

Exploring Indigenous Obstacles to the Implementation of Participatory Curricula and Analyzing Their Relationship with Cognitive-Behavioral Motivation, Active Engagement, and the Phenomenon of Flow among Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify the indigenous barriers to implementing participatory curricula and to examine how these barriers relate to cognitive-behavioral motivation, active engagement, and the experience of flow among elementary school students in Zehak County.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative design using a phenomenological approach. The study population included elementary school teachers and principals in Zehak County during the 2024–2025 (1403-1404) academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the principle of theoretical saturation, resulting in the inclusion of 15 individuals. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: The analysis revealed four major categories of indigenous barriers to participatory curriculum implementation: Physical and climatic barriers, including the effects of the 120-day winds and weak infrastructure, which negatively influenced students' concentration and flow experience; Cultural and linguistic barriers, such as the mismatch between students' mother tongue and the language of instruction, as well as parental resistance rooted in traditional beliefs; Professional barriers, including teacher burnout and insufficient skills in curriculum localization; and Managerial barriers, particularly the dominance of quantitative, grade-centered evaluation within the supervisory system. The findings suggested that these barriers undermine students' active engagement and flow by weakening adaptive cognitive factors such as self-efficacy and motivation.

Conclusions: The findings indicate that successful implementation of participatory curricula in the Zehak region requires moving beyond centralized curriculum models toward a contingency-based and context-sensitive approach to curriculum planning.

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Introduction

In contemporary educational systems, the paradigm of curriculum planning has shifted from rigid, transmission-oriented models toward dynamic, participatory approaches. It is now widely recognized that learning is not merely an individual cognitive process but the product of social interactions and the learner's active engagement with the educational environment. This fundamental transition transforms the student from a passive consumer of information into an active agent who contributes to the production of meaning. Indeed, practical participation in the curriculum—where the student's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral faculties are aligned—is considered the beating heart of modern education for fostering deep, sustainable learning.

Motivation is the primary driver for initiating learning behaviors; humans require motivation not only to learn but to act upon what they have learned (Singh et al., 2023). This link between motivation and participation is well-documented, highlighting the role of motivational approaches in improving outcomes for students, particularly those facing academic difficulties (Asterki et al., 2022). Consequently, student motivation is an influential factor in learning, inspiring self-direction and providing the energy required to achieve educational goals (Zepke et al., 2010).

However, participatory curriculum planning should not be reduced to mere physical activity in the classroom. Rather, it encompasses deep cognitive and emotional engagement that places the student in a state of "Flow." As defined by Trowler (2010), participation represents the interaction between a student's time and effort to optimize the learning experience, leading to enhanced insight and knowledge. Conversely, cognitive and behavioral challenges can lead to low motivation and diminished academic performance (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). While techniques to stimulate learning and increase student effort are well-established (Rubeck, 2007), and recent studies in Iran have confirmed that active student participation significantly correlates with academic progress (Atghaei, 2024), realizing these goals depends on identifying the specific barriers that hinder the implementation of these programs.

Translating these theoretical models into practice, particularly in specific or underserved regions, is fraught with complex challenges. While the supportive behavior and leadership styles of teachers and principals are undeniable factors in fostering motivation and participation (Maziyari et al., 2016; Najarzadeh-Hachesoo, 2020), field observations in regions such as Zehak County

reveal that indigenous and climatic variables heavily dictate the quality of curriculum implementation.

Located in the north of Sistan and Baluchestan province, Zehak faces severe educational disruptions due to geographical realities, such as 120-day winds and drought, which complicate sustained practical participation. A critical barrier in this region is the conflict between the centralized curriculum content and the linguistic and cultural realities of the students. While participatory curricula are built upon dialogue and exchange, bilingualism and dialectal differences in border areas like Zehak can act as communicative barriers, preventing deep engagement in classroom discussions. This issue is exacerbated when teachers, lacking specialized training in localization, attempt to implement centrally-designed educational scenarios that resonate poorly with the “lifeworld” of the Sistani student (Najarzadeh-Hachesoo, 2020).

Furthermore, practical participation requires significant mental energy and time. In Zehak, climate crises—such as dust storms—not only compromise physical health but also disrupt the learner’s psychological security, leading to premature educational burnout. In such challenging natural environments, the energy and “Flow” necessary for participation are depleted, leading students to retreat into defensive, minimal learning for academic survival (Shirdel & Rezaei-Rad, 2022). Additionally, infrastructure limitations, such as high-density classrooms with fixed, dilapidated furniture, often prevent teachers from designing the collaborative and project-based activities required for modern, participatory curricula, forcing a fallback to traditional, teacher-centered models (Maziyari et al., 2016). Finally, traditional parental attitudes in the region—often equating education solely with grades and rote memorization—create social pressure that forces teachers into a dilemma: adhering to modern pedagogical principles versus meeting the traditional expectations of families (Salehi et al., 2024; Atghaei, 2024).

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Andrew Martin’s (2007) cycle of motivation and engagement, which posits that motivation is a set of adaptive cognitions (e.g., self-efficacy, valuing learning) and behaviors that allow students to persist in the learning process. Within the context of Zehak, this model explains how harsh environmental conditions can push adaptive cognitions toward maladaptive behaviors (such as self-handicapping).

Furthermore, the study utilizes the concept of Flow and Engagement as described by Schaufeli and Bakker (2010). Participation comprises three components: vigor, dedication, and absorption

(flow). In Zehak's primary schools, achieving "dedication" is difficult because students often fail to find semantic connections between the curriculum and their native environment. Research consistently shows that if physical and behavioral participation is strengthened, it can act as a shield against academic failure (Dinsmore et al., 2019; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

Despite numerous studies on general curriculum barriers in Iran, there is a lack of cohesive research specifically focusing on the indigenous context of Zehak County and its interplay with cognitive-behavioral motivational factors. Most previous research has identified barriers in a general sense, failing to account for the specific climatic and cultural variables of the Sistan region. Therefore, this study aims to penetrate the "beating heart" of Zehak's elementary schools to identify barriers rooted in the ecosystem, language, climate, and livelihoods of the region.

The core objective of this study is to elucidate that until curriculum localization shifts from a slogan to an execution strategy, student participation in this border region will remain overshadowed by maladaptive motivation and structural barriers. By understanding these nuances, this research seeks to provide a roadmap for provincial policymakers to create an environment where students in Zehak can experience the joys of participatory learning and the "Flow" of knowledge, equitable to their peers in more advantaged regions.

Material and Methods

This study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-analytical in nature, employing a qualitative approach. Given that the main objective of the study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of teachers and school administrators and to identify indigenous (context-specific) barriers in Zehak County, a phenomenological strategy was adopted. This approach enabled the researcher to move beyond quantitative indicators and to access the less visible layers of educational challenges within the region's specific context, thereby eliciting the meanings embedded in practical-participation impasses from the perspective of educational actors.

Study Population

The study population comprised all elementary school teachers, school principals, and instructional leaders in Zehak County during the 2024–2025 (1403–1404) academic year. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, specifically through a combination of snowball sampling and maximum variation strategies. Inclusion criteria were: (1) at least five years

of teaching experience in schools in the Zehak region; (2) familiarity with contemporary curriculum-planning approaches; and (3) living and working within the geographical context of the region. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached (i.e., when additional interviews yielded no substantively new information), resulting in a final sample of 15 participants.

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was the semi-structured interview. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended, in-depth questions addressing topics such as: challenges in implementing the national centralized textbooks, the impact of the 120-day winds on students' motivation, language barriers and bilingualism, the status of classroom equipment and facilities, and parents' attitudes in the region. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation and member checking (participant review) were employed.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. During this process, statements related to physical/infrastructural barriers, climatic barriers, cultural barriers, and motivational barriers were extracted and organized into main and sub-themes.

Ethical Considerations

Across all stages of the study, ethical principles were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining the confidentiality of participants' identities, ensuring the right to withdraw at any time, and preserving accuracy and integrity in the use of quotations.

Results

Based on the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with teachers and administrators in Zehak County, the indigenous barriers to implementing a participatory curriculum were categorized into four main themes and twelve sub-themes. The following sections describe these barriers and their relationship with the study variables (cognitive-behavioral motivation and practical participation).

Main Theme 1: Physical Impasses and Environmental Challenges (Hard Barriers)

One of the most frequent findings was the destructive impact of weak infrastructure and Zehak's specific climatic conditions on students' energy and "Flow."

The 120-Day Winds and Educational Continuity: Participants emphasized that sandstorms not only lead to school closures but also destroy the psychological security necessary for deep concentration. When the classroom environment is contaminated with dust, students engage in physical defensive reactions rather than engaging with the content. This directly contradicts the model proposed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), as "Vigor"—a core pillar of participation—subsides in a hazardous environmental atmosphere (Shirdel et al., 2024).

Physical Rigidity of the Classroom: Classrooms in Zehak often feature traditional structures, poor lighting, and heavy, fixed desks. This physical rigidity prevents movement and the formation of discussion groups. According to Prince-Som'ehsarayi (2024), when the physical space restricts movement, practical participation becomes an abstract concept, and students' behavioral motivation to interact with peers is minimized.

Main Theme 2: Linguistic Disconnects and Cultural Conflicts (Soft Barriers)

The findings indicated that the centralized curriculum content is alienated from the "lifeworld" of students in Zehak County.

The Bilingualism Barrier: Students in the region speak the Sistani dialect at home but encounter textbooks in the classroom written in formal, capital-centric Persian. This linguistic gap slows down the cognitive stage of learning. Consequently, students avoid participating in classroom discussions for fear of judgment or making mistakes—a state categorized as "Maladaptive Cognition" in Martin's (2007) model.

Traditional Parental Resistance: Interviews with administrators revealed that parents in Zehak often perceive practical participation (such as gamification or project-based learning) as a "waste of time." This social pressure compels teachers to return to traditional, rote-based assignments to satisfy parents, which ultimately stifles students' intrinsic motivation and the joy of learning (Salehi et al., 2024; Atghaei, 2024).

Main Theme 3: Professional Challenges and Educator Burnout (Human Barriers)

While the teacher is the driving force behind participation in Zehak, findings show a significant depletion of energy in this sector.

Lack of Localization Competence: Teachers reported that in-service training sessions provided no techniques for managing multi-grade or bilingual classrooms during climate crises. This skill gap leads to a decrease in teacher self-efficacy. As noted by Maziari et al. (2016), when teachers feel incapable, the classroom atmosphere fails to become participatory.

Deprivation-Induced Burnout: Geographic isolation and working in harsh weather conditions have led to professional burnout among teachers. A burnt-out teacher lacks the capacity to guide students toward “Flow” because they themselves have moved past the stage of “Dedication” to a state of minimalist performance (Najarzadeh-Hachesoo, 2020; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

Main Theme 4: Quantitative-Oriented Supervisory System (Managerial Barriers)

Focus on Grades instead of Process: The regional managerial structure evaluates schools based on Grade Point Averages (GPA) and passing rates. This approach steers the “Hidden Curriculum” toward a path where practical participation and cognitive motivation are sacrificed for the sake of quantitative test success (Maleki, 2022; Asterki et al., 2022).

Final Synthesis of Findings

The results suggest that indigenous barriers in Zehak County operate as a destructive chain. Environmental deprivation leads to a decrease in cognitive motivation; decreased motivation results in the avoidance of practical participation; and ultimately, rather than experiencing a state of “Flow,” the student falls into educational apathy. These findings underscore that without a fundamental revision of curriculum design based on Zehak’s climatic and linguistic variables, educational justice will remain limited to the level of “access to school” and will never reach the level of “quality of learning” (Shirdel & Rezaei-Rad, 2022).

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore the indigenous barriers to the implementation of participatory curriculum programs in the elementary schools of Zehak County and their relationship with students’ cognitive-behavioral motivation and practical engagement. The findings reveal a phenomenon that can be termed “Educational Stagnation,” wherein environmental and climatic variables act as powerful moderators that neutralize the effectiveness of modern pedagogical approaches.

In explaining the findings related to physical and climatic barriers, the results align with research by Shirdel et al. (2024) and Atghaei (2024). The 120-day winds in Zehak are not merely a natural phenomenon but serve as an “educational disruptor.” By interrupting the continuity of instruction, these conditions destroy the possibility of achieving a state of “Flow.” According to the theory of Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), engagement requires total absorption and concentration; however, in the context of Zehak, students must expend a significant portion of their psychological energy on environmental adaptation and survival, leaving little reserve for deep engagement with academic content.

Regarding cultural and linguistic barriers, the findings confirm that the centralized curriculum often “silences” the voice of the Sistani student. The conflict between the mother tongue and the language of instruction leads to the formation of maladaptive cognitions and academic anxiety, which Martin (2007) identifies as a primary barrier to practical participation. Due to a fear of not mastering the official language, students in Zehak often opt out of group activities, representing a failure of the participatory curriculum’s objectives. This finding is in full agreement with Najarzadeh-Hachesoo (2020) regarding the urgent need for content localization.

Furthermore, the analysis of managerial and professional barriers indicates that regional teachers are trapped in a “skill bottleneck.” When the supervisory structure emphasizes quantitative scores almost exclusively, teachers are forced to abandon time-consuming participatory activities to ensure job security and institutional compliance. This finding resonates with Salehi et al. (2024) and Maleki (2022), who emphasize the role of organizational climate in strengthening or weakening intrinsic motivation.

In conclusion, achieving practical participation and fostering cognitive-behavioral motivation in Zehak’s schools requires a paradigm shift from centralized curriculum planning toward “Contingency and Indigenous Curriculum Planning.” Until the climatic (storms), linguistic (bilingualism), and economic (border deprivation) realities are integrated into the design of educational activities, students in this region will remain in a state of “surface participation,” and deep, sustainable learning will remain an aspirational goal rather than a classroom reality.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the implementation of participatory curricula in Zehak County:

Content Localization and Implementation Flexibility: It is recommended that the Provincial Curriculum Planning Council delegate necessary authorities to Zehak's teachers to adapt educational scenarios to the local culture and climate (e.g., using indigenous examples and a "bridge language" in early primary education).

Equipping Schools with Climate-Resilient Infrastructure: Given the regional dust storms, schools must be equipped with advanced ventilation systems. Additionally, developing dust-resistant "smart classrooms" is essential to prevent instructional gaps through e-learning during emergency closures (Shirdel & Rezaei-Rad, 2022).

Overhauling the Evaluation System: Regional educational management should shift teacher evaluation metrics from quantitative GPAs toward indicators of active student participation and the teacher's initiatives in curriculum localization.

Empowering Teachers in Motivational Psychology: Specialized training workshops should be held for Zehak's elementary teachers focusing on modern motivational models (such as Martin's Model), with an emphasis on strategies for engaging bilingual students in underserved areas.

Family and Community Engagement: Awareness programs should be developed for parents to explain the importance of gamification and collaborative activities in their children's cognitive development, thereby reducing social pressure to return to traditional, rote-based methods.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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