Analyzing the Social Skills of Students at the Early Childhood Education Level and the Role of School Personnel

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Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to investigate the social skills of students in early childhood education (ECE) and the practices and challenges faced by the teacher and the head teacher in developing these students' social skills. The case study research design was adopted for this study. One school in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) was selected. The social Skills Observation Scale (SSOS) and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The validity and usability of the research instrument were ensured before data collection. Each of the twenty-two ECE students was observed three times for their social skills. Semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher and the head teacher of the school. The study concluded that there was a need to improve the social skills of the students. The students had a higher level of interaction and participation skills as compared to the emotional skills. The teacher and the head teacher faced problems related to the differences in background/cultural differences among students, lack of time allocated for social skills in school and personality differences among children. It is recommended to involve parents along with the school in the development of their children's social skills.*

Introduction

Social interaction and developing relationships play a significant role in human life. An individual collaborates with other people for a significant period of his/her life. These relations play an important role for an individual and the community. Social skills are suitable skills and behaviours that assist in social interaction among people. The development of social and emotional skills is decisive. It includes understanding and managing the emotions of self and dealing with others accordingly, communicating your point of view, participating in group work and showing empathy for others. Besides its importance for the well-being of an individual, social skills promote global citizenship by enabling individuals to contribute to society in a productive manner.

Early childhood education leads to a more positive change in the cognitive and socio-emotional skills of children (Sattler, 2023) as compared to caregiver engagement (Yildirim, Blake & Roopnarine, 2023). Socio-emotional competencies play a mediating role in cognitive abilities to predict the academic success of the child. Further, in order to reduce emotional and behavioural problems, socio-emotional competencies play a key role (Adela, Mihaela, Elena-Adriana & Monica, 2011). Mulvey and Jenkins (2021) reported a positive association among language skills, social skills (i.e., empathy and assertion) and pro-social behaviour (pro-socialness, aggression and victimization). The grooming of social competence at the early childhood education level helps children in their socio-emotional development and early adjustment (Kennedy, 2018). The language and social skills of the child help in academic success during early childhood education and the formal schooling period (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller & Zimmerman, 2010). The above-mentioned literature showed that early childhood education is a key stage for grooming children's social skills.

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It was reported that the children at the early childhood education level showed a lack of cooperation skills and an inability to solve social problems while playing with their class fellows (GOBENA, 2020). Preschool teachers reported challenging behaviours related to accommodation problems, self-control, pro-social behaviour and assertiveness (Aksoy, 2020). Although these problems can be understood and tackled effectively while keeping in view the context of the school and socio-cultural context, it is evident that children face different types of problems related to social skills at the early childhood education level.

The development of young children's social skills is the critical responsibility of teachers (Kennedy, 2018). However, the teachers did not receive the training related to ECE (GOBENA, 2020). ECE teachers need support to develop their knowledge, skills, and experiences in the context of the social skills of children (Aksoy, 2020). Teacher's education, experience and the classroom, in addition to the home environment, affected the social skills of the children (Maleki, Mardani, Chehrzad, Dianatinasab & Vaismoradi, 2019). The interaction with the teacher, instructional support and classroom organization had a positive association with the social skills of children with disabilities (Aguiar, Aguiar, Cadima, Correia & Fialho, 2019). However, there are various challenges at the ECE level, such as a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers, resources and continuous mentoring and evaluation that may affect the effectiveness of the ECE program (Nawaz, Ashraf & Siddique, 2021).

The assessment of students' social skills during the early years of education may be helpful for identifying the children who need support in social skills (Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015). A lack of social competence may affect the personal well-being and social interactions of a child, which may persist during adulthood (Narvekar & Ghani, 2022). Socio-emotional learning is an abstract construct taking into account the cultural and societal dimensions which may vary from country to country and/or across different communities. The policymakers, teachers and researchers must note it. The curriculum must highlight the key learning goals and outcomes related to socio-emotional competencies for various stages of the learning process (Dobia, Arthur, Jennings, Khlentzos, Parada, Roffey & Sheinman, 2020). The socio-emotional development was included as a key competency area in the national policy document (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2017) and national curriculum document (Pakistan) for early childhood care and education for grade pre-I (National Curriculum Council, 2020) that ensures the emphasis of this domain in the school and the classroom. However, its manifestation in the school practices was yet to be assessed. Therefore, this study was planned to assess the social skills of the students studying at the early childhood education (ECE) level in a metropolitan city in Pakistan and to explore the problems faced by the school personnel in this process of developing the social skills of their students.

Review of Literature

Social skills can be defined as a collection of social behaviours that assist in social interactions in interpersonal tasks and are significant for the individual, group and community (Prette & Prette, 2021). Social skills include showing respect and empathy, sharing opinions, disagreements and feelings, accepting/rejecting criticism, public speaking and making friends (Prette & Prette, 2001: as cited in Prette & Prette, 2021). Social skills can be categorized into nine groups: communication (verbal and non-verbal communication for conversation and feedback), civility (greetings, use of courtesy words such as please, thank you, sorry and following standards of a culture), making and maintaining friends, empathy (listen and understand the perspective of other persons, express willingness to help (if applicable), share the joy and accomplishments of other people), assertiveness (seruing the rights of self and others, questioning and agreeing/disagreeing with certain behaviors, deal with criticism, owning and apologizing for mistakes, and talking to authority for purposeful connection), expressing solidarity (recognize the needs of other people, offer help and console others, participate in meetings, campaigns and donate for those who are in need), managing conflict and solving interpersonal problems (emotional regulation, identifying the cause of a problem/conflict and evaluating various alternatives to resolve it), coordinating groups (setting goals, organizing and sharing work, completing the assigned tasks, explain and give feedback, check for the problems), and public speaking (greeting, interacting with audience, sharing personal experiences and reporting about events, using humour) (Prette & Prette, 2021).

Social competence in children is reflected in how they initiate, sustain, and manage positive interactions or cooperation and in their ability to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Social skills comes under

social competence (Kennedy, 2018). Skill can be described as a well-organized and hierarchically coordinated sequence of purposeful mental and behavioural actions; the purpose may be to solve a problem or achieve a particular goal. The development of a skill is measured by monitoring its progress towards this purpose; the progress requires concentration and effort (Leseman, 2002). Social skills involve working together to share ideas and achieve a common goal inside or outside the classroom. It encompasses interpersonal and intrapersonal skills such as considering perspective, empathy, emotional regulation and problem-solving (Pushparatnam, Ding, Lee, Rolla & Wilinski, 2021).

Socio-emotional skill development programs involve multiple stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and the community, for socio-emotional competencies, self-management and discipline. Parents and teachers are models for the rules and strategies of social interaction and emotional regulation for the children. If children are provided with appropriate opportunities, they can develop socio-emotional competencies (Adela, Mihaela, Elena-Adriana & Monica, 2011). A whole school approach inspired by the World Health Organization's Health Promoting Schools (HPS) Initiative (WHO, 1995: as cited in Dobia, Arthur, Jennings, Khlentzos, Parada, Roffey & Sheinman, 2020) provided an integrated and tiered model that employed multiple components and strategies for children's socio-emotional development. It placed children at the centre, surrounded by the actions and implementation strategies of the school. The outer sphere involves the actions and input from the community and education system for school-based strategies (Dobia, Arthur, Jennings, Khlentzos, Parada, Roffey & Sheinman, 2020).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) proposed ten indicators of schoolwide SEL (Social and Emotional Learning): explicit SEL instruction, SEL integrated with academic instruction, youth voice and engagement, supportive school and classroom climates, focus on adult SEL, supportive discipline, a continuum of integrated supports, authentic family partnerships, aligned community partnerships, and systems for continuous improvement. If these indicators are implemented fully into a system, it may promote equitable outcomes for learners and their integration into the instructional process (CASEL, 2018). Schoolwide SEL indicators may provide a comprehensive and integrated approach that also takes into account the input from family and the community.

Social skills highlight key events in the typical preschool classroom sequence and the examples from the classroom simplify the complexity of this construct. Each of these elements may entail various discrete social skills and an underlying understanding of social cues and situations. Social skills encompass specific behaviours contributing to one's social competence, such as entering play, taking turns, and making requests. While many of these skills are applicable in diverse settings, their comprehension and application require context-specific approaches. In a given play scenario, a child may need to utilize social language, interpret social cues, exhibit positive initiations and responses, engage in sharing, negotiate play roles, address aggression, and exchange ideas (Kennedy, 2018).

ECE school experiences may help children to share their feelings and understand the feelings of their peers (Shahzad, Zainab & Ali, 2022). Children in ECE schools greet and listen to each other (Ali & Saleh, 2022). The children are treated equitably in a supportive classroom regardless of their gender or other social variables. Different types of play, such as free play, involve the students in interactive and meaningful activities. Collaborative problem-solving also helps children to listen to each other's perspective, understand the problem in a better way, promote their interpersonal skills, and may boost a child's self-efficacy because of the influence of the peers (Pushparatnam, Ding, Lee, Rolla & Wilinski, 2021).

Keeping in view the available literature, it can be noticed that social skills are a multi-trait construct, and there are a number of sub-skills involved in it. Therefore, the researchers defined the social skills and the components of social skills covered in this study, which are provided here. Social skills can be defined as the ability to understand a situation and choose an appropriate response with verbal and nonverbal actions, keeping in view the circumstances and the interpersonal contacts. Social skills consist of different areas, and each area contains groups of certain behaviours or abilities that assist an individual in recognizing social signals and giving an appropriate response to them. The social skills can be classified into five areas:

1. **Interaction Skills:** Interaction skills involve behaviours related to the management and control of mutual interactions, such as self-management and the ability to have positive interactions.

2. **Communication Skills:** Communication skills involve the ability to initiate and maintain contact. It also encompasses sending the message, receiving and understanding the message through verbal and non-verbal means, and responding/behaving according to the context.
3. **Participation Skills:** Participation skills include the ability to work with the team members on a certain activity and share and receive opinions/feedback on the activity.
4. **Emotional Skills:** Emotional skills involve recognizing and managing the emotions of self, understating the emotions of other people and interacting with them appropriately.
5. **Social Cognition Skills:** Social cognition skills include the ability to understand social cues, evaluate a situation, compare it to social norms, adopt an appropriate behaviour in the given situation and deal with the situation/solve the problem. (Jurevičienė, Kaffemanienė & Ruškus, 2012)

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follows.

1. To investigate the social skills of students at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in public schools.
2. To explore the practices and challenges faced by the class teacher and the head teacher about the social skills of their students at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in public schools.

Research Methodology
Research Design

The research study involved the case study research design. One school in the Islamabad Capital Territory (Pakistan) was selected as a 'case' for this study out of eight schools in that area. All the students (both males and females) enrolled in the ECE (Early Childhood Education) classroom were involved in the study, along with the class teacher and the school principal. There were 13 male students and 09 female students in the ECE class. Each student of the ECE class was observed at three different times regarding his/her social skills.

Research Instruments

The researchers developed two research instruments for this study. The 'social skills observation scale' was used to collect data about the social skills of students in ECE (Early Childhood Education) classes. It consisted of 57 items with five possible options against each item: frequently (4 score), sometimes (3 score), rarely (2 score), not at all (1 score) and not applicable (0 score). The observation scale consisted of five factors: social cognition skill (18 items), participation skill (05 items), interaction skill (06 items), communication skill (15 items) and emotional skill (13 items). The items of the observation scale were related to the behaviours or indicators associated with the five factors of social skills, i.e., social cognition skills, participation skills, interaction skills, communication skills and emotional skills.

The second instrument was the questions for the semi-structured interviews from the ECE (Early Childhood Education) class teacher and the school principal. The questions of semi-structured interviews were related to class activities, assessment, and the problems faced by the class teacher/school in developing the social cognition, participation, interaction, communication, and emotional skills of the students of the ECE class. For example, (1) Which activities/strategies do you think are effective for developing 'social cognition skills' among students? (2) how do you assess the level of 'social cognition skill' of students within/outside the classroom? (3) What problems do you face while developing students' 'social cognition skills'? The interview schedule covered the questions related to five social skills.

The experts' opinion was sought to ensure the validity of the research instruments. One interview and one classroom observation in a school (other than the sample of the study) were conducted to assess the usability of the research instruments for data collection.

Data Collection

The data were collected through personal visits to the school. The data were collected from the students of the ECE (Early Childhood Education) class, their class teacher, and the head teacher of that school. The

consent was obtained from the school personnel beforehand. A rapport was built with the participants before the interview. Each student in the ECE class was observed three times when they were involved in the teaching-learning process. Three observations of a child were conducted with a gap of one week between two observations. A one-to-one semi-structured interview was conducted with the class teacher and the school principal.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) Software. The scores on each factor of the social skills observation scale were categorized into high, moderate and low levels. The score in one standard deviation above/below the mean was moderate level. A score below one standard deviation of the mean indicated a low level of social skill, and a score above one standard deviation of the mean was considered a high level of social skill (Maleki, Chehrzad, Reza Masouleh & Kazemnezhad Leyli, 2018; Maleki, Mardani, Mitra Chehrzad, Dianatinasab & Vaismoradi, 2019).

Mean, standard deviation, percentage, Wilcoxon signed rank test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient were used to analyze the quantitative data. The total score of factors of SSOS was split into three levels, i.e., low, moderate, and high levels, based on professional judgment, as explained above. In this method, a cut score was applied to the percentage of scores for each factor. The qualitative data of the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through constant comparison analysis. The qualitative data was analyzed through coding and thematic analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1

Cumulative score of three observations on the Social Skills Observation Scale (SSOS)

Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage of Mean Score
Social Cognition Skills	41.24	5.75	57.28%
Participation Skills	13.79	3.10	68.94%
Interaction Skills	16.77	1.17	69.89%
Communication Skills	35.62	3.92	59.37%
Emotional Skills	28.86	3.46	55.51%
Total Score on the Social Skills Observation Scale	136.29	12.51	59.78%

Table 1 shows the mean score of three observations of five factors and the cumulative mean score on the observation scale for social skills and its percentage. The students secured the highest score on 'interaction skills' (69.89%), followed by 'participation skills' (68.94%). The children had the lowest score on 'emotional skills' (55.51%).

Table 2

The week-wise mean score of ECE students on social skills observation scale (SSOS)

Factors	First week			Second week			Third week		
	Mean	SD*	%age	Mean	SD	%age	Mean	SD	%age
Social Cognition Skills	40.14	8.22	55.74	42.36	6.22	58.84	41.23	5.61	57.26
Participation Skills	13.77	4.39	68.86	13.50	3.76	67.50	14.09	2.83	70.45
Interaction Skills	17.82	1.94	74.24	16.45	1.65	68.56	16.05	1.53	66.86
Communication Skills	36.95	5.42	61.59	34.32	4.24	57.19	35.59	5.21	59.32
Emotional Skills	27.64	5.56	53.15	29.09	4.84	55.94	29.86	4.78	57.43
Total Score on the Social Skills Observation Scale	136.32	16.28	59.79	135.73	13.28	59.53	136.82	11.84	60

*SD=Standard Deviation

Table 2 shows the weekwise mean score, standard deviation and percentage of mean score of ECE students on factors of the 'social skills observation scale'. In the first and second weeks, the students secured the

highest score on 'interaction skills' and the lowest score on 'emotional skills' among social skills had the highest score. In the third week, they had the highest mean score on 'participation skills' and the lowest score on 'social cognition' and 'emotional' skills among social skills.

Figure 1

Comparison of the week-wise observation (percentage) score of students on Social Skills Observation Score (SSOS)
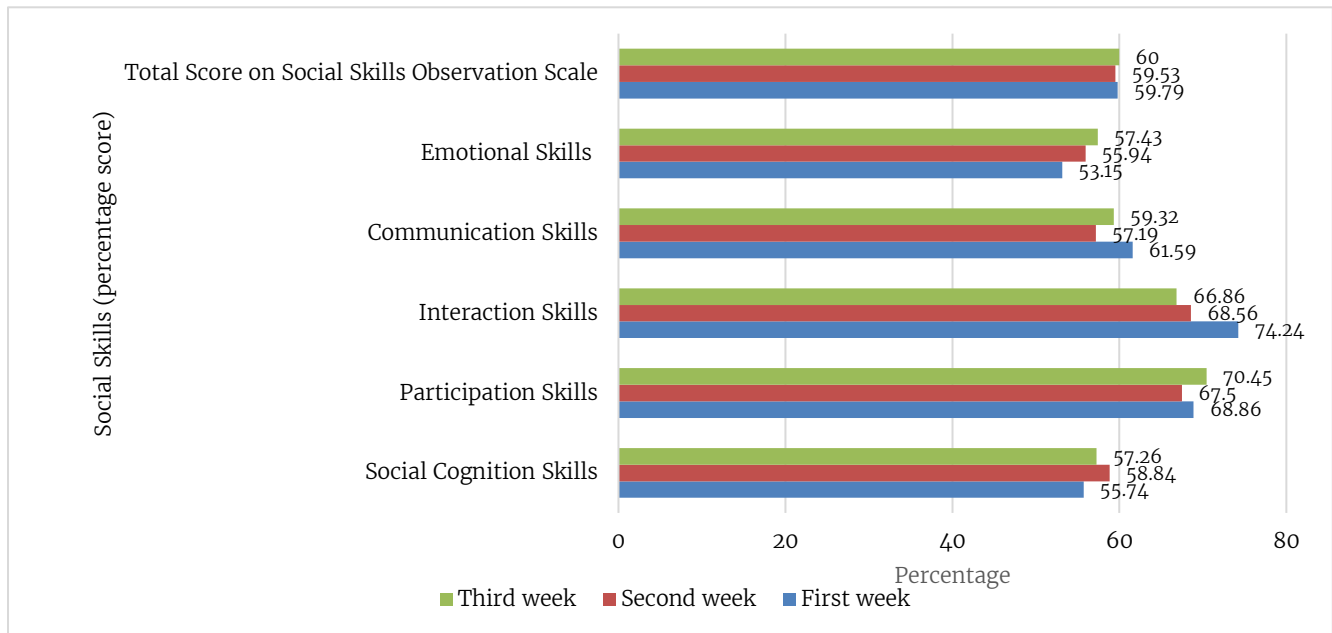

Table 3

Comparative analysis of first-time and third-time observation of ECE students on social skills observation scale (SSOS)

Pre-test score	N	M[7]	SD[8]	Mean rank	Positive ranks	Negative ranks	Z	Asymp. Sig.
SC[1]– first observation	22	40.14	8.22	13.14	11[a]	11	–.585	.558
SC[1]– second observation	22	41.23	5.61	9.86				
P[2]– first observation	22	13.77	4.39	9.50	9[b]	9	–.000	1.00
P[2]– second observation	22	14.09	2.83	9.50				
I[3]– first observation	22	17.82	1.94	8.00	2[c]	17	–3.202	.001[*]
I[3]– second observation	22	16.05	1.53	10.24				
C[4]– first observation	22	36.95	5.42	8.05	10[d]	10	–.917	.359
C[4]– second observation	22	35.59	5.21	12.95				
E[5]– first observation	22	27.64	5.56	12.71	12[e]	9	–1.289	.197
E[5]– second observation	22	29.86	4.78	8.72				
SSOS[6]– first observation	22	136.32	16.28	10.42	12[e]	9	–.331	.741
SSOS[6]– second observation	22	136.82	11.84	11.78				

*SC[1]=Social Cognition Skills; P[2]=Participation Skills; I[3]=Interaction Skills; C[4]= Communication Skills; E[5]= Emotional Skills; SSOS[6]= Social Skills Observation Scale; M[7]= Mean score; SD[8]= Standard Deviation; a= 0 ties; b=4 ties; c=3 ties; d=2 ties; e=1 ties; *= statistically significant difference*

Three observations of each student were carried out on the social skills observation scale (SSOS). Table 3 shows the output of the Wilcoxon signed rank test for assessing the difference in the first-time and third-time observation of ECE students on the social skills observation scale (SSOS). There was no statistically significant difference between first and third-time observation on 'social cognition', 'participation', 'communication' and 'emotional' skills; however, there was a statistically significant difference in the mean score of first and third-time observation on the 'interaction skills'. The possible reason for this difference may be that this data was collected in 2021 when COVID-19 restrictions were still prevalent in the schools for a considerable period after the lockdown restrictions in March 2019.

Table 4

Level of social skills of ECE students based on social skills observation scale (SSOS)

Factors	Total frequency			Frequency of male students			Frequency of female students		
	H[6]	M[7]	L[8]	H[6]	M[7]	L[8]	H[6]	M[7]	L[8]
SC[1]	3	3	16	2	3	8	1	0	8
P[2]	4	2	16	3	1	9	1	1	7
I[3]	1	0	21	1	0	12	0	0	9
C[4]	3	1	18	2	1	10	1	0	8
E[5]	2	1	19	0	1	12	2	0	7

SC[1]=Social Cognition Skills; P[2]=Participation Skills; I[3]=Interaction Skills; C[4]= Communication Skills; E[5]= Emotional Skills; H[6]= High; M[7]= Moderate; L[8]= Low

Table 4 shows the frequency of children with high, moderate and low levels of social skills ECE students based on their scores on the social skills observation scale (SSOS). It was noticed that the majority of the students were at a low level of social skills in terms of social cognition, participation, interaction, communication, and participation.

Table 5

Relationship among factors of the Social Skills Observation Scale (SSOS)

Factors	M[7]	SD[8]	N	SC[1]	P[2]	I[3]	C[4]	E[5]
SC[1]	41.24	5.75	22	–	.274 (.217)	.478[6] (.024)	.528[6] (.011)	.158 (.482)
P[2]	13.79	3.10	22	.274 (.217)	–	.132 (.559)	.391[6] (.072)	.423[6] (.050)
I[3]	16.77	1.17	22	.478[6] (.024)	.132 (.559)	–	.314[6] (.155)	.302[6] (.171)
C[4]	35.62	3.92	22	.528[6] (.011)	.391[6] (.072)	.314[6] (.155)	–	.480[6] (.024)
E[5]	28.86	3.46	22	.158 (.482)	.423[6] (.050)	.302[6] (.171)	.480[6] (.024)	–

SC[1]=Social Cognition Skills; P[2]=Participation Skills; I[3]=Interaction Skills; C[4]= Communication Skills; E[5]= Emotional Skills; x[6]= moderate relationship; M[7]= Mean score; SD[8]= Standard Deviation

Table 5 displays the relationship among factors of the social skills observation scale. Social cognition skills had a moderate relationship with interaction and communication skills. Communication skills had a moderate relationship with interaction, participation, social cognition, and emotional skills. The interaction skill had a moderate relationship with emotional and social cognition skills. The participation skill had a moderate correlation with the emotional skill. Thus, the development of one social skill may complement the positive change in the other social skills. It was noticed that these social skills were not strongly correlated with each other. Therefore, each of these skills must deliberately be emphasized in the teaching–learning process so that the students can be groomed on these skills.

Table 6

Gender–wise mean score on the Social Skills Observation Scale (SSOS)

Factors	Male Students			Female Students		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage of Mean Score	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage of Mean Score
Social Cognition Skills	41.92	6.73	58.22%	40.26	4.10	55.92%
Participation Skills	13.92	3.26	69.60%	13.59	3.05	67.95%
Interaction Skills	16.56	1.27	69.00%	17.07	.99	71.13%
Communication Skills	35.51	4.12	59.18%	35.78	3.85	59.63%
Emotional Skills	28.54	2.59	54.88%	29.33	4.57	56.40%
Total Score on the Social Skills Observation Scale	136.46	13.69	59.85%	136.04	11.37	59.67%

Table 6 displayed the gender-wise mean score of ECE students on the factors of social skills observation scale and the total score on it. The male students have higher percentage scores on 'social cognition skills' and 'participation skills' than female students. Female students have higher mean scores on 'interaction skills' and 'emotional skills' than male students. Both groups of students have almost the same score on the 'communication skills' and total score on the 'social skills observation scale'.

Table 7

Gender-wise comparison of mean scores on factors of social skills observation scale (SSOS)

Factor	Male children			Female children			Mann–Whitney U test		
	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann–Whitney U value	Z value	Sig value
Social Cognition Skills	13	12.23	159	9	10.44	94	49.00	–.635	.526
Participation Skills	13	11.85	154	9	11.00	99	54.00	–.302	.763
Interaction Skills	13	10.46	136	9	13	117	45.00	–.908	.364
Communication Skills	13	11.35	147.50	9	11.72	105.50	56.50	–.134	.894
Emotional Skills	13	11.96	155.50	9	10.83	97.50	52.50	–.402	.688
Total Score on the Social Skills Observation Scale	13	11.12	144.50	9	12.06	108.50	53.50	–.334	.738

Table 7 shows the output of the Mann-Whitney U-test for assessing the gender-wise difference in ECE students on social skills. Although the gender-wise difference in the percentage score was evident in Table 06, there was no statistically significant difference in the mean score of the male and female ECE students, as shown in Table 07, on the factors and the overall score on the social skills observation scale (SSOS).

Interpretation of Interviews of the ECE Teacher and the Head Teacher

The findings of one semi-structured interview with the ECE teacher and one semi-structured interview with the head teacher were presented in this section. The activities and techniques mentioned by the teacher and the head teacher for developing the social skills of the children included group work, planned indoor and outdoor activities, discussion, games, storytelling, recreational activities such as the 'Eid Milan party', classroom seating arrangement and the use of toys and blocks. While planning class activities, the teacher considered the interest and the mood of the child. The teacher encouraged the children to make them comfortable in the class and provided them the opportunity to interact with each other and the teacher/head teacher. The main problems faced by the teacher and head teacher in developing the social skills of the children included the home environment not deliberately focusing on the social skills, the language barrier faced by the children due to differences in the family background/culture, lack of time allocated by the teacher for providing guidance and opportunity to children for these skills, and gender and personality-related differences in the social skills of the children. The detailed findings of the interviews are given below.

Social Cognition Skills

The teacher arranged games, toys and class activities such as puzzles, storytelling and class discussion for the ECE students. While assessing the students, the teacher had to consider their interest, focus and stress level in an activity. S/he noticed their responses when they were engaged in an activity. She said that children noticed her facial expressions in their work. The head teacher shared that the comparison among students helped them to complete their work.

The teacher faced some problems in the development of social cognition skills: the mood of the child, personality-related differences, and differences in the children's family backgrounds. Some children were too shy to share their views, and few children wanted their teacher to only listen to them. There were gender-wise differences in the social skills of students: girls understood things quickly, whereas the boys did not ponder (on the instructions). Due to differences in the family background of the children, the home environment and the conversation style of the children were different. So, the teacher has to work hard for

the development of the children's social skills. The head teacher pointed out that younger children were moody and wanted to visit their brothers/sisters in other classes. The head teacher advised the teacher to improve the interaction of children in the class so that they adjust themselves to that environment.

Participation skills

Group activities in the classroom were mostly used to improve the participation skills of students. The teacher changed the seating arrangement in the class randomly so that a child could sit with different children every day. Informal brief conversations with the children and group activities such as group discussions in the class were arranged by the teacher and head teacher. The head teacher played a supervisory role and visited the ECE class for a short time every day. The principal mentioned some recreational events, such as Eid Milan Part, in which the children enjoyed and shared their lunch. However, the children and parents did not like sharing the lunch among children, so the teacher usually avoided it. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the outdoor activities could not be conducted. When the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, the teacher started to focus on the development of the children's sharing skills.

According to the principal, if the teacher provides time, attention and guidance to the children, they get together with each other. Children participated in the class activities if they got the opportunity. As mentioned by the teacher, it was very important for the child that their teacher participated in the process. For example, if the teacher appreciated the work of a child, s/he shared it with the class fellows.

The main problem mentioned by the principal was that the children could not get enough time from the teacher and did not have good interaction with each other. However, the teacher mentioned the problems in developing the participation skills of the children, such as the lack of communication skills to speak clearly or convey a message, differences in the family background of the children, and lack of exposure.

Interaction Skills

The activities used for developing interaction skills, mentioned by the teacher, included group activities and discussion. The teacher encouraged the children to talk to each other. The principal also realized the importance of discussion for developing the children's interaction skills, but s/he realized the lack of time allocated for children to talk to each other. In addition, children also took time to intermingle with each other due to the difference in their family background, home environment and the language barrier. Therefore, more time allocation for group work and deliberately focusing on interaction skills may be very beneficial. The teacher mentioned a number of aspects for assessing the interaction skills of the children: interaction and conversation of the child with the teacher and other children, the children listening and following the directions of the teacher, and the confidence of children while talking to the teacher.

Communication Skills

The teacher and the head teacher emphasized the grooming of active listening communication among children and with the teacher/principal for the development of communication skills of the ECE students. Besides this, the teacher also focused on teamwork, the use of courtesy words such as 'please', and developing confidence among children. Group activities were planned in the class for this purpose. The head teacher mentioned that these activities were very important for developing interest among children. The teacher and head teacher discussed each other about the performance of the children from time to time. The main problem mentioned by the teacher related to the communication skills of children was that children, due to a lack of focus on these skills in their home environment, often forget about them. However, s/he deliberately practised the use of prayer (Dua) and Bismillah in the group activities; sometimes, when s/he pretended to forget about it, children reminded him/her about the prayer (Dua'a).

Emotional Skills

The teacher and the head teacher shared that most of the children were shy and did not speak about their needs. The teacher had to notice their verbal and non-verbal expressions to recognize their needs. If a child spoke about his/her needs, the teacher had to understand it. The head teacher mentioned that they had to plan learning activities keeping in view the mood of the child. The teacher shared that s/he motivated the

'shy' children to talk and make new friends in the class. The teacher also encouraged these students by clapping and appreciating them in order to make students comfortable in the class. The teacher faced the difficulty of dealing with a child who was shy and did not give any facial expressions. Another problem mentioned by the teacher and head teacher was that the children did not encourage each other much.

Discussion

The study reported that the social skills of ECE students were at a low level for the majority of the class. The highest level was reported for interaction and participation skills, whereas the emotional skills were reported to be at the lowest level. The social skills training had a positive effect on the cooperative skills of the children at the early childhood education level (Fikri & Tegeh, 2022). An experimental study conducted during COVID-19 also reported a positive change in the social skills of the children (Nurjanah, Machmudah, Zahroh, Ainiyah, Hasina & Kamariyah, 2022). There is a need to deliberately focus on providing opportunities to the students for grooming their social skills. Children may need time and practice to develop social skills. It is important that ECE school personnel are prepared to intentionally support the development of children's social and emotional skills (Meuwissen, 2022).

There was a moderate and statistically significant correlation among various factors of the social skills observation scale, which asserted that working on one skill might result in a positive change in other social skills. Other factors that can contribute positively to improving the social skills of young children include smaller class sizes and teachers with more work experience (Maleki, Chehrzad, Leyli, Mardani & Vaismoradi, 2019). ECE teachers encouraged children to express their feelings verbally, as reported by Ghumman and Khalid (2016).

The study found no gender-wise difference in the social skills of the students. The possible reason may be the socio-cultural experiences of the students. The literature reported mixed results about the gender-wise difference. Yildirim, Blake and Roopnarine (2023) found that girls are more likely to follow directions and interact with others as compared to boys. However, Maleki, Chehrzad, Leyli, Mardani and Vaismoradi (2019) reported that there was no gender-wise difference in the social skills of children at the preschool level; the reason may be social expectations and context.

The study found that the teacher and head teacher planned different types of indoor and outdoor activities for grooming the social skills of students. However, the teacher faced problems in this process due to the lack of time and the socio-cultural and personality differences of the students. It is important that the school and the home work together to emphasize the social skills of the children. Sustaining collaboration between parents, caregivers and school personnel may be helpful in cultivating the social skills of the children (Yildirim, Blake & Roopnarine, 2023). At the ECE level, the students worked with their peers and helped each other (Bano, Amir, Arshad & Muhammad, 2021) in the group work. The storybooks can be helpful in developing the students' listening skills (Bano, Amir, Arshad & Muhammad, 2021).

Conclusion

It was concluded that the students had a higher score on interaction and participation skills as compared to other social skills, such as emotional skills. When the cut score was applied, the majority of the children were found to be at a lower level in all the social skills. Social cognition skills had a moderate relationship with interaction and communication skills. Participation and interaction skills had a moderate relationship with communication and emotional skills. There was also a moderate relationship between the communication and emotional skills of students. It means that working on the development of one social skill may insert a positive change in the development of other social skills, as mentioned above. There were no gender-wise differences in the social skills of ECE students. As mentioned by the teacher and head teacher, they set up group discussions and indoor and outdoor activities to groom the social skills of the students. However, the differences in the cultural background and home environment, language barrier and personality differences among the children may hinder the process of grooming their social skills.

Based on the results of the study, it would be important to assess the personality of the child to provide tailored support to groom his/her social skills. The involvement of the child's family may improve the effectiveness of this process. The social engagement of parents would positively affect the social skills of

children (Yildirim, Blake & Roopnarine, 2023). The integration of social skills in curricular and co-curricular activities may be helpful to allocate more time and effort to grooming the social skills of the children. The teacher in this study reported the language barrier as one of the problems in developing children's social skills. A study by Mulvey and Jenkins (2021) reported a positive association among language skills, social skills (i.e., empathy and assertion) and pro-social behaviour (pro-socialness, aggression and victimization). Therefore, teachers and parents may work together on the language skills of the children to improve the social skills of the children. The school personnel may engage family members of the child in his/her social development, particularly in the development of emotional skills. The study results were based on a small sample size; therefore, the study may involve a larger sample size in future. The future study may involve data collection from the parents about the role of the home environment in the development of social skills of the ECE children. The significance of school and home support for the social skills of children with disabilities may be explored in future research work.

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