

# Preschool Teachers' Knowledge and Practice on Social-Emotional Learning

Conocimiento y práctica de los maestros de preescolar sobre el aprendizaje socioemocional

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## ABSTRACT

Fostering and nurturing young children with good social-emotional skills are vitally important. Previous studies indicated a positive correlation between young children's social-emotional skills and their future success. Hence, preschool teachers as children's first educator play an important role in fostering and nurturing positive social-emotional development in young children. It is pivotal to ensure preschool teachers have vast knowledge and skills on social-emotional learning, hence capable to promote social-emotional learning. As such, this research aims to examine preschool teachers' knowledge and practice regarding social-emotional learning. This is a quantitative study with a survey research design.

**Keywords:** Social-Emotional Learning, Teachers' Knowledge, Preschool, Teachers' Practice, Teachers' Skills.

## RESUMEN

Fomentar y cuidar a los niños pequeños con buenas habilidades socioemocionales es de vital importancia. Estudios anteriores indicaron una correlación positiva entre las habilidades socioemocionales de los niños pequeños y su éxito futuro. Por lo tanto, los maestros de preescolar como primer educador de los niños juegan un papel importante en el fomento y el desarrollo del desarrollo social y emocional positivo en los niños pequeños. Es fundamental asegurar que los maestros de preescolar tengan un vasto conocimiento y habilidades sobre el aprendizaje socioemocional, por lo tanto, capaces de promover el aprendizaje socioemocional. Como tal, esta investigación tiene como objetivo examinar el conocimiento y la práctica de los maestros de preescolar con respecto al aprendizaje socioemocional. Este es un estudio cuantitativo con una encuesta de diseño de investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje socioemocional, Conocimiento de los docentes, Preescolar, Práctica de los docentes, Habilidades de los docentes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional development refers to cooperative and prosocial behaviours, initiatives to start and maintain peer and adult relationships, abilities to deal with conflict and aggressive attitudes, and feelings of self-control and self-esteem. Studies indicated that social-emotional development begins from birth and strengthened by experience faced by children. A positive experience will strengthen and negative experience will weaken children's social-emotional competencies (Edwards, 2018; Tominey & Rivers 2012). Experience in this context linked to children's social environment like relationships and interactions with parents, families and community (Mohamed & Toran 2018).

Young children develop social-emotional skills by interacting with nurturing adults and competent peers (Rakap, Balikci, Kalkan, & Aydin, 2018). A social institution like a school plays an important role in nurturing and fostering social-emotional development in young children for the reason that they spent half a day in school daily. Studies showed that there is a significant correlation between early social-emotional formation with the success of a child's future life (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg & Gullotta, 2015; Rhaodes, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2010; Raver & Knitzer 2002).

Children with good social-emotional skills are normally able to identify their feelings, identify others' feelings, manage emotion, express their feeling through sensible behaviour, have empathy and know-how to maintain a relationship (Badilla, 2015; Dowling, 2014). They also know how to control their emotion, thinking, and action to avoid conflict. On the other hand, children who lack social emotional skills customarily have difficulties involving in any form of social interaction activities (Cooper, Masi, & Vick, 2009). A lack of social-emotional development will give an impact on other domains of development such as adaptive, cognitive and communication (Durlak et al., 2015).

Additionally, children with good social-emotional skills are found to be more ready to enter school compared to children with low social-emotional skills (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Children with low social-emotional skills tend to exhibit social issues and challenging behaviour at school and they are at risk to fail in academics (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2008). This issue is caused by ineffective emotional control. Ineffective emotional control causes children to have difficulties in adjusting themselves with peers, as well as finding it hard to follow school rules (Sutan et al., 2018). Therefore, children who enter school with low social-emotional skills are classified as at-risk children for school dropout (Zins et al., 2004).

Recognising the importance of early social-emotional competencies for children's future life, it is crucial to ensure that preschool teachers are knowledgeable and skilful to promote social-emotional development. Preschool teachers as the first educators in a child's life play a vital role in fostering and nurturing social-emotional development in young children. Teachers' beliefs and attitude are key indicators of their perceptions and judgements, which in turn, affect their teaching practices (Mohamed & Satari, 2019; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012). This is because positive experiences at an early age will help children to create and have a good foundation for social-emotional development.

National preschool curriculum in Malaysia includes learning objectives for children aged four to six years old in six development areas, namely; (1) communication; (2) spiritual, attitude and values; (3) self-esteem (social-emotional); (4) physical and aesthetics; (5) science and technology; and (6) humanity (Ministry of Education, 2017). Even though the national curriculum emphasises on social-emotional development area, not all preschool teachers are competent to implement it in classrooms (Mohamed et al., 2019). Literature shows preschool teachers in Malaysia are not ready to implement social-emotional learning in classrooms (Mohamed et al. 2019; Yunus & Mohamed, 2019; Nyawin & Majzub 2017).

Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate Malaysian preschool teachers' knowledge and practice of social-emotional learning. This study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What is the level of Malaysian preschool teachers' knowledge regarding social-emotional development?; (2) What is the level of Malaysian preschool teachers' practice of social-emotional learning in their classrooms?; and (3) Is there a relationship between the level of preschool teachers' knowledge and practice?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a survey research design with a quantitative approach. Participants were 332 preschool teachers who are working in government preschools and private preschools. Based on the descriptive analysis, 16.8% of the respondents are currently working in publicly funded preschools and 83.1% of the respondents are working in private preschools. Approximately, 35.1% of the respondents possess degree level, 34.5% have diploma, 22.4% of the respondents have Malaysian Certificate of Education and 8.0% hold Malaysian Higher School Certificate. Regarding the teaching experience, 54.3% of the respondents have less than two years' teaching experience, 22.4% have 3 to 5 years' teaching experience, 12.1% of the respondents have more than 10 years of teaching experience and 11.2% have 6 to 10 years' teaching experience. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics of the respondents' demographic information.

**Table 1 Demographic Information**

Category	n (%)
Types of preschools	
Publicly funded	56 (16.8)
Private	276 (83.1)
Levels of education	
Malaysian Certificate of Education	70 (22.4)
Malaysian Higher School Certificate	25 (8.0)
Diploma	108 (34.5)
Graduate degree and above	110 (35.1)

Early childhood teaching experience	
2 years and below	170 (54.3)
3 to 5 years	70 (22.4)
6 to 10 years	35 (11.2)
10 years above	38 (12.1)

### Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researcher based on the literature reviews from previous research. Three experts in the early childhood education area were appointed to address the issue of content validity of the questionnaire. Based on experts' feedback, the content validity index is 0.92 for *knowledge* and 0.90 for *practice*. The questionnaire demonstrated an excellent internal consistency with the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.92 for *knowledge* and 0.96 for *practice*.

The questionnaire of this research comprises 39 items in three sections, which are Section A: Demographic information; Section B: Teachers' knowledge about social-emotional; and Section C: Teachers' practice on social-emotional in the classroom. Section A is made up of three items about the respondents' background which are: types of preschool, levels of education and teaching experience. Both sections B and C comprise 18 items from eight sub-constructs. The sub-constructs for Section B consist of the definition of social-emotional, factors associated with social-emotional development, how social-emotional should be taught in the classroom and a list of social-emotional skills. The four sub-constructs for Section C are classroom management, teaching approach, supporting friendship and group activities and collaboration with families. A nominal scale is used in scoring for section A and 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) is used in scoring for Sections B and C.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A convenient sampling technique was used for sample selection. After agreeing to participate in this study, participants received a packet of materials containing a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study and a questionnaire. Two weeks after questionnaire distribution, follow-up calls were conducted to encourage questionnaire completion and return. Incomplete data were excluded. All data were coded and labelled with identification numbers. Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science, using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis was run to determine the level of preschool teachers' knowledge and practice, whereas, inferential analysis was run to examine the correlation between the levels of preschool teachers' knowledge and practice.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for teachers' knowledge and practice regarding social-emotional development. These results indicate that teachers have limited knowledge relating to social-emotional development with a mean score of 1.80 and a standard deviation value of 0.82. The analysis has found that teachers are practising poor practice relating to social-emotional learning in the classroom with the mean score 1.26 and standard deviation value 0.74.

**Table 2 Mean Scores on the Knowledge and Practice regarding Social-Emotional**

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Mean Interpretation
Knowledge	1.80	0.82	Low
Practice	1.26	0.74	Very low

### Teachers' knowledge of social-emotional development

Table 3 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for teachers' knowledge about social-emotional development. Teachers' knowledge on social-emotional development was examine based on their understanding of the definition of social-emotional, factors influencing social-emotional development, how social-emotional should be taught in the classroom and list of social-emotional skills. Overall, the results show that preschool teachers have low knowledge of social-emotional development.

Analysis of each sub-construct displays figures which demonstrate preschool teachers' low knowledge about the definition and skills of social-emotional and very low knowledge about the factors influences social-emotional development and how social-emotional development should be taught in the classroom. Teachers recognized children with good social-emotional skills can manage and express emotions, cooperate, start and maintain relationship and have high curiosity.

Descriptive analysis from these findings depicts preschool teachers are not aware of the factors may give impact on young children's social-emotional development, be it a positive or negative impact. Without this basic knowledge, how can preschool teachers give an intervention and extra attention to at-risk children? Teachers also perform very limited knowledge regarding how social-emotional should be taught in the classroom. Some of them perceive teaching social-emotional as not important at all.

Knowledge is a basic thing every teacher should have before implementing it in classrooms. In this scenario, teachers should have at least basic knowledge of teaching approach for social-emotional learning before practising it. This outcome is similar to a previous study (Osman, 2015) that was based on a case study. The researcher reported preschool teachers to feel less knowledgeable and unconfident to teach social-emotional in classrooms. While other scholars reported preschool teachers were not ready to teach and practise social-emotional

**Table 3 Mean scores for the Sub-Constructs of Knowledge**

Sub-construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Mean Interpretation
Definition of social-emotional	1.95	0.93	Low
Factors associated with social-emotional development	1.62	0.77	Very low
How social-emotional should be taught in the classroom	1.70	0.71	Very low
Social-emotional skills	1.94	0.86	Low
<b>Overall</b>	<b>1.80</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>Low</b>

### Teachers' Practice on Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom

Table 4 provides information on the teachers' practice on social-emotional learning in the classroom. Teachers' practice was investigated by determining their actions in classroom management, teaching approach, supporting family's involvement and supporting group activities. The level of Malaysian preschool teachers' practices supporting social-emotional competence is very low with score mean value 1.26. This outcome shows preschool teachers are not competent and confident in implementing social-emotional learning.

Descriptive analysis for the sub-constructs of practice finds preschool teachers implementing very low practices in classroom management, collaboration with families and supporting friendship and group activities. 75.2% of the respondents stated that they have been practising punishment technique in the classroom and 53.8% said they would use high voice whenever they scold the children. This technique contrasts with suggested techniques to promote healthy social-emotional development. Lack of training and in-service courses were identified as a major contribution to low levels of teachers' practice (Mohamed & Satari, 2019)

This finding is similar to a study in Turkey. The scholar reported that Turkish preschool teachers had difficulties implementing practices to support young children's social-emotional competence (Rakap, Balikci, Kalkan, & Aydin, 2018). According to the researcher, the preschool teachers were merely able to implement very low levels of practices associated with social-emotional skills. A research in South Korea, however depicted a different result whereby Korean preschool teachers were seen practising a good social-emotional learning practice (Heo, Cheatham, Hemmeter, & Noh, 2014). Nevertheless, a comparison between Malaysia, Turkey and South Korea indicates that Malaysian preschool teachers have the lowest level of skills in practising social-emotional learning.

**Table 4 Mean Scores for the Sub-Constructs of Practice**

Sub-construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Mean Interpretation
Classroom management	1.56	0.72	Very low
Teaching approach	2.09	0.85	Low
Support friendship and group activities	1.56	0.69	Very low
Collaboration with families	1.65	0.71	Very low
<b>Overall</b>	<b>1.26</b>	<b>0.74</b>	<b>Very low</b>

### Correlation between Preschool Teachers' Knowledge and Practice

The relationship between teachers' knowledge and practice on social-emotional learning was determined via the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a strong positive correlation between two variables,  $r = 0.634$ ,  $p = 0.00$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), with high levels of knowledge on social-emotional development associated with high skills in teaching. This result shows that there is a positive relationship between preschool teachers' knowledge and skills. Preschool teachers who have high level of knowledge would practise good social-emotional learning skills in classrooms but teachers with limited knowledge will practise limited skills in classrooms.

### Correlation between teachers' knowledge and practice with teaching experience

The relationship between teachers' knowledge on social-emotional development and teaching experience in early childhood was also investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were also performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a negative correlation between the two variables,  $r(332) = -0.175$ ,  $n = 332$ ,  $p = 0.002$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), with high levels of knowledge on social-emotional development associated with less experience in teaching early childhood.

The varied differences in the syllabus for teachers training have been identified as a contributory factor to these findings. In Malaysia, courses for preschool teachers training are continuously improved to ensure the preschool teachers are being kept abreast of new knowledge, new national curriculum and other new developments in education. Social-emotional learning was introduced into the national curriculum in 2010 and from the onset, institutes of teacher education have included social-emotional learning in their syllabus. This explains why preschool teachers with less experience are more knowledgeable about social-emotional development.

To assess the relationship between teachers' practice on social-emotional development and teaching experience in early childhood a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated. Preliminary analyses were also performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There is no significant relationship between the two variables,  $r(332) = -0.029$ ,  $n = 332$ ,  $p = 0.608$  ( $p > 0.01$ ).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate Malaysian preschool teachers' knowledge and practice in supporting and promoting social-emotional learning in the classroom. The result showed Malaysian preschool teachers have low knowledge and very low practice towards social-emotional development. Overall participants in this study showed an understanding of basic information of social-emotional and social-emotional skills. Teachers recognized children with good social-emotional skills can manage and express emotions, cooperate, start and maintain relationship and have a high curiosity.

However, teachers showed a poor understanding of the factors associated with social-emotional development and how social-emotional should be taught. Teachers need to know what factors significantly affect social-emotional development because with this knowledge teachers can identify which children need more support and attention from them. Results also showed poor understanding of how social-emotional should be taught in classrooms. Some of them perceived teaching social-emotional as not important at all.

Teachers are important individuals who act as forefront to convey the aspirations of development plans of children as future generations of future national administrators. Then, a teacher needs to have good knowledge and practising good practice to promote students' social-emotional development because a healthy social-emotional development is a strong foundation for later well-being and academic success.

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