environment
A12	Talking calmly helps solve learning problems.	Supportive parenting strategy
A13	Better educational resources would improve children's future.	Need for educational investment

The initial coding process demonstrated considerable consistency across interviews. Although participants described their experiences differently, many referred to similar issues, including supportive teachers, inadequate educational resources, parental involvement, children's motivation, and aspirations for better educational opportunities. These recurring ideas provided the basis for developing broader conceptual categories. The relationships among the initial codes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Development of Subthemes from Initial Codes

Subtheme	Representative Initial Codes
Structural Educational Constraints	Limited facilities, outdated equipment, multi-grade classrooms, poor infrastructure, educational inequality
Teachers as Emotional Anchors	Teacher commitment, patience, encouragement, emotional support, caring relationships
Supportive Social Relationships	Positive friendships, respectful classmates, peer acceptance, collaborative learning
Collaborative Educational Partnership	Parent participation, communication with teachers, shared educational responsibility
Holistic Value-Based Education	Moral education, religious instruction, social responsibility, cultural values
Supportive Parenting Practices	Encouragement, dialogue, rewards, guidance, emotional support
School as a Secure Developmental Space	Sense of belonging, psychological safety, positive school climate
Need for Improved Learning Environments	Technology, library, learning materials, extracurricular activities, school beautification
Hope for Educational Mobility	Future success, university aspirations, better career opportunities

As shown in Table 3, parents' experiences extended beyond isolated educational concerns and formed several interconnected dimensions. These dimensions were synthesized into six overarching themes that capture the essence of families' educational experiences.

Theme 1: Educational Hope Amid Structural Constraints

Parents generally described schooling as a valuable opportunity for their children's future while simultaneously acknowledging the structural limitations of border-region schools. Although shortages of educational facilities, technological resources, and infrastructure were repeatedly mentioned, these limitations did not diminish parents' commitment to education. Instead, families viewed schooling as the primary pathway toward social mobility and future success. Many participants emphasized that teachers compensated for limited resources through dedication and persistence, allowing children to continue learning despite contextual disadvantages. Hope therefore emerged not from the availability of educational resources alone but from parents' confidence that sustained effort by teachers, children, and families could overcome structural barriers.

Illustrative quotations

"Although our school lacks many facilities, the teachers work hard and my child enjoys learning." (A2)

"If schools had better equipment, our children could show their real abilities." (A9)

"I hope my child can build a better future despite the limitations of our village." (A11)

Theme 2: Teachers as Catalysts of Educational Resilience

Teachers were consistently described as the most influential factor shaping children's educational experiences. Parents perceived caring, patient, and supportive teachers as promoting children's confidence, motivation, and willingness to attend school. Beyond delivering academic instruction, teachers were viewed as emotional mentors who contributed to children's social and personal development. Participants also highlighted the importance of engaging instructional methods. Creative teaching approaches were believed to increase students' interest, whereas repetitive instruction reduced motivation. Consequently, teacher quality was understood not only in terms of professional competence but also through interpersonal relationships and emotional support.

Illustrative quotations

"My child enjoys school because the teachers are patient and kind." (A7)

"Interesting teaching methods make children more eager to learn." (A3)

"A good teacher can make children forget the school's shortcomings." (A1)

Theme 3: Family–School Partnership as a Protective System

Parents consistently described education as a shared responsibility between families and schools. Active communication with teachers, participation in school events, and collaboration in educational activities strengthened parents' confidence in the school and reinforced children's motivation. Many participants believed that when parents and teachers worked together, children developed stronger academic engagement and more positive attitudes toward learning. Parental involvement extended beyond attending meetings. Families described contributing to cultural celebrations, religious ceremonies, classroom activities, and providing practical support for school programs. These experiences fostered a stronger sense of partnership and collective responsibility for children's education.

Illustrative quotations

"When we participate in school activities, our children become more motivated and prouder." (A8)

"Working together with teachers makes us feel that we all share responsibility for our children's education." (A10)

"Helping at school strengthened my relationship with teachers and made me feel part of the school community." (A1)

Theme 4: School Belonging Through Positive Relationships

A strong sense of belonging emerged as an essential component of children's educational experiences. Parents repeatedly associated school belonging with warm teacher–student relationships, supportive friendships, and a respectful classroom atmosphere. These interpersonal experiences promoted emotional security, confidence, and willingness to participate in school activities. Conversely, conflicts with peers, harsh teacher behavior, or stressful classroom experiences were perceived as reducing children's motivation and emotional comfort. Parents therefore viewed positive relationships as fundamental to successful learning, particularly in schools with limited material resources.

Illustrative quotations

"My child feels safe because the teachers and classmates treat him kindly." (A13)

"Good friends and caring teachers make children love going to school." (A7)

"When children are respected, they feel that school is like a second home." (A9)

Theme 5: Holistic Education Rooted in Moral and Cultural Values

Participants viewed education as a process that should develop the whole child rather than focus solely on academic achievement. Alongside literacy and academic success, parents emphasized moral character, religious commitment, respect for others, responsibility, and cultural identity as central educational goals. They appreciated schools that reinforced these values through religious programs, ethical instruction, and everyday interactions. Parents believed

that consistency between family values and school practices strengthened children's personal development and promoted responsible citizenship.

Illustrative quotations

"Education is not only about lessons; I want my child to learn respect, responsibility, and religious values." (A8)

"The school's religious and cultural programs support the values we teach at home." (A10)

"I want my child to become both educated and morally responsible." (A11)

Theme 6: Educational Aspirations for Equity and Future Opportunities

Despite expressing overall satisfaction with their children's schools, parents consistently highlighted inequalities between border-region and urban schools. Limited facilities, outdated equipment, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted learning opportunities were viewed as obstacles to children's educational development. Nevertheless, these concerns were accompanied by strong optimism regarding children's future. Parents hoped that improved educational resources would create equal opportunities for academic achievement, university education, and meaningful employment. Educational success was therefore viewed not only as an individual accomplishment but also as a pathway toward improving family and community well-being.

Illustrative quotations

"Children in border areas deserve the same educational opportunities as children in cities." (A13)

"Better facilities would help our children discover their talents." (A9)

"I hope education will open a brighter future for my child." (A11)

Table 4: Final Thematic Structure of the Findings

Main Theme	Subthemes
Educational Hope Amid Structural Constraints	Structural Educational Constraints; Need for Improved Learning Environments; Hope for Educational Mobility
Teachers as Catalysts of Educational Resilience	Teachers as Emotional Anchors; Supportive Social Relationships
Family–School Partnership as a Protective System	Collaborative Educational Partnership; Supportive Parenting Practices
School Belonging Through Positive Relationships	School as a Secure Developmental Space; Supportive Social Relationships; Teachers as Emotional Anchors
Holistic Education Rooted in Moral and Cultural Values	Holistic Value-Based Education; Supportive Parenting Practices
Educational Aspirations for Equity and Future Opportunities	Structural Educational Constraints; Need for Improved Learning Environments; Hope for Educational Mobility

Table 4 summarizes the final thematic structure emerging from the phenomenological analysis. Although each theme captures a distinct aspect of parents lived experiences, the themes are closely interconnected. Together, they illustrate how families simultaneously negotiated educational barriers while maintaining optimism through supportive relationships, shared values, and strong aspirations for their children's future.

Table 5: Distribution of Participants Across the Emergent Themes

Main Theme	Participants Represented	n
Educational Hope Amid Structural Constraints	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	13
Teachers as Catalysts of Educational Resilience	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	12
Family–School Partnership as a Protective System	A1, A3, A5, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	10
School Belonging Through Positive Relationships	A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	12
Holistic Education Rooted in Moral and Cultural Values	A1, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	11
Educational Aspirations for Equity and Future Opportunities	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12, A13	13

Table 5 demonstrates that the identified themes were consistently represented across participants, suggesting a high level of convergence in parents lived experiences. Although individual narratives differed in emphasis and personal circumstances, they reflected common educational concerns and aspirations. This consistency supports the credibility of the thematic structure while preserving the diversity of participants' perspectives.

Overall Synthesis and Essence of Families' Educational Experiences

The phenomenological findings indicate that families' experiences of their children's education in a border region are shaped by the interaction between structural challenges and relational strengths. Although parents identified limitations such as inadequate infrastructure, restricted educational resources, and fewer learning opportunities compared with urban areas, they did not define education solely through these disadvantages. Supportive teachers, family–school collaboration, positive peer relationships, and shared moral values emerged as key protective factors that enhanced children's motivation, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging. The essence of this experience was described as sustaining educational hope within conditions of structural disadvantage, where families-maintained optimism through collective efforts and strong aspirations for their children's academic and future success. Overall, the findings demonstrate that educational resilience in border communities is influenced not only by material resources but also by the quality of interpersonal relationships, supportive educational environments, and the shared commitment of families and schools to children's holistic development. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model derived from the phenomenological analysis of families' educational experiences in a border region.

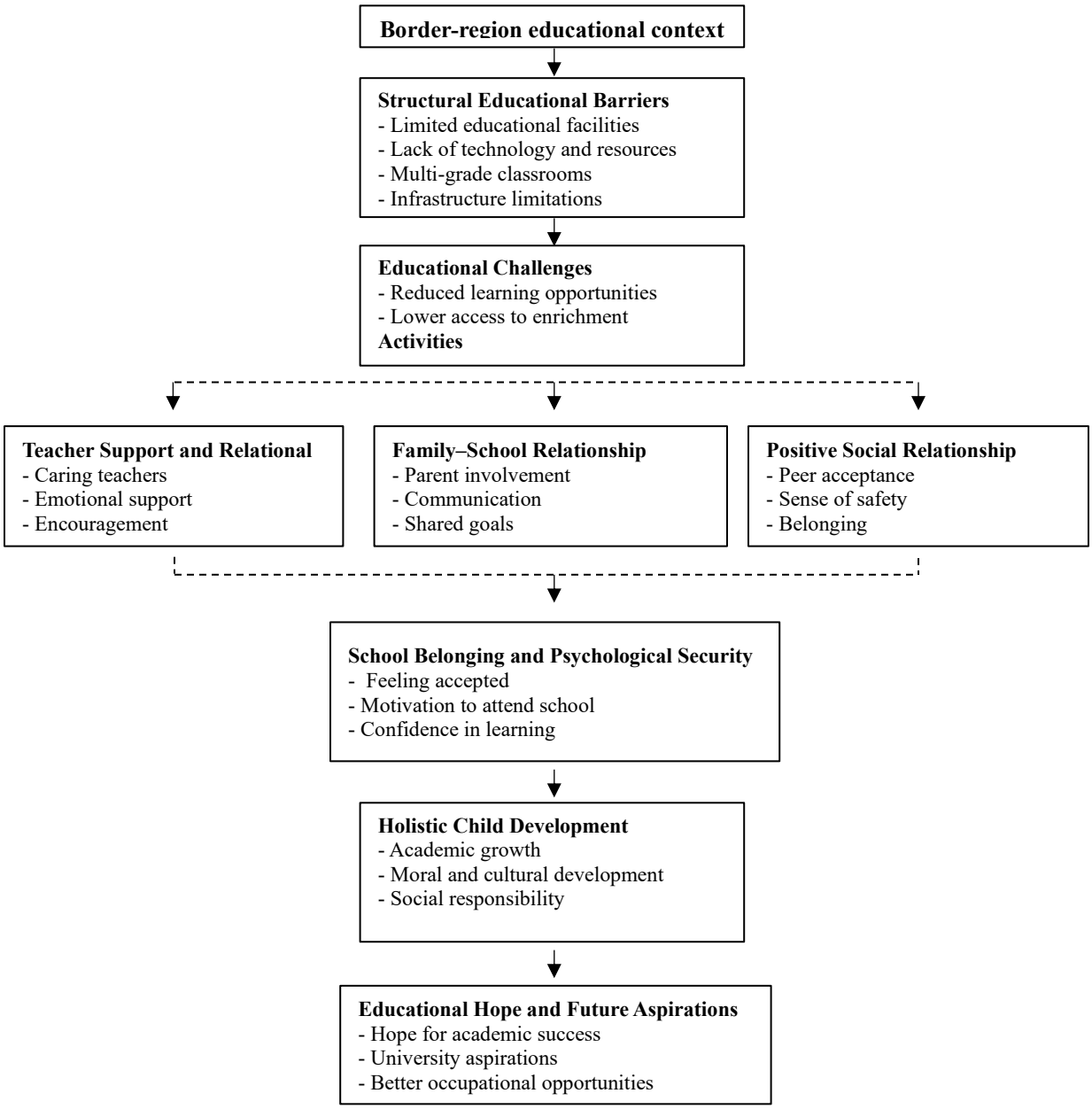

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Families' Educational Experiences and Resilience Processes in a Border Region

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of families in a rural border region regarding their children's educational challenges. The findings indicate that parents viewed education as a dynamic process shaped by both structural conditions and interpersonal relationships. Although participants acknowledged the limitations of border-region schools, they consistently emphasized the importance of supportive teachers, family involvement, and strong educational aspirations. The following discussion interprets these findings through four major themes in relation to previous literature and the specific context of border communities.

1. Education as a Source of Hope Despite Structural Disadvantage

The first major finding of this study revealed that although families living in the border region clearly recognized the structural limitations surrounding their children's education including inadequate educational facilities, geographical isolation, and unequal learning opportunities they nevertheless viewed schooling as the primary

pathway toward a better future. Parents consistently described education as an opportunity for social mobility, personal development, and future occupational success. Despite expressing concerns about educational inequalities, they maintained strong confidence in their children's ability to succeed through persistence, family support, and teachers' commitment. Thus, hope rather than deprivation emerged as the dominant lens through which families interpreted their children's educational experiences. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that educational experiences are shaped not only by objective resources but also by the broader social and cultural context in which learning occurs (Hikmat, 2025; Marah et al., 2025; Jokar & Behrouzi, 2024). The findings further support studies indicating that rural communities often attach particularly high symbolic value to education because schooling represents one of the few accessible pathways for improving future socioeconomic conditions (Song, 2023; Enock & Living, 2025). Similarly, previous investigations have shown that despite geographical disadvantage, many rural families continue to invest considerable emotional and motivational resources in their children's education (Leng et al., 2025; Umatgerieva, 2025). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that such educational aspirations may be even more pronounced in border communities, where families simultaneously experience structural inequalities and perceive education as the most realistic means of overcoming those inequalities. Recent research on border education likewise suggests that although schools in border regions frequently operate under conditions of limited infrastructure, shortages of educational resources, and restricted access to learning opportunities, families often develop resilient educational expectations that help sustain children's motivation (da Silva, 2023; Carvalho et al., 2023; Roulston et al., 2024). The present study provides qualitative support for these observations by showing that hope persisted despite parents' awareness of educational disadvantages. From a phenomenological perspective, this finding suggests that parents did not define educational reality solely through the material conditions of border schooling. Rather, they interpreted education as a meaningful life project that symbolized opportunity, dignity, and future security. Their narratives reflected an enduring belief that children's educational success depended not exclusively on available resources but also on perseverance, family commitment, and sustained educational aspirations. Consequently, educational hope emerged not as a denial of structural disadvantage but as a socially constructed response through which families maintained.

2. Human Relationships as Protective Educational Resources

The second major finding demonstrated that parents consistently viewed supportive interpersonal relationships as the strongest protective factor in their children's educational experiences. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of caring teachers, positive peer relationships, constructive family–school collaboration, and children's sense of belonging within the school environment. Although educational resources were often limited, parents believed that warm teacher–student interactions, respectful communication, and active parental involvement substantially enhanced children's motivation, emotional security, and willingness to attend school. For many families, the quality of these relationships compensated for some of the structural limitations associated with living in a border community. This finding is consistent with previous literature emphasizing that learning is fundamentally embedded within social relationships rather than occurring in isolation (Delen et al., 2026; Maglasang & Galigao, 2026). Educational researchers have long argued that children's academic development emerges through continuous interactions among schools, families, and communities (Sitoe, 2025). Similarly, studies have demonstrated that teachers' emotional support and positive classroom climates contribute significantly to students' motivation, school engagement, and psychological well-being (Pibooltaew & Chantarakamol, 2025; Omarkhanova et al., 2024). The present findings also reinforce evidence indicating that parents who establish collaborative relationships with schools are more likely to support children's educational development effectively (Mirzaei Kalar et al., 2022; Safari & Haghighi Ashtiani, 2025). Furthermore, research conducted in disadvantaged educational settings has suggested that positive human relationships frequently function as protective mechanisms that reduce the negative influence of contextual adversity on children's educational outcomes (Roulston et al., 2024). In border communities, where material resources are often insufficient, these interpersonal connections may become even more influential because they provide emotional stability, strengthen children's sense of belonging, and maintain educational motivation despite external challenges. From a phenomenological perspective, participants rarely described schools simply as educational institutions; instead, they portrayed them as relational environments where children experienced acceptance, encouragement, and emotional security. Their lived experiences suggest that the meaning of schooling

was constructed primarily through daily human interactions rather than through physical facilities alone. For these families, committed teachers, trusting relationships with school staff, supportive friendships, and meaningful parental participation collectively transformed the school into a psychologically safe environment. Consequently, interpersonal relationships emerged as essential educational resources that enabled families to experience schooling as a place of hope, belonging, and personal growth despite continuing structural disadvantages.

3. Family Values and Active Parental Engagement in Children's Education

The third major finding indicated that families considered themselves active partners in their children's educational development rather than passive observers of the schooling process. Parents consistently emphasized the importance of encouraging learning, monitoring academic progress, communicating with children about school experiences, reinforcing moral and religious values, and collaborating with teachers whenever difficulties arose. Academic success was viewed alongside character formation, social responsibility, and religious commitment, reflecting a holistic understanding of education in which cognitive, moral, and cultural development were inseparable. These findings are closely aligned with previous research highlighting the central role of parents in children's educational experiences (Pibooltaew & Chantarakamol, 2025). As children's first educators, parents shape attitudes toward learning, motivation, self-confidence, and long-term educational aspirations through their beliefs and everyday practices (Omarkhanova et al., 2024; Alborzi et al., 2021). Previous studies have also shown that parental expectations and educational values strongly influence children's academic engagement and future orientation (Enock & Living, 2025; Umatgerieva, 2025). Within rural communities, families often assume broader educational responsibilities because schools alone cannot fully address children's developmental needs (Leng et al., 2025). The present findings further demonstrate that in border settings, parental involvement extends beyond academic supervision to include moral guidance, religious education, emotional encouragement, and continuous communication with schools. These observations are also consistent with research suggesting that educational beliefs are deeply embedded within cultural and social contexts and shape how families interpret children's schooling experiences (Smolnitska & Baryshpolets, 2025; Safari & Haghighi Ashtiani, 2025). Rather than separating academic learning from ethical development, participants perceived both dimensions as complementary aspects of successful education. From a phenomenological perspective, parents experienced education as a shared family responsibility rather than an activity delegated exclusively to schools. Their narratives reflected an understanding that children's development occurs through continuous interaction between family values and school experiences. Consequently, parental involvement represented more than assistance with homework or school attendance; it embodied an ongoing commitment to cultivating responsibility, perseverance, respect, and moral identity. This integrated interpretation illustrates how families actively constructed educational meaning by linking academic achievement with broader cultural, religious, and interpersonal values that they considered essential for children's future lives.

4. Persistent Educational Inequalities and the Need for Context-Sensitive Educational Understanding

The fourth major finding revealed that parents consistently recognized substantial educational inequalities affecting schools in the border region. Participants identified inadequate educational infrastructure, multi-grade classrooms, shortages of instructional technology, limited extracurricular opportunities, insufficient learning resources, and disparities between rural border schools and urban educational environments. Although these limitations were widely acknowledged, families generally distinguished structural deficiencies from teachers' professional commitment, emphasizing that educational challenges resulted primarily from contextual inequalities rather than inadequate teaching. Their accounts reflected an awareness that children's educational opportunities remained strongly influenced by geographical location and unequal access to educational resources. These findings correspond closely with previous research demonstrating that rural and geographically isolated schools frequently experience lower levels of educational investment and fewer learning opportunities than urban schools (Song, 2023; Shakouri et al., 2022). Studies focusing specifically on border regions have similarly reported that geographical isolation, shortages of educational infrastructure, and limited access to technology contribute to persistent educational disparities (da Silva, 2023; Carvalho et al., 2023). Within the Iranian context, rural development research has likewise highlighted the continuing influence of geographical and socioeconomic inequalities on educational opportunities despite decades of national development efforts (Seydaei et al., 2016). The present findings extend this body of knowledge

by demonstrating that parents themselves possess a sophisticated understanding of these structural inequalities and clearly distinguish between systemic limitations and the efforts of individual educators. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the argument that educational experiences should be interpreted within their broader contextual environments rather than evaluated independently of geographical and social conditions (Karimzadeh & Khaleghi, 2023; Jahanbakhshi & Chatarsimin, 2023). Parents' narratives suggest that educational disadvantage in border communities is experienced not simply as a shortage of physical resources but as an unequal distribution of learning opportunities relative to children living in urban settings. From a phenomenological perspective, educational inequality was experienced by families as a normal yet deeply meaningful aspect of everyday life. Rather than expressing resignation, parents interpreted these inequalities through continual comparisons between what their children possessed and what they believed children elsewhere could access. Their lived experiences therefore reflected an ongoing awareness of educational inequity while simultaneously preserving confidence in education as a valuable and worthwhile pursuit. This coexistence of critical awareness and enduring educational optimism represents a defining characteristic of families' educational experiences in the border region and illustrates the complex manner in which structural disadvantage is interpreted through hope, resilience, and commitment to children's futures.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of families residing in a rural border region regarding their children's educational challenges. The findings demonstrated that parents perceived education as a multifaceted process influenced simultaneously by structural conditions, interpersonal relationships, and family aspirations. Although participants identified persistent challenges such as limited educational facilities, inadequate technological resources, and geographical inequalities, they consistently emphasized the protective role of supportive teachers, positive family–school partnerships, strong peer relationships, and shared moral values in promoting children's learning and well-being. The study further showed that educational resilience in border communities extends beyond material resources and is largely sustained through collaborative efforts among families, schools, and the local community. These findings contribute to the literature on rural and border education by providing an in-depth understanding of how families interpret educational challenges within their everyday lives. Overall, the study highlights the importance of considering parents lived experiences when designing context-sensitive educational policies and interventions aimed at reducing educational inequalities in border regions.

Limitations and Future research

Despite providing valuable insights into families lived experiences of children's educational challenges in a border-region context, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with a relatively small sample of parents from rural border communities in Darmian County, South Khorasan Province, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other border regions with different cultural, socioeconomic, or educational characteristics. Second, the study explored only parents' perspectives; therefore, the experiences of students, teachers, school principals, and local educational authorities were not included, although these stakeholders may provide complementary understandings of educational challenges. Third, as with all phenomenological research, the findings reflect participants' subjective interpretations at a particular point in time and should not be generalized statistically. Future research could employ multi-perspective qualitative designs by incorporating the voices of students, teachers, and policymakers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of educational experiences in border communities. Comparative studies between border and non-border rural areas, as well as between different border provinces, would also help clarify the influence of geographical context on educational opportunities and family experiences. In addition, mixed-methods and longitudinal studies are recommended to examine how family resilience, school–family partnerships, educational resources, and policy interventions interact over time to influence children's academic development, well-being, and educational aspirations. Such research would strengthen the evidence base for understanding educational inequalities and resilience in geographically marginalized communities.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences, and the confidentiality of the information they provided. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information was removed and participants were assigned anonymous codes (A1–A13). The collected data were used solely for research purposes.

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