

Exploring the Role of Early Childhood Educators in Cultivating Social Skills among Preschool Students: Strategies, Challenges, and Implications in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study delved into the critical role of early childhood educators in nurturing social skills among preschool students within Sri Lanka. Due to a lack of understanding of the type of stimulation that children under the age of three need, teachers do not pay enough attention to improving social skills for personality development. Employing a mixed research methodology and involving two preschools, forty parents, and six teachers, the research explored a diverse range of perspectives and experiences related to social skills development in preschool education. The objectives were to examine the motivation of teachers to develop soft skills of preschool students, examine the techniques used by teachers to develop social skills, identify classroom management strategies to improve social skills, and analyze the effects of teacher attitudes on social skill development. The study investigated various strategies employed by educators, challenges they encountered, and the broader implications of their efforts. Findings highlighted that teacher behavior and personality traits, as well as activities designed for children, significantly influenced the enhancement of social skills among preschoolers. Educators' interactions with students, their teaching approaches, and the learning environments they created played pivotal roles in shaping the social development of young learners. These insights underscored the crucial role of early childhood educators in fostering social skills and preparing children for success in their academic and social lives. Furthermore, the study shed light on the complexities and nuances involved in cultivating social skills in preschool settings.

Keywords: Social skills, Pre-school education, Teacher role

BACKGROUND

The concept of Early Childhood Education (ECE) emerged in the 1990s, marking a relatively recent development (Pattnaik, 1996). With industrialization, urbanization, and shifts in family structures, the demand for preschools and childcare centers has been steadily increasing. Consequently, there is a growing global emphasis on the importance and transformation of Early Childhood Education. This expansion has prompted governments to reevaluate policies, teacher training, and funding to ensure high-quality educational environments (Drury, Miller, & Campbell, 2000; Lambert & Clyde, 2000; Miller, 2002). Although early childhood programs are often perceived as uniform, they vary significantly in philosophical and educational approaches, as well as in their operational settings within communities and states (Elliott, 2006). Preschools and kindergartens are run by diverse providers, including schools, nonprofit community groups, and for-profit businesses. They may function independently, be affiliated with schools, or operate within childcare centers (Elliott, 2006).

Changes in economic and social landscapes have led to children entering early childhood education at

increasingly younger ages. Shonkoff & Phillips (2000) emphasized that the period from birth to age five is widely recognized as the most crucial developmental phase in childhood. During this time, the potential for change in both skill development and neural circuitry is at its peak, gradually declining with age. Early childhood harbors critical periods wherein specific skills and abilities are more easily acquired (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron & Shonkoff, 2006). ECE is believed to foster a more engaged and constructive learning environment for children, promoting cooperative learning through play, which is essential for their overall development (Halpern, 2013). While studies have provided compelling evidence of a positive relationship between preschool education and cognition (e.g., PeisnerFeinberg et al., 2001), the connection between preschool education and children's social-emotional outcomes remains less conclusive (Sylva et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2007). Research underscores the profound impact of early learning on later development and societal engagement (Mustard & McCain, 1999).

Bandura (1971) suggests that early childhood educators need to cultivate effective skills for interacting with and engaging young children at their developmental stage. This includes the ability to communicate with parents about the child's needs, abilities, challenges, and achievements, enabling both educators and parents to support the child in managing their emotions. Jones et al. (2015) identified a correlation between evaluated social-emotional skills in kindergarten and significant outcomes in schooling, employment, criminal behavior, substance use, and mental health as individuals transition into adulthood. They concluded that early assessments of social-emotional skills can help identify children who may be at risk of developing deficiencies later in life, facilitating early interventions to improve their coping abilities. Denham and Holt (1993) found that promoting social-emotional skills such as listening, cooperation, seeking effective support, and negotiation skills in children is predictive of their future mental health and overall well-being. Herath (2022) stresses the importance of acquiring social capital for personality development of students in environment settings.

Sri Lanka's fragmented preschool education standards, curricula, and administrative systems have led to subpar learning outcomes, failing many children, and hindering their potential. A concerted effort is imperative to ensure the nationwide implementation of Early Learning Development Standards (ECDS), providing all young children with equal opportunities to acquire the skills and competencies necessary for success in school and beyond (Unicef, 2017). The report highlights that only about 39 percent of preschool teachers have received at least one year of professional training, and their working conditions lag those of their counterparts in primary or secondary education. Moreover, preschool curricula lack comprehensiveness and fail to adequately promote positive behaviors such as practicing proper hygiene. There is also insufficient emphasis on developing fine motor skills, socio-emotional awareness, and cognitive abilities. Herath (2021) mentions that social class disparities should be considered when planning the teaching-learning process to develop skills in students.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This research endeavored to analyze the influence of teacher attitudes on the development of social skills in preschool students, examining how teachers' perspectives impacted the social growth of young learners. Additionally, it sought to explore the various techniques employed by teachers to nurture social skills among preschool students, delving into effective strategies and approaches utilized within educational settings. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify and assess classroom management practices adopted by teachers to enhance the social skills of preschoolers, shedding light on organizational structures and pedagogical methods conducive to social development. Lastly, it aimed to examine the underlying motivations that drove teachers to prioritize the cultivation of soft skills in preschool students, investigating the intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing educators' dedication to fostering holistic growth in their young charges.

In this study, a mixed research methodology was utilized, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather comprehensive insights. The sample size comprised 40 parents and 6 teachers, deliberately selected from a diverse pool representing both government-operated and privately-owned preschools. Interviews were held for teachers and questionnaires were administered to parents. Students were observed in their classrooms. This deliberate inclusion of participants from various preschool settings aimed to capture a broader spectrum of perspectives and experiences related to early childhood education. By incorporating input from both parents and teachers, the study sought to provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics influencing social skill development in preschool environments, considering factors such as curriculum differences, teaching methodologies, and parental involvement. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the subject matter, enriching the depth and breadth of the study's findings.

DISCUSSION

Motivational strategies of teachers

In the study, the researcher delved into the motivations driving preschool teachers to cultivate social skills among their students. Within the context of this objective, several assumptions emerged: Firstly, it was assumed that preschool teachers universally provide motivation to all children, indicating the pivotal role motivation plays in the developmental process within preschool settings. Secondly, the study suggested that most children (80%) exhibit increased motivation to engage in preschool activities repeatedly, even outside the classroom environment. Thirdly, it was observed that parent-teacher meetings in preschools (90%) serve as valuable forums for discussing children's weaknesses, problems, and limitations, facilitating a deeper understanding for both educators and parents regarding the children's levels of achievement, required support, and motivational needs. Additionally, all preschool teachers underscored the significance of employing positive thinking and motivation to address their students' weaknesses, emphasizing the critical nature of motivation in effective preschool teaching practices. Lastly, (87%) efforts were made to enhance students' self-esteem, self-directed learning, and individual learning pace, aiming for a more holistic approach to education. These assumptions collectively underscored the impact of motivational strategies on the effectiveness of the learning-teaching process, highlighting the potential for preschool educators to foster positive attitudes, knowledge acquisition, and social skills among their young learners. These findings are in parallel to the notions mentioned by Knudsen et al (2006).

Techniques used to develop social skills.

The researcher identified various techniques utilized by preschool teachers to foster the development of social skills among their students. The findings revealed two distinct trends in the approaches employed: Firstly, a significant portion (5/6 teachers) of preschool teachers were observed not to employ negative techniques in cultivating social skills. Examples included the use of corporal punishment, overreliance on the lecture method, and adopting a strict and inflexible teaching demeanor. Conversely, most (4/6) preschool teachers were noted to implement effective techniques aimed at enhancing social skills. These included consistently engaging students' attention, maintaining fairness and consistency in attention allocation, exhibiting organizational skills, enthusiasm, and passion for teaching, integrating technology into learning activities, providing opportunities for children to showcase their activities, and focusing on improving children's self-awareness. In parallel to findings of Jones et al. (2015), the study underscored the importance of employing effective techniques for the development of social skills in preschool education. Techniques such as being punctual and adopting a democratic teaching approach, promptly organizing classroom activities, and utilizing voice effectively were identified as crucial for effectively managing and nurturing children's social skills within the educational environment. These findings highlight the significance of employing diverse and effective teaching strategies to promote comprehensive social skill development in

preschool students, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience. This was highlighted elsewhere in the chapter (Unicef, 2017).

Classroom management strategies:

The researcher explored the classroom management strategies employed by teachers to enhance the social skills of preschool students. The findings revealed several key insights: Firstly, a significant majority (4/6) of preschool teachers demonstrated a solid understanding of classroom management processes aimed at fostering social skills development. They were observed to employ a variety of techniques within their classrooms to effectively manage student behavior and promote positive social interactions. Moreover, the study found that most (5/6) preschool teachers held favorable perceptions regarding the efficacy of classroom management techniques in achieving desired social skill outcomes. This positive perception indicates a high level of confidence among educators in the effectiveness of their teaching practices. Furthermore, the research highlighted that most (82%) parents possessed a good understanding of the techniques utilized by preschool teachers to manage the classroom environment. Additionally, parents expressed satisfaction with the classroom management techniques employed by teachers, indicating a sense of trust and confidence in the educators' abilities to facilitate their child's development. Overall, the findings suggest that both teachers and parents recognize the importance of effective classroom management in nurturing social skills among preschool students. The trust placed in teachers' techniques by parents further underscores the collaborative effort between educators and families in supporting children's social development within the preschool setting.

Teacher attitudes

The researcher investigated the impact of teacher attitudes on the development of social skills among preschool students, uncovering several significant findings: Firstly, it was observed that preschool teachers' behavior patterns play a crucial role in fostering long-term interest and engagement with social skills among students. When teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards social skill development, children are more likely to be motivated to practice and improve these skills. Furthermore, the study revealed that children who have ample opportunities to practice social skills in a supportive environment are more likely to develop a strong interest and experience positive outcomes in social interactions. Conversely, when children are subjected to prolonged periods of unpleasant lessons under the influence of pressure and stress, they may develop disinterest and negative perceptions towards social skills in the future. Moreover, the research highlighted that teacher attitudes, along with other related experiences, have the potential to significantly influence the learning of social skills. Examples of these influencing factors include the nature of the preschool, classroom environment, classroom management strategies, teacher techniques, and family factors. This is true when comparing with the findings of Herath (2022) These external influences interact with teacher attitudes to shape the overall social skill development of preschool students, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to fostering social skills in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of early childhood educators in nurturing social skills among preschool students in Sri Lanka. The research underscores several critical factors: motivational strategies, teaching techniques, classroom management, and teacher attitudes. Teachers' motivational efforts, such as promoting positive thinking and fostering self-esteem, are essential in encouraging children to engage actively in their learning. Effective techniques, including fair and consistent attention, enthusiasm, and the use of technology, significantly enhance social skill development. Classroom management strategies play a crucial role, with both teachers and parents recognizing their importance in fostering positive social interactions. Furthermore, teachers' positive attitudes are instrumental in maintaining children's long-term interest and

engagement in social skills. Collectively, these findings emphasize that a comprehensive approach, integrating motivation, effective techniques, robust classroom management, and positive teacher attitudes, is vital for the holistic development of social skills in preschoolers. These insights are not only critical for educators but also valuable for policymakers and stakeholders in early childhood education, highlighting the importance of supporting and enhancing the practices of preschool teachers to ensure the social and academic success of young learners in Sri Lanka and beyond.

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