



Providing a Behavioral Educational Model for Socially Vulnerable Groups

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Abstract

The objective of the present study was to propose a behavioral educational model for socially vulnerable groups. The research was applied in terms of its objective and employed a mixed-method exploratory design. In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis was used, while the quantitative phase employed a descriptive-survey approach. The statistical population in the qualitative phase included academic experts and experienced officials from universities in Tehran, who were selected using non-probability purposive sampling. In the quantitative phase, the statistical population consisted of all stakeholders involved with child labor in Tehran Municipality, including managers and deputies, who were selected through structural equation modeling. Stratified random sampling was used in this phase. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase and a researcher-made questionnaire in the quantitative phase. To assess internal validity in the qualitative phase and external validity of the researcher-made questionnaire based on the model components, relevant metrics were used. In the qualitative phase, the credibility criterion was applied, and reliability was examined through detailed documentation of the research process and intra- and inter-researcher alignment. Additionally, in the quantitative phase, validity was assessed using content and construct validity, while reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients. Data analysis in the qualitative phase involved thematic analysis using Maxqda-V2018 software, whereas the quantitative phase applied descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS-v23, SmartPLS-v3, Lisrel V8.8, and ExpertChoice-V11 software. The findings revealed that the dimensions of the behavioral educational model for socially vulnerable groups included educational (curricula, teaching methods, educational equipment and resources, educational evaluation, teacher professional development, extracurricular activities), psychological (psychological support, psychological empowerment, psychological care, emotional support, family support), social (social support, opportunities for social participation, social awareness, enhancement of social skills, promotion of social solidarity, social networking), economic (job skills, entrepreneurship, local economic development, financial management training, economic empowerment), and cultural (preservation of cultural identity, cultural education, cultural communication, artistic development, protection of cultural heritage, cultural promotion) aspects. The results of this study not only contribute to improving the behavior of socially vulnerable groups but also serve as an effective tool for enhancing the quality of behavioral education for child laborers.

Keywords: Behavioral education, socially vulnerable groups, child laborers in Tehran Province

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1. Introduction

Child labor is an enduring issue rooted in the history of humanity. Across different periods, children have been exploited to varying degrees. This problem has been prevalent in poor and developing countries. During the 1800s, child labor was an integral part of economic life and industrial growth [1]. Children under the age of 14 worked in agriculture, factories, mines, and as street vendors. Children from impoverished families were often expected to contribute to household income and sometimes worked 12-hour shifts in hazardous conditions. In the 1900s, in England, more than a quarter of poor families lost their children to illness and death. With the rise of education, economic development, and labor regulations, child labor began to decline. However, child labor remains a widespread issue in many parts of the world, both in developed and developing countries [2].

Globally, approximately 1.5 billion children aged 0 to 14 years receive no financial support from their families. Over 160 million children worldwide—1 in 10 children aged 5 to 17—are involved in child labor. While global child labor rates steadily declined between 2012 and 2020, the rates increased in certain regions during the same period. In Sub-Saharan Africa in 2020, 81.5% of child labor occurred in agriculture, with children often working without pay on family farms [3]. Labor market failures play a significant role in the prevalence of child labor [4].

Unfortunately, working children face a wide range of social harms. Numerous reports from reputable international organizations and local authorities highlight this grim reality. The International Labour Organization's 2021 report estimates that about 160 million children aged 5 to 17 are involved in child labor globally. The report also provides a gender breakdown, stating that 79 million boys and 81 million girls are among these children. Seventy-three million of these children are engaged in hazardous work. Similarly, UNICEF's 2021 report, "The State of the World's Children 2021," discusses the situation of children globally, highlighting the social and economic risks faced by working children, including deprivation of education, abuse and exploitation, physical and psychological harm, and poverty. The 2020 World Bank report, "Child Labor: Eradicating This Plague," examines the roots of child labor and strategies for combating it. This report underscores poverty, social inequality, and armed conflicts as primary causes of child labor and emphasizes that investment in education and social support can help eradicate it [5].

Moreover, the 2016 census by Iran's Statistical Center reveals that approximately 73,000 children in Iran aged 5 to 17 are engaged in various occupations. The report shows that the highest number of working children are in the provinces of Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, and Isfahan. The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare has published multiple reports in recent years on the condition of working children. A 2019 report points to the social harms faced by working children, including deprivation of education, abuse and exploitation, physical and psychological harm, and poverty [6].

Working and street children are often neglected by society, families, and educational systems [7]. The present and future of these children, who are considered the country's human capital, are under threat. Moreover, they are often deprived of the respect and dignity they deserve. Many of these children and adolescents spend significant portions of their days on the streets. Due to financial poverty, domestic violence, and the inefficacy of educational and cultural systems, they are exposed to risks such as sexual abuse, substance addiction, illnesses like HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, and even death. Additionally, there is a pressing concern that these children may miss out on education that could help them flourish and develop their personalities [3, 8, 9].

A nation's true measure of success lies in how it treats its children—their health and safety, fulfillment of basic needs, education, and the inculcation of a sense of love and respect within their families and communities [10]. Education plays a critical role in individual, social, cognitive, and skill development and, more broadly, in fostering social justice and solidarity [11]. Indeed, education is the most vital social institution in any modern society. It is the key to a society's economic development and affects almost every aspect of an individual's life as a determinant of social outcomes [12].

The realization of education for working children also depends on the role and attitudes of parents. Alongside other critical factors influencing family decisions, cultural behaviors and attitudes are essential. This is because there is a strong link between human decisions and actions and individual attitudes. Humans live in a symbolic world of their own making, where every reality is a symbol connected to their cultural framework [13].

However, the amount of education a person acquires, like any other commodity or service, is largely determined by supply and demand. Two key factors influencing the optimal amount of education are: (1) whether higher education in the

future will lead to increased income, and (2) the costs associated with acquiring education [14].

Prioritizing the status of children and childhood is a modern phenomenon and specific to contemporary times. The modern approach to childhood distinguishes between children and adults, attributing roles and social responsibilities to the latter while exempting the former. Although no child is obligated to assume significant social responsibilities, such as employment, in various social settings, some children are engaged in economic and occupational activities. This phenomenon, identified as a social issue in the social sciences, affects working and street children, who spend extensive hours in the streets with minimal access to basic living, educational, and health facilities, jeopardizing their health and safety.

In industrial societies, children are often not assigned any role in the labor process. Play and learning are expected to encompass their entire childhood, yet play and learning are not typically regarded as "work" [15]. Effective education, tailored to children's needs, talents, and real-life contexts, can transform their lived experiences, motivate them and their families to pursue education, and empower them to face high-risk situations. However, formal education systems in the country generally fail to connect with the real-life contexts of impoverished classes, neglecting children's developmental and social needs and failing to inspire sufficient motivation for continued education.

Working children, who often struggle with poverty and hardship, need a platform to voice their concerns and needs. Allowing their voices to be heard can increase social awareness, foster social solidarity, improve governmental educational policies, and facilitate targeted planning for nonprofit organizations. Teachers, counselors, educational policymakers, educational psychologists, social workers, sociologists, parents, and others involved with children, particularly those from disadvantaged classes, can benefit from the findings of this research to transform their thinking, actions, and attitudes.

This research aims to address the question: What is the behavioral educational model for socially vulnerable groups?

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design

This study is applied in nature based on its objective. Regarding the type of data, it employs a sequential mixed-method design. In terms of the paradigm, it is pragmatic (a

combination of interpretivism and positivism). Based on its nature (approach and design), it initially adopts an exploratory approach, followed by a descriptive-analytical method. Concerning reasoning (execution logic), it utilizes a mixed approach (inductive-deductive), as it employs inductive reasoning in the qualitative (and Delphi) phase and deductive reasoning in the quantitative (survey and correlational) phase.

2.2. Statistical Population and Sampling

A. Qualitative Phase

The statistical population for the first stage of the qualitative phase (meta-synthesis) included all articles and scientific works from domestic and international databases and existing documents and regulations in this field. In this stage, 20 articles were selected through purposive non-probability sampling based on the PRISMA guideline. The selection criteria for the meta-synthesis included recency, relevance to the research topic, high scientific quality and credibility, sourcing from reputable domestic and international databases, appropriate methodology, and diversity of perspectives.

In the second stage (Delphi technique), the statistical population included experienced officials in universities in Tehran with expertise in social harm (child labor), having over five years of experience in education, research, evaluation, management, policy-making, etc. Given that the minimum number of experts in a Delphi panel typically ranges from 10 to 18 (Linstone & Turoff, 2011), 18 experts were selected through purposive non-probability sampling. Selection criteria for the experts included: holding a Ph.D., having teaching experience in relevant fields, expertise in and experience with related research projects, familiarity with policies, challenges, and barriers, the ability to provide analytical insights, diversity of perspectives, commitment to participation, holding relevant positions and responsibilities, and practical experience in the research field.

B. Quantitative Phase

The statistical population included all stakeholders involved with child labor in Tehran Municipality, including managers and deputies. Based on the recommendations of notable theorists like Kline (2015), who suggest a minimum sample size of 200 for structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis, the study included 291 respondents. A stratified random sampling method was employed to select managers and deputies from relevant

departments in Tehran Municipality involved in urban discipline and child labor affairs.

2.3. *Data Collection Tools, Validity, and Reliability*

A. Qualitative Phase

In the first stage of the qualitative phase (meta-synthesis), data collection involved systematically reviewing literature and credible scientific sources. This process included targeted searches in academic databases, articles, books, and dissertations relevant to the research topic. Content validity analysis during the meta-synthesis stage confirmed that the reviewed content and concepts were comprehensively covered in the existing literature. Articles were meticulously selected, screened, and filtered using a search and selection flowchart. Temporal (domestic and international), spatial (domestic and international databases), methodological (synthesis, review, qualitative, and quantitative), and thematic (keywords for searches) limitations were applied during this process. Screening was conducted in two stages, coarse and fine.

Internal validity results indicated that findings from the meta-synthesis were not influenced by external factors and were correctly interpreted. To ensure reliability, tools such as PRISMA's 27-item checklist, independent analysis by the researcher and a statistical expert, Cohen's kappa coefficient for agreement, standard criteria, repeatability (transparency in execution), and MAXQDA software were used for tracking analysis steps and data coding. Additionally, expert feedback was sought to identify and resolve discrepancies in coding.

In the second stage of the qualitative phase (Delphi technique), a Delphi worksheet was used. Experts were asked to score indicators and provide comments or suggest new indicators if necessary. Content validity of the Delphi worksheet was ensured by designing questions that were simple, clear, and relevant, using accessible language for the experts. Content validity was calculated using the content validity ratio formula, confirming the comprehensive representation of concepts. Reliability was assessed using internal and temporal consistency, confirming the Delphi worksheet's validity and reliability.

B. Quantitative Phase

In the quantitative phase, researcher-developed questionnaires were used to assess internal validity (based on identified indicators from the qualitative phase) and external validity (based on the final model). Developing the questionnaire for internal validity followed a systematic

literature review using the PRISMA protocol. Twenty articles were selected based on specific criteria, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify evaluation dimensions. These dimensions informed the creation of Delphi worksheet questions, which were refined through three rounds of expert consensus.

The questionnaire included 161 items measured on a Likert scale ranging from "very high" to "very low." Content validity was assessed using the Lawshe content validity ratio and content validity index, involving 10 experts. Questions were reviewed for redundancy or needed modifications before distribution. Construct validity was assessed using convergent and divergent validity with SmartPLS 3 software. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and McDonald's omega. Values above 0.7 for all variables indicated the questionnaire's reliability.

2.4. *Data Analysis Methods*

A. Qualitative Phase

In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis was used to propose a behavioral educational model for socially vulnerable groups. MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 software was employed to identify and analyze common themes and patterns from the selected articles and open-ended Delphi worksheet questions. In the Delphi stage, closed-ended questions were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and Kendall's coefficient of concordance to evaluate expert agreement and prioritize responses, utilizing IBM SPSS Statistics 16.

B. Quantitative Phase

In the quantitative phase, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, tables, and charts to describe demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and work experience, as well as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis for research variables) and inferential statistics. Confirmatory factor analysis (for internal validity) and one-sample t-tests (for external validity) were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 23 (2015) and SmartPLS-V3 (2016).

3. Findings and Results

In the qualitative phase, data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, employing a coding process that included three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. These stages were applied to the indicators examined in the meta-synthesis as well as the indicators derived from interviews. The final coding process is

presented in Table 1, which also includes the corresponding interview codes and the sources of the codes.

Table 1. Extracted Themes for Developing a Behavioral Educational Model for Socially Vulnerable Groups

Dimension	Component	Indicator
Educational	Curriculum	Alignment with specific group needs- Diversity in educational content- Flexibility of programs- Up-to-date content- Use of credible resources- Focus on practical skill learning
	Teaching Methods	Use of active and participatory methods- Integration of modern educational technologies- Diversity in teaching methods- Emphasis on interactive learning- Provision of practical learning opportunities- Use of continuous feedback
	Equipment and Educational Resources	Access to books and credible resources- Availability of educational software- Well-equipped and suitable learning environment- Access to internet and online resources- Provision of supplementary resources
	Educational Evaluation	Use of diverse evaluation methods- Continuous and ongoing evaluation- Feedback-based educational improvement- Evaluation of students' practical abilities- Assessment based on defined educational goals- Use of self-assessment and peer-assessment
	Teacher Professional Development	Provision of in-service training courses- Opportunities for experience exchange- Access to specialized consultations
	Extracurricular Activities	Organization of educational camps- Implementation of practical projects- Participation in competitions and festivals- Creation of educational clubs- Organization of skill workshops- Collaboration with other educational institutions
Psychological	Psychological Support	Continuous counseling services- Access to psychologists and specialized counselors- Safe spaces for discussing problems- Organization of group therapy sessions- Provision of psychological resources and materials
	Psychological Empowerment	Confidence-building workshops- Stress management techniques- Training in effective communication skills- Self-awareness sessions- Meditation and relaxation programs
	Psychological Care	Depression prevention programs- Regular psychological status evaluation- Support programs during crises- Follow-up and support for individuals with psychological problems- Training in coping strategies
	Emotional Support	Formation of support groups- Encouragement to express emotions- Provision of emotional support- Organization of group sessions- Strengthening social relationships- Emotional management training- Individual and group counseling sessions- Specialized solutions for psychological issues- Referrals to specialized centers- Psychological follow-up after counseling- Training in coping with psychological problems
Family Support	Training families on psychological issues- Family counseling services- Parent workshops- Formation of family support groups- Educational resources for families	
Social	Social Support	Formation of interpersonal and group support networks- Provision of social services- Opportunities for social participation- Strengthening social relationships
	Social Participation Opportunities	Organization of social events- Encouragement to participate in social activities- Opportunities for volunteering- Interactive sessions- Encouragement of social responsibility
	Social Awareness	Social rights and duties education- Awareness workshops- Educational content on social issues- Encouragement of social discussions- Promotion of social responsibility
	Social Skill Enhancement	Effective communication skills training- Life skills workshops- Strengthening group capabilities- Conflict resolution training- Opportunities for practicing social skills- Continuous feedback in social communication
	Social Solidarity Promotion	Promotion of empathy and cooperation- Group and interactive sessions- Encouragement of collaboration- Opportunities for joint efforts- Strengthening social relationships in diverse environments- Development of social support networks
	Social Networking	Strengthening social relationships- Interaction and networking opportunities- Organization of networking events- Strengthening interpersonal connections- Use of social media for networking
Economic	Job Skills	Job skill training- Organization of practical workshops- Provision of internship opportunities- Career counseling services- Encouragement to pursue practical studies- Strengthening job skills
	Entrepreneurship	Promotion of entrepreneurship- Organization of entrepreneurship courses- Entrepreneurship counseling- Encouragement to start small businesses- Provision of entrepreneurial resources and information- Organization of entrepreneurship competitions and festivals- Provision of low-interest loans- Establishment of support funds- Financial counseling services- Strengthening financial management skills
	Local Economic Development	Support for local businesses- Encouragement to buy local products- Organization of local markets- Development of local business networks- Strengthening local capabilities
	Financial Management Training	Financial management training- Organization of financial management workshops- Financial management counseling- Strengthening financial management capabilities- Provision of financial management resources
	Economic Empowerment	Business skills training- Provision of internship opportunities- Strengthening economic capabilities- Creation of job opportunities- Provision of economic counseling
Cultural	Cultural Identity Preservation	Organization of cultural festivals- Training in local culture- Strengthening cultural awareness- Creation of joint cultural programs- Promotion of local culture- Provision of cultural resources
	Cultural Education	Organization of cultural workshops- Educational content on various cultures and traditions- Promotion of acceptance and respect for cultural diversity- Organization of cultural diversity courses- Use of diverse cultural resources
	Cultural Interactions	Promotion of cultural interactions- Organization of cultural exchange programs- Opportunities to learn about different cultures- Strengthening cultural relationships- Promotion of participation in cultural programs- Creation of joint cultural programs
	Artistic Development	Organization of art workshops- Opportunities to showcase artistic works- Encouragement of artistic activities- Organization of art festivals- Provision of artistic resources and materials- Strengthening artistic capabilities

Cultural Heritage Preservation	Training in cultural heritage preservation- Organization of workshops on cultural heritage preservation- Organization of visits to cultural sites- Promotion of heritage preservation- Provision of educational resources on cultural heritage- Strengthening public awareness of cultural heritage importance
Cultural Promotion	Organization of cultural events- Encouragement to participate in cultural activities- Opportunities to showcase cultural works- Strengthening cultural awareness- Provision of cultural resources and materials- Use of cultural media for cultural promotion

At this stage, structural equation modeling based on partial least squares (PLS-SEM) was employed to validate the model fit and examine the relationships among the model components. This analysis was conducted to address the following questions. The results are as follows:

As shown in Figure 1, the factor loadings for all components and indicators are above 0.4, indicating an acceptable level of explanation of the indicators for each

component and the components for each dimension. The significance coefficients (t-values) of the model are presented in the following figure.

As depicted in Figure 2, the t-values for all indicators and components exceed 2.58. Thus, with 99% confidence, all indicators for each component and all components for each dimension are confirmed, and no indicator or component requires elimination.

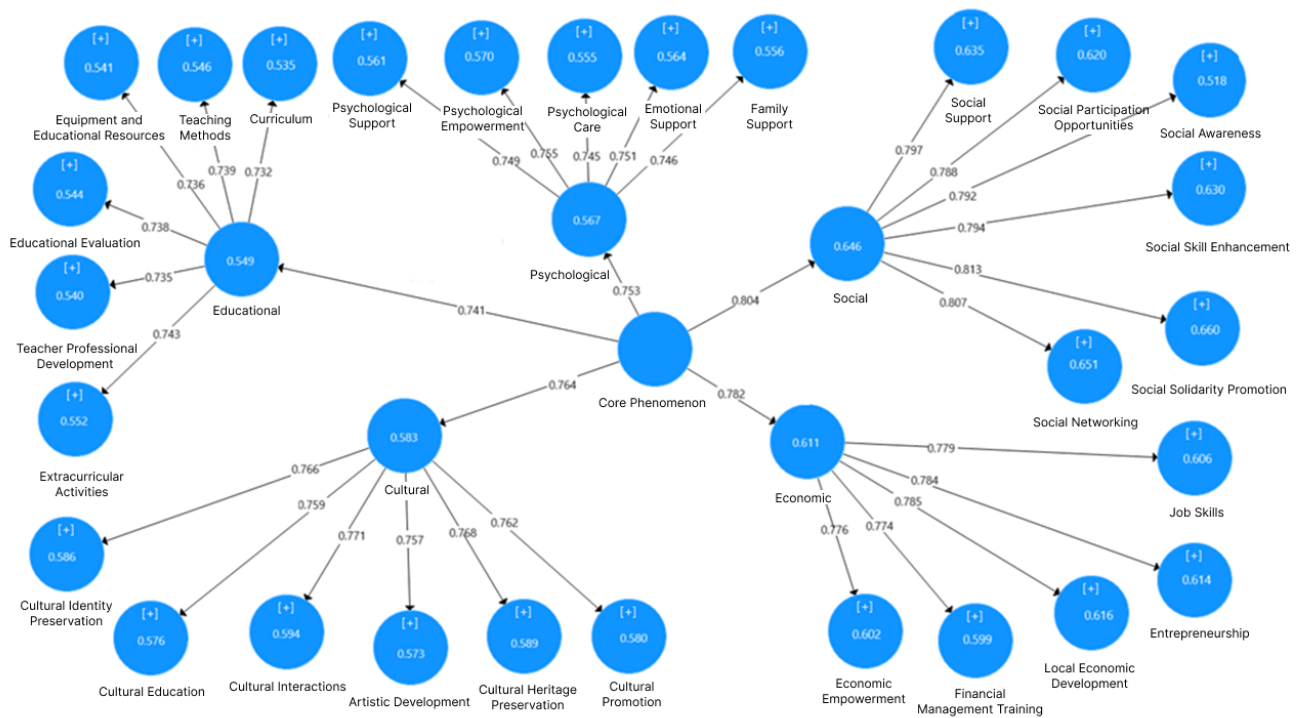


Figure 1. Quantitative Validation of the Behavioral Educational Model for Socially Vulnerable Groups (Factor Loading State)

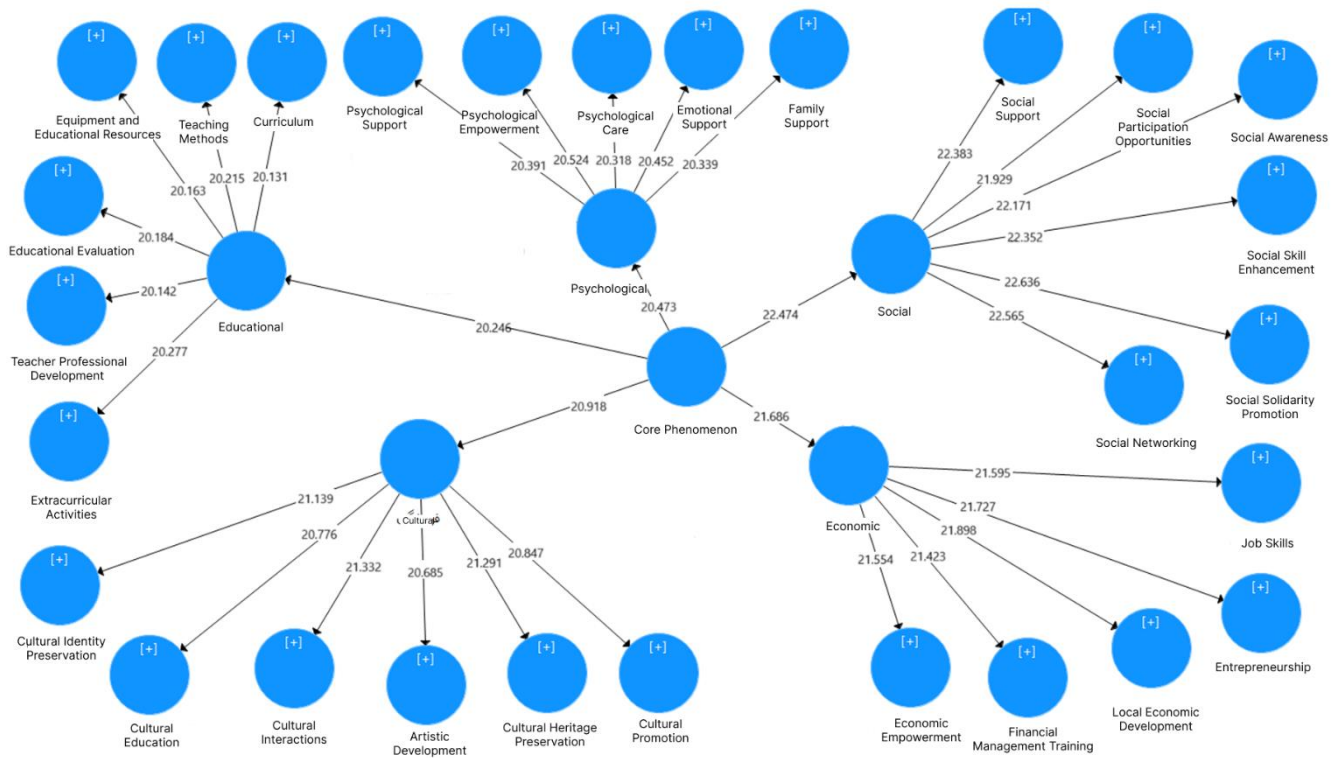


Figure 2. Quantitative Validation of the Behavioral Educational Model for Socially Vulnerable Groups (Significance Coefficients State)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, a behavioral educational model was designed and proposed for socially vulnerable groups, specifically working children in Tehran Province. This model comprehensively takes into account diverse educational, psychological, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, each of which plays a crucial role in empowering and improving the condition of these children. The model highlights five main dimensions: educational, psychological, social, economic, and cultural.

Regarding the educational dimension, it covers curricula, teaching methods, educational equipment and resources, educational evaluation, teacher professional development, and extracurricular activities. These elements collectively contribute to the creation of an effective and efficient learning environment, emphasizing the importance of education in the growth and development of children. Evidence shows that diverse educational programs and practical learning experiences can increase children’s motivation and engagement [16]. In addition, psychological support, psychological empowerment, and psychological care are among the components that aid in the mental health of vulnerable children. This dimension underscores the importance of emotional and social support for children and

their families; research indicates that emotional and social support positively affects the mental well-being of children [4].

The social dimension consists of social support, opportunities for social participation, and the enhancement of social skills. These components address the promotion of social solidarity and social networking, which are critical for working children. In fact, positive social interactions and social support can substantially improve mental health and foster a sense of belonging to society [17]. On the other hand, the economic dimension includes job skills, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment. These factors help children attain future financial independence and become active members of society. Numerous studies have demonstrated that job skills training can improve economic conditions and help alleviate poverty [18].

The cultural dimension outlined in the model refers to various components as well. Preserving cultural identity and cultural education underscores the significance of culture and art in children’s lives, along with the promotion of cultural heritage and cultural interactions. Specifically, preserving and promoting local culture can strengthen children’s identity and sense of belonging to their community [19].

This model shares several similarities and differences with other models presented in research on social vulnerability and the education of working children. Most models emphasize educational and psychological dimensions, stressing the importance of education and emotional support. The presence of social and economic components in many models highlights the need for social and economic empowerment of working children [20]. Conversely, the present model explicitly devotes special attention to the cultural dimension, which is less frequently highlighted in many other models. This dimension focuses on preserving cultural identity and promoting culture among vulnerable children. Moreover, integrating different dimensions in a coherent, comprehensive manner is a hallmark of this model—an approach not often observed in other models.

The proposed model introduces innovations in the field of educating and empowering working children. For instance, the simultaneous integration of educational, psychological, social, economic, and cultural dimensions provides a holistic and systematic approach to the issue of child social vulnerability [8]. Emphasizing the preservation of cultural identity and the promotion of culture among working children helps identify and reinforce their cultural roots, a component that is less frequently addressed in other models. This research aligns with prior studies [9, 21-28] regarding the importance of cultural dimensions in educating socially vulnerable children. Rather than focusing solely on education, the model prioritizes comprehensive empowerment of children, aiming to create an environment conducive to their growth and development. Finally, this model can serve as a reference for designing educational and support programs for working children in other regions and similar countries, aiding in improving this vulnerable group's conditions.

One of the main limitations of this study is that the use of semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase and researcher-made questionnaires in the quantitative phase may introduce constraints related to the tools' specific design, potentially affecting the precision and breadth of the collected data. In particular, questionnaires may not fully capture every dimension of the subject.

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that program implementers develop initiatives to increase social support and social participation opportunities for working children. Such efforts may include group activities, social workshops, and cultural programs that bolster social solidarity and relationships. In addition, implementers

should provide counseling and psychological support services for working children and their families. These services should encompass individual and group counseling, psychological empowerment workshops, and training in coping skills.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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