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Challenges of Educating Single-Child Students: Perspectives of First-Grade Elementary Teachers in Yazd, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Background: The aim of the current research is to study the views of first grade elementary school teachers in Yazd about the challenges of working with single-child students.

Methods: In this qualitative descriptive study, 15 primary school teachers were selected through theoretical sampling. The criteria for determining sample size were achieving the theoretical saturation in extracted categories. The inclusion criteria were willingness to participate and at least one academic year of teaching experience with single-child students in the classroom. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted over a period of 3 months. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with a conventional (inductive) approach. To ensure research rigor, the authors addressed trustworthiness through four criteria: (1) credibility (via member checking and peer debriefing), (2) transferability (thick description of context), (3) dependability (audit trail of research process), and (4) confirmability (researcher reflexivity journals). Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources and analyst cross-checking.

Results: Three core themes emerged from the analysis, with twenty distinct subthemes illuminating the challenges faced by single-child students in classroom settings:Social Competency Deficits (Social isolation, peer incompatibility, egocentric behaviors, conflict resolution difficulties, rule-compliance challenges, friendship formation barriers), Developmental Vulnerability Traits (Depressive tendencies, obsessive behaviors, low self-efficacy, poor resilience, indecisiveness, digital overreliance, self-regulation gaps, delayed social acceptance, passive listening, accountability deficits),Emotional Regulation Difficulties (Separation anxiety, perceived deviance distress, emotional dysregulation, excessive validation-seeking).

Conclusion: The study reveals that single-child students' developmental trajectories are significantly shaped by their limited peer socialization opportunities, which are manifested in three interrelated domains: underdeveloped social competencies, heightened vulnerability in personality development, and impaired emotional regulation capacities. These findings suggest that the absence of sibling relationships may create distinct socialization challenges that classroom environments must intentionally address through targeted pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: Education, Qualitative Research, Only Child, Students, School Teachers.

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Introduction

While family formation remains a universal human institution , contemporary demographic trends show declining fertility rates globally, particularly in urbanized societies (Gerland et al., 2022). The transition to single-child families has accelerated due to socioeconomic factors including urbanization, female workforce participation , and shifting cultural values. In Iran, where this study was conducted, fertility rates fell below replacement level (1.6 births per woman) by 2022, reflecting this global pattern.

In most European and North American countries, the prevalence of single-childhood has increased over time (Lee et al., 2024). Growing up as the only person in a family can lead to distinctive characteristics of a child. According to ecological systems theory, children's behavioral characteristics are intricately related to ecological factors in their living environment, especially family factors such as parenting styles and number of children (Zhu et al., 2024). Research results of many researchers show that these children may rely heavily on parents, are not optimistic, and have a simpler social network compared to children with siblings (Yang et al., 2023). According to the cognitive-behavioral model, people who have previous psychological problems such as loneliness and interpersonal relationship problems are especially vulnerable to Internet addiction (Tian et al., 2021). The daily experiences of people in the family, including the interactions of members with each other, are the basis of the formation of their worldview, view and belief system towards themselves, others and the surrounding world.

According to (Satooriyan et al.,2014) research, children from two-child families have a lower average and a completely better condition in terms of behavioral problems, including internalization problems and externalization problems, compared with single-child families. They also concluded in research that the average rank of psychological irritation and psychological dissociation of students from families with one and two children is significantly higher than that of students from families with more than two children. (Hoghabrkhah et al., 2023) also found that single children had lower self-compassion and more avoidant identity style than multiple children(Jalili et al., 2022) .observed that only-child children are likely to show ambivalence in family interactions (protective relationship and dependency-loneliness), inconsistent personality structure (positive and negative moral and behavioral characteristics) and limited social interactions (restricted communication with relatives and friends; weak communication with friends and peers).

Single-child students often exhibit distinct behavioral patterns that influence classroom dynamics (Geeraerts et al., 2020). Classrooms function as complex social systems requiring specialized management approaches . Effective classroom management involves three interdependent dimensions: organizational design (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013), socio-emotional coordination (Goodwin et al., 2022), and instructional monitoring (Korpershoek et al., 2016). Research confirms that teacher-student communication quality mediates 42% of classroom management outcomes (Wentzel et al., 2021), particularly for single-child students who often require tailored interaction strategies (Jiao et al., 1986). The importance of communication in the classroom is so great that some experts believe that communication and management and control of a classroom are necessary for each other. In communicating with students in the classroom, the teacher faces many obstacles and factors that the teacher's awareness and mastery of these issues and communication skills are inevitable in order to achieve educational goals.

One of these challenges and obstacles is dealing with single-child students and managing the class with these students. It is necessary for the teacher to know the behavioral

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characteristics and challenges of this category well in order to be successful in managing the class. As seen from previous studies, there are many research findings related to the challenges of single children; however, no research has investigated these challenges from the perspective of a teacher and someone who wants to manage a class despite this sensitive spectrum; Therefore, according to this existing gap and the gap in studies in understanding the challenges and problems of single children in the classroom and managing the classroom with them, it seems necessary to discover and understand the possible challenges facing the teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to study the viewpoint of the first-grade teachers in Yazd city regarding working with single-child students in the classroom.

Methods

This was qualitative research with Husserl's transcendental phenomenological approach. From Husserl's point of view, phenomenology is basically the study of lived experience or the world of life. Phenomenology looks at the world, as it is through a person lived, not a world or a reality that is something separate from man. The study sample included primary teachers of Yazd who had experience of being and interacting with single-child student in the classroom for at least one academic year. In qualitative methods, researchers are instructed to interview 5 to 25 people who have experience with the phenomenon under study (Polkinghorne, 1989). Participants were invited to the interview by introducing school management and expressed their willingness. Gradual and purposive sampling continued until reaching data saturation. Therefore, 15 primary teachers of yazd were enrolled in the present study (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the research participants

Code	Teaching experience	Type of school	Gender	Degree	Field of study	Teaching basis
1	6 years	B	M	Master's degree	Educational psychology	First
2	25	B	M	Bachelor	Educational sciences	First
3	9	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	First
4	12	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	Third
5	19	G	W	Bachelor	Psychology	First
6	22	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	Second
7	10	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	Third
8	8	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	Third
9	6	G	W	Master's degree	Educational psychology	First
10	24	G	W	Bachelor	Psychology	First
11	28	G	W	Bachelor	Psychology	First
12	8	G	W	Master's degree	Curriculum planning	First
13	5	G	W	Bachelor	Educational sciences	Third
14	10	G	W	Master's degree	Educational psychology	Second
15	21	G	W	Ph.D	Clinical psychology	Second

W: Woman M: Man B: Boyish G: Girlish

It should be noted that data reached saturation after 14 interviews; but 15 interviews were conducted to ensure data accuracy. Interviews were conducted over a three-month period from mid-April to mid-July 2025, and each interview lasted between 40-60 minutes. The data collection tool included a semi-structured interview. All interview sessions were recorded by a voice recorder after obtaining the consent of the participants. Each interview was then implemented verbatim, and key points were noted at the same time. Also, after each interview, the

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implementation process, weaknesses and strengths, and follow-up items were determined so that they could be taken into consideration in the next interviews.

The interviews were conducted at school environment. Data analysis was carried out using the interpretative approach proposed by Smith and Fieldsend, (2021). Smith has proposed three stages of data generation, data analysis, and case integration for data analysis in the phenomenological method. In the present study, interviews were first conducted and analyzed. Then, subthemes were determined and coded. Afterward, themes were organized and clustered, which means that more general themes were extracted by continuously comparing and considering the differences and similarities of the themes. To enhance trustworthiness in this research, prolonged and continuous engagements, avoiding quick and unproven judgments, discussing findings with neutral people, documenting the process of change throughout the study, member check, and the researcher self-review were used during the data collection and analysis process. Coding was carried out and compared by two experts in qualitative research. To enhance trustworthiness in this research, prolonged and continuous engagements, avoiding quick and unproven judgments, discussing findings with neutral people, and documenting the process of change throughout the study were done during the data collection and analysis process. In addition, the validity of the findings can be improved by using "different sources, different methods, and sometimes multiple reviews"; which is known as the triangulation method. In the current research, the method of triangulation of the quadrants presented by Deniz Cited (Johnson, 1997) has been used. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings from the perspective of the researcher, participants, or readers of the research report, the following measures were taken:

- Member checking: some of the participants reviewed the final report of the first stage, the analysis process or the obtained themes, and expressed their opinions about them.
- Peer examination: several professors of educational sciences and master's students familiar with qualitative research and the subject of the research reviewed the findings and commented on them.
- Collaborativeness of the research: the participants were simultaneously helped in analyzing and interpreting the data.
- Researcher reflexivity: as much as possible, it was tried to control the researcher's bias and prejudice.

Results

Based on the study and review of texts obtained from interviews with primary school teachers, the problems of single-child students in the first year of primary school were identified and categorized in three themes, which are: 1- social competency deficits; 2- developmental vulnerability traits; and 3- emotional regulation difficulties. Themes and subthemes extracted from interviews with teachers are presented in (Table 2).

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Table 2. Themes and sub-themes extracted from interviews with teachers

Row	Main Theme	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Challenges of Educating Single-Child Students First-Grade Elementary	Social competency deficits	Social isolation Incompatibility Self-centeredness Inability to resolve interpersonal conflicts Weakness of rule of law Weakness in making friends
2		Developmental vulnerability traits	Depression Obsession Low self-confidence Poor resilience Inability to make decisions Addiction to cyberspace Weakness of self-discipline Late acceptance of others Poor hearing Weakness of responsibility
3		Emotional Regulation Difficulties	Separation anxiety Negative feeling of being different Weakness in controlling emotions Excessive attention seeking

Social competency deficits**:** The first theme is in the field of collaboration and working group and establishing social communication with a frequency of 26. Social isolation, incompatibility, self-centeredness, inability to resolve interpersonal conflicts, weakness of rule of law, weakness in making friends are among the subthemes that are included under this category.

Social isolation: Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, sadness and low self-esteem. Inability to interact with peers and teachers may lead to lack of motivation and participation in class activities. A number of interviewees admitted that this problem was observed more in single children. For example:

Code 7. "*In sport-class, as a different work, everyone was supposed to bring their favorite toys or ideas and play cooperatively with their friends. This girl (she is single- child) took her belongings and went to sit behind one of the pillars of the prayer room alone and did not allow anyone to enter her territory until the last bell.*

Incompatibility: The behavior of incompatible students creates a very bad feeling in those around them, so that they themselves are affected by its unpleasant reactions from others. They cannot control their behavior and show harmonious and appropriate behavior with others. Interviewees had observed the category of incompatibility in single children more than others. For example:

Code 15. "*The mother of the student, referring to the fact that her daughter was single- child and was alone, regularly asked me to mediate for the girl's good relations with her friends; But her inconsistent behavior and the fact that she had not really learned how to get along with others even after one year of study was really challenging."*

self-centeredness: children between the ages of 2 and 6 have self-centered thinking; that is, they consider themselves to be the center of the world and believe that everything should be at their service and everything they want will be provided. Even though self-centeredness should be resolved at the beginning of the 7th year and the beginning of school,with the wrong parenting method, it may remain as a moral trait for years. The interviewees admitted that this feature is stronger in single children due to parents paying too much attention to their wishes. For example:

Code 1. *"Even in their playing, this spectrum*

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acts differently. For example, the way they like and the way they want, they force others to enter the game and think that others must also like this model. For example, he says that we should all play football and others should listen and others' opinions are not important at all."

Inability to resolve interpersonal conflicts: psychological conflict is a situation in which a person is faced with two or more conflicting or incompatible motivations, values, feelings, thoughts or behaviors. This conflict can occur at the intrapersonal level (between individual personality components) or interpersonal level (between the individual and others). According to the opinions of some interviewees, single-child students face more challenges in solving interpersonal conflicts. For example:

Code 14. "*Children who have brothers and sisters have had so many fights and arguments that they have learned how to get along with others, but this is not the case for single children! There is a greater need for teacher intervention in solving communication problems."*

Weakness of rule of law: teaching children the law, acceptance of the law, and respect for the rights of others is a sensitive issue, because excessive teaching of rule of law to children causes perfectionism and excesses, leading to their narcissism, which according to the interviewees, the second case is more pronounced in single children.

Code 13. "*In group work and games, I have to constantly warn the student (he is single- child) to respect his turn or to do it cooperatively. I paid attention and saw that it is because they spend time with their parents at home and in games the parents neglect their rights so that the child does not get upset."*

Weakness in making friends: Part of a child's cognitive development is done through making friends and communicating with peers. Friendships and having friends of the same age for children of any age give them the feeling of being accepted, wanted, belonging and self-esteem. According to the opinion of a significant number of interviewees, the only children in their classes needed more time to make friends. For example:

Code 10. "*During the years that I have worked, I have come to the conclusion that students whose parents do not travel much and have a limited circle of communication are also weaker in dating, and now single- children have also been added to them."*

Developmental vulnerability traits**:** The second theme is in the field of foundation and personality, and it is related to the effects of being single- child on the personality . Depression, obsession, low self-confidence, poor resilience, inability to make decisions, addiction to cyberspace, weakness of self-discipline, late acceptance of others, poor hearing, weakness of responsibility are among the mentioned subthemes, which are placed under this theme due to the affinity of the subject with the main theme.

Depression: children may suffer from depression at any age, and in this respect, they are no different from adults. Occurrence of mood disorder, discomfort with intense sadness, irritability, constant feeling of emptiness and loss of interest in daily activities are among the common symptoms of depression in children. According to some participants, depression caused by loneliness is more observed in single children. For example:

Code 8. "*He is not interested in anything but crying." I really don't know what and how makes him happy. I also talked to my mother and she also knows the reason for this is her loneliness."*

Obsession: obsession in children is a disorder that is constantly repeated in the form of disturbing thoughts. This disorder usually occurs with a specific behavior in the form of anxiety in the child. According to some participants, the obsessive behaviors of single children seem more worrying. For example:

Code 9. "*He checks his stuff a hundred times to see if it's there or not. Or when she takes an exam and her score has even improved, she asks a thousand times if I had improved?" Did I read well?"*

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Low self-confidence: self-esteem is feeling good about yourself. According to some participants, single children have shown less self-confidence than others. For example:

Code 1. *"He withdraws in class games and when I ask why, he says that he didn't like this game, but that's not the case. He's afraid of losing".*

Poor resilience: when parents who do not let their child experience the most trivial challenges and constantly pursue him for fear of failure or injury, the child will gradually distance himself from his normal life and will probably remain overly dependent and with poor resilience. According to the opinion of some participants, this category is observed more in single children. For example:

Code 4. *"He made a small mistake in the math test; But he has lost himself in such a way that it seems as if he has become zero. He says that I am not good at my studies and I could not get twenty".*

Inability to make decisions: children, like any other person, may make mistakes in their decisions, make wrong decisions or regret later. This process is inevitable and it can happen to anyone, although parents should do their best so that children do not make a wrong decision in sensitive and critical times; but, this does not mean that they do not give their children a chance to make mistakes and constantly want to control them. According to the statements of the interviewees, parents of single children were extremely involved in their children's decisions. For example:

Code 5. *"For the student award, we gave the children green and orange notebooks and let them choose the color themselves. He was hesitant in choosing and deciding on a simple color, and when his mom's doorbell rang, he showed it to his mom and said that there were two colors and I chose this one, did I choose it right?!"*

Addiction to cyberspace: taking refuge in the Internet to escape from problems, mistaken belief in improving emotional disorders such as feelings of hopelessness, guilt, anxiety, depression, and loneliness can be considered as reasons for extreme desire to use the Internet. According to some interviewees, single children have turned to cyberspace to escape loneliness. For example:

Code 2*." In our time, who knew what the phone and the Internet are?" We were a few kids and we used to play with ourselves and have fun. Now the kids don't have anyone at home to have fun with, and unfortunately, what's more attractive than a phone to replace it."*

Weakness of self-discipline: a child who grew up freely in the family and his personality was respected, feels more restricted in school than at home; in addition, his personality may not be to get as much attention and respect as at home, thus forcing the child to do actions against school regulations. For example:

Code 13. *"It has happened a lot that he asked me to go to drink water and instead of going to the drinking fountain, he sneaked into the water house and drank from the teachers' glasses. He didn't do a big thing that needs a serious warning, but the issue becomes more interesting when he says that his mother told him to do whatever is easy, it doesn't matter."*

Late acceptance of others: social interaction or social capabilities means interaction in society, knowing the mood and inner feelings of oneself and others and dealing with them correctly and appropriately . According to the statements of some interviewees, only children start their relationships with others later. For example:

Code 6. *"Last year he was alone, this year he has reached half of the year and he was able to find some real friends for himself. "In the beginning, when anyone came to sit with him, he would pull himself away and not look at them."*

Poor hearing: The power game can be seen throughout history and in different contexts. One of the features of this game is the parent-child relationship; parents expect to listen to their children and children also expect to be freed from the constraints of their parents. It is possible that children of single children become weaker listeners due to the excessive obsession of their parents. For

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example:

Code 7. "*Enough of ordering him to study, write homework, go to such and such a class, do such and such work, the child has become a model who seems to be indifferent to what his parents say. The way I jokingly warned the parents to make things busy for themselves other than focusing too much on their children in order not to make the situation worse."*

Weakness of responsibility: excessive support of parents to the child causes weakness of responsibility. But if parents assign responsibilities according to the child's age characteristics, in addition to developing a sense of responsibility, other abilities of the child will also develop. According to the interviewees, this weakness is more visible in single children. For example:

Code 5. "*When the doorbell rings, the child doesn't touch anything to collect, and the mother comes, collects her things and takes them with her. The mother wants to support her child, but she doesn't know how."*

Emotional regulation difficulties: The third theme is in the field of emotional-affective traits, which includes a subset of problems such as separation anxiety, negative feeling of being different, weakness in controlling emotions, excessive attention seeking.

Separation anxiety: separation anxiety disorder (SAD) is defined as excessive worry and fear of being separated from family members or people to whom a child is most attached. Children with separation anxiety disorder are afraid of getting lost or that something bad will happen to a family member. According to some interviewees, this disorder was more visible in single children. For example:

Code 2. "*He is coming to me and asks me to call him to talk to his mom. When I ask him why, he says that he feels that his mom is not well when he comes in the morning."*

Negative feeling of being different: sometimes a person may feel that being different is wrong and want to be the same color as the crowd so as not to feel the difficulties of being among people. For example:

Code 10."*When we start teaching the Persian book, it starts with the topic of family and that Amin and Azadeh are siblings, and we discuss about the family, and the children also start talking about their siblings, but so-and-so (he is an only child) either gets busy with his things quickly or distracts himself in another direction."*

Weakness in controlling emotions: Some children may not be able to control their emotions, they may experience extreme anger or cry when they feel upset. According to some interviewees, single children have shown less self-control. For example:

Code 11. "*When arguing with his classmates, he is much more chaotic and cries a lot and thinks that here, like at home, someone should come and pamper him immediately."*

Excessive attention seeking: in attention seeking, which is also known as approval seeking, people have a great desire to attract attention and be the center of attention. It means that a person wants to gain the approval and opinion of others at any cost (even inappropriate behavior and movements). According to some participants, this feature is more common in single children.

Code 3. "*It was strange to me that a student whose mother is paying so much attention to him and should be full of attention right now is trying so hard to attract the attention of me and the children. It is as if parents' excessive attention has given the opposite result or is a habit."*

Discussion

The aim of the present research was to study the views of first grade elementary school teachers in Yazd about the challenges of working with single-child students. By examining the opinions of teachers who had a history of school interactions with single-child students, three main theme including Social competency deficits, developmental vulnerability traits, and emotional regulation difficulties were obtained.

Collaboration and teamwork are related to weak interactions of individual children with peers and adults. It seems that children who have siblings

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have more and better opportunities to connect with others and have social interactions. This main theme included subthemes (social isolation, incompatibility, self-centeredness, inability to resolve interpersonal conflicts, weakness of rule of law, weakness in making friends). Among the subthemes mentioned, the weakness of making friends and the weakness of rule of law were mentioned by more interviewees. Law evasion is synonymous with order evasion, the consequences of which are a person not being satisfied with his rights, violating the rights of others, not doing his homework, avoiding responsibility and achieving his desire in any possible way, which can threaten the pillars of the mental and social health of society. Teachers acknowledged that children with siblings automatically learn the rules and respect the rights of others during communication and playbecause they have to find a way to compromise with each other in any way possible; But, single children have different conditions and need to be specially trained. In this regard, the findings of the present research are in line with the research by (Jalili et al.,2022). In their research, they found that the main problems of single children are caused by ambivalence in family interactions (protective relationship and dependence - loneliness), inconsistent personality structure (positive and negative moral and behavioral characteristics) and limited social interactions (restriction of communication with relatives and friends; weak communication with friends and peers). However, the findings by(Mehdizadeh Hasanabadi, 2022) research are not consistent with the present research. They do not consider the problems mentioned for single children to be caused by their being only children and state that the sense of psychological coherence, self-regulation and psychological toughness in single children and multiple children may be due to the parents' expectations and parenting styles due to the differences in the personality characteristics of each child. It is possible that the findings of the current research are also related to to the teachers' perspective, their expectations, and their student-raising styles.

The second theme under the title of foundation and personality included subthemes such as depression, obsession, low self-confidence, poor resilience, inability to make decisions, addiction to cyberspace, weakness of self-discipline, late acceptance of others, poor hearing, and weakness of responsibility. Among the mentioned problems, the two categories of depression and late acceptance of others have been assigned the highest frequency respectively. Regarding the category of depression, the results of (Taheri et al., 2023) research are consistent with the current research, and they consider play therapy and social interactions to be the appropriate approach and intervention to reduce behavioral problems, depression, and feelings of loneliness in children. In relation to the reason why single-children are more involved with cyberspace, the results of (Zhu et al., 2024) research show that students with interpersonal relationship problems are more drawn to online communication and are more likely to suffer from Internet addiction. It may be more attractive for people who have difficulty with face-to-face interpersonal relationships and feel lonely to seek out virtual social connections. The findings of the present study in the field of low self-confidence of single children are in line with the findings of (Hoghabrkhah et al., 2023), which state that single children had lower self-compassion and more avoidant identity style than multiple children.

The third theme, titled weakness of emotional-affective traits, includes secondary problems including separation anxiety, negative feeling of being different, weakness in controlling emotions, and excessive attention seeking. In the third theme, separation anxiety and weakness in emotional control have the highest frequency, respectively. (Mohammadi kashka et al.,2023) came to the conclusion that group play therapy can be used as an effective treatment method to promote mental health and prevent psychological problems in children with separation anxiety disorder, which in a way refers to the need for the child to

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communicate with his peers, and in this regard, single children should be given more attention due to the limited circle of communication.

This research was faced with limitations. The findings of the research may not be generalizable to all single-child students, and there are families that have prevented and eliminated these cases and problems with proper educational methods. This research was conducted only in the city of Yazd and in the first period of elementary school; therefore, in the continuation of this study, it is suggested that other researchers investigate the challenges of single children in classrooms at higher levels and in other cities and different classes of society.

Conclusion

The study reveals that single-child students' developmental trajectories are significantly shaped by their limited peer socialization opportunities, which appear to manifest in three interrelated domains: underdeveloped social competencies, heightened vulnerability in personality development, and impaired emotional regulation capacities. These findings suggest that the absence of sibling relationships may create distinct socialization challenges that classroom environments must intentionally address through targeted pedagogical interventions.

In order to apply the findings of the research, it is suggested that the present findings be made available to other teachers so that they can manage the class with the knowledge of the challenges of this special spectrum. Moreover, the findings of the current research can be provided to families so that they adopt the lifestyle and number of family members and parenting style with more awareness.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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Ethical considerations

Necessary explanations were given to the teachers about the objectives of the research, and interviews were conducted after obtaining permission and consent from Yazd University. The teachers were assured of the confidentiality of their information. No additional costs were imposed on the research participants. The participants were free to answer the interview questions.

Code of ethics

Research ethics code: IR.YAZD.REC.1403.109

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization was done by D.D; methodology was devised by H.H. and D.D;. H.H. and D.D conducted the investigation; formal analysis conducted by H.H and G.V; G.V reviewed and edited the manuscript; D.D. made the original draft; and H.H. supervised the study.

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