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Identifying the Components of School-Based Curriculum Planning and Decentralization in Adolescents with Social Anxiety Symptoms

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify the core components of school-based curriculum planning and decentralization and to explore their role in enhancing the academic self-efficacy of adolescents with social anxiety symptoms. This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with experienced principals of successful schools and educational experts from the Department of Education in Mazandaran Province, Iran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with inclusion criteria of prior management or teaching experience, direct involvement in school-based curriculum planning, and willingness to participate. Data were collected through individual interviews lasting 25–45 minutes, during which participants shared their experiences regarding curriculum decentralization and its impact on teaching and learning. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Data coding followed iterative cycles of initial coding, category formation, and theme development, with validation through member checking, peer debriefing, and expert review to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. The analysis revealed four overarching themes and twenty-nine subthemes that collectively illustrate the relationship between curriculum decentralization and student outcomes. The main themes were structured curriculum design, collaborative and flexible implementation, growth-oriented and motivational evaluation, and empowering decentralization. In addition, eight detailed subthemes of decentralization were identified, including decision-making authority, structural flexibility, participatory governance, community engagement, alignment with policy frameworks, autonomy in learner evaluation, enrichment of resources, and strengthening professional identity. Together, these components demonstrated how school-based curriculum planning enhances self-efficacy and psychosocial resilience in adolescents, particularly those facing social anxiety. The study concludes that decentralization and school-based curriculum planning are mutually reinforcing processes that create adaptive, participatory, and context-sensitive learning environments. These environments not only improve institutional effectiveness but also play a critical role in fostering adolescents' academic self-efficacy and reducing vulnerability to social anxiety.

Keywords: School-based curriculum planning; Decentralization; Academic self-efficacy; Social anxiety; Educational innovation

Introduction

In Iran, as in many other countries, the tension between centralization and decentralization in curriculum planning has been a long-standing issue. Historically, centralized systems of education have been designed to ensure national cohesion and consistency. However, critics argue that excessive centralization reduces schools' ability to respond to local contexts, individual learning needs, and the diverse cultural realities of students. The reflections provided by scholars on the cyclical movement

between centralization and decentralization in Iran reveal that while centralization ensures control and standardization, it also restricts innovation and responsiveness at the school level (1). A growing body of literature now supports the argument that decentralization of curriculum planning can open pathways for innovation, local ownership, and student-centered education. This shift is particularly significant in contexts where students' mental health challenges, including social anxiety, are intertwined with academic engagement and performance.

Curriculum decentralization, when effectively implemented, is not simply a matter of shifting decision-making power from central authorities to schools. Rather, it represents a profound transformation in the philosophy of education, requiring the design of frameworks that balance autonomy with accountability. For example, research in Iran has demonstrated the potential of designing decentralized primary education curricula that are more closely aligned with local realities and responsive to students' psychosocial needs (2). This resonates with broader global perspectives on learner-centered curriculum design, where decentralization is positioned as a strategy to not only enhance educational justice but also address the diverse academic and emotional needs of students (3). In this regard, decentralization becomes both a pedagogical and a social necessity, particularly in preparing adolescents with anxiety-related challenges for success in academic and social domains.

The policy discourse in Iran has increasingly emphasized the necessity of decentralization in curriculum planning, especially in higher education, where responsiveness to local contexts and professional needs has become paramount. Studies analyzing decentralization policies highlight both the opportunities and the challenges of such reforms. On the one hand, decentralization creates avenues for innovation, adaptability, and responsiveness. On the other hand, it raises issues of accountability, consistency, and potential disparities among regions (4). These insights demonstrate that decentralization must be strategically designed and implemented, with careful attention to both structural capacity and pedagogical vision. In the context of secondary schools, where adolescents' academic self-concept and social functioning are under development, the implications of decentralization extend beyond educational efficiency to the broader realm of mental health and psychosocial adjustment.

The relationship between curriculum and student well-being has become increasingly salient in recent years. International studies provide evidence that curriculum models emphasizing growth, reflection, and psychosocial skills can enhance both academic performance and mental health outcomes. For instance, integrating relaxation-response-based curricula in high schools has been shown to reduce stress and support adolescents' well-being (5). Similarly, mindfulness and decentering strategies incorporated into professional curricula have proven effective in improving self-regulation and reducing psychological distress (6). The relevance of these findings to adolescents with social anxiety symptoms is clear: curricula that integrate psychosocial dimensions alongside academic goals can play a vital role in creating supportive school environments.

Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of decentralization intersect with concepts of decentering in psychology, which refer to the ability of individuals to distance themselves from intrusive or self-critical thoughts. Research has suggested that decentering mediates the effects of stressful experiences such as peer victimization, influencing life satisfaction and psychological resilience in adulthood (7). From a curriculum perspective, fostering environments where students can engage reflectively with their learning, supported by flexible and locally adapted educational frameworks, contributes to psychological growth alongside academic achievement. This illustrates how curriculum models, when designed with sensitivity to psychosocial processes, can address both cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning.

Practical efforts to design curriculum frameworks in Iran provide additional insights into how decentralization can be effectively implemented. For example, the development of curriculum models rooted in citizenship rights has emphasized the need for context-sensitive approaches that respect both local cultural conditions and global democratic values (8). Such approaches underscore the importance of engaging stakeholders—teachers, parents, and students—in the decision-making process, thereby enhancing ownership and accountability. Similarly, designing schemes for curriculum decision-making based

on Schwab's theory highlights the importance of creating structured yet flexible frameworks that can adapt to contextual needs while maintaining coherence with national educational policies (9). These models demonstrate how decentralization is not merely a structural reform but a dynamic process of aligning curriculum philosophy, policy, and practice with the realities of schools and communities.

The importance of decentralization is further reinforced by comparative international research. Curriculum innovations in diverse settings demonstrate that decentralization and school-based approaches can significantly improve academic engagement and social-emotional learning. For instance, the development of alternative thinking strategy curricula has been associated with improvements in students' academic, social, and emotional competencies (10). Likewise, interventions linked to social story curricula combined with video self-modeling have been shown to enhance the academic engagement of students with autism spectrum disorders, highlighting the adaptability and inclusivity of localized curriculum models (11). In the context of adolescent anxiety, school counseling interventions built around structured curricula—such as CBT-based group programs—have been demonstrated to effectively reduce anxiety and promote adaptive coping strategies (12). These findings collectively affirm that decentralized and school-based curriculum planning can act as a powerful mechanism to integrate academic and psychosocial development, particularly in vulnerable adolescent populations.

The literature also underscores the critical role of small-group and student-centered approaches in enhancing learning outcomes and psychosocial development. Studies on the True Goals Curriculum have illustrated the effectiveness of group-based investigations in promoting student motivation and achievement (13). Such interventions resonate strongly with the philosophy of school-based curriculum planning, where small-scale, locally adapted, and participatory approaches become vehicles for meaningful educational transformation. In environments where adolescents struggle with social anxiety, small-group approaches embedded in decentralized curricula can foster peer support, reduce isolation, and strengthen students' confidence in academic and social domains.

At the same time, the necessity of a forward-looking perspective in curriculum design cannot be overstated. In contexts such as Iran, where the educational system is navigating both global transformations and local demands, curriculum planning requires approaches that anticipate future challenges and opportunities. The design of workplace curriculum models with a futurology orientation, for instance, reflects an acknowledgment that education must prepare learners for rapidly evolving social and professional realities (14). Such forward-oriented perspectives complement decentralization by ensuring that curricula are not only responsive to present needs but also adaptable to future uncertainties. For adolescents with social anxiety, this future-oriented adaptability is essential, as their developmental trajectories are shaped by both immediate educational experiences and long-term social and professional pathways.

Taken together, these insights reflect the growing consensus that decentralized, school-based curriculum planning provides an effective framework for enhancing both academic outcomes and psychosocial well-being. It allows schools to tailor curricula to the cultural, social, and emotional needs of students, creating environments that support growth, resilience, and self-efficacy. At the same time, it requires careful policy design to balance local autonomy with national educational objectives, ensuring that decentralization does not lead to fragmentation or inequity. For Iranian adolescents with social anxiety symptoms, who often struggle with feelings of isolation and lack of control, decentralized and school-based curricula can create empowering environments that promote both engagement and psychological strength.

This study, therefore, seeks to identify the core components of school-based curriculum planning and decentralization in the Iranian context, with a particular focus on adolescents experiencing social anxiety symptoms.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design with the aim of deeply exploring the lived experiences of school principals and teachers regarding the processes of school-based curriculum planning and its relationship with decentralization in the educational system. The research population consisted of experienced principals from successful schools and educational experts affiliated with the provincial Department of Education in Mazandaran, Iran. A purposive sampling method was adopted in order to recruit participants with substantial expertise and direct involvement in school-based curriculum planning. The inclusion criteria required that participants had professional experience in teaching or school management, were actively engaged in curriculum-related decision-making, and demonstrated a willingness to share their insights during the interviews. Conversely, the exclusion criterion was limited to incomplete or insufficient provision of information during the interviews. Ultimately, only those participants who could meaningfully contribute to the depth and credibility of the study were included.

The main method of data collection was semi-structured individual interviews, a widely accepted technique in qualitative inquiry that allows participants to provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to capture perspectives on the role of school-based curriculum planning in fostering students' academic self-efficacy, as well as the perceived challenges and benefits of decentralization. Prior to each interview, the researcher established rapport with the participants to create a comfortable and trusting atmosphere, ensuring that they felt safe to openly discuss their experiences. Each interview began with an introduction of the researcher and a clear explanation of the study's purpose. Verbal consent for audio recording was obtained, with participants being reassured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. All interviews were conducted and moderated by the principal researcher, who also took observational notes during the sessions to capture contextual details and participants' nonverbal expressions.

The length of the interviews varied between 25 and 45 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness and psychological comfort. During the interviews, the researcher remained attentive and responsive, asking follow-up questions when necessary to elicit deeper reflections and more nuanced insights. After each interview, the researcher documented observations and notable points that emerged during the discussion. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, providing a comprehensive dataset for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis was performed using qualitative content analysis, which enabled a systematic and interpretive examination of the interview transcripts. Following the methodological guidelines proposed by Streubert and Carpenter (2007), the researcher applied a step-by-step algorithm to identify recurring patterns, compare emerging categories, and develop broader conceptual themes. The analysis began with initial coding, in which the transcripts were read multiple times and meaningful units of text were assigned preliminary codes. These codes were closely related to concepts such as the direct and indirect effects of school-based curriculum planning on students' academic self-efficacy, as well as the administrative and pedagogical challenges associated with decentralization.

In the second stage, similar codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring themes across participants' accounts. These categories encompassed dimensions such as the psychological outcomes of curriculum planning for students, the strategic role of teachers and principals in shaping localized curricula, and the institutional difficulties in implementing decentralized approaches in schools. Through constant comparison and iterative refinement, the categories were synthesized into main themes that provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were implemented. Member checking was used by returning parts of the coded transcripts to a selection of participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretation. Peer debriefing was also employed, in which the emerging codes and categories were reviewed by fellow researchers with expertise in

education and curriculum studies. Additionally, external experts in educational planning were consulted to validate the coding framework and ensure that the thematic interpretations aligned with the realities of the field. This multi-layered validation process strengthened both the credibility and dependability of the results, ultimately contributing to the robustness of the final conceptual model that emerged from the data.

Findings and Results

The qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with school principals and educational experts from the Mazandaran Province was organized around four central axes: curriculum design, curriculum implementation, evaluation, and the mediating component of decentralization. This analysis followed a content-driven approach aimed at identifying the components and strategies that, if effectively realized, could significantly contribute to enhancing students' academic self-efficacy. The data were coded and categorized into four overarching themes and twenty-nine subthemes. The four main themes consisted of "Structured Curriculum Design," "Collaborative and Flexible Implementation," "Growth-Oriented and Motivational Evaluation," and "Empowering Decentralization." These themes, which emerged in an interconnected manner, formed a coherent conceptual framework that supports a school-based approach to teaching and learning.

Table 1. Final categorization of main themes and subthemes of qualitative findings in the curriculum domain

Main Themes	Subthemes
Design Stage	Purposeful design with a systemic approach; Flexible and context-based design; Participatory instructional design; Learner-centered planning; Enrichment through innovative approaches; Responsiveness to individual differences
Implementation Stage	Goal-oriented and structured implementation; Flexible execution considering individual differences; Active learner participation; Empowerment of implementers; Strengthening intra-school collaboration; Continuous feedback practices; Experiential and practice-based execution
Evaluation Stage	Clarification of evaluation objectives; Focus on growth processes; Active student participation; Motivational feedback practices; Flexibility and diversity of tools; Performance-based methods; Documentation and trend analysis; School–family communication
Decentralization	Delegation of authority in design and implementation; Flexible managerial structures; Structural local participation; School–community connections; Decentralization within policy frameworks; Autonomy in evaluation; Resource enrichment; Strengthening professional identity

The design stage findings highlighted that purposeful curriculum planning, when grounded in systemic structure and contextual flexibility, plays a vital role in fostering students' academic self-efficacy. Curriculum design should go beyond knowledge transmission to contribute to identity formation, self-regulation, and the cultivation of learner confidence. The integration of innovative approaches and attention to individual differences transformed the design process from a technical blueprint into a dynamic framework that nurtures students' talents and trust in their abilities.

The implementation stage revealed that successful enactment of school-based curriculum requires blending professional creativity of teachers, active learner participation, managerial support, and innovative teaching methods. A strong emphasis was placed on continuous feedback, intra-school collaboration, and stepwise progression of learning activities. This approach not only empowered teachers but also reinforced students' sense of mastery and competence. Collaborative and flexible implementation redefined schools from rigid environments into interactive and motivating learning arenas.

Evaluation findings demonstrated that assessment, when focused on growth processes and enriched by motivational feedback, can itself become a catalyst for academic self-efficacy. Involving students actively in assessment practices, employing diverse tools, and documenting learning trajectories contributed to transforming evaluation into a developmental and empowering experience. Rather than acting as a mechanism of control, evaluation became a means of fostering self-belief and reinforcing learning progress. Communication with families further strengthened this dimension, ensuring that evaluation supported both academic and emotional growth.

The decentralization dimension showed that reducing central control and granting greater autonomy to schools, when combined with participatory structures, adequate resources, intelligent supervision, and genuine independence, created opportunities for innovation and informed decision-making at the school level. Decentralization strengthened professional identity among teachers and principals, empowering them to adopt localized strategies tailored to their students' needs. This sense of ownership and responsibility within schools not only fostered a supportive and dynamic environment but also directly enhanced students' perceptions of their own efficacy, as they experienced a more responsive and empowering educational atmosphere.

Table 2. Categorization of open codes on decentralization within subthemes

Subtheme	Related Open Codes
Delegation of decision-making authority to the school in design and implementation	Authority in developing local curricula; Autonomy in teaching methods; Authority in selecting supplementary content; Flexibility in scheduling activities; Independence in extracurricular programs; Autonomy in using school spaces
Structural flexibility in school management	Adjusting the school's executive structure; Independence in staff role allocation; Scheduling of teacher council meetings; Autonomy in internal documentation; Organizing cultural events based on local context
Structural and collective participation in educational decision-making	Involvement of school councils in decision-making; Parental participation in school governance; Utilizing teachers' capacities in planning; Horizontal structures among principals, teachers, and parents; Participation in external evaluation
Connecting the school to the social environment and local institutions	Collaboration with local institutions; Freedom to select local educational partners; Membership in regional learning networks; Use of local data for interventions
Smart decentralization within broader policy frameworks	Delegated authority from regional offices; Decentralization with intelligent monitoring; School-level educational policymaking; Boundaries of local authority within national goals
School autonomy in learner evaluation	Decision-making on evaluation methods; Designing school-specific assessment models; Combining individual and group assessments; Using locally adapted assessment tools
Enrichment of learning resources and educational tools at the local level	Freedom in selecting educational resources; Access to diverse learning materials; Use of books, software, and supplementary local content
Strengthening professional identity, accountability, and innovation within the school	Development of professional identity in schools; Accountability for school performance outcomes; Creating innovative environments; Designing school-based annual programs

The first subtheme, delegation of decision-making authority to the school in design and implementation, emerged as a critical manifestation of effective decentralization. Participants emphasized the importance of granting schools the autonomy to design local curricula, choose teaching strategies, select supplementary materials, schedule activities, manage extracurricular programs, and creatively utilize school spaces. This degree of independence enabled principals and teachers to adapt instructional approaches to the cultural, social, and cognitive contexts of their students. Such flexibility was described as a driver of professional creativity, commitment, and ownership among educators, creating a more adaptive learning environment that supports students' academic self-efficacy.

The second subtheme, structural flexibility in school management, underscored the need to redesign the internal organizational structures of schools to align with local needs. Participants explained that the ability to adjust executive structures, assign staff roles, schedule teacher council meetings, and determine documentation practices allows schools to function more efficiently and responsively. Furthermore, the autonomy to design cultural and social programs reflective of the local context strengthened schools' adaptability. This structural flexibility promoted more purposeful and participatory school management, which in turn cultivated a stronger sense of cohesion and organization among students.

The third subtheme, structural and collective participation in educational decision-making, highlighted the role of stakeholder collaboration in the decentralization process. The inclusion of school councils, parental involvement, teacher engagement, and in certain cases student participation, was viewed as essential for fostering a sense of shared ownership and accountability. By creating horizontal structures among administrators, teachers, and families, decision-making processes became more realistic and effective. This participatory approach also modeled democratic and cooperative behaviors for

students, reinforcing their belief in their capacity to influence their learning environment and strengthening both social and academic self-efficacy.

The fourth subtheme, connecting the school to the social environment and local institutions, illustrated how decentralization extends beyond internal school structures to include community engagement. Respondents highlighted the significance of collaboration with local organizations, partnerships with community-based educational providers, participation in regional learning networks, and reliance on locally generated data to inform interventions. This outward orientation transformed the school into an active social actor rather than an insular institution. For students, stronger links between school and community created more meaningful and authentic learning experiences, which enhanced their motivation and sense of relevance in education.

The fifth subtheme, smart decentralization within broader policy frameworks, reflected the tension between granting schools autonomy and maintaining alignment with national goals. Participants stressed that effective decentralization must be intelligently designed so that schools are empowered to make localized decisions while remaining within the boundaries of overarching educational objectives. Delegated authority from regional offices, intelligent oversight, and a clear delineation of responsibilities ensured that local innovation could flourish without generating policy confusion. This balance provided schools with both psychological security and operational flexibility, supporting responsible decision-making and sustainable innovation.

The sixth subtheme, school autonomy in learner evaluation, revealed that decentralization was most impactful when schools had the freedom to design and apply their own assessment approaches. Participants described the value of creating school-specific evaluation models, choosing between individual or group assessments, and employing locally relevant tools. Such autonomy not only made assessment practices more equitable and culturally appropriate but also conveyed to students that their efforts were recognized in meaningful ways. This fairness and adaptability in assessment played a key role in reinforcing students' belief in their academic competence.

The seventh subtheme, enrichment of learning resources and educational tools at the local level, addressed the importance of allowing schools to select and adapt instructional materials according to their unique contexts. The ability to access a diverse range of books, software, and supplementary resources empowered teachers to design creative and engaging lessons. Localized enrichment of resources increased the relevance of instruction, sustained learner interest, and enhanced teachers' capacity to align educational practices with students' cultural and developmental needs. Ultimately, this dimension of decentralization contributed directly to stronger student engagement and confidence.

The final subtheme, strengthening professional identity, accountability, and innovation within the school, emphasized that decentralization must also be accompanied by a shift in institutional culture. Participants explained that schools should not only receive authority but also embrace accountability for their performance outcomes. The establishment of annual school-based programs and the creation of innovative spaces encouraged schools to position themselves as independent, reflective, and responsible institutions. This professional identity promoted motivation and psychological investment among staff, while simultaneously providing students with a model of self-leadership and resilience. In such environments, students experienced empowerment through example, further enhancing their sense of self-efficacy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of school-based curriculum planning and decentralization in strengthening the academic self-efficacy of adolescents, particularly those with social anxiety symptoms. Through qualitative analysis, four main themes—structured curriculum design, collaborative and flexible

implementation, growth-oriented and motivational evaluation, and empowering decentralization—were identified. In addition, eight subthemes of decentralization were extracted, ranging from delegation of authority in curriculum design to strengthening professional identity and innovation at the school level. Taken together, these findings illustrate the complex yet essential relationship between localized curriculum decision-making and the promotion of psychosocial resilience in students.

One of the most prominent results of this study was the recognition of purposeful and systemic curriculum design as a foundational component of school-based planning. Participants emphasized that design should not be limited to technical mapping but should instead cultivate learners' self-regulation, identity development, and confidence. This finding resonates with broader research on curriculum models that stress future orientation and responsiveness. For instance, the workplace curriculum model with a futurology approach illustrates how forward-looking design can integrate both academic and psychosocial skills, equipping students for evolving realities (14). Similarly, research on citizenship rights curriculum design highlights the necessity of context-sensitive frameworks that embed democratic and participatory values, ultimately shaping students' sense of ownership and responsibility (8). Such approaches validate the current study's findings that curriculum design, when aligned with local and cultural realities, is instrumental in promoting self-efficacy among adolescents.

The second major finding concerned collaborative and flexible implementation, which emerged as a cornerstone for effective curriculum delivery. Participants pointed to active learner involvement, intra-school collaboration, continuous feedback, and empowerment of implementers as critical elements. This aligns with international perspectives on learner-centered curriculum development, which position participation and flexibility as vital to addressing diverse learner needs (10). Evidence from interventions such as social story curricula combined with video self-modeling further demonstrates that flexible, student-centered implementation can significantly improve academic engagement, particularly among students with special needs (11). Moreover, school counseling group curricula designed for anxiety, such as the BREAK FREE and Fly program, show how collaborative implementation within supportive environments directly reduces anxiety symptoms and enhances student resilience (12). These studies provide strong support for the present finding that flexible and participatory implementation transforms the school into a dynamic environment conducive to both learning and psychological well-being.

Evaluation as a growth-oriented and motivational process constituted the third key finding of this study. Rather than treating evaluation as a control mechanism, participants emphasized its role in providing constructive feedback, documenting progress, and involving families in the learning journey. This perspective corresponds with research highlighting the value of performance-based and reflective evaluation methods in fostering motivation and self-belief. For example, studies have demonstrated that integrating relaxation-response or mindfulness-based curricula into high school programs not only improves academic outcomes but also reduces stress and anxiety among students (5, 6). These results echo the current study's conclusion that evaluation, when designed as a supportive and developmental process, contributes directly to enhancing self-efficacy, particularly in vulnerable adolescent groups.

The fourth main finding, empowering decentralization, revealed that transferring authority to schools can stimulate innovation, strengthen professional identity, and align educational practices with local needs. Participants described decentralization as a multi-dimensional construct involving decision-making autonomy, structural flexibility, community engagement, smart alignment with policy frameworks, and enriched resources. This reflects long-standing debates in Iran and internationally about the balance between centralization and decentralization. Scholars have observed that while centralization guarantees uniformity, it often stifles responsiveness and innovation, whereas decentralization fosters contextual adaptability and ownership (1). Recent Iranian studies also confirm that decentralized primary education curricula enable schools to address local realities and psychosocial needs more effectively (2). Moreover, research analyzing decentralization in higher education policy highlights both its potential for creating responsive systems and the challenges it poses for maintaining accountability

and coherence (4). The present findings expand these insights by showing that, at the school level, decentralization not only strengthens institutional innovation but also directly contributes to adolescents' academic self-efficacy by fostering supportive, adaptive environments.

The subthemes of decentralization identified in this study provide more granular insights into how this process can be operationalized in practice. For instance, the delegation of decision-making authority to schools in curriculum design and teaching methods was highlighted as a critical enabler of contextual responsiveness. This finding resonates with Schwab's theoretical emphasis on practical decision-making in curriculum development, as reflected in research on decentering schemes for curriculum decision-making (9). Similarly, the study's emphasis on structural flexibility in school management, such as adjusting executive structures and internal documentation, supports the view that decentralization is not merely policy rhetoric but a lived institutional practice. This mirrors international findings where small-group and context-specific approaches have been shown to strengthen both educational outcomes and student motivation (13).

Another significant subtheme was structural and collective participation in decision-making, involving school councils, parents, teachers, and sometimes students. This participatory model reinforces democratic values and strengthens ownership, consistent with the principles of learner-centered curricula (10). It also reflects the broader policy discourse in Iran that situates decentralization as both a necessity and an opportunity for aligning educational practices with democratic governance (4). Participation not only increases the realism and commitment behind school decisions but also models social responsibility for students, thereby enhancing their sense of agency and competence.

The findings on connecting schools to local communities underscore the social dimension of decentralization. By engaging with local institutions, joining regional learning networks, and using community-based data, schools can become active societal actors. This external orientation supports the creation of authentic and meaningful learning experiences, echoing workplace curriculum models that integrate education with broader social and professional contexts (14). For adolescents with social anxiety, such connections provide tangible opportunities for building confidence and transferring classroom learning into real-world applications.

The subtheme of smart decentralization within broader policy frameworks reflects the necessity of balancing autonomy with accountability. Participants noted that while schools should enjoy decision-making authority, their practices must remain aligned with national educational goals. This aligns with global perspectives that emphasize intelligent oversight and structured autonomy as key to avoiding fragmentation in decentralized systems (1). In this way, decentralization is conceptualized not as absolute independence but as a calibrated distribution of authority that maintains coherence across the system.

Autonomy in learner evaluation was another important subtheme, with participants emphasizing the value of localized and culturally relevant assessment practices. This corresponds with studies showing that diverse and school-specific evaluation models can enhance fairness and foster self-efficacy (11). Similarly, enriched access to resources and tools was identified as a mechanism for increasing teaching effectiveness and student engagement, consistent with international findings on the role of alternative curricula in improving academic and social competencies (10). Finally, strengthening professional identity and innovation within schools was seen as a hallmark of effective decentralization, where schools evolve into independent yet accountable institutions. This mirrors findings from CBT-based school counseling programs, which demonstrate that cultivating responsibility and ownership within schools directly contributes to students' psychological resilience (12).

In summary, the results of this study confirm that school-based curriculum planning and decentralization function as mutually reinforcing processes. Together, they create conditions that enhance student self-efficacy, reduce vulnerability to social anxiety, and foster institutional innovation. By integrating perspectives from both Iranian and international research, the

findings illustrate that decentralization is not merely a structural adjustment but a transformative educational philosophy with profound implications for students' academic and psychosocial development.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design, while suitable for exploring complex experiences, inherently limits the generalizability of findings. The perspectives gathered were primarily from principals, teachers, and educational experts in Mazandaran Province, which may not fully represent the diversity of contexts across Iran. Second, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews raises the possibility of bias, as participants may have emphasized socially desirable perspectives or downplayed challenges. Third, while the study aimed to capture the implications of curriculum planning for adolescents with social anxiety, the voices of students themselves were not directly included. This absence limits the ability to fully understand the lived experiences of adolescents in relation to curriculum and decentralization.

Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating a larger and more diverse sample across different provinces and educational levels. Including students' perspectives, particularly those with social anxiety, would provide a richer and more balanced understanding of how curriculum decentralization affects learners directly. Longitudinal studies could also examine the long-term impacts of decentralized curriculum practices on both academic performance and psychosocial development. Comparative studies between centralized and decentralized contexts would be particularly valuable in isolating the specific contributions of school-based planning. Additionally, mixed-methods designs could integrate quantitative measures of self-efficacy and anxiety with qualitative insights to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

From a practical perspective, policymakers should prioritize creating frameworks that grant schools meaningful autonomy while maintaining alignment with national educational objectives. Professional development programs are essential to equip teachers and principals with the skills required for participatory curriculum design, flexible implementation, and innovative evaluation. Schools should also strengthen community engagement by building partnerships with local organizations, which would both enrich resources and create authentic learning opportunities. Finally, educational leaders should view decentralization not merely as administrative reform but as a cultural transformation, fostering environments of accountability, innovation, and support that can directly enhance students' self-efficacy and resilience.

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Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration of Interest

The author of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

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

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