TEACHING AND LEARNING AMONG PRE-SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

From the time of their appearance, human beings have put in their full effort in the attempt to learn how to survive in this world. People then started living together in groups so that they could learn from each other and share a common pool of knowledge. Eventually, after a period of evolution, the behaviour of human beings came to be highly influenced and shaped by social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions. However, as these factors do not have the same effect on all persons they tend to mould them into distinct individuals, each with his/ her unique traits. The challenges faced, the tactics devised to handle those challenges and the previously learnt lessons from one's own and other people's experiences contribute to the personality development of every individual. This process starts from a very early age, even as a child starts to attend pre-school. At this stage, the child begins to understand its own wishes and desires and further, the direct immersion in that environment will help to develop its creative skills. While at pre-school, the child will start to think and understand about himself/ herself. It was in this regard the study was conducted, to learn about and analyse the learning and teaching activities taking place in the pre-schools that are not specifically institutionalized and supervised. This study was conducted in Digana in Kandy district in three selected pre-schools. A questionnaire, key-informant interviews and direct observation were used to collect primary data from teachers, students, and parents about the teaching and learning environment, processes and related activities. Relevant books, research articles, reliable web sources, newspaper articles and educational records were used as secondary data sources for this research. The primary data collected for this research were analysed using the descriptive analysis method and critical analysis method.

Keywords: Cognitive Development, Environment, Intelligence, Pre-school

I. Introduction

This research focused on how the Learning–Teaching environment influences childhood activities and behaviour. Heredity and environment are the main factors influencing child development. Ancestral factors determine a child's features, attitudes and structures while environmental factors influence a child's behaviour and activities. These factors together play a major role in the process of human development. Overall, human

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development is the result of physical development, cognitive development, mental health development, social development and spiritual development. Mostly, a child's home environment plays a major role in human development. In the modern world, children have to deal with environmental changes long before their physical development is complete.

Child education in different countries follows different forms. This education system centred on early childhood is known as pre-school, kindergarten, Montessori and nursery school. According to a Spanish report, the early childhood education system was started in Europe somewhere around 1677 (Palacios, 1989). The practice of early childhood education began in France, Italy and Hungary in the 1800s (Le Normand, 1992; Pistillo, 1989; Vari, 1989). Early childhood education was started in the middle of the 1800s in many North and South African countries while it started in the early 1900s in some other African countries (Onibokun, 1989; Riak *et al.,* 1989). Pre-school education was started in many Asian Countries too. In the case of Sri Lanka, which was known as Ceylon, this happened even while it was a British colony in the 19th century. However, the importance of pre-school education was really felt in the late 20th century in Sri Lanka. However, there are no sources like newspapers, magazines or other documents to obtain historic information about pre-schools and their services in Sri Lanka during the early period.

According to an essay written by Douglas M. King on "Pre-School Montessori Education in Sri Lanka: An Overview" published in The Island Internet Edition, an estimated 80% of children between the ages of 2 and 5 years currently attend some form of pre-school or day care centre; the total numbers over 500,000 children. Most of these schools and centres are run privately. There appear to be no organizations, databases or research studies in Sri Lanka that have surveyed and recorded information about these schools. All of the research conducted by this study in the field has only returned negative results. Pre-schools can be set up by anyone, anywhere and anyhow and for the most part, they are neither regulated nor inspected to ascertain standards or quality. There are no organisations or supervisory board to monitor these pre-schools. There are about 25,000 pre-schools scattered island wide and most of the 40,000 teachers attached to them do not possess the required qualification for this work (Douglas M. King, The Island).

In Sri Lanka, importance is only given to higher education and advanced technical education, as these can enhance the earning potential of students. Parents give priority to and target only the university entrance and competitive education programmes rather than pay any attention to their children's primary education. There is not much focus on the primary school education programme, which is also curriculum oriented. It is vital to understand the difference between providing an education that is designed to facilitate the students and providing an education that allows them to learn what they really wish to learn. When a student begins to pursue higher education, he has to rely partly on the grounding provided by his/ her pre-school education.

Research Problem

A child is admitted to pre-school at the age when its understanding is beginning to dawn. The child then begins to interact with the environment around itself. Therefore, pre-school is the place where a child begins to

recognize who he/ she is. In this respect, this research mainly focuses on whether the teaching activities and the environment of the school contribute to the development of skills and personality of the child.

Research Objective

The need for more research on educational psychology is now being realized as essential to assist children to attain social development in a sustainable way through education. Adequate research studies on pre-schools have not been carried out in Sri Lanka to date. There is also no documentation on the statistics, such as the number of teachers in pre-schools and their qualifications. It is important to recognize that a child attending pre-school is subject to a personality change as this is the formative age for personality development. The objective of this research is to identify and analyse the learning and teaching activities taking place in the pre-schools that are not specifically institutionalized and supervised.

II. Methodology

This research is based on primary and secondary data. The data was collected from three different pre-schools, located in Digana, Kandy. Primary data were collected by observing their teaching-learning methods, holding discussions with teachers and students, and distributing questionnaires to the parents. Secondary data were obtained from relevant books, research articles, reliable web sources and newspaper reports covering the research topic.

Child Development Theories

Developmental psychology is a psychology discipline based on theoretical analysis using psychology. It focuses on the growth and development aspects of humans. Developmental psychology explores the physiological, psychological, and behavioural changes that determine the developmental aspects of a human throughout his life from birth to old age. Psychology is viewed and divided into phases as child psychology, adolescent psychology and adult psychology. Developmental Psychology discusses the theories, principles, observations and methods of human development in a detailed manner.

Child psychology provides a detailed description of developmental changes that occur from conception to the attainment of puberty. Several theories about child development have been proposed by psychologists. Of these, the concepts of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and Erik Erikson (1902-1994) are considered very important. These scholars have examined in detail the various developmental changes that usually occur at the ages of 2 to 5 years, which is the time that a child attends pre-school.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), a doctor practicing in Vienna described the stages of psychosexual development. He said that unconscious experience is often more powerful than conscious experience and could profoundly influence human behaviour. He claimed that childhood experiences moulded people's personality and the behavioural problems they exhibited in adult life often stemmed from childhood experiences. According to his statement, childhood experiences played the strongest part in adult personality development.

He mainly focused on sexual aspects in his psychoanalysis. Freud stated that even a child has sexual feelings. He proved that a child has stronger and more independent sexual feelings than an adult. This is his basic concept of psychoanalytic theory, wherein he explained the working of the human mind dialectically, stating it was strongly influenced by the child's sexual attitude and behaviour.

In this context, Freud divided a child's psychosexual stages of development as follows:

1.   Oral Stage   0 - 2 years
2.   Anal Stage   2 - 3 years
3.   Phallic Stage   3 - 5 years
4.   Latency Period   5 -11 years
5.   Genital Stage   11-16 years

According to his observation, a child moves to a situation different from the family environment around the age of 5 years or so. After that, the child begins to socialize with the community, abandoning its sexual instincts. According to his statement, a child's skills development is stronger in the age range from 3 to 5 than in the previous stages. At this stage, a child gets to know and understand about himself/ herself. A child then gets the desire to emulate the activities of his/ her parents. It is at this stage they get to know their own sexual identity based on their father's and mother's behavioural patterns.

According to Freud, a child meets strange people when it enters a new environment that is different from home at around the age of three. The child then goes through a stage of psychological and social development in the different environment. In this case, the perception of the child regarding himself/ herself could change due to forming new relationships with peer group children and the teachers. Therefore, the child's cognition, ability and recognition could change from what it was previously, as Sigmund Freud had noted in his statement.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) is known as an important contributor to Developmental Psychology. He was the first person to start the study field that is devoted to understanding children in a formal way. Piaget was interested in the mental development of children, and recognized that self-improvement occurred during the process of constructing and reconstructing while the child was growing. Through this, he presented his psychological perspective regarding cognitive development. He emphasised that intelligence is not a fixed trait and that it improves as cognitive development continues due to biological maturation and new environmental stimuli.

Piaget provided explanations on basic concepts relating to number, time, quantity, causality, and justice after studying how children count, spell and solve problems. Piaget, who conducted several researches on cognitive abilities, formed theories on children's cognitive development, and gave explanations about their cognitive learning stages.

Piaget divided child development into 4 stages, based on cognitive development.

1. Sensorimotor Stage   0-2 years

2. Pre-operational Stage   2-7 years

3. Concrete operational Stage   7-11 years

4. Formal operational Stage   11 - Adulthood   (McLeod, 2018)

Biological maturity and environmental interaction influence a child's mental growth at every stage. He called the ages from 2 to 7 as the pre-operational stage. According to Piaget, children understand the world by touching, seeing, listening and feeling before the age of 2 through sensations. Children acquire several behaviours from the age of 2 to 4. They do not take any notice of the differences between their own behaviour and that of others. They imitate others while attempting to do things. Piaget said that at this age children could not think logically. Cognitive development really started at the age of 4. Children began to think of the reasons for their actions from the ages of 4 to 7. They would do things only after understanding the differences between their intended actions and other people's actions.

Children prepare themselves for Concrete operational Stage through logical thinking and lived experience. In the Pre-operational Stage, they prepare themselves through the Adaptation process. At the end of this stage, children can mentally picture events and objects and engage in symbolic play (McLeod, 2018).

Erik Erikson (1902-1994) explains a child's development by dividing it into eight stages. They are known as Psychosocial Development Stages. The theory of Erikson points out that the personality and development of a child at each stage is reflected by how the child faces the challenges at that stage. He went on to describe how successful developmental changes occur from the time of an individual's infancy to his/ her adulthood.

Every individual comes into existence through birth, but his character is determined by environmental, social and cultural influences. Erikson described his ideas about the eight stages of psychosocial development and how the challenges faced by the individual determined his/ her character. He also explained how the way of facing challenges at one stage would influence the individual's position in the other stage. People learn about how to overcome the challenges and soon realize how important it is to reach the following stages, as this has a bearing on their future. The stages are listed below.

1.   Infancy   -   0-2 years
2.   Early childhood   -   2-4 years
3.   Pre-school   -   4-5 years
4.   School age   -   5-12 years
5.   Adolescence   -   13-19 years
6.   Young adulthood   -   20-40 years
7.   Middle adulthood -   40-64 years
8.   Old Age   -   65 years

The motor abilities are developed in a child at the age of 2-4 years. During this period, child begins to explore its surroundings. Whilst the parents make every effort to ensure the child's security, the child attempts to explore the world on its own according to its wishes. The guidance and encouragement of parents play a major role

in determining the freedom and success of the child. Erikson emphasised that children at this stage try to explore and understand their surroundings, and that parents must be aware of their activities, because children may attempt to explore things that could be dangerous to their safety.

It is during this period that the child develops its early interests. Music loving child plays the radio, TV, etc. and listens to music, while some children love the outdoors and spend time with nature. It is the responsibility of parents to recognize the child's interests and encourage it to develop it further. On the other hand, when children's thoughts and desires are controlled, they view the world with suspicion and hesitate to take on the challenges of the world. Children in the 4-5 age group tend to move freely with more independent planning on their own. Furthermore, they are curious about the world around them and have a desire to acquire the basic skills. They are also goal oriented during this phase but become confused when handling unfamiliar situations. They also feel guilty at times if their goals are not achieved.

The children are provided with opportunities to work with peers at school. Therefore, they become confident enough by enjoying this freedom. In the same way, facing any guilty feelings is a big challenge during this period. However, the children face challenges more courageously and develop decision-making skills at this age. Because of the self-acquired skills and self-made decisions, the children manage to develop leadership qualities. Accordingly, the children begin to practice new things. They try to cross the road without any help. They move about freely on their own. However, they should be guided carefully and warned about their limitations.

The children may exhibit negative emotions while going forward. They also feel disappointed when their goals are not attained. They become frustrated too. This can result in unruly and uncontrollable behaviour. For instance, they may throw things about, start screaming and fight with the other children. Therefore, the children should be guided correctly and advised by their parents and pre-school teachers whenever the children engage in self-improvement activities. Thereafter, the children should be able to make the appropriate decisions freely. Erik Erikson explains that controlling the children too strictly and discouraging them from engaging in independent behaviour may create guilty feelings within them.

Sampling

Three pre-schools in Digana area in Kandy district were selected for this research. Although seven pre-schools were operating in Digana, only three were selected on convenience sample basis.

Table 01 : Details of pre-school

No.	Name of the pre-school	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
01	Be Friend Better Future Pre-school	35	02
02	Little Minds Pre-school	50	05

| 03 | Hilal Islamic Pre-school | 16 | 01 |

Source : Survey Data, 2020

Seven teachers were attached to the three pre-schools selected for the research. All the teachers were interviewed individually and students were questioned in groups, in addition to making general observations. All the teachers had passed the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination and one of them even possessed experience of teaching in a foreign country. The teacher at the Little Minds Pre-school was the only one who had completed a course in pre-school teaching. All three pre-schools had been established entirely on the initiative of their owners/administrators. Altogether one hundred and one students were attending the three pre-schools. Ten parents were selected using simple probability sampling method in the ratio of 10:1 (students to parents). They were given questionnaires, which they had to complete and return; in this manner, the data were collected.

III. Results and Discussion

The structure of the classroom

The first pre-school classroom was a closed environment. It had doors to prevent the children from moving out. This created a dim and dark environment in the classroom. The layout of the classroom and the arrangement of chairs were the same every day. The students sat on the chairs in the same positions every day. The classroom walls were decorated with artwork and other colourful materials. There were no special arrangements for the children to play.

There were 50 students in the second pre-school but the classroom was small and narrow. The seating for the students was arranged in groups, with 10 students in each group seated around a circular table. The doors of the classroom were kept open. No facilities were found for the children to play in the second pre-school that was surveyed. The third pre-school was open and well ventilated. The environment was calm and relaxing. There were no facilities for the children to play but the place was spacious.

Activities of the Children

In the first pre-school, "Befriend Better Future Pre-school", the closed classroom contained separate furniture units for each student. As the children were constantly trying to run out of the classroom the door was always kept shut. The students were still moving and walking around inside the closed classroom. They sit in their places when the teacher is kind to them, but soon rise from their seats and start to play again. Students did not like being in the classroom under the control of a teacher. All were engaged in some activity they found interesting.

It was observed that when the students were asked to draw a picture, all of the students tried to colour it as they wished regardless of the guidance of the teacher. The classroom was quite silent when the children were drawing and colouring. While the students were posed a question on their favourite colour, many answers came

from them. Some repeated the name of the same colour as others. This was how they tried to respond to the question. It was understandable that there was no need for each of them to have a favourite colour.

When the students were questioned about their choices for being inside the classroom or outside, most of the students expressed a desire to stay outside. When the students were again asked whether they feared or loved their teacher, most of the responses reflected fear of the teacher.

When considering the second pre-school, "Little Minds Pre-school", the students alike wished to go out of the classroom rather than remain inside the classroom. They kept playing even while they were inside the classroom. They were playing either individually or in groups with their learning aids. When a student wanted to move out of the classroom for a particular reason, all the others tried to follow citing the same reason. If the teacher happened to be very strict, the students did not attempt to leave the classroom without permission even when the doors were open. Though the students responded with different answers when asked about their favourite colour, each of them listed two or more colours. As in the previous pre-school, the students preferred to stay outside of the classroom. When they were questioned about their fear for the teacher, all of them responded with a 'yes'.

The third pre-school, Hilal Islamic pre-school was in an open space and the students were on their own. Most of the students expressed the view that they liked to attend the pre-school. The teacher simply kept an eye on the activities of the children and mostly allowed them to learn or play independently.

### The views and activities of the teacher

All teachers of the three pre-schools stated that the students were attending willingly and studying. It was mentioned by the first pre-school teacher that the students could be persuaded and controlled better by small gifts rather than advice. She further expressed the idea that it was a teacher centred school and the students should be guided by the teachers rather than left to pursue self-learning. At the same time, they could learn from the materials displayed in the classroom. The teacher continued by saying that the students were actually learning and there were positive behavioural changes each day (Interview 1).

The teacher of the second pre-school commented that she does not agree with the view of the government that pre-school students should not be given homework and written exercises. She added that the subjects are in accordance with the syllabus drawn up by them and mentioned that she does not use a cane to punish the children (Interview 2). However, it was noticed that she did show the cane to control the students.

According to the third pre-school teacher, most of the students like to come to school. As they get used to class their attendance improves. However, some students prefer to have their mothers standing nearby to provide moral support. Majority of the students perform their activities as guided by the teacher. She further emphasised that the teachers should be appointed according to the number of students in a class; for instance, there should be a teacher for every 15 students (Interview 3).
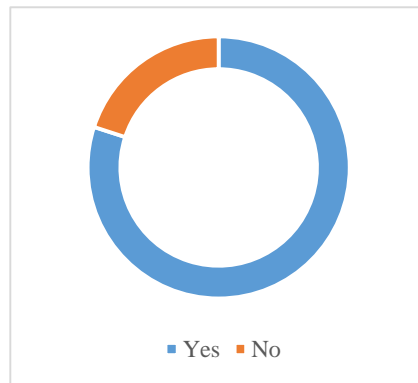
The Views of the Parents

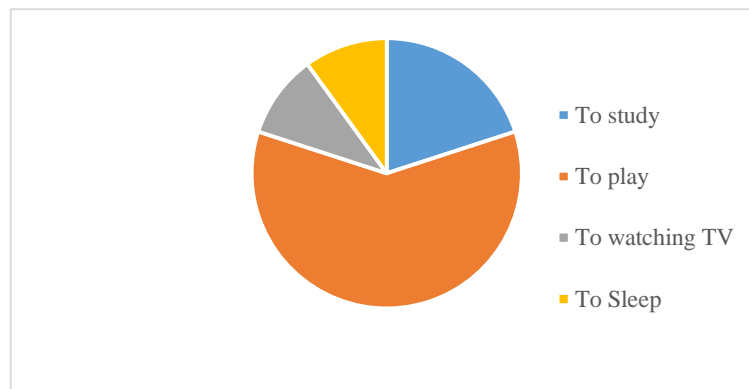**Figure 01 : The right age for a child to attend pre-school**
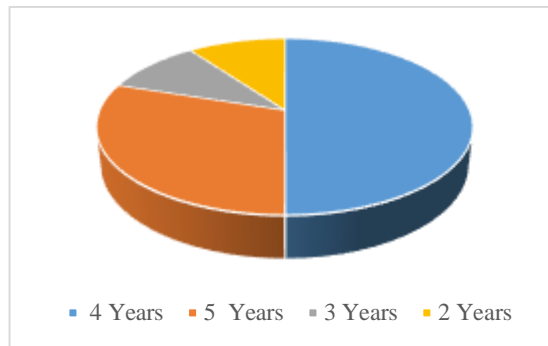
Source : Survey Data, 2020

Figure 02: Should provide more training in writing to pre-school children

Source : Survey Data, 2020

Figure 03: The preferences of children in pre-schools

Source : Survey Data, 2020

The desire of most parents is that their children should learn to write on their own and that homework be given to them to get practice. The parents of the children who are learning in the "Little Minds" pre-school say that just as with schools, the pre-schools should conduct Tamil, English and Sinhala days as well as other cultural days as this practice seems to improve the learning activities of the students.

The study critically outlines the following results based on the above data analysis.

1.   Children from the three observed pre-schools do not like to sit in one place for 5 hours. They like to play outdoors and engage in activities that make them happy instead of sitting in a closed classroom. Therefore, the education system of pre-schools that is based on the motto, "what we think must be done by children", has to be changed. Therefore, the pre-schools have to understand the children's desires; they must identify what the children love to do and give them the independence to pursue their preferred activities.

2.   It is observed that in the selected three pre-schools, the teachers after passing their G.C.E. Advance Level examination had started right away to teach in a pre-school, as they found it to be an easy way to get a job quickly. They did not follow any training course or take any guidance in pre-school teaching. Handling the children and putting all of them under a generalised routine is not an approved solution and it does not provide satisfactory results. Therefore, pre-school teachers' educational qualifications, their teaching methods, and their ways of handling the children should be scrutinised and supervised by professionals in the child education field. If necessary, suitable training should be provided.

3.   The surroundings of these pre-schools are often not suitable as learning environments for the children. The children are often taught in dark classrooms without proper ventilation. The doors of classrooms are closed sometimes, which is not recommended. There is often no suitable place for the children to play. This is a big shortcoming because the parents have indicated that the children are mainly interested in playing.

4.   In one pre-school, lessons that are based on a particular curriculum are written and taught to children. More written work is given. Children are assigned homework. This makes the children do only one thing. These kinds of activities cause the children suffering because they make the students think about the same things. This creates a stressful situation for the innocent children. In addition, when they study in this manner, they are pressurised to come first in class at a very young age. Further, the lesson based competitive methods create conflicts among the students, which promote a competitive mind set at a very early age. This is not good for the sound development of a child's mind and works against healthy and positive child development.

5.   Teachers and parents are seen to agree unanimously that students should be given more writing related tasks. This shows they believe that students can learn properly only through writing. Children in fact learn from every experience that they receive from the environment. There is a need to elucidate this matter to parents and teachers.

6.   A question frequently asked to understand the mind of children was, "What is your favourite colour?" Some children have given the answer clearly by writing it down or stating it loudly, some of them have mentioned a particular colour, some children did not reply, and some of them have listed more than one colour. If the question demands one particular type of answer, then the other answers become irrelevant to the question. For example, if children mentioned one favourite colour, then all other colours can be regarded as not their favourite colours. So, here the question is worded wrongly. Therefore, these types of pre-determined questions must not be asked of children.

IV. Conclusion

Nowadays, researches and studies on psychology of the child are very much in vogue in the world. This means, not only giving a better education to the children, but also to reform the education system and process to ensure that priority is given to the child's preferences, innate desires, and likes and dislikes as well. In the schools the students study according to the syllabus. However, the cognition and intelligence at the school going age have to be developed in step with the growth of children. Therefore, it is important to remember that the children who go to pre-school between 2 and 5 years of age are in the initial stage of developing their intelligence, cognition and creative skills. At this age, children are trying to learn independently. The environment in which the children find themselves is very crucial during the initial stage of learning. Childhood is the stage that encompasses the enthusiasm, interest and curiosity of the children, so they should be raised at this stage with certain controls and restrictions to keep them engaged mainly in useful activities. This will contribute to the child's cognitive ability and intelligence positively.

Psychiatrist Sigmund Freud emphasised that a person's behaviour is determined by his childhood experiences. The environment in which the child grows decides the child's experiences. At the age of 2 to 4 years, the child tries to understand its surroundings and keeps trying to learn from experiences. Erik Erikson pointed out that we have to provide them independence and encouragement at this stage. Therefore, it is a duty and responsibility of all parents and teachers to understand what their children are learning and how to teach them better by providing a favourable learning environment.

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