

INTEGRATION OF PLAY METHOD FOR PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL SKILL ACQUISITION: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The need to enhance social skill acquisition by preschoolers is both critical and crucial for social coherence. Several means have been employed by teachers and caregivers to boost social skills. One of them is through play method. This paper therefore discussed the integration of Play Method for Preschooler's Social Skill Acquisition: Critical Issues and Way Forward. It x-rayed the concept of preschooler and the need to guide them towards acquiring needed social skills. paper aims to provide early exposure and an understanding of the effectiveness of playing on the social development of children. Generally, children who play more are better at cooperation, thoughtfulness, sociable and have a higher social competence. There are various types of play that are involved in the process of teaching and learning that affect the social skills acquisition of preschoolers. The paper further adopted and related some social learning theories to the current discussion. This paper discusses the implications of play on the social development of children and proffered a way out. Conclusion and recommendation were also drawn from the work and based on that, the work recommended among others that children should be exposed to certain play methods that will motivate them towards learning. It also suggested that teachers and caregivers should provide play time in their timetable and guide the preschoolers in the choice of play they take part.

Keywords: Preschooler, Social skills, Play method, Integration,

Introduction

The early years of a child's life are critical for later development. A child's development is a process of a change in behaviour from being immature to mature, from simple to complex, from being dependent to being self-reliant. There are many critical skills that children need to develop in preparation for later developments, such as exploring, risk-taking, fine motor skills, and gross motor development. These skills can be learned effectively through play-based activities (Johnson , 2010). Taking into account the nature of children is "play", the lessons and learning process involving young children should be done through play Casteno (2018) Moreover, play offers the best learning experience for children (Moyles, 2018). Education experts, organizations and curriculum documents worldwide indicate the importance of integrating play into the education of young children. An association in the United States comprising of various early childhood professionals—the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2019) emphasized the need to incorporate play in teaching and learning. Play is vital in helping the holistic development of children (Gray 2019). In Malaysia, the National Standard Preschool Curriculum (KSPK) by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2017) highlights play as one of the approaches that is highly recommended to be implemented throughout the classrooms. Hill (2019) stressed the important function of play through social interaction and language expression. During children's exploration of the world, they learn to communicate and express naturally. In contrast, Piaget (Smith 2020) asserted that children construct knowledge through interaction with others and by acting on their environment. Taylor and Boyer (2020) highlights the relationship between play and cognitive development; whereby children could reach a higher level of cognitive developments through the process of assimilation of experience through play.

Young children cannot be separated from play. Also, every child has the right to engage in play (Gray 2019). More importantly, play is an essential part of a child's development and it is critical for a child to reach their full potential (Ginsburg, 2019). As highlighted by NAEYC (2019), play is an important factor in helping the holistic development of children. Play contributes to the aspects of cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children (Pyle and Bigelow 2020). However, to elicit social development in children, it can occur when children explore their environment with their peers or adults through social interactions (Dzainudin, 2018). This can be done through play, where the adults will have ample opportunities to participate in their children's activities (Allee-Herndern & Roobert, 2020). The process of teaching and learning using play-based activities is a structured approach that provides students with the opportunity to learn in a meaningful and positive way (Loy, 2019). Children will develop cooperative skills and display appropriate social behaviour. The social competence of children will increase as children learn to control themselves, overcoming stress, and talk about emotions (Daubert, 2018). Children will display various positive emotions such as joy and happiness. This will lead them building their own experiences through exploration and discovery.

Preschoolers

Preschooler is the age within which a child is undergoing preparatory educational formation prior to entering formal education system. Preschooler is described by Alfieri (2018) as a pre-learning school age of a child which runs from the age before the formal enrolment in the educational system. Similarly, Bahlmann, Bollinger and Myers (2019) explained that preschool is a stage in child development when learning attitude is yet to set in. This stage is a play age that requires a play-like learning method to enhance comprehension of ideas. The age in which a child is formally enrolled into educational learning system is outside the preschool age. The author asserted that preschooler still lack the coordination to take learning serious and thus, should not be encourage to enroll into organized learning process. Rebecca (2021) asserted that a child of 3 or 4 is considered a preschooler. So, whether or not your child is attending a formal preschool program, he is no longer a toddler. Preschoolers are different from toddlers in that they are developing the basic life skills, independence, and knowledge that they will need as they enter their school years.

Furthermore, preschoolers are children between the age of 0-5years in a learning environment that caters for them. Similarly, Grammatikopoulos, Gregoriadis and Zachopoulou, (2019) observed that preschooler means a child between 36 months of age and the age the child will be when he or she initially enters a public or private school system. That is to say that the age of preschooler is a factor in which the child could be place here or there in the learning environment. Contextually, preschoolers are children below the age of 5 who are gradually being exposed to formal learning activities in an educational environment called preschool.

A preschooler has not yet reached the age of primary school hence they are unique and innocent in their thinking, they are happy, friendly, hilarious and always curious about life. They have various needs ranging from satisfaction of hunger, social needs, safety needs and so on. They have certain characteristics such as intellectual, explorative, social, emotional and spiritual. Intellectually, preschoolers want to discover things within their immediate environment (Nilsson, Ferholt & Lecusay, 2018). They perceive every object as it is and observe it keenly to notice its dimensions and taste. This aspect is the explorative nature of preschoolers. Socially, preschoolers want to love and be loved in return. They want to interact with people in their environment, people who play one significant role or the other in their lives. Emotionally preschoolers are very sensitive to pleasure and pain. Anything which elicited pleasure attracts their attention, like the noise of a rattling object or sound of music. When they

are uncomfortable they cry for help to be relieved of their discomfort. Spiritually, preschoolers have growing sense of that God is very special and real rather than pretense, tend to have very literal concept of God, perhaps as a grandfather figure who lives “up there” they also readily accept what you say about God (Wall et al, 2018).

Preschoolers learn faster because of undistracted nature of their life. In the view of Swartout-Corberil (2019) preschoolers are enrolled in early childhood programme which children combine learning with play in a program run by professionally trained adults. Preschool and preschooler are interrelated in the sense that when one talked about preschooler, preschool would likely come into place because preschooler are trained in the preschool, therefore, the two concepts was discussed concurrently. Suffice it to say that children are most commonly enrolled in preschool between the age of three and five, though those as young as two can attend some schools. Preschooler and preschool are two concepts that looked at preschool age and school for such age. Preschoolers are given a foundation in education that helps to shape and improve their lives, their potentialities and personalities towards self-actualization, training and modeling and it also focuses on children’s learning through play. Hill (2019) observed that in recent studies on infant brain development, most people’s neurons are formed from ages 0 to 8. The author further stated that if a child fails to receive sufficient nurturing and skill during this formation stage, it will affect its performance in the advanced years. Therefore, preschooler learns very fast in this young age, and play-base method have been advocated as learning techniques that enhance their fast-learning process.

Play-Based Learning

Play is a fundamental aspect of early childhood development, and the play method for preschoolers involves using play-based activities and experiences as a primary means of learning and development. Play allows preschoolers to explore, interact, experiment, and make sense of the world around them in a fun and engaging way. The play method recognizes that children learn best through active, hands-on experiences that are meaningful and relevant to their interests and abilities (Lay, 2019). The play method for preschoolers supports holistic development by addressing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects of learning. Through play, children develop critical skills such as problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, and self-regulation. Play-based learning also enhances motivation, engagement, and intrinsic curiosity, setting a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development. Preschool educators and caregivers play a crucial role in creating an environment that supports and promotes play-based learning, providing children with opportunities for open-ended play, structured play, and guided play experiences that support their individual needs and interests.

Play methods play a crucial role in the development and learning of preschoolers. According to Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2023), play is the essential mechanism for the development of the brain in early childhood. Play allows preschoolers to explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them in a safe and engaging way. It provides opportunities for children to develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills in a holistic and integrated manner. One important aspect of play methods for preschoolers is the promotion of creativity and imagination. Through various types of play, such as pretend play and constructive play, children can unleash their creativity, problem-solving skills, and innovative thinking. As children engage in imaginative scenarios and role-playing activities, they develop their narrative skills, language abilities, and self-expression. Furthermore, play methods support the development of social and emotional skills in preschoolers (Smith, 2021). Through play, children learn important social skills such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution. Play-based activities provide opportunities for children to practice social

interactions, share experiences, negotiate roles, and collaborate with peers, fostering their emotional intelligence and social competence. Cognitive development is also enhanced through play methods for preschoolers. As children engage in various play activities, they are actively building their cognitive skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, memory, and decision-making. Play-based learning promotes curiosity, experimentation, and discovery, encouraging children to explore and make connections between concepts and ideas. Finally, play methods are essential for supporting physical development and motor skills in preschoolers. Physical play, such as running, jumping, climbing, and manipulating objects, helps children develop their gross and fine motor skills, balance, coordination, and spatial awareness. These physical activities not only promote healthy growth and development but also contribute to children's overall well-being and self-confidence (Casteno 2018).

There are many ways teachers can connect play and learning in their classrooms. Nilsson et al. (2018) observed three preschool classrooms on the relationship between play and learning in the classrooms. The research took place over several months. The intervention being tested was play and exploration in the classroom. The findings of this study show the connection between play, exploration, and learning. The authors of this study suggest that young children's play opportunities should be engaging, challenging, and supported by adults in the classroom to add ideas and continue the exploration within the classroom (Nilsson et al., 2018). Nilsson et al. (2018) share that learning is a fundamental part of play and exploration.

The Benefits of Play-Based Learning

Research revealed that play benefits students' growth and development in areas of social skills, emotional skills, cognitive skills, language skills, and physical skills (Pyle et al., 2020). Veiga et al., (2019) tested 78 children ages four to six years on their social and emotional functions through free play. The findings disclosed that when students do not have opportunities to play, there is a greater chance for more negative behaviors (Kirk and Maccallum, 2019). Darling, (2019) shared that young children learn best by exploring, using their imagination, and doing. Young children learn through play (Chaeng et al. 2018). Parents can also help their children develop social and emotional skills through play. In a similar study by Keung and Cheung (2019), 29 principals and teachers and 50 kindergarten students were interviewed on their perspectives of play-based learning and how it affected whole child development. The research was both qualitative and quantitative over the span of two years. The findings affirmed that when parents were involved in the play-based learning activities, young children were more effectively developing skills (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Keung and Cheung (2019) also found that play-based learning is developmentally appropriate for young children when teachers incorporate students' interests, including activities that allow the children to problem solve and explore. For overall development in each domain (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and cognitive), children need to play (Petrie & Clarkin-Phillips, 2018).

Play-based learning also leads to academic benefits. In a study by Bahlmann et al. (2019), early childhood teachers were interviewed and observed on the process of integrating early writing opportunities into play. The teachers created engaging learning centers for their preschool classrooms. The learning centers were based on students' interests and enabled students to grow academically. Findings from the study reported that teachers need to purposefully implement developmentally appropriate materials into every center to attract students' interests and engagement. The findings also showed that teachers should embed opportunities for students to write in every center, rather than having one designed writing center. Bahlmann et al., (2019) explained that a child's motivation to learn comes from adult support and quality materials with which to learn and play. Play is an important piece of child development (Pyle et al., 2020). When young children are given the opportunities to play,

learning and development takes place. Play-based learning has many benefits towards students' development when it is intentionally integrated into a classroom environment. When early childhood educators maximize students' interests and engaging materials that offer exploration and inquiry, children will gain skills over time (Sumsion, 2019).

Types of Play in Children's Social Development

There are different types of play that preschoolers engage in according to Kirk and MacCallum, (2021) they include:

Symbolic Play: Also known as pretend play or imaginative play, symbolic play involves preschoolers using objects, actions, or ideas to represent other objects, actions, or ideas. In symbolic play, children engage in role-playing, create imaginary scenarios, and explore different roles and identities. This type of play allows preschoolers to express their creativity, develop language skills, and practice social interactions.

Constructive Play: Constructive play involves preschoolers using materials such as building blocks, Legos, clay, puzzles, or art supplies to build or create something. This type of play promotes problem-solving skills, spatial reasoning, creativity, and fine motor skills. Through constructive play, children learn how to manipulate objects, experiment with design and structure, and develop their cognitive abilities.

Sensory Play: Sensory play engages preschoolers' senses, such as touch, smell, taste, sight, and sound, through activities that involve different textures, materials, and sensory experiences. Examples of sensory play include playing with sand or water, exploring sensory bins filled with various materials, or engaging in messy play activities like finger painting. Sensory play helps children develop sensory processing skills, promote exploration and discovery, and support cognitive and emotional development.

Physical Play: Physical play involves preschoolers engaging in movement, exercise, and physical activities that promote gross motor skills and overall physical development. Physical play includes activities such as running, jumping, climbing, crawling, balancing, and playing sports. Through physical play, children build strength, coordination, balance, and spatial awareness, while also promoting physical fitness and well-being.

Dramatic Play: Dramatic play involves preschoolers engaging in pretend scenarios, role-playing, and acting out imagined situations or real-life experiences. This type of play allows children to explore social roles, practice communication and language skills, and develop emotional intelligence. Dramatic play encourages creativity, imagination, empathy, and social interaction, as children collaborate with peers to create and act out stories and scenes.

Exploratory Play: Exploratory play focuses on exploring objects, materials, or environments without a specific goal in mind. It encourages curiosity, discovery, experimentation, and sensory exploration in young children.

Social Play: Social play involves interactions with peers, such as sharing, taking turns, and cooperating in group activities. It helps children develop social skills, communication, empathy, and conflict resolution abilities.

Language Play: Language play includes activities that promote language development, such as storytelling, rhyming games, or wordplay. It enhances vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, and literacy skills in preschoolers.

Cooperative Play: Cooperative play involves collaborative activities where children work together towards a common goal. It fosters teamwork, problem-solving, negotiation, and cooperation skills among preschoolers.

Expressive Arts Play: Expressive arts play encompasses activities like drawing, painting, singing, and dancing. It allows children to express themselves creatively, develop fine motor skills, and explore different art forms. By engaging in these various types of play methods, preschoolers can develop a wide range of skills, including cognitive, social,

emotional, and physical abilities, in a fun and interactive way that supports their overall growth and development.

Implications of Play methods on the Social Development of Children

According to Whitman (2018), in a social context, play is important. The reason being is that at this stage, children will begin to develop relationships, build trust and establish long-term bonds. Play will enhance the imagination by allowing children to be creative and engage in pretend play. It also improves communication skills for children and develops language skills while playing. Through the writings of Zhao (2021), children will interact with others during playing to build up relationships. Therefore, pro-social behaviour is required during play as it allows children to recognize other people's emotions and enhance their ability to see perspectives. Denham also implied that emotional awareness of others teaches children to empathise with others. Such a perspective that is built at a young age is important whereby it helps children to be less egocentric (Taylor & Bayer 2020). When children exhibit pro-social behaviours, they are also learning to think about others as well. The caregiver or guardian is the "first teacher" of the child and is a primary proponent for a child's learning experience. Therefore, caregivers play an important role in creating a learning space through play. Also, it is important to support the caregivers and empower them to take an active role in shaping the children's education and development, as well as to facilitate fun learning for children at home and in the community in their everyday experiences (UNICEF, 2018).

Proper preschool education can help children in the formation and development of attitudes, intellectual, physical and motor skills, social, moral, and creativity required by a child before moving on to the next stage of development. One of the aspects that starts to grow at this age is the social aspect of children (Dewi et al., 2019; Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). Children who have a good grasp on their social skills will find that they are able to adapt easier, to enjoy their childhood and later on, be adaptable in various situations as adults (Dewi et al., 2019). Inviting the families and community members into the preschool environment to interact with young children and experience the process of learning directly would help demonstrate the benefits of play to the adults. Directly experiencing active learning can help in convincing the family that the experience of play can build critical skills that cannot be learned through a traditional learning environment (UNICEF, 2018). Society also plays an important role in establishing young children's relationships with the real world. Communities can provide additional resources and services to help enhance learning through play. It is therefore important to identify and integrate community resources into learning. Examples include community centres, libraries, museums, and playgrounds to enrich play-based learning.

Games or play activities are an important stimulus for children. Aspects of children's development can be nurtured optimally and maximised through play activities (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). Play greatly influences a young child's social, behavioural, cognitive and language development. It is something universal and critical to healthy social development. As fewer opportunities are presented for children to play, a variety of social problems arise (Daubert et al., 2018). In the context of social development, play provides an opportunity for children to learn to connect or interact with others. Play can enhance the exploration of an environment and provide a safe space for children to try something new (Wall, Litjan & Taguman 2019). Through play, children will learn to work together and strive to demonstrate good behaviour (Daubert et al., 2018). Playing is also a form of therapy for children, especially for the younger ones who are not able to express themselves properly through words. It has become a form of expression that children use to express themselves (Irvin, 2017). For example, playing in the backyard can foster a sense of cohesion as well as develop social skills (Abdullah, 2018).

Play and play-based learning is important for children's social development. Children who play are better at being able to control themselves, be more cooperative, considerate, friendly and are with higher social competence. They also exhibit good social behaviour, adaptable and are more likely to interact with peers. However, it is being said that children are missing out on opportunities to play due to the pressure that is on them to focus on their academic pursuits and are also more likely to play video games instead (Daubert et al., 2018; Irvin, 2019).

Play-based learning often takes place in a state of an active relationship and interaction between children and their peers or their environment (Daubert et al., 2018). One of the most popular types of play to help with children's social development is free play and role-playing. It is one of the solutions to address children's social and emotional development problems by adopting a learning approach that is appropriate to the child's need and age (Dewi et al., 2017). According to Pyle (2018), free play is very beneficial to the development of social competence and a child's self-control. For example, in role-playing, which is a form of free play, children will have the opportunity to resolve problems in a conflict, suppress impulsive behaviour, express emotions, adhere to social rules and support the emotional needs of others.

The results of previous studies have also shown that role-playing affects developing early socio-emotional skills for young children (Holis, 2019). Experiences that provide space and exploratory opportunities are the essence of early childhood learning. In these situations, children are able to generate strong imagination and fantasy thus making an impact. This shows that role-playing is not a form of meaningless simulation, it has the capability of bringing children to explore both the actual and the factual (Holis, 2019).

Another approach that has been used to help in the development of children's social aspect is the stimulation through games using puzzles. Researchers have studied the impact of the use of puzzles on the social development and the autonomy of preschool children (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). The results show that puzzles have a significant impact on children's social development (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). The game trains children to develop a cooperative attitude, patiently waiting for their turn and being able to control themselves well. Children will not only enjoy the play-based activities through learning, they also develop physically, mentally and emotionally (Nachiappan et al., 2019).

Challenges of play methods for preschoolers

Implementing play methods for preschoolers can come with its challenges, despite the many benefits it offers. Some of the challenges associated with play methods for preschoolers include constraints on time and resources, misconceptions about the value of play, and difficulties in assessing play-based learning outcomes. One of the key challenges in implementing play methods for preschoolers is the pressure to cover a broad curriculum and meet academic standards within a limited timeframe (Smith, 2020). In many early childhood education settings, there may be a focus on academic achievement and standardized testing, leading to a reduced emphasis on play-based learning. As noted by Pellegrini and Holmes (2019), the current educational climate has emphasized early academic achievement, often to the detriment of play in early childhood programs. This can create barriers to incorporating play methods effectively in preschool settings. Another challenge is the misconception that play is not a valuable or serious form of learning. Some educators, policymakers, and parents may not fully understand the importance and benefits of play in early childhood development. As a result, play-based activities may be seen as frivolous or unproductive, leading to a lack of support for play methods in preschool programs. Assessing and measuring the outcomes of play-based learning can also present challenges for educators. Unlike traditional forms of assessment that focus on standardized tests and academic benchmarks, evaluating the

effectiveness of play methods requires a more nuanced and holistic approach. As Castano (2018) pointed out, measuring play is perhaps the hardest of all pedagogical tasks. Finding appropriate assessment tools and methods to capture the diverse learning outcomes of play can be complex and time-consuming. In conclusion, while play methods have numerous benefits for preschoolers, challenges such as time constraints, misconceptions about play, and difficulties in assessment can hinder their effective implementation in early childhood education (Burke & Williams 2021). Addressing these challenges requires raising awareness about the value of play, advocating for play-based approaches, and finding creative solutions to integrate play methods into preschool curricula.

Conclusion

In conclusion, adults such as parents and society need to value the concept of play in early childhood education and its importance to children's social development. Child development depends on the adults who help bring up the child whether it is at home or the school. The home and community environment is where children spend most of their time, interacting with parents, siblings, family members, and neighbours. These interactions and relationships have a significant impact on how children understand and experience the world around them. The home and community environment also provide an excellent opportunity to promote learning through play for preschool and elementary school children (UNICEF, 2018).

Recommendations

The following recommendation was identified at the end of the study.

1. Teachers and caregivers should provide play time in their timetable and guide the preschoolers in the choice of play they take part.
2. There is a need to integrate playing techniques in every subject taught to preschoolers.
3. Teachers and caregivers should always guide the children in the learning process through playing methods.

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