

Delving into Preschool Teachers' Approaches and Knowledge on Social Skills and its Relationship to School Readiness

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i1/20316>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i1/20316

Published Date: 17 January 2024

Abstract

This study delves into the crucial topic of preschool teachers' approaches and knowledge regarding social skills and their direct impact on school readiness. It addresses the misconception that preschool teaching requires minimal education, emphasizing the pivotal role of preschool teachers in fostering children's school readiness through effective social skills instruction. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews to collect data. Ten preschool teachers from two Malaysian preschools were interviewed to explore approaches to teaching social skills and understand the relationship between social skills and school readiness. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that respondents have varied knowledge levels on social skills, highlighting the need for updated curriculum and innovative teaching approaches. Respondents also acknowledged the pivotal role teachers play in bridging gaps in social skills instruction and agreed on the necessity of prioritizing these skills in early education. The study concludes by promoting interventions that nurture well-rounded individuals, blending social competence with academic achievement for holistic student development. As a precursor to further research, the study suggests exploring and implementing strategies to enhance teacher education in the realm of social skills instruction and encourages ongoing efforts to refine and update preschool curricula.

Keywords: Trained Teachers, Social Skills, Approaches, School Readiness, Academic Success.

Introduction

Educators are widely recognized for their unwavering commitment, drive, kindness, and compassion toward their pupils, enabling them to attain proficiency and aptitude through their instruction. Hence, in early childhood education, youngsters must have teachers who can foster a conducive learning atmosphere, as advocated by Dewey (Balakrishnan & Thambu, 2017). From preschool, teachers dedicate themselves to shaping the lives of young

children and improving their prospects. By modeling productivity, creativity, independence, and social courage, exceptional teachers inspire children to develop these qualities within themselves. Through the cultivation of social skills, such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, attentiveness, and creativity, children are empowered to reach their full potential and achieve lifelong success (Courtier, et al., 2021).

In this modern age, teachers must be properly trained and accredited. Their readiness should reflect their knowledge, experience, and aptitude to face challenges (Yusof, Ismail; 2021). Expertise and proficiency of early childhood teachers foster a child's progression and achievement. (Nurani, et al., 2020). The research suggests that teachers play a vital role in shaping a child's personality and academic growth through their teaching methodologies. The study aims to investigate teachers' awareness of the social skills that foster a child's creativity and progress. The objective is to encourage an open-minded approach in children, using innovative teaching techniques and the teacher's experience, which will benefit them in their future endeavors. Teaching is an art that requires creativity and innovation, while the science of teaching involves imparting rational, technical, and practical knowledge to achieve specific goals (Rajagopalan, 2019). The inadequate knowledge of teachers in these areas may hinder children's learning and social development, ultimately impacting their goals (Derapa & Mohamed, 2018; Derapa et al., 2020). This is further aggravated when parents and stakeholders are intense on children's good grade academic performance. Understanding social skills enables one to display the behaviour of concern, putting oneself in another man's shoes (Smogorzewska & Szumski, 2018).

In 2019, UNICEF suggested that a child's readiness for school can be determined by their ability to pay attention, sit in a designated area, raise their hand before speaking, and demonstrate knowledge of the alphabet and numbers (Needham & Ülküer, 2020). Preschool plays a crucial role in developing cognitive and social skills, laying the groundwork for future academic success (Rakap et al, 2018). An Australian study showed that early education helps children develop confidence, self-acceptance, empathy, respect, and positive social skills (Gregory, et al; 2021). Social skills prepare children for school readiness by making them interested and receptive to learning. (Children's School Readiness Based on Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions, 2018). According to an observation by UNICEF (2012), Children need to be ready to succeed in school.

Research Question

The questions to this qualitative study are as the following

- 1) How do teachers' teaching approaches influence the nurturing of social skills?
- 2) What are the challenges teachers encounter when school readiness?

Methodology

The study's methodology framework was through a questionnaire survey. This was conducted to gather information about respondents' backgrounds, qualifications, years of experience, career progression, and professional attitudes. The interview was conducted in Malay and English or mixed languages, according to the comfort of the respondents. The study proceeded with, in-person interviews, where respondents were at ease to express their opinions and views on work experiences. The interview was methodologically recorded using audio technology, which the respondents gave their permission, to avoid errors later. At this juncture, the researcher informed, during transcribing the researcher will transcribe from Malay to English to the best interpretation of what the respondent meant. The researcher

ensured that if there were any ambiguities, respondents would be contacted, to avoid misinterpretation. The study followed a thematic analysis by scrutinizing and classifying the documents at hand to retrieve the various views that will assist in preparing children for school readiness by teachers' teaching approaches and social skills knowledge.

The researcher followed ethical issues by ensuring school authorities, and respondents were aware, understood, and were volunteered participants in this study. The aim and contention of the study were explained introduced and repeated before each recorded interview. The researcher explained that their confidentiality would be respected, which guided the study's procedure, and the well-being of respondents for the duration of the study.

Population and Sample Procedure

The methodology design addressed issues of sampling by defining the participant's academic qualifications, with their knowledge of social skills, school readiness, theories, and approaches. Respondents' (teachers) names are pseudonyms listed to protect their privacy during this study. The research sampling has allowed for the discovery and insight attainment crucial in selecting samples that have the most input of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Kokkalia et al., 2019).

The research intends to work with teachers from the research location. A purposive sampling approach has been adopted allowing the research to gain insight, discover, and understand, but most importantly to retrieve samples that are informative to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96; Kay, 2018).

This part of the research specified the theory that has been chosen implicitly and explicitly on assumptions of the subject and nature of knowledge to resolve the research questions. The research has been on a systematic investigation of social and human behaviour and interaction (Lictman 2014; Kokkalia, Drigas, Economou, & Roussos, 2019). The sampling procedure is selecting an appropriate number of samplings from the background of the study (Sekaran, 2006; MNA 2007; Comercial & Pesqueros 2014). One of the objectives of this study is to explore teachers' understanding, approaches, and challenges in teaching social skills to pre-schoolers. In trying to attain relevant crucial information about the research, participants were given prepared open-ended questions ahead (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005; Pekdogan & Akgul, 2016).

Instrumentation

Methodology choice has involved question instrumentation allowing participants to express views and experiences without feeling constrained, as the questions and interviews provided freedom to express, which is the goal of the study (Haradhan, 2018; Viswambharan, & Priya, 2016).

The researcher has ensured trustworthiness by pre-checking the mode that confirmed accuracy during interpretation. Issues of teaching approaches were discussed, hence obtaining the background information that assisted the researcher in focusing on the objectives of the research. This will be an advantage for the researcher to refine research interview questions, which in turn would give depth to the research perspective.

The first set of questions was on teachers' demographic information such as gender, age, highest education level, race, marital status, teaching experience, and position. Secondly, questions projected concentrated on respondents' knowledge, skills, attitude, and understanding of social skills while teaching in a multi-ethnic classroom, leading to school

readiness, A range of interview questions was formatted covering the concepts and constructs of social skills and school readiness.

Data Collection Procedure

This qualitative research accentuates on data assembled and analysis method employed, with aims to understand insights, interpretations, and findings. To achieve this, the researcher engaged in interviews by data collection, and effective interviews to draw out responses in languages preferred by teachers who were the participants. The data on participants' demographic questions included teaching experience, classroom settings, ages of children, and types of schools.

The interviewed participants increased the amount and scope of data documented in an overview to develop a broader perspective on the importance of social skills for school readiness. Previous studies indicated that children who experienced time in social skills in a preschool environment enhanced their development of social skills, influenced by culture, communication, and socialization (Zhang & Nurmi, 2012; Sheikhzakaryaie, 2012; Nourani, 1999; Maleki et al., 2019).

The action plan below was formulated during the research to expedite the process:

Step 1	Confirming ethics approval from the selected preschools
Step 2	Gaining access to the preschools
Step 3	Dealing with school personnel
Step 4	Recruiting the participants
Step 5	Choosing language proficiency of Bahasa Malaysia or English
Step 6	Interviewing the participants
Step 7	Transcribing the verbal interviews
Step 8	Recording findings and discussion

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, ethical dilemmas are the responsibilities of the researcher. Thus, the researcher is to ensure the research work is towing the ethical requirements by formulating the research with formatted research questions, which are ethically informed and in line with the research purposes. While translating and transcribing retrieved data, the researcher had to reconsider that ethics is vital during interpretation. Information should not be misinterpreted as the representation of the information retrieved was to be a close possible representation of the conclusion, possibly derived from the data at hand.

In sum, ethics is the researcher's conduct and responsibility during research. With ethical values, the researcher shouldered the safety, dignity, rights, and well-being of the respondents. Acknowledging both researcher and respondents were the main players in the study, therefore understanding to appreciating each other's rights is obligatory. To get along for the duration of the research, the researcher had to know social skills herself. Starting with respecting respondents' rights by being ethical, it continued to consider their perspectives on the interviews.

A thematic analysis was used in informing the data. Triangulation methods or corroboration techniques assisted the research conclusions through interviews and questionnaires as mentioned being precautionary ethical measures of a qualitative approach.

Respondents Information

Name (Pseudonym)	Qualification	Experience	Designation
P 1 SCP (M)	SPM & Permata	2 & half years	Assist teacher (2-years-old)
P 2 SCP (F)	SPM & Permata	2 & half years	Assistant Teacher (2-years-old)
P 3 SCP (F)	SPM & Degree in ECCE	3 & half years	Main teacher (3-years-old)
P 4 SCP(F)	SPM & Degree in ECCE	3 years	Main teacher (4- 5 years old)
P 5 SCP (F)	SPM & Permata	5 & half years	Supervisor (3-5 years old)
P 6 YTK (F)	SPM & Degree in ECCE	10 years	Main teacher (4-years-old)
P 7 YTK (F)	SPM & Degree in ECCE	23 years	Main teacher/ supervisor (5-years-old)
P 8 YTK (F)	SPM, & LCCI Certificate	16 years	Main teacher (5-years-old)
P 9 YTK (F)	Diploma & Degree ECCE, Computer Science	10 years	Main teacher (4/5-years- old)
P 10 YTK (F)	SPM, Diploma ECCE	35 years	Owner & Principal

Findings*Social skills learning is fun*

The play approaches by Vygotsky in research describe adults' views on learning differ from young children whereby a child's learning progresses during play (Tertoolen, Geldens, Van Oers, & Popeijus, 2017; Colliver & Veraksa, 2019). Playing with friends at school gives children the chance to be free from adults' rules. Here children however understand they have to follow the rules of the game. Children may even be creative to devise their own game rules which they all share and abide by, as they are the ones managing their ideas to reality. Playtime provides a great opportunity for children to express themselves emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Their needs are naturally highlighted during play, which further motivates and engages them to participate in various activities (Colliver, 2019). Below are snippets from the two schools:

“During this play activity, social skills are experienced which is important for their growth and also build-up their confidence. I am introduced to social skills which are taught by my parents and later through my own experience. Therefore, I do my best to make my children happy to come to school so they will be happy to accept changes”

Supporting children's learning with approaches

Approaches practiced are related to views that preschoolers ought to encounter the enjoyment of coming to school with a different approach to learning; avoiding the regimented old school teaching highlighting that teachers stood at the podium as in a picture from the past.

Reggio Emilia (Helm & Katz, 2001; Kontra, Goldin-Meadow, & Bei Lock, 2012; Birinci, 2018) and Montessori approaches are both child-centered and carried out in an orderly classroom (Pouw, van Gog, & Paes, 2014; Courtier et al., 2021). Children's moments of 'learning by doing' awaken their senses of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. They then develop the ability to distinguish shades of colours and feel texture differences (Dewey, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978; Allazzam, 2015).

Saya tumpu perhatian pada aspek psychology, cognitive, fizikal, dan emosi. Dengan ini saya mengukuhkan ajaran dengan cara bermain dan bercerita yang saya ulangkan selalu supaya mereka akan ingat"

[I look into aspects of school readiness like psychology, cognitive physical, and emotions. I repeat to enforce my teaching through play and storytelling so that children will not forget].

In this situation, the researcher suggested that when teaching preschoolers it ought to be quality teaching with qualified teachers. These thoughts have been mentioned by previous research suggesting that Malaysia ought to look into acquiring qualified, competent, and educated teachers. They have undergone training designed and offered by the Malaysian ECCE curriculum (Taha et al., 2020).

Knowledgeable and qualified teachers

Another study indicated that only 21.6% of preschool teachers had a diploma in early childhood education in 2014. Hence both the ministries target having teachers possess a Diploma in Early Childhood Education by 2020 (Foong, L., P. K. Veloo, M. Dhamotharan and C. Loh. 2018. Private sector early child care and education in Malaysia: Workforce readiness for further education.," 2018).

In a study by Nair and friends (2017), they discovered that teachers with higher qualifications have a better knowledge of Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) when compared with those less qualified. These relationships are attainable by building the roots of social skills development trained and qualified teachers that will:

- 1) Teachers who know a child as an individual.
- 2) Teachers who show empathy by providing comfort and security.
- 3) Teachers that are fair and just and not prejudiced.
- 4) Teachers that are encouraging, supportive, and set goal
- 5) Being a teacher that participates and not one that sits behind a desk.

Teachers will then be able to assess, encourage, and support changes in children accordingly, especially with cultural concerns in mind. It is only prudent when training teachers to ensure that they are familiar with the child's background. This knowledge will assist teachers in comprehending diversity in a classroom. Rightly then institutes or universities that train to be teachers to include diversity meaning and learning that will help

strengthen society's development (Francesconi & Heckman, 2016; Macià-Gual & Domingo-Peñafiel, 2020).

Theories to Improve Social Skills

Living in the 21st century, today's learning is focused on a child-centered approach rather than teachers in podium settings. Education stakeholders need to look into approaches by theorists and approaches like Dewey, Vygotsky, Skinner, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia. Teaching approaches of Vygotsky's play theory, Dewey's Hands on theory, and Skinner's Behaviourism theory will be taught to the young 'gems' that are to focus on children's needs, children's capability, and children-centered approach, (Edward, 2002; Benson, Guess & Siegel-Causey, 2005; Birinci, 2018).

Challenges encountered by teachers

Teachers act as 'referees' assisting and relieving assistance when is competence (Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development). Teachers who encounter challenges in social skills experiences will format an active curricular activity for children. Whereby, children will experience interaction, independence, discipline, obedience, and diligence students, that integrate civility between races beginning in preschools (W. E. Hoe, 1994; Ahmad, 2016), as below

i) Parent's Socioeconomic Status

School administrators should open their minds by preparing children with social skills and traits impartial to the parents' economic status. This refers to parents' income, employment status, and level of education. Due to parent's poor economic status, their children are at a disadvantage as they suffer the brunt of economic setbacks upon entering schools.

ii) Coping with School Environment

Children's kindergarten days are the first and future formal learning structured experience not only for children but for parents too (Malsch, Green, & Kothari, 2011; Marie & Petig, 2015). Socialization with the surroundings environment are children's first experience when they enter preschool. During preschool education, children experience the basic skills of coping with the school environment which is likened to community interaction (Yasar, 2008).

iii) Health and Physical Development

Children's well-being, health, safety, and physical begin from the period of the child's weight at birth (Halsey, Collin & Anderson, 1996; Reichman, 2006), poor nutrition health imbalance, (Hair et al., 2006; Janus & Duke, 2007), and disabilities, are associated to delayed development, thus effecting positive educational outcomes and even poor school readiness (Altun, 2017).

Discussion

After visiting the two schools, challenges faced by teachers when reintroducing social skills to preschoolers, are due to cultural and religious differences, and parents are worried that their children may be lured away from their original beliefs. Therefore, parents ought to know that social skills are traits that they use daily at home.

Parents and trained teachers need to be aware that social skills can result in the child's learning progress and school readiness, therefore instead of fearing they can climb the rungs

of success together. Qualified teachers steer away from sensitive issues, thus lessening the challenges of social skills learning. therefore, by parents and teachers sharing their ideas, concerns, and suggestions they work hand-in-hand for the good of their children.

The study believed that teachers need to be qualified, trained, and with experience before being asked to manage a classroom. The glaring differences between both schools are the researcher's concerns. Whereby, the researcher felt the need to address teachers' vast academic differences. While YTK teachers are confident with years of experience, those in SCP need to be accessed by educational bodies, so that children's education will not be compromised. This is achievable if schools do not simply find a square peg' and fit it into a 'round hole'. School heads must simply abide by stipulated rules by conforming to academic requirements to be teacher by the Ministries.

Conclusion

Concluding and highlights the importance of social skills for school readiness, which will help students become ready to learn and achieve academic success, as indicated by past research Children who possess social skills are more likely to be willing to learn and have a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of their actions in the classroom, society, community, and nation. Such children are more likely to become successful and balanced citizens.

It is worth noting that children who possess well-developed social skills have a greater potential to make friends, communicate clearly and effectively, understand nonverbal cues, and participate in cooperative play. Furthermore, these same children tend to exhibit strong cognitive abilities, which enable them to think critically, reflect on their experiences, and explore their own identities. Such skills are invaluable, as they help children to navigate their daily interactions, work collaboratively, and demonstrate kindness and compassion towards others. Ultimately, the development of social skills can pave the way for young children to achieve success as they mature into adulthood.

In summing up the aim of the study, that is to achieve social skills for school readiness, the school management, owners, parents, and teachers have to re-acquaint preschoolers with social skills learning to be just as important as the 3Rs. To achieve this aim, the researcher has further impressed upon a famed local expression 'turun padang' (go down to the field) by working together towards refined future young citizens. An all-inclusive education that is suited for 21st-century living with academic success, teaming up with social skills abilities that project future triumph, for none other but for the nation's young and their future.

Future Research

It is crucial to ensure that teachers who educate young children are qualified and possess adequate teaching knowledge.

Future research should focus on how the Ministry of Education and parents ought to be attentive towards social skills learning. Social skills ought to be awarded with the same importance as reading, writing, and mathematics, as social skills outcome school readiness, which has a significant positive impact on academic success.

This study recommends that all relevant bodies that are responsible for Early Childhood Education be focused and not swayed by changes due to political shifts by compromising with curriculum and planning. Shifting sands of learning that muddle up the young minds.

This study suggests implementing a child-friendly curriculum that allows young children to communicate, express themselves, and develop skills necessary to achieve good grades. When social skills lead to school readiness that results in learning readiness for academic success.

This then raises the question as to why social skills learning has become a hidden subject.

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