

# The Role of School in the Identification of Afghan Refugee Adolescents in Iran

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article explores the role of independent schools in the identity formation of Afghan refugee adolescents. **Method:** Following Thematic Analysis, 21 Afghan students studying were qualitatively interviewed. **Findings:** The Afghan adolescent used the accommodation strategy in Iran and achieved identity integrity through the narrative of intimacy. For them, the past (Afghanistan) is a 'Nowhere land', the present (Iran) is a 'no here land', and the future is ambiguous. The independent schools have the potential to rebuild their past, provide a pleasant present, and picture a hopeful future. It is a place where they can write their identity biography.

**Keywords:** Identity; Afghan Refugee; Independent Schools; Qualitative Interview; Narrative Identity;

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the statistics released by the Iran Census Centre in 2016, a total of 1,583,979 Afghan refugees in Iran have been registered, of which 550,470 are children and adolescents under the age of 15. Afghan children-As second and third-generation refugees, face double identity problems compared with their previous generations. Besides, they have not left their homeland by choice, but by the decision of the last generation, they unavoidably settled or were born in Iran and, in other words, have no idea about the birthplace of their fathers. On the other hand, Iranian law considers them 'non-Iranian residents' and therefore does not consider any rights for them.

Meanwhile, one of the most important policies for Afghan children in Iran has been the policy of banning the education of non-Iranians. As of the beginning of 2015, all Afghan children, whether those who are legally in Iran or those who do not have legal documents to be in Iran, must be enrolled in public schools. However, Afghan refugees who do not have a legal permit still fail to get an education, and in practice, the burden of educating these children has fallen on informal schools called independent primary schools. As for Afghan children being excluded from Iranian society and deprived of living in their imaginary homeland, these schools are important not only due to the education opportunity but also due to identity development (Hoodfar, 2010: 163).

Given the idea that the self is a reflexive project in the post-traditional order of modernity (Giddens, 1991: 5), the narrative identity approach can be helpful in the study of identity. Based on this approach, people construct their life stories to link the past, the present, and the future (Pasupathi et al., 2012) and achieve integration

(McAdams, 1996). Individuals, via autobiographical reasoning, make inferences about their identity and meaning of life (McAdams, 2013). However, this process cannot be completed independently since life stories are affected by dominant cultural narratives (McAdams and McLean, 2013). 'Biographical me' as an individual's experience of self, integrates experiences and identities into the personal narrative (Mackinnon & Heise, 2010: 104). There are some types of identity narratives: While in the redemption narrative, a bad situation or feeling ends in a good outcome, in the contamination narrative, a good event turns terrible. In agency narratives, people show their autonomy and ability to change their own lives or others. The focal point in intimate narratives is interpersonal connections like love and friendship. People narrate their development in understanding themselves in exploratory narratives. Incoherent positive resolution narratives, tensions in the story are resolved, and in meaning-making narratives, the emphasis is on the message learned from an event (McAdams and McLean, 2013). Adolescence in modern societies is a critical period of life in which people construct an integrated life story comprised of the past, the present, and the future (McAdams, 2001).

Refugees' identity narratives have to be reconstructed because they face acculturation in some ways: They may lose the original culture and absorb the majority culture (assimilation), maintain the minority culture and reject the majority culture (separation), keep both cultures at the same time (integration) or reject both cultures (marginalization) (Arends-Toth and van de Vijver, 2004). Generally, the collective identity of the minority is maintained by two factors: status problems and, furthermore, minority response to status problems. Minority groups experience external forces that make them excluded and stigmatized as a different group in society, and as a result, the minority tries to form an oppositional identity against the majority (Ogbu, 2004). As for refugee adolescents being excluded, especially in educational systems, they mostly choose the opposition strategy; however, in some cases, some try to be inhibited and native-like students (Cooper et al., 2015: 304). Regarding Afghan refugee adolescents, lack of enough connections with the host society (Monsutti, 2007) and being exposed to contradictory values of the host and the guest society (Taherpoor et al., 2006) have made this generation of Afghan refugees struggle with identity issues and even, insufficient organization of their life stories which is sometimes associated with some psychological dysfunctions (Neshat Doost et al., 2014). This is precisely where the role of independent school matters, and this study aims to examine this role. Given the fact that adolescence is a crucial course of life for self and identity development (Pfeifer and Berkman, 2018) and schools are essential in terms of more extensive ethnic collectivity construction (Jenkins, 2008: 11), it is necessary to examine the role of independent schools in identity status of Afghan students. Therefore, the present study seeks to study the identity status of Afghan children in relation to their educational status in independent schools.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research is based on thematic analysis, a qualitative method that uses a series of systematic procedures to develop inductive theories about a phenomenon (Nowell et al., 2017). Besides, following the rule of 'Gradual Selection'- a theoretical sampling strategy (Flick, 2009: 120), 21 students studying in Afghan independent schools in Tehran were interviewed in 2012. The data were collected based on semi-structured and narrative interviews. The researchers transcribed and coded the audio-recorded interviews of which, 1243 open codes

were extracted.

This qualitative study has been done based on techniques like de-familiarization, iterative analysis, and adjustment through review, critique, and debate (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Thus, to ensure an accurate and deep understanding of the refugees' experiences and give a detailed and thick description of their life, efforts have been made to enhance communication with them. As for data analysis, the authors separately coded and initially analyzed the findings. Then the final themes were agreed upon after discussions.

Some demographical characteristics of participants are reported in the following table.

Table 1. Demographic and background characteristics of participants

Variables	Frequency
Gender	
Female	10
Male	11
Age (years)	
12-13	6
14-15	11
16-17	4
Household size	
>3 individuals	1
3-6 individuals	7
6-9 individuals	10
>9 individuals	3
Education (years)	
4-5 years	4
6 years	6
7 years	11
Place of birth	
Afghanistan	14
Iran	7

As seen in the table1, all the boys and a half of the girls were part-time or full-time workers. Also, all participants lived in poor urban areas.

### 3. FINDINGS

Based on the findings of this study, two main categories of insiders and outsiders can be created. The insiders' realm is the realm in which Afghan adolescents feel similar and integrated, and the outsiders' realm is the realm in which Afghan adolescents feel differentiated and even excluded. Based on these core categories, it

will be explained what role the school plays in Afghan children's sense of identity in the context of family, neighborhood, and society.

### **3.1 Outsiders' realm**

The outsiders' realm is where the adolescents experience the neighborhood and society in their daily interactions.

The present study's findings show that Afghan adolescents and their families are generally not accepted by their neighbors. They have experienced insults, ridicule, and invisibility by neighbors and friends in the neighborhood. Race and ethnicity also play a crucial role in shaping neighborhood relations. Afghan families interact closely with their Afghan neighbors but distance themselves from Iranian neighbors to avoid conflicts. Iranians also refuse to communicate with their Afghan neighbors. What Sadegh said in the interview is a good indication of rejection by his peers in the neighborhood. Sadegh told about his relationship with his peers in the area:

*'Sometimes, we wanted to play soccer in the neighborhood. They used to say don't play with him. He's Afghan. So, nobody did, and I had to go home.'*

Bahareh said about her life experience:

*'We used to live in this building before... and there was this lady on the fifth floor, a horrible person. Sometimes we put on a tape, played a song, and then she used to come to our door and start cursing and bothering us. I was distraught. Maybe what we did was bad, but it's not good if I mention it... She used a nasty curse word about our being Afghan.'*

As mentioned, the common characteristic of the students is living in poor urban areas, which has led to their fear of crime. For example, Rostam said:

*'It's a good neighborhood; there's the Bazar, there are shops, but something stops us from living a good life there. You get afraid... cause it's mostly a neighborhood for criminals. Like there are a few people there who sell drugs.'*

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that Afghan children and adolescents have been subject to humiliation and disrespect, obscenity, beatings, and insults to their Afghan identity during their daily interactions with Iranians (1). But the Hazaras have been more exposed to these behaviors than the non-Hazaras because of their distinctive appearance from other Iranians. These day-to-day interactions have shaped their perception of Iranians and, in turn, of themselves as Afghans.

For instance, when Masoud (a Hazara) was asked about his relationship with his Iranian peers, he said:

*'I used to go to a computer class; there was this boy who called me 'Afi' a lot. 'Afi' means Afghan. He kept calling me Afghan and Afi... Then cursed at me. I couldn't control myself and bashed his head in the monitor. The monitor stopped working, and I had to compensate for the damages. I don't talk to anyone from that point on. I just tolerate whatever they say.'*

Contrarily, Fariba said:

*'In most places where I was, no one knew I'm Afghan. That's why they didn't say anything to me. But I've*

*seen my classmates be insulted a lot, especially those with narrow eyes... Mostly those. Of course, it's mostly the uncultured people who do this.'*

This rejectionist approach has had significant consequences on Afghan adolescents' perceptions of themselves and others (Iranians), which will be addressed in the issue of developing Afghan adolescents' identities.

The findings are in line with Kum's research (2020) that found similar behaviors in refugee learners in UK schools embracing inward integration rather than outward integration as a result of social exclusion.

### **3.2 Insiders' realm**

The insiders' realm is about the adolescents' perception of family relationships and peer relationships at independent schools.

The context that plays a decisive role in the lives of Afghan children and adolescents is their family life and relationships with relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Having or not having family and relatives is a social resource and, in a way, an economic capital. Most interviewees had answers like the following about their family relationship: 'It's ok. I'm satisfied. I love them; we have no problems; I always listen to them'. In other words, the overall perception of family relationships is positive for Afghan adolescents. However, when interviewees were asked to further explain the nature of their relationship with family members, the response was generally not accurate. This was due to the concern for families' livelihoods, which prevented family members from spending enough time together, and they spent most of their time working and earning a living. For example, Farideh described her relationship with her parents as follows:

*'I can't really say I have a good relationship with my father. Cause he's working all the time. He doesn't have time to talk to us. Therefore, I'm jealous of our neighbor upstairs. I can hear the father talk to his daughter, and his son, at night. My dad doesn't talk to us that much. My mom is like him too. They go to the workshop at 8 in the morning and are there until 10, 11 at night. So, we don't see each other that much. If we can, which we can't talk about that much in the workshop, we have nothing specific to talk about.'*

This has been the condition of most Afghan students interviewed and has been repeatedly cited as a lack of quantity and, consequently, a low quality of family relationships.

Parisa described her family relationships as follows:

*'I can't be comfortable with my dad. Because I can't tell them how I feel. Same with my mother. We have no emotional connection at all. I can't.... But with my friends, ever since I started sixth grade, I can easily talk to them. Cause it's been two years that we've been studying together. I love them as much as my parents.'*

This experience was more pronounced for girls who were severely unable to leave the house and spent their time at home when they were not at school at the insistence of the family, and for boys, since they had to work outside, it was less of a concern for them.

As for the role of peer relationships at school, it is worth noting that many studies on school dependency have been done among students, and most of this research has focused on the factors affecting the increase of school engagement, such as organizational quality, hidden curriculum, teachers as significant others, cyberspace and so on (Weidman, 1989). Other studies of school engagement among minority students have also focused on how social rejection has led to a decrease in educational dependency, especially in the black students in the

US. However, the results of the present study show that the interviewees have shown a strong sense of belonging and dependence on the school. All the Afghan adolescents interviewed expressed a strong sense of belonging to the independent school. All of them, however, were aware of the severe welfare and service problems at the school, but despite these problems, they were strongly dependent on the school and felt satisfied attending it.

Goli said:

*'I think we don't have any specific problems in the school. Well, all the kids say it's small, the yard and the classes are so and so, but I think these don't matter. What matters is that we just study... when I come to school, I feel like it's our own home.'*

Benyamin said:

*'I'm pleased with the school. The teachers, staff, and principal are all good. We just don't have many facilities. Like we don't have air conditioning in the summer. They don't have a big yard. No PE, no art class... but I'm very comfortable here. I can't study anywhere else. I really like this place.'*

It can be argued that participants in the independent school felt belonging not because of being provided with good service, having knowledgeable teachers, providing academic advancement, etc., but because these students were rejected in the community and neighborhood and the family environment for the reasons mentioned, are not able to respond to their need of belonging. School provides hope, integrity, and similarity for Afghan adolescents where they can meet and befriend adolescents with similar circumstances (exclusion and rejection). The reader may suspect that the reason for the importance of school for Afghan adolescents is that nowhere other than the school provides them with educational opportunities. Hence, the reason for the importance of school is the service of educational advancement. But it can be said with certainty that the main reason for the importance of school for them is its identification function. Because they were asked: 'If one day you were given the opportunity to study in Iranian schools, would you be willing to study there?' And despite knowing the completely superior welfare facilities of Iranian schools compared to those of independent schools, they preferred to stay and continue their education in the independent school. Even among these adolescents, there were those who had previously studied in Iranian schools but still preferred education in independent schools. 'I feel good; I don't want to go to an Iranian school,'

Elnaz said of her school:

*'It's good here,' she said and added that she does not like to go to Iranian schools because 'Kids bother us. They keep calling us Afghans. It's better here than there.'*

Rejection is a common problem for all these adolescents, and the independent school is a refuge for them to avoid this rejection and gain a sense of belonging to people like them. A house of hope in which one loves and is loved.

Independent schools provide a platform for Afghan adolescents isolated from the mainstream to come together and build a bond between them.

Haroon said:

*'The guys at the school are excellent. They've been with us for four years ... Like I call them on Fridays so we can go to this newly built park. I ask them to come there so we can play football.'*



Parisa said:

*'Since I came to this school, it's been great with my friends. I can easily tell them my problems... because it's been two years, we've been studying together... I love them as much as my parents.'*

One of the critical pieces of evidence that shows the impact of the prominence of Afghan identity and the importance of school in finding a sense of identity is this statement by Bahareh. She has a non-Afghan appearance; because of this, she has Iranian friends and a good feeling about her educational experience in an Iranian school. She answered when she was asked about the independent schools and her relationship with her classmates. 'I'm happy to be with my fellow citizens. We talk to each other as we are.' She came to the independent school due to a change of residence and the distance of the public school from home, but she feels positive about being with Afghan adolescents. This indicates that a sense of identity is one of the most critical needs of these students that the independent school has provided for them, despite all its material shortcomings. Findings of in-depth interviews in this study show that most subjects are reluctant to go to public schools. Only a few respondents were willing to attend the same schools in Iran due to better welfare and educational facilities, but only if they were going to study with a few friends. Some respondents have experienced studying in Iranian schools and have been ridiculed there; the other group is those who are afraid of being rejected because they have heard from relatives and friends that Afghans are being disrespected in Iranian schools and that no one makes any contact with them.

For example, Fariba is interested in studying in Iranian schools because of the welfare and educational facilities but is unwilling to go there alone. She said:

*'I like to continue my studies, like if someday I'm unable to do that I would lose hope in life... I can also study in an Iranian school because I like to achieve my goals, but I don't want to lose my friends. If someday I decide to go to an Iranian school, I'd want my friends Sahar or Hamideh to be with me there as well.'*

Masoud and Farshid have experienced Iranian schools, and the humiliation and disrespect they have encountered there have led to their indifference and distance from that environment. Masoud said: 'I was in a public school in second and third grade. Things were in a way there that I didn't like. It was closed. You couldn't do what you wanted. You couldn't even study easily... I had a PE teacher who bothered me a lot and made fun of me. Called me Afghan. We always had problems. I once argued with him... after that, he bothered me more. For that reason, I quit that school.'

### **3.3 Identity development of Afghan adolescents**

A developmental perspective on identity is one of the best tools for understanding the identity status of Afghan adolescents in relation to school. For this purpose, the process of developing Afghan students' ethnic-racial identity is described using the theory of narrative identity to examine the role of independent schools in this identity narrative.

This is the main status problem for Afghan adolescents: 'They were brought to Iran by the decision of their parents, without their consent, and due to the dire conditions in Afghanistan.' From then on, Iranian society took a stand against them, and four minority-building mechanisms occurred in the case of Afghans, especially Afghan adolescents: they were involuntarily (without a personal will) and formally deprived of citizenship

and civil rights, informally subjugated by members of society, and spatially isolated from others, and subjected to alleged abuse (cultural, language, and intellectual denigration of these minorities) (Ogbu, 2004: 5).

The reaction of the Afghan minorities to this status problem is that they suffered from this situation and realized that they could not join the dominant group at all, and for this reason, they saw the dominant as the reason for their misery and, in response, intensified their collective and distinct identities, putting their collective identities vis-a-vis their perceptions of dominant identity. Thus, their efforts to solve the status problem led to the formation of their perception of themselves. Afghan identity, which may not have had centrality in Afghan society due to ethnic divisions, has found salience in Iranian society today in the face of status problems. The ideology cited in this regard was the patriotic ideology, secondly, the repressed minority ideology, and, finally, the humanistic ideology.

In the meantime, the issue of Afghan adolescents seems more complicated and different than the issue of their fathers. First, it needs to be explained that Identity causes a person to consider themselves a part of this world, during which they consider themselves one among a group and express themselves apart from another. Without identity, a person feels 'alienated' from the world around them (Jenkins, 2008: 6). The authors have developed this issue in such a new formulation: 'Land' is where one feels that they are a part of relationships and affairs and is related to various matters there. 'nowhere land' is a place that either does not exist or we have not gone there, and we have named it 'nowhere land' out of ignorance. But 'no here land' is where we are present in the 'nowhere land' but have nothing to do with that environment. A person in that place has nothing to do with the relationships and affairs of the place, and that is why they feel alienated. Like a soldier who involuntarily goes to another city to do his military service, and when he is in that city, he does not feel any connection with that environment, and everything that happens around him is alien to him. Afghan adolescents have been born in 'no here land' or relocated there at an early age, and on the other hand, Afghanistan is manifested for them not as a land in which they used to live but as a 'nowhere land' that they do not know, and their understanding of it is limited to what they have heard about it or a short trip. The Afghan adolescent was born in this 'no here land' of Iran. Neither Iran's government nor Iranian society has accepted them; therefore, Iran is a 'no here land' for them. Faced with this 'no here land', Afghan adolescents have adopted the strategy of accommodation without assimilation and a desire for separation- if possible.

These adolescents had to interact with Iranians for their employment, education, and daily life, and therefore spoke Persian in the outsiders' realm and lived by the norms of life in Iranian society. But when they entered their own realm, they limited their relations with Afghans, behaved according to the norms of Afghan culture, and spoke the Afghan language. Most Afghan adolescents interviewed stated that they spoke the Afghan language to their families and preferred to interact with Afghans, and refused to interact with Iranians unless necessary. There was also a desire for separation in all the adolescents interviewed.



Table 1: participants’ Opinions about Iranians

<b>Good</b>	<b>No idea</b>	<b>Bad</b>	<b>Good - Bad</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>0</b>	1	10	10	21

According to the table2, half of the interviewed adolescents in response to the question ‘What do you think about Iranians?’ stated that some Iranians are good and some are bad, and the other half stated that Iranians are not good people and only one person abstained. However, the desire for separation was fully expressed in the conversations of these adolescents.

Table 2:participants’ opinions about Leaving or Staying in Iran

<b>Going anywhere other than Iran or Afghanistan</b>	<b>Staying in Iran</b>	<b>Returning to Afghanistan</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>4</b>	1	16	21

As seen in the table3, all of them wished to leave Iran forever. In the meantime, some suggested going to developed countries, and some suggested returning to Afghanistan.

Another issue for Afghan adolescents is that Afghanistan is not a ‘land’ for them but a ‘nowhere land.’ They had very incomplete, general information, mostly based on what they had heard or their short stay in Afghanistan. Answers like that of Shafiqeh were observed in all interviewees:

*‘I’d like to go to Afghanistan. Cause I wanna see what it looks like there. I wanna know if it’s as people say. I sometimes hear them there’s a war in Afghanistan, and women are being disrespected. I wanna know if this is real. Our teachers say it’s not true.’*

In another instance, Fariba said:

*‘I’d like to see how Afghanistan is for myself. Some say it’s a very bad country when they come to Iran. It’s an unsafe, unorganized, and dirty country. Others say it’s so good that it looks like America and Los Angeles. I wanna see for myself what kind of a country it is. But until it has the right conditions, I don’t wanna live there.’*

Afghanistan is a ‘nowhere land’ for an Afghan adolescent. At a time when the Afghan minority in Iran is struggling to build an Afghan identity as opposed to an Iranian one, Afghanistan as a ‘nowhere land’ is very important for Afghan adolescents to find their sense of identity. Therefore, it should highlight the positive aspects of Afghan identity, but Afghanistan is in a dire situation, and all interviewees have expressed this. For instance, Masoud said: ‘If you ask any Afghan kid, they’ll tell you that they wanna go. But when they get there, they regret it. Cause the situation is not good over there.’ Therefore, to find a sense of identity, Afghan adolescents have adopted another strategy, which is to ‘cultivate the desire to return to Afghanistan and develop Afghanistan.’

Table 4: Participants' Opinions on Afghanistan

Bad Situation - Homeland	Lovely homeland	Uninterested	Uninformed	Total
13	2	2	4	21

According to table 4, about two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they would like to return to Afghanistan, regardless of whether they referred to the dire situation in Afghanistan (bad situation-homeland) or not (homeland). Four of them did not have specific information about Afghanistan (uninformed) and refused to answer, of which three stated that they would like to see Afghanistan gain information. Two of the interviewees had no desire to go and live in Afghanistan (uninterested).

For instance, Feysal said: 'I'd like to go to Afghanistan cause it's my homeland. I was born there. Our relatives are there. No relatives here. I wanna be with our relatives there. I really like our homeland.' It should be noted that many students wanted to return to Afghanistan with the motive of developing and rebuilding their country, as well as joining themselves and their people and relatives.

As explained, an Afghan adolescent as an auto-biographer is fleeing from the present time (now: Iran) and wants to leave Iran based on their identity narratives. On the other hand, they have constructed their past (Afghanistan) as a 'dream.' They face a significant challenge in the future. All interviewees indicated that they would like to continue their education. But in Iran, this possibility has been denied to them, and the future of these adolescents is practically unclear. They do not know what the future holds, and this uncertainty about the future will indeed cause them great anxiety. Education for Afghan children is the only hope that gives them hope for change in the future and liberation from poverty and material hardship. Mohammad described 'studying' as one of the main goals of his life, stating the reason for its importance: 'To secure my future. So that I can have a good job, and can support my mother and father. Then I won't need others' help. So that I'm not homeless and penniless, we should not have a shortage in life and equipment, that's all.' All these adolescents wanted to study to become 'someone' for themselves. This statement means that their sense of self-actualization is completely tied to education, and the inability to achieve this variable means failure in self-actualization. In stating what they want to do, they referred to occupations, most of which require higher education. Jobs such as a doctor, engineer, member of parliament, teacher, lawyer, school principal, etc., were mentioned. The distance between the selected identity (teacher, lawyer, etc.) and the realized identity in the process of daily life is a lot, and in practice, the only way to achieve this selected identity is through education, which is also dubious in Iran. It is in this process that the school becomes essential. The school for Afghan adolescents is a place to draw on their constructive past. A place where they can feel good about being Afghans together and heal their challenged identities with other friends. To speak and hear of being Afghan, and here, the Afghan dialect does not mean being an 'Afi' but being a member of the country of Afghanistan.

Moreover, a school is a place that empowers Afghan students to reach the future and helps them move toward self-realization. The school allows them to study, particularly in a society that has deprived them of the right to formal education. In this regard, the school provides an opportunity for Afghan adolescents to find a sense of identity. Thus, School is a place for Afghan adolescents to rebuild the past and map out the future while

avoiding the harms of exclusion (isolation, negative self-evaluation, lack of collective identity, ambivalence, encapsulation, marginalization, etc.). The content of the narrative of Afghan adolescents through school is the narrative of intimacy. The Afghan adolescents at school feel intimate and have a positive sense of attendance at school because of the opportunity to meet peers like themselves. The narrative of the Afghan adolescent's identity, with its content of intimacy, achieves its integrity and is protected from isolation.

In addition, the Afghan adolescents who in case not getting an education work day and night and do not get a chance to get their sense of identity at night by their tired families will get that chance through attending school. As adolescents are re-establishing their behavioral boundaries at puberty, societies typically allow them to find themselves, and this period is called the moratorium period (Gross, 1987). At school, an adolescent has the opportunity to think and decide about their future, past, who they are, interests, and tastes.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Given the above, one can understand why independent schools are such important for Afghan adolescents. The following diagram clearly summarises the main findings of this research and shows the centrality of independent schools for Afghan children who are excluded from the mainstream of Iranian society.

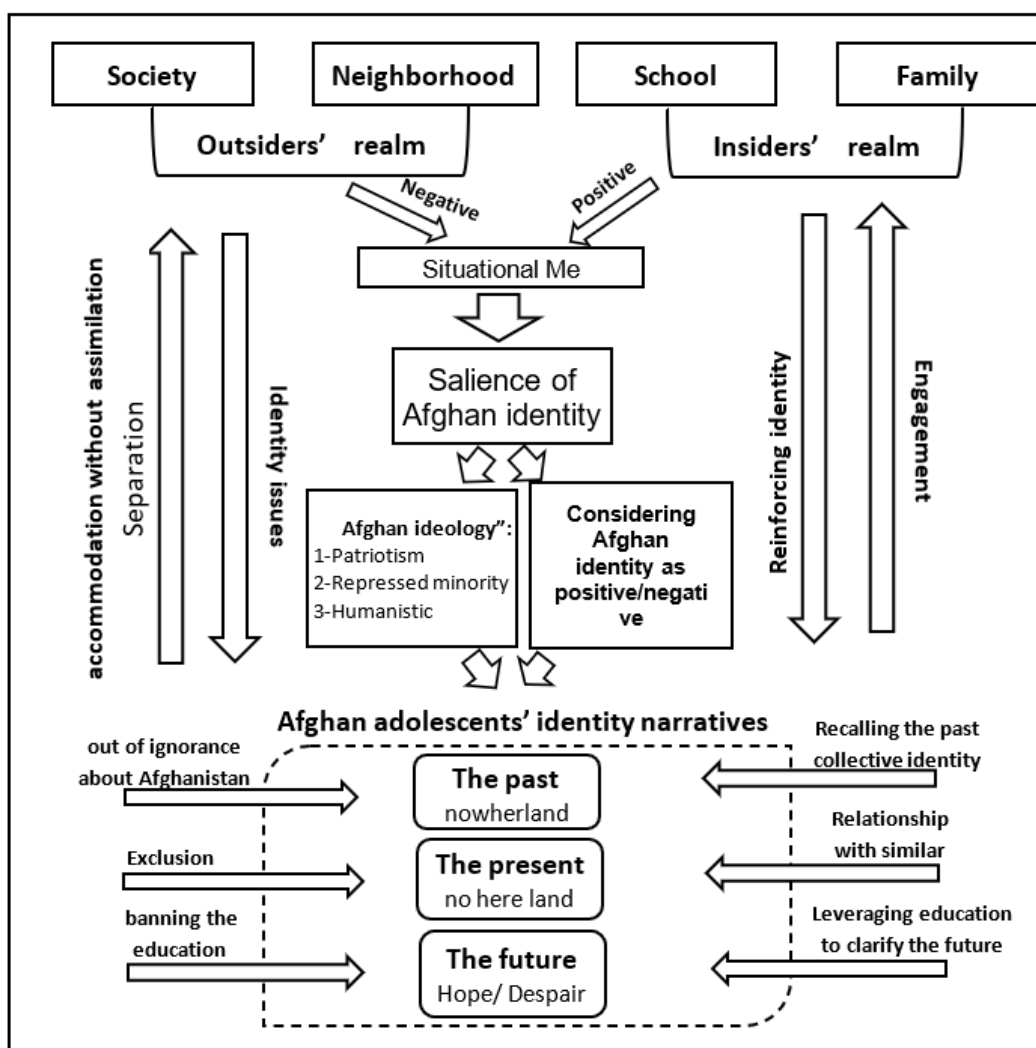


Figure 1. The role of school in the identification of Afghan refugee children in Iran.

As depicted in the figure above, the adolescents' lives are divided into two realms: the outsiders and the insiders. The social exclusion experienced in the outsiders' realm has led to the centrality of Afghan identity for the participants. The ideologies that have been referred to in this regard are the patriotic ideology, the repressed minority ideology, and the humanistic ideology. Besides, in the insiders' realm, the sense of integrity is achieved through the narrative of intimacy. The role of independent schools is critical for the adolescents because when the past (Afghanistan) is 'nowhere land' and the present (Iran) is 'no here land' and the future is unclear due to social exclusion and the ban on official education in Iran, the schools provide them with the opportunity to highlight Afghan identity as a positive aspect (rebuild the past), to interact with insiders (the pleasant present) and to achieve further education (the hopeful future).

## **5. Conclusion**

Subordination mechanisms in Iran have made Afghan immigrants react to this status problem by accommodation. Hence, they refused to interact with Iranians (outsiders' realm) unless essential and Afghan identity has found salience between them (insiders' realm). But the situation for Afghan immigrant adolescents is more complicated. They do not have much idea about their past (Afghanistan), they do not like their present due to social exclusion (Iran), and their future is problematic because of the ban on official education in Iran. Adolescents can consider being Afghan as a positive aspect, have a positive relationship with insiders, and transform their destiny through education at the schools. Generally, the Afghan adolescents' identity achieves its integrity through the narrative of intimacy. This school function is at a stage in the life of an Afghan adolescent where they are allowed to write their identity biography as a teenager. Hence, the schools have been incredibly effective in Afghan adolescents finding an identity.

Under these circumstances, the government's policy toward Afghan adolescents has changed, and following the Supreme Leader's order to allow these adolescents to study in Iranian schools, the relevant authorities took the necessary decisions to implement this order during the Social Justice and Refugee Children Symposium in Iran. Thus, in the coming years, we will see an increase in the number of Afghan students entering Iranian schools. According to the present study, it is noteworthy that, given the general conditions of society, Afghan students are likely to adopt a separation strategy or unequal adaptation in Iranian schools, which will create new challenges for Iranian schools. Although the educational structure has formally allowed Afghan students to enter, the social body of schools (teachers, students, principals, etc.) will still have an exclusionary approach toward these students, and Afghan students' defensive reactions will follow this. In a situation where the general context of society is exclusionary, the joint presence of Afghan and Iranian students together requires adopting new policies in schools and providing the necessary social and cultural conditions. Because this issue is not addressed, it may lead to aggressive and separatist behaviors, intensifying social exclusion, increasing racial-ethnic tendencies, etc.

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## **Endnotes**

- (1) It is worth noting that rejectionist reactions to Afghan immigrants occasionally intensify. For instance, based on data represented on Google Trends, subsequent to the austerity economic policies- known as economic surgery, a wave of negative phrases such as 'Afghans entering Iran' and 'Afghans invading Iran' became trendy in April 2022.