Article

A phenomenological study of the learning experience of children in rural tourism destinations

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Abstract

Increasing the level of awareness and knowledge of children is one of the families' main goals and concerns. Informal learning through communication, experience, and objective observation during tourism can be one of the appropriate methods in this field. Particularly tourism in rural environments is a new, tangible, empirical, and observational experience. In this study, using a phenomenological approach, the learning experiences of 22 children in rural tourism destinations in the vicinity of the metropolis of Mashhad, Iran were interpreted through interviews and paintings. The descriptive phenomenological approach is a good qualitative method for studying children's tourism experiences. Also, analysis of paintings and interviews conducted with children studied in rural tourism destinations showed that the experience of tourism outside the city, viewing life and activity in villages, observing other tourists, and playing in nature, led to the formation and increase of children's learning. It is about taking responsibility, self-confidence, socialization, respect nature, tolerance, and patience, fostering creativity, and self-protection. The findings show that travel and tourism have a significant impact on increasing children's environmental and social learning and can be an appropriate guide for parents of children and schools related to raising children in the use of tourism in rural areas as a way of environmental, experimental and observational learning. Thus, informal learning through tourism is a good way to develop children's awareness and various skills such as familiarity with rural lifestyles, occupations and animals and plants, touching objects, the true size of phenomena, understanding environmental realities, communicating with others.

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Keywords

children's learning, children's tourism, phenomenological approach, rural tourism, tourism experience

Introduction

Tourism is a collection of voluntary and purposeful processes for creating experiences (Coelho et al., 2018). These experiences may have different contents such as amusement, emotions, learning, tranquility (Aho, 2001), happiness, joy, socialization, sense of guilt, annoyance, worry (Kim and Ritchie, 2014), anger, discomfort, sadness, fear, shame, loneliness, love, peace, optimism, excitement, pride, and anxiety (Schmitt, 2011). Travel experiences, from interacting with locals in a restaurant to providing an interpretation of a historic site, allow tourists to learn (McKercher and du Cros, 2002). Therefore, in analyzing tourism experiences, the key insights generated through this study are that experiences are accompanied by learning or transfer of information (historical, cultural, and natural) to tourists through travel, people, and environments (Pina and Delfa, 2005). Hence, the experience is more than offering a service that creates a memorable, unique event called staged experience (Loureiro, 2014). Tourism experience is a social concept (Albayrak et al., 2018; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009) and has various aspects such as emotional (Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Vitterso et al., 2000), social (Morgan and Xu, 2009), and cognitive (Gopalan and Narayan, 2010). It should be added that, somehow, all these experiences play an essential role in creating and increasing tourists' learning. Learning is a significant method for developing skills, capacities, and improving individuals' abilities (Visser and Kruss, 2009). In other words, it is a continuous process that happens in various areas throughout the life of an individual. We can say that an effective method to learn is to interact with others and engage senses, and in such settings, the environment becomes influential, too. In other words, every experience is a potential opportunity to learn (Boud et al., 1993). Learning by experience provides an opportunity for enhancing, developing, and creating synergistic knowledge. Overall, learning is a motivation for tourism (Van Winkle & Lagay, 2012) as the willingness to learn influences the choice of tourism destinations (Poria et al., 2004; Van Winkle and Lagay, 2012). There are numerous opportunities for learning during travel, which include both planned (formal) and unplanned (informal) ones (Poria et al., 2005).

Generally, learning in tourist destinations differs from learning in formal settings such as schools since informal educational settings; usually, learners are a captive audience and have fewer free choices (Ham, 1992). However, in tourism destinations, individuals have open learning opportunities, which takes an environmental learning framework (Van Winkle and Lagay, 2012). Environmental learning, which is an essential part of the tourism experience, is defined as interaction with the environment or environmental thinking, which is achieved through tourists' experiences in a rural tourism destination (Kachel and Jennings, 2010). Studies on free learning experience in tourism destinations show that these learning experiences usually have characteristics such as being amusing, entertaining, enjoyable, multi-sensory, attractive, comfortable, exploratory and are accompanied by freedom of choice (Packer and Ballantyne, 2004; Packer, 2006; Vespestad et al., 2019).

Due to providing an open environment for tourists, connecting them with nature and the culture, offering socialization opportunities in the environment, being away from stressful urban factors, and returning to one's roots, rural tourism is usually associated with a specific sense of nostalgia for good old days which attracts the attention of tourists (Ribeiro and Marques, 2002; Kastenholz et al., 2012). All these internal resources and capacities in rural areas are considered to be learning experiences for tourists (Mossberg, 2007), among which experiences such as promenading in the village, watching animals and playing with them, playing with water, soil, etc. can be named, which play an essential role in tourists' learning (Mossberg, 2007; Pan and Ryan, 2009; Richards and Wilson, 2005). Thus, individuals who visit virgin, natural rural environments with the purpose of tourism gain unique experiences that are specific to rural areas. Therefore, tourist destinations and environments create a unique learning experience for different human groups (Campos et al., 2016) since the quality of learning differs based on age or gender groups. However, according to education principles, environmental learning in childhood is both very important and persistent. Hence, in the process of tourism, features such as being exploratory, exciting, and amusing can have a significant effect on children's learning and encouraging them to learn (Packer and Ballantyne, 2004). Experiences form the basis of children's learning, and in case they are accompanied by joy, can lead to learning (Buck et al., 2019). There is nothing that children love as much as nature. This internal love for nature in children leads to learning and joy for them. Through rural tourism, children can gain numerous experiences such as familiarity with various animals, hearing animal sounds, eating different local foods, becoming familiar with the jobs in the village, local languages, and the rural culture, and watching and touching flowers, trees, etc. Therefore, rural tourism experiences can significantly affect children's social and environmental learning and enhance their life skills. Rural tourism is considered a common pattern for family trips in Iran such that each week a considerable number of families, along with their children, travel to naturally attractive rural areas for spending their leisure time. In this regard, villages with a pleasant and agreeable climate, which are crucial spaces and a peripheral capital surrounding major cities, are beautiful to urban tourists and are usually visited by family tourists coming from cities. Therefore, by analyzing children's experiences from tourism in rural areas through painting, the purpose of this study is to identify the type of environmental, experimental, observational, and informal learning of children during rural tourism. Thus, the present study aims to answer the following question: What do children learn informally when they experience tourism in rural areas? It is predicted that this study's results could indicate the importance and effectiveness of environmental and free experiences in increasing the level of children's learning during tourism. Awareness of children's environmental experiences when traveling to rural areas can also help families and children's schools to properly adjust the quantity and quality of children's travel and educational programs in the future.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Experimental and tourism learning theory

The concept of environmental learning is based on Kurt Lewin's field theory and living space concept. For Lewin, person and environment are interdependent variables in which

behavior is a function of person and environment. This theory has played an essential role in theories of human learning and development (Kolb and Kolb, 2009). Experimental learning theory is a comprehensive view of learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior. This theory emphasizes the primary role of experience in the learning process, and this type of learning is a continuous process that is based on experience (Guney and Al, 2012). Therefore, elements in open spaces can pave the way for group learning, social learning, social brain stimulation and social communication, and knowledge of the aspects of the environment (Banduran, 1996; Beard and Wilson, 2006). This learning model consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization/abstract thinking, and actual experience/application (Kolb, 1984; Lidyasari, 2014). Learning is possible through real experiences; because the environmental experience gained through thinking leads to the formation of new concepts (Lidyasari, 2014). In addition to empirical learning theory, which emphasizes the role of the environment in learning, the task-centered learning approach also emphasizes the integration of theory and experience. Accordingly, learning is not enough through theory alone, but one must be exposed to it and participate in it and experience it in some way (Boud, 1997; Merrill, 2007; Raelin, 1997). In tourism, people have the opportunity to learn by being directly involved in the environment and experiencing it. Because tourism is also considered an environmental activity that is formed outside the normal life of individuals, human beings are associated with various elements of the human and natural environment following tourism. For example, environmental tourism (such as ecotourism, geotourism, and wildlife) increases tourists' environmental awareness (Ballantyne et al., 2011). Cultural and historical tourism also raises the level of social knowledge (Zuo, 2014). Thus, tourism is more than a free-time activity so that it can help a person learn in different ways (Chen et al., 2014). Travel can help create "individual change" and opportunities to learn more about new ideas and new personal insights (Roberson, 2018). This is done through food, people, religion, climate, language, culture, and history (Rickly-Boyd and Metro-Roland, 2010). Of course, it should be noted that in each type of tourism, according to the different nature of the environment and its natural and human elements, different learnings are formed (Li and Liang, 2020). The learning age can also be changed in terms of age and sex. But the best learning period is childhood, during which experimental and environmental learning is very enduring. So the critical issue emphasized in most studies in the field of children's tourism is the impact of travel and tourism on children's learning (Ap, 2004; Wong, 1996), because based on experimental teaching theories, cognitive and free learning in early and mid-childhood has a high impact on children's learning for future life (Moore, 2014). So it can be free games, free exploration, personal and direct exploration while traveling and being in nature with the family.

Tourism and children's environmental learning

Environmental experiences in the early years of a child's life can form the vital foundation of a child's entire life and lead to a positive outlook and mental and practical ability in adulthood (Gill, 2014). Children who have positive experiences with the natural world have a greater sense of curiosity, imagination, creativity, observation skills, communication

skills, and motivation to learn throughout life (Miller, 2007). The process of travel and tourism is one of the things that can help children learn about the environment and increase their experience. Also, being outside the home has a positive effect on children's sense of well-being, supporting all aspects of their growth and development (Undiyaundeye, 2014), because the environment and open spaces allow children to do some things in different ways and on different scales, it is impossible to do at home. Dempsey (2005) emphasizes that playing with children outdoors allows them to communicate directly with the climate, seasons, and the natural world. Exploratory play is a way for children to interact with places and people (Kerr and Price, 2016). Therefore, play and learning are considered as a continuous part of learning through nature. For example, free exploration and sensory learning occur when children build a dam in a small waterway, picking up stones to find the subsurface, watching the sun dance through the rotting leaves, following the active ants, touching. Growing moist terrestrial surfaces, bending flexible stems to the roof of a nest, collecting wood to create fire, smelling the air, watching a moving lizard among the rocks, and thousands of other ways to have fun with nature (Moore, 2014) provides different contexts for children to learn. Therefore, the experiences of playing in the environment during rural trips, as living memories and informal learning, often remain for the rest of life. They also provide an opportunity for formal learning and motivate the child to study and understand life systems in the future (Hubbard, 2014). Thus, through play in nature and presence in social environments different from ordinary life, children's learning experiences expand in such a way that they acquire ethical, environmental values and understand the human culture (Moore, 2014). Children can experiment and explore the boundaries of activities and spaces while playing outdoor tourism (Price & Kerr, 2018). Therefore, playing in nature, as well as communication with the local community, is a tool to activate children's diverse experimental and emotional realms.

Children's place in tourism alongside their family is becoming increasingly important as tourism can be considered a comprehensive, useful, and fun learning experience for children (Wu et al., 2019). Since children have more influence on families' consumption and activities like leisure time activities and tourism (Poria et al., 2005; Poria & Timothy, 2014; Schänzel et al., 2012; Wu and Wall, 2016), the role played by children should not be ignored while studying tourism. That is why on a global level, researchers are increasingly highlighting the active role of children in tourism (Canosa et al., 2016; Feng and Li, 2016; Hay, 2018; Schänzel and Carr, 2016; Schänzel et al., 2012). For instance, Byrnes (2001) believes that children's learning through travel and tourism can expand their world view, help them learn life skills (such as problem-solving, patience, and flexibility), and become familiar with different values and cultures. Nowadays, teaching based on communication, experience, and observation are commanding much attention (Bandura, 1998). Van Winkle and Lagay (2012) have expressed six characteristics of the learning experience in tourism through interviews with 10 tourists: 1. recognizing the contrast between daily life, 2. Situations presented with on a trip such as cultural differences, 3. lifestyles or values of people, 4. Freedom and flexibility in tourists' daily life, 5. Fun and engagement which allows tourists to absorb new information, information obtained through traveling was described as first-hand knowledge by tourists, and 6. Reflection about relationships, past experiences, and the difference between the home environment and the destination, exploring and analyzing self, the place and method of

living and values of others. Coelho et al. (2018) studied the tourism experience along the three environmental, personal, relational dimensions in a study. Their findings showed that tourists gain various experiences through ambiance, socialization, and emotions in tourist destinations. The findings of Wu et al. (2019) show that Chinese children gained numerous experiences and ideas through tourism experiences. Such experiences are usually shared with families and focus on family solidarity and physical activities. Among these experiences encountering animals, tasting local foods, and understanding natural and constructed environments can be named. Also, the results of Israfilova and Khoo-Lattimore's (2019) study showed that after 25 children visited a genocide site, four important educational effects were achieved as a result of this visit, which included the expansion of knowledge, characterization, emotional challenges, and accompanying educational factors. They are having fun. Thus, the research findings emphasize that dark tourism leads children to become interested in the study of history and forms a patriotic character in them. Besides, studies such as "Visitor experiences at heritage sites: A phenomenological approach" (Masberg and Silverman 1996) and "Sacred site experience: A phenomenological study" (Andriotis, 2009) have used phenomenology to gain a better understanding of tourism experiences. These studies focus on the experiences gained through tourism.

A survey of studies shows that many previous types of research have considered tourist experiences of tourism destination from the perspectives of marketing, tourists' loyalty to the tourism destinations (e.g. Astenholz et al., 2012; Bec et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019) or rural tourism; however, children's environmental learning experiences during tourism has received less attention. To this end, the present study investigates and analyses the skills that children gain in rural tourism destinations environments, which can lead to learning.

Methodology

Historically, issues related to the tourism experience were among the critical aspects of tourism which attracted the attention of scholars in the 1960s and, subsequently, in 1970s through the phenomenological discussion of researchers such as MacCannell (1973) and Cohen (1979), gained prominence (Coelho et al., 2018). Husserl's qualitative phenomenological approach, which is used for studying life experiences, was used in some tourism studies to gain a deeper understanding of the tourism experience (Pernecky and Jamal 2010; Ritchie and Hudson, 2009). In the phenomenological methodology, the researcher tries to arrive at a direct description of personal experiences without considering psychological origins and scientific explanations that scientists might offer (Andriotis, 2009; Merleau-Ponty and Bannan, 1956). Therefore, phenomenological approaches are widely used in fields such as tourism, which focus on understanding human experiences (Andriotis, 2009; Casmir, 1983) since, in these approaches, it is crucial to discover the tourism learning experience (Ryan, 2000) by understanding the different phenomenon and their relationship with learners (tourists). To this end, the present study uses a qualitative methodology within the framework of phenomenology for conducting field research and interpreting the data obtained from analyzing children's experiences in rural tourism destinations.

Data collection

A literature review shows that few studies were conducted on children's learning experience in tourism destinations (Carr, 2011). The dearth of studies in this area can be attributed to numerous reasons: first, undertaking studies on children requires a unique skill (Measelle et al., 1998) to establish a friendly relationship with children and understand their behavior (Poria and Timothy, 2014). Besides, in terms of conducting interviews with children and studying them, the research should be carried out by researchers who are familiar with several techniques (such as playing dolls, storytelling, and posing picture-based questions) and can use them for different age groups. Moreover, in many countries, researchers interested in conducting studies on children should obtain the consent of children's parents and require the permission of governmental organizations along with ethics committees, both inside and outside universities (Obrador, 2012). Therefore, in this research, we conducted an in-depth study on a sample of children who, with their families, were visiting four major rural tourism destinations in the vicinity of the metropolis of Mashhad, which has a population of 3.5 million people[1] and attracts 25 million religious tourists per year and is located in the north-east of Iran.[2] According to the definition of children in Iran, individuals who are between 6 and 11 years old are considered children, and participants were selected randomly. At these ages, children can understand social interactions and can establish independent relationships with others, and some of them may even try to be independent of their parents (Blichfeldt et al., 2011). In the phenomenological approach, the topic under study is usually investigated by conducting in-depth interviews with a limited number of people (3–10 individuals) who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Van Winkle and Lagay, 2012). To this end, in selecting children for the interviews, the researcher approached 50 tourist families (With accommodation for at least one night in the village), and all of whom granted their consent for their children to be interviewed, but only 30 children agreed to participate in the interview. During interviews, eight children grew tired and did not want to continue and were subsequently omitted from the study. After conducting interviews with and gathering data from 22 children, the point of data saturation was reached. To satisfy the children for the interview, the interviewer first introduced herself, and an explanation was given about the work. She was then given a book and a toy of the child's choice as a gift. An attempt was made to start the interview with easy and open questions and have more polling mode.

The study's qualitative data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with children and painting with them. The data was gathered while talking and playing with children; besides, necessary tools for painting (A4 sheets, color pencils, erasers) and playing (such as dolls, toy cars) were provided for children who were asked to express and paint their experiences of tourism in the village, because children are interested in painting and painting is one of the best ways for children to express their mental realities. Painting can play an important role in communicating with the outside world. By drawing, children are drawn to the things in their minds about the problem. Painting is imagining and depicting the child's dreams, imagination, feelings, and inner states, and understanding it, unlike writing, does not require much effort or care (Alderson, 1995; Barnett et al., 1994). Therefore, in this study, in addition to the interview, painting

Image 1. Sample of children studied.

was used as a tool to express part of the children's tourism experience. Children's paintings can be analyzed in terms of color, the elements in them, the objects' size in the paintings, and the conversations during the child's painting.

In this study, the descriptive phenomenological approach with the Colaizzi method has been used to analyze the data (Ghiyasvandian et al., 2012; Leininger, 1987). According to this method, the study steps were performed (Aspers, 2004; Groenewald, 2004). In the first stage, after the field study and interviews, the interviews were conducted and recorded with the children, listened to several times, and carefully written on paper. In the second stage, the material was read carefully and several times, and the phrases or sentences that were directly related to the subject of the study were extracted from the interviews (for this purpose, underlined the important sentences). In the third stage, to extract the important concepts of each interview's formula or phrases, which expressed the meaning and the basic part of the child's thinking, an attempt was made to determine the meaning of each of the important sentences. In the fourth stage, the related phrases were formulated as the main learning themes. In the fifth stage, by placing similar ideas next to each other, key learning topics were prepared. In the sixth stage, an attempt was made to provide an overview of the inherent structure of children's learning experience in rural tourism destinations. As the samples were from children, the seventh stage, which was to refer the children back to control the results, was not performed, and the results were matched with the children's paintings instead.

It should be mentioned that parents' consent was obtained prior to recording the interviews and taking photos from children. The average time for conducting in-depth interviews as well as playing and painting with each child was 40 minutes (Image 1).

Frequencies and percentages were calculated using the Excel software package, and finally, the mind map of the points that children learn from rural tourism destinations was drawn using iMindMap.

Results

In terms of gender, there was an equal number of boys and girls in the sample. In terms of age, 45% of interviewed children were 10 and 11 years old, which had the highest

frequency. For 86% of children, travel duration was more than 1 day (24 hours), and it was only a weekend trip. The type of trip for all interviewees was family. The rural tourism pattern in this region is mainly family-based, which is in the form of weekend trips and has overnight camping experience in nature or villages. Furthermore, all children emphasized that they liked villages and their surrounding environment very much since they could play freely and observe animals, trees, flowers, streams, etc. Playing with other children, playing with water, stone, and wood, setting up the fire with their family, watching rivers, trees, and flowers are among the interesting points for children in the village environment.

After the interviews were written on paper, the study-related phrases were extracted. Then, the 20 main themes of children's learning were derived based on rural tourism experience. In the following, due to the similarity and proximity of the themes, seven critical topics related to children's learning experience were extracted. The issues of taking responsibility, self-confidence, respect nature, and self-protection are formed with three themes of learning, the topics of socialization and tolerance of each with two important themes of learning and creativity with four themes. Then, each topic was interpreted and explained based on interviews as well as children's paintings.

Taking responsibility

Analysis of the key themes mentioned by children showed that three key themes of helping to pack equipment before the travel, watching over one's belongings, and asking for parent's permission are signs of taking social responsibility. Nearly all children mentioned that they help their family with packing the required equipment before the travel and also during the trip. In this regard, one child stated: "*when preparing for a trip, I help my family with packing the required equipment such as dishes, ground cloth, etc. and also during the trip I help with tasks such as collecting firewood, preparing the food, washing the dishes*." Watching over one's personal belongings when visiting tourism villages is another point that effectively helps children take more responsibility and was pointed out by 90% of children. One of the children mentioned that "*when I am playing in the village, I am careful not to lose or destroy my belongings*." Another child stated, "*When I want to go somewhere or see an animal up close, the first thing that I do is to ask for my parents' permission, and if they do not let me leave, I won't go*." Asking for parents' permission is another instance of learning to take more responsibility by children while visiting open rural spaces, and all children mentioned it. Therefore, the findings of the study indicate that when traveling, children, unconsciously and on their own, start helping the family and their fellow travelers with packing the equipment, watching over them, or even moving small objects, which indicate they are learning to shoulder some type of responsibility (Dementiy and Grogoleva, 2016). Moreover, paintings drawn by children confirm the identified concepts in interviews to some extent. Image 2 depicts a child's impression of helping her parents pack the required items for the trip. In these children's paintings, the utilization of warm and diverse colors underscores their interest in and enthusiasm for traveling and their agreement with this experience.

Image 2. Taking responsibility (packing the required items for the trip in a basket; by an 11-year old girl).

Self-confidence

Analysis of the content of interviews with children showed that three themes of parents' consultations with their children and asking their opinion, the courage to approach domestic animals, and establishing a relationship with peers could be considered signs of self-confidence in children. In their interviews, 86% of children stated that their parents consult with them and ask their opinion about choosing the tourism destination. They had come to the village not because their families forced them, but rather eagerly and on their own volition, which profoundly affected children's self-confidence. Encouraging children to approach animals and touch them under their parents' supervision is another instance of boosting confidence. In this regard, 86% of children pointed out that when they saw animals that were not dangerous or dirty, such as birds or sheep, they approached and touched them in the village, but they didn't approach dangerous animals such as dogs. The ability to establish a relationship with their peers is another instance of boosting children's confidence. Children who visit rural tourism destinations have more opportunities to enhance this ability. In this regard, 86% of children were able to communicate with their peers, find friends, and play with each other. As can be seen, Image 3 depicts establishing a relationship with peers and finding new friends. In fact, by drawing this painting, the child has expressed her willingness to communicated and play with his peers, which is an essential requirement for boosting self-confidence in children (McGrane et al., 2016).

Socialization and social bond

Overall, analysis of the critical themes pointed out by children showed that playing group games and finding new playmates in tourism destinations are indicative of children's socialization. When children enter the village environment during their visit, they can

Image 3. Self-confidence (finding friends and playing with each other; by an 8-year old girl).

communicate with their peers easily and improve their communication skills. It should be mentioned that 90% of children stated that playing and interacting with their peers is one of the village environment's attractions. Some of the instances of children's socialization that can be seen in the interviews are as follows: 90% of children mentioned that they prefer to have playmates in the village environment, and only 10% preferred to play on their own. Besides, 86% of children had successfully found new playmates during their trip. For instance, in Image 4, the child, by drawing her friends, has expressed her willingness to have playmates and to find new playmates in the tourism destination. Hence this painting directly highlights the child's socialization and her desire to have social solidarity. As mentioned by Bandura (1977), social interaction is an inescapable part of children's mental development. Because in interacting with others and the environment, children learn by modeling and observing their behavior (Banduran, 1996), how to behave, how to play, and how to interact. Initial years of life play an essential role in learning. Acquiring the skill to communicate with others, proper comprehension of their intentions, and reacting to others' feelings are abilities that should be obtained in the initial years of life through interaction with others and engagement in collaborative and interactive activities (Kharrāzi and Delgoshāee, 2010). Therefore, children learn how to interact with other children by finding teammates, agreeing to play group games, accepting group play rules, following group play orders, talking to other children, and observing and emulating teammates. Also, children in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people (other children of tourists) learn how to communicate and define a common goal within a game. Also, by observing how their parents interact with other families, villagers, and service providers in the tourism destination, children learn how to interact socially, and the grounds for their socialization are provided.

Image 4. Socialization and solidarity (playing group games; by a 10-year old girl).

Respecting the nature

Respecting animals and nature is another point that children can learn from the environment and a rural tourism destination. To this end, all the interviewed children mentioned that when visiting villages, they have seen various animals such as sheep, goat, rabbit, chicken, hen, rooster, horse, etc. and after seeing these animals, they have become very interested in them and have learned to be kind to animals. One of the children pointed out that "*when I saw the animals in the village, I decided not to hurt them and to feed them*." Moreover, after seeing animals up close, 77% of children believed that animals and birds should not be kept at home or in cages, but instead, they should be free in nature. Another issue mentioned by children was that after visiting the village, they had grown very interested in nature and learned to be kind to nature. Nearly all children pointed out that "*we should not cut tree branches, litter the environment, or pollute the water, and in case we start a fire, we should put it out*." Besides, in Image 5, children, by drawing things such as no hunting, no littering, and also depicting the consequence of starting a fire in nature, which leads to wildfires, highlight teachings concerning respecting the nature and living beings. On the other hand, an increased presence of natural elements in children's paintings and games is also indicative of the importance of natural environments of villages in learning from nature and respecting it. Therefore, when children communicate with nature and engage in a sensory relationship with it, they consider themselves to be a part of it. Playing in open spaces and interacting with nature has a positive effect on the children's future health and also increases their experience and environmental awareness, which, in turn, reinforces respecting nature and making an effort to protect it among children (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013).

Tolerance and patience

Reinforcing children's tolerance and patience in tourism trips is another category that was identified after analyzing the interviews with children. Responding to challenges
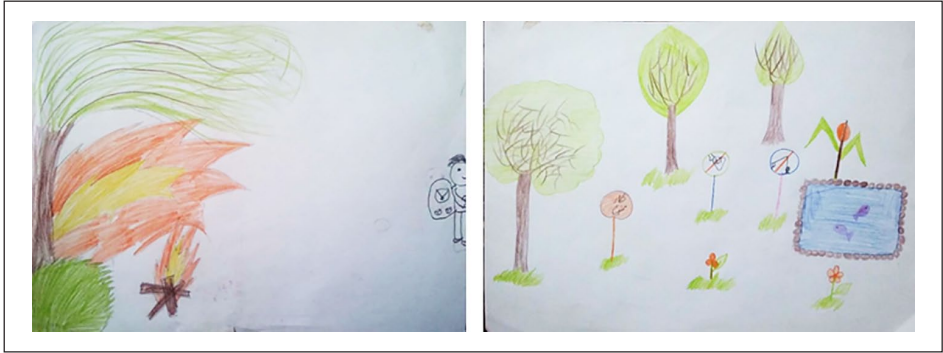
Image 5. Respecting the nature. No fire in nature (by an 11-year old girl). No hunting (by a 10-year old girl).
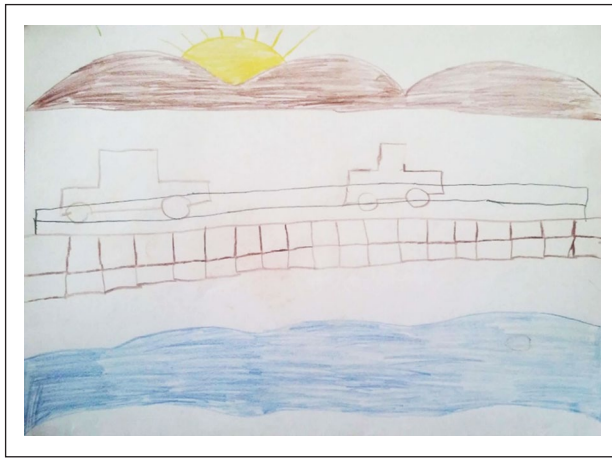

Image 6. Patience and tolerance (lengthy road to destination; by an 11-year old boy).

such as warm weather, duration of the journey, congestion in the village, and the amount of time it takes to find a proper camping site are among the instances that can help children learn to be patient. About 68% of children stated that they exercise patience and do not become upset in the face of such issues. One child said that "*when the village is crowded, I help my family find a camping site*." Such issues are practices that help improve children's patience and tolerance. By depicting the road, a child points to the long route to the tourism village (Image 6) and explains that when there is a long way to the destination, he is patient to get there and to find a camping site and also helps his family. As pointed out, the occurrence of such problems can make children realize that to arrive at the destination, they need to withstand these problems and this can have a significant influence on increasing children's patience and tolerance; and this needs to be learned from early childhood (Barragan-Jason et al., 2018).

Image 7. Fostering creativity. Utilizing natural elements in painting (by a 6-year old girl). Creating a new character in the game as a rural girl (by an 8-year old girl).

Fostering creativity

Nature is one of the sources of creativity and a significant factor in fostering creativity. There are a lot of elements in the environment and the nature of a village, which can be influential in fostering children's creativity. Among the instances that were pointed out by children, the following can be named:

- Utilizing natural elements in games (such as wooden sticks, stone, and soil in games)
- Drawing inspiration from nature in games and paintings,
- Creating new roles in games (shepherd, villager, etc.).
- Having a real understanding of nature and distinguishing between natural elements.

Analysis of children's interviews and paintings shows that traveling to nature and being there plays a role in fostering children's creativity because by seeing new spaces, patterns, and elements, children gain an understanding of elements and the real environment and become familiar with the function of elements such as wood, stone, soil, and water. Besides, in a natural environment, the foundation for using real elements of the natural, local environment in games and paintings is laid, and children begin to create new characters. For instance, the tree, flowers, river, animals, etc. depicted in Image 7 signify an ability to draw the real image of elements in the painting, which is a kind of intellectual creativity. Also, the presence of children in nature and observing it up close can substantially affect their inspirations from nature and foster their creativity.

In nature, children have the opportunity to discover water, soil, and living organism present in their surrounding environment (Veselinovska et al., 2010). Engaging in the natural environments allows children to discover and gain numerous meaningful experiences, which help build awareness and numerous skills, including observational skills, in

Image 8. Self-protection (playing close to the family; by a 9-year old boy).

children. Therefore, open spaces and environments are filled with numerous experiences and discoveries for children (Taylor et al., 1998). Generally, children who experience the natural world and have an opportunity to play and learn in it are more likely to choose science or areas related to nature as their job (Veselinovska et al., 2010).

Self-protection

Staying close to the family, not approaching wild animals, and not touching dangerous substances are among the children's points, which can help improve self-protection skills. In this regard, remaining close to the family is a point that was mentioned by children. One child said, "*When playing in the village, I am careful not to get away from my family and not to leave my parents without their permission.*" "*When I'm playing, I am careful to keep my distance from wild animals.*" Besides, all children emphasized not touching dangerous substances. For instance, one child emphasized, "*I am careful not to touch dangers substances that I don't know.*" Image 8 shows a child's depiction of camping sites in rural tourism destinations. In this painting, the child hints at staying close to the family when playing in the village and not leaving his family without permission, which is an instance of self-protection. Overall, we can say that self-protection is a point that children can experience while visiting open environments, and this has a significant effect on their learning. Self-protection means that the child can evaluate her performance, saying that she can distinguish between correct and incorrect actions (Lipowski et al., 2013).

Therefore, following the transcription of interviews and extraction of critical themes, 20 learning themes were identified among the interviewed children, which were categorized as seven learning topics due to their conceptual proximity. The frequency of learning themes among studied children was higher than 80% in all instances except for the length of the journey and the amount of time spent finding a camping site, which was mentioned by 68% of children (Table 1).

Table 1. Key themes and topics of children's learning during the rural tourism experience.

Learning topics	Learning themes	Repetition by children	
		Number	Percent
Taking responsibility	Helping to pack things	22	100
	Watching over personal belongings	20	90
	Asking for parents' permission	22	100
Self-confidence	Consulting with children and asking their opinion (independence)	19	86
	The courage to approach domestic animals	19	86
	Communicating with peers	19	86
Socialization and social bond	Changing from individual games to group games	21	90
	Finding new playmates	19	86
Respecting the nature	Interest in animals and nature	22	100
	Respecting animals	22	100
	Respecting the nature	22	100
Tolerance and patience	Duration of the journey	15	68
	The amount of time it takes to find a camping site	15	68
Fostering creativity	Using natural elements in the game (wood, stone, etc.)	21	90
	Drawing on nature in paintings and games	21	90
	Creating new characters in the game (villager, shepherd, etc.)	21	90
	Ganging a real understanding of nature and differentiating between elements	22	100
Self-protection	Staying close to the family (family solidarity)	22	100
	Staying away from wild animals	22	100
	Not touching dangerous substances	22	100

Discussion

Informal learning experiences can provide more suitable opportunities for improving general life skills. One of the main features of informal learning experiences is the greater importance of the environment in learning, and tourism is one such example. Facing the real environment makes learners better understand both the issue and how to deal with it and, at the same time, facilitates the transfer of acquired skills to other situations (Carliner, 2017; Van Merriënboer and Kirschner, 2018). Therefore, free environment learning during tourism allows children to learn empirical facts, and children can get acquainted with environmental realities and the real size of phenomena and elements and touch them. Hence, free learning experiences in rural tourism destinations that enjoy features such as being exhibiting local life, being exploratory, amusing, and enjoyable can be of paramount importance in children's learning, especially urban children. During childhood, social interactions provide the background for personal and educational excellence, preference for collective life, and collaboration among humans. Providing a suitable environment for children to develop and become familiar with their needs and true nature, which

is needed in childhood, paves the way for their proper development in terms of personality, education, and training and maintaining a healthy future generation. Therefore, attending natural and open spaces such as rural areas paves the way for the creation of a free, environmental visualization with broad and diverse perspectives (contrary to the limited urban aspects) and lays the real foundation for touching the environmental elements (stone, tree leaves, wood, soil, and water) and incorporating them into games. Through rural tourism, children's environmental knowledge increases and leads to the development of their geographical, environmental, social, and cultural knowledge. Tourism provides an opportunity for children to visit rural environments alongside their families. Attending rural tourism environments shapes children's geographical, spatial, and correlational knowledge and clears the way for the relationship between humans and nature (Poria et al., 2005). Therefore, many experiences that children obtain from rural tourism destinations, such as familiarity with the rural lifestyle and villagers' jobs, familiarity with numerous animals and plants and the way they live, all have a significant effect on increasing their environmental and behavioral understanding and these, in turn, influence their behavior, lifestyle, and selection of jobs related to the environment. These environmental perceptions, which are acquired through observation, lead to the creation of numerous mental images in children, which are beneficial to the development of their creativity and formation of creative spaces in the future. Therefore, based on the theories of environmental (Van Winkle and Lagay, 2012), experimental (Kolb and Kolb, 2009), and observational (Banduran, 1996) learning, in the process of children's tourism, it is possible to explain various aspects of social, cultural, geographical and spatial learning, individual, mental, auditory, visual, olfactory, linguistic and so on. In this study, based on environmental, experimental, and observational learning theories, the crucial aspects of children's learning in rural tourism destinations have been identified and analyzed.

The findings showed that from the beginning of tourism planning at the origin to returning from the destination, children face new conditions. All these moments are new experiences for children. The primary point that distinguishes children's experiences in tourism from other experiences is that they are engaged in a real, exiting experience that makes them enjoy the situation and is also accompanied by learning and development of some necessary skills. Due to offering new and unknown experiences to children who are in line with their needs, such as curiosity, interacting with others, playing, and the desire to discover, such learning environments, contrary to formal ones, are highly motivational (Keller, 2011). Children acquire numerous experiences in rural destinations, which leads to the development of skills and learning. Considering the conducted paintings and interviews children's learning experiences during tourism can be analyzed in seven key topics: taking responsibility, self-confidence, socialization, respect nature, tolerance, and patience, fostering creativity, and self-protection (Figure 1).

Findings of the study show that children, by helping their parents with packing the equipment, watching over their personal belongings, and asking for their parents' permission to visit different village parts learn to be more responsible (Fernández, 2015). Overall, learning to be accountable in childhood turns children into responsible individuals vis-a-vis their family and in their workplace. Moreover, in tourism destinations, children learn to socialize by finding new playmates and communicating with their peers (Kharrāzi and Delgoshāee, 2010). Children's presence in natural environments and their
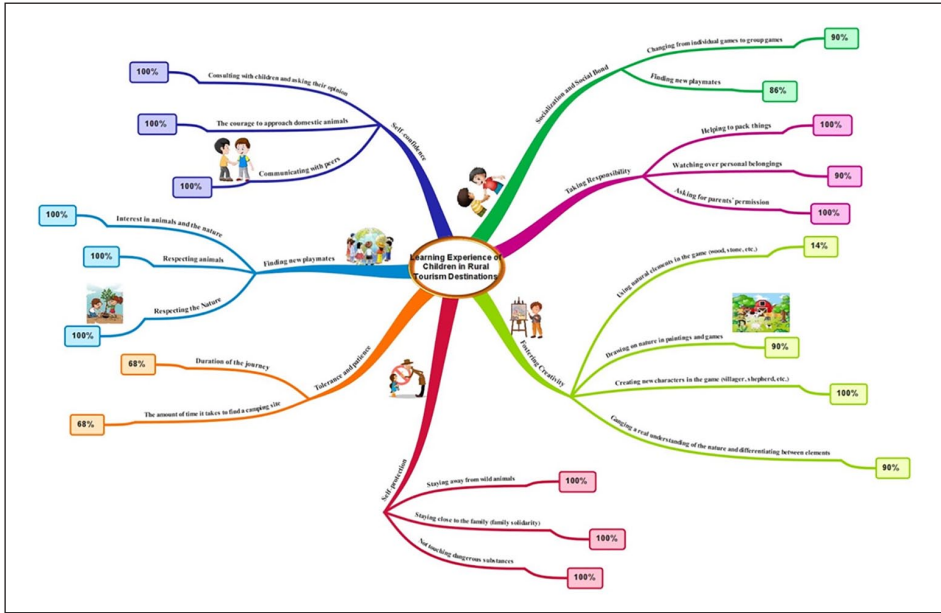
Figure 1. Key themes obtained from children's learning experiences in rural tourism destinations.

familiarity with and interest in nature and animals can have a significant effect on protecting natural resources and proper exploitation of them in adulthood (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013). Consulting with children before choosing a tourism destination, communicating with peers in tourism destinations, and approaching animals in rural environments can increase children's self-confidence, which has a major influence on improving their performance and social development in the future.

On the other hand, by staying close to the family and not touching dangers animals or substances, children learn to protect themselves; similarly, the duration of the journey to the destination and the amount of time it takes to find a camping site in the goal are also influential in increasing children's patience and tolerance (Barragan-Jason et al., 2018). Likewise, incorporating natural elements in games, drawing on nature, and creating new characters are all indicative of greater creativity in children. Therefore, the findings of the present study are in line with the studies conducted by Stone and Petrick (2013), Wu et al. (2019), and Van Winkle and Lagay (2012). Therefore, rural tourism has very diverse, informal, and effective educational aspects in children's learning. It removes many of the children's mental ambiguities about the natural environment elements, and children find answers for their questions objectively and realistically. On the other hand, new curiosities are formed in children's minds to discover the human and natural environment around them. Children also learn a lot from the social behaviors of adults when traveling. Seeing new characters, as well as other children, enhances children's behavioral learning. In addition, by being in travel conditions, the concept of time and place of life finds real meaning for children.

Conclusion

By adopting a qualitative framework through interviews and paintings, this study dealt with investigating and analyzing children's experiences that were influential in their learning.

The results show that outdoor tourism, such as rural destinations, can be the right way for children to learn informally. Because tourism in rural areas creates an opportunity for children to be with their parents, children can also see real objects and phenomena, model them, touch objects and elements of nature, get acquainted with rural lifestyle and culture, economic activity, and livelihood rural areas. It can be concluded that children become more excited and curious about new experiences during rural tourism. They learn in what areas they should be cautious and what areas they should be brave and strong. Also, the playfulness of family members shapes the understanding of child support. In rural tourism, due to the simultaneity of new space, open space, the possibility of physical activity, and group play lead to children's happiness and loud laughter. Children learn that nature is soothing and reduces children's stress and fear of the environment because they understand that nature can be a good friend to humans. Tourism in natural environments increases children's intellectual focus on the environment, maintenance of environmental tools, and elements. Thus, children's creativity, alertness, and power of action increase.

Overall, skills and experiences acquired through tourism in rural environments can significantly affect achieving success and having a good life in adulthood since tourism in rural environments alongside family paves the way for children to understand the environment and elements present in it and satiate their curiosity in a new, amusing, exploratory way and gives them the freedom to incorporate the environmental aspects into their games. Therefore, rural tourism is a kind of informal learning opportunity for children, and we can say that encouraging families to spend time in nature and visit rural tourism destinations can provide children with a suitable empirical learning methodology. Parents can also pass on many educational tips to their children informally through tourism tools. Therefore, it can be said that based on the theories of environmental, experimental, and observational learning, children's tourism experience paves the way for good informal learning for them, which can be well studied, explained, and interpreted through the qualitative method of descriptive phenomenology.

The main implication of the present study is that complementing these programs with purposeful assignments and tasks that are conducive to the development of specific competencies in children can help enrich the educational aspect of these experiences. Therefore, task-based learning environments (Francom, 2016; Merrill, 2007) by families can provide and organizing a suitable theoretical framework to guide such a learning methodology. In this way, learning assignments whose completion by children, either individually or in cooperation with peers, family members, or others, might appear to be a part of the tourism experience, but are opportunities for learning and developing specific skills that can be incorporated into tourism events. Therefore, to understand the environment, increase creativity, physical activity, socialization, participation, and self-confidence, tourism in rural areas is one of the key programs for children.

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Notes

1.   https://www.amar.org.ir/english (May/2018)
2.   http://www.mcth.ir/english (June/2018)

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