

An Exploration of Child-Friendly Learning Environment Characteristics in Sri Lankan Preschools

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Abstract:

This study explores the characteristics of child-friendly learning environments in Sri Lankan preschools by examining how the key dimensions of the Child-Friendly School (CFS) framework are reflected in preschool settings in the Batticaloa District in Sri Lanka. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of current preschool practices. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to preschool teachers, while qualitative insights were obtained through in-depth interviews and systematic observations conducted at selected preschool sites. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to examine quantitative data, and narrative analysis was applied to interpret qualitative findings. From the 99 preschools in the Batticaloa zone, a 10% sample (13 preschools) was selected using stratified random sampling. Purposive sampling was applied to select 5% of teachers, 10% of principals, and 10% of preschools to ensure the inclusion of key informants relevant to the study's objectives. The findings reveal several critical challenges in establishing child-friendly learning environments. Teachers demonstrated limited awareness of child-friendly pedagogical principles and insufficient training in addressing the needs of children with disabilities or special learning requirements. Furthermore, the characteristics of child-friendly learning environments recommended by UNICEF were not consistently incorporated into preschool practices. These gaps highlight significant areas for improvement and indicate the need for systematic capacity-building, targeted professional development, and strengthened policy implementation. Overall, the study contributes valuable insights into the current status of preschool learning environments in Sri Lanka and underscores the need for enhanced alignment between policy expectations and on-the-ground practices. Strengthening child-friendly environments in preschools will require coordinated efforts among educators, administrators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to ensure that early learning spaces fully support the holistic development and rights of young children.

Key words: Child -Friendly, Learning Environment, Sri Lankan Pre-school.

Introduction:

In 1999, UNICEF's Programme Division introduced the CFS framework to promote schools that cater to the holistic development of children. Since then, the CFS initiative has become UNICEF's primary education program and is implemented in 95 countries globally (UNICEF, 2009). UNICEF supports and promotes the CFS framework at the regional and global levels. The CFS model embodies the following key elements: effectiveness, inclusiveness, democratic participation, a healthy, safe, and protective environment, and gender sensitivity (Clair, Miske & Patel, 2010; Akoto-Senaman, 2015; Cobanoglu, Ayvaz-Tuncel & Ordu, 2018).

This study explores the characteristics of child-friendly learning environments (CFLE) in Sri Lankan preschools by examining how the key dimensions of the CFS framework are reflected in preschool settings in the Batticaloa District in Sri Lanka. It seeks to assess the level of awareness among pre-school teachers regarding these characteristics and analyzes their practical applications of a CFLE. Through a comprehensive examination of these objectives, this research contributes towards understanding the effectiveness and feasibility of fostering child-friendly educational spaces in pre-schools, thereby enhancing the quality of early childhood education.

Purpose and objectives of the study:

This study explores the characteristics of child-friendly learning environments in Sri Lankan preschool settings in the Batticaloa District in Sri Lanka. To achieve this aim, the following objective was established:

a) To identify the characteristics of the child-friendly learning environment in Sri Lankan preschools.

Literature Review:

UNESCO (2015) stated, that the United Nations CRC provides an ideal approach for children to learn about their human rights. This is because it specifies human rights especially relevant to

children. Everyone, parents and adults who work with children, but especially children, should be familiar with this important component of the international human rights framework. A child-friendly school is based on the UNICEF Framework for Rights-Based, Child-Friendly Educational Systems and Schools, and these schools are characterized as inclusive, healthy, and protective for all children, effective with children, and involved with families and communities and children. According to this framework, child-friendly schools have the following tenets: child-seeking, child-centered, inclusive, effective, healthy, protective, gender sensitive, and involved with children, families, and communities. These details of each variable are presented below in line with the explanation:

1. A child-friendly school is a child seeking school- It actively identifies excluded children to get them enrolled in school and included in learning, treating children as subjects with rights and as duty-bearers with obligations to fulfill these rights, and demonstrating, promoting, and helping to monitor the rights and well-being of all children in the community.

2. A child-friendly school is a child centered school- It acts in the best interests of the child, leading to the realization of the child's full potential, and is concerned both about the "whole" child (including her health, nutritional status, and well-being) and about what happens to children in their families and communities before they enter school and after they leave the school.

3. A child-friendly school is inclusive of children- it does not exclude, discriminate, or stereotype on the basis of difference. It provides education that is free and compulsory, affordable and accessible, especially to families and children at risk. It respects diversity and ensures equality of learning for all children (e.g., girls, working children, children of ethnic minorities and affected by HIV/AIDS, children with disabilities, victims of exploitation and violence). It responds to diversity by meeting the differing circumstances and needs of children (e.g., based on gender, social class, ethnicity, and ability level).

4. A child-friendly school is effective for learning- it promotes good quality teaching and learning processes with individualized instruction appropriate to each child's developmental level, abilities, and learning style and with active, cooperative, and democratic learning methods. It provides structured content and good quality materials and resources, it enhances teacher capacity, morale, commitment, status, and income and their own recognition of child rights. And it promotes quality learning outcomes by defining and helping children learn what they need to learn and teaching them how to learn

5. A child-friendly school is healthy and protective of children- it ensures a healthy, hygienic, and safe learning environment, with adequate water and sanitation facilities and healthy classrooms, healthy policies and practices (e.g., a school free of drugs, corporal punishment, and harassment), and the provision of health services such as nutritional supplementation and counseling; it provides life skills-based health education. It improves both physical and psychosocial-emotional health in teachers and students, and it aids in the defense and protection of all children from abuse and damage, as well as providing pleasant experiences for children.

6. A child-friendly school is gender sensitive-it promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement and it eliminates gender stereotypes. Moreover, it guarantees girl-friendly facilities, curricula, textbooks, and teaching learning processes. It also socializes girls and boys in a non-violent environment; it encourages respect for each other's rights, dignity, and equality. A child-friendly school is involved with children, families, and communities: it is child-centered, promoting child participation in all aspects of school life. It is family focused, working to strengthen families as the child's primary caregivers and educators and helping children, parents, and teachers establish harmonious relationships; it is community-based - encouraging local partnership in education, acting in the community for the sake of children, and working with other actors to ensure the fulfillment of children's rights (UNICEF, 2012). It is obvious

that the vision of Child-friendly Schools for educating children goes far beyond who gets the best score on the final examination. Their mission insists that each and every girl and boy has the right to participate in her or his own learning in a safe, protective learning community.

Susanto (2022) examined the Child-Friendly School Policy according to the Perspective of Islamic Education Teachers in Indonesia. This research explored the perspectives of Islamic education teachers within educational institutions regarding the implementation of child-friendly school policies, alongside identified infringements of children's rights. Employing a qualitative approach, the study engaged Islamic education teachers from three provinces: DKI Jakarta, West Java, and Banten, during the period of August to December 2021. The participants included teachers from elementary, junior high, and high school levels, totaling 120 individuals, selected through random sampling. Data collection methods included virtual interviews conducted via the Zoom platform, distribution of questionnaires through Google Forms, and document analysis. Subsequently, the data was subjected to descriptive analysis. The findings of this study indicate that 85% of Islamic education teachers hold a positive view of the quality of child-friendly school policies. Moreover, 72% of teachers believe that the content of these policies can be improved, while 75% of them assert that child-friendly school policies are relevant for enhancing the education service system. Additionally, 86% of teachers recognize the benefits of these policies in terms of improving school culture.

Sya (2016) conducted a study on the Child-Friendly Environment in Education for Children's Wellbeing. The aim of this study was to create an effective and friendly learning environment. According to the study, teachers must possess both theoretical knowledge and inventiveness, and they should employ a variety of teaching strategies while also being open to developing new ones as needed. Managing classrooms requires a foundation in research-based routines,

while further flexibility is crucial for adapting to changing situations. Understanding students on a personal level, including factors like age, culture, social class, and gender, fosters a child-friendly atmosphere. Key considerations for such an environment include using age-appropriate materials, employing effective teaching methods and evaluation techniques, and accommodating lower-ability students. The results of this study emphasize that as a teacher, recognizing one's own strengths, weaknesses, and cultural identity is vital. This self-awareness enables educators to respect and understand their students' cultural identities, ultimately contributing to a successful learning environment.

Theoretical framework of the study:

The theoretical framework introduces and describes the theories that explain why the research problem under study exists (Labaree, 2009) This study was identify the characteristics of the Child Friendly Learning Environment, with the Sri Lankan Pre-School as its research topic. Therefore, the theories used to examine the research problem are Rational Theory of Piaget

Rational Theory of Piaget

According to the psychological theory of rationalists, a learner learns through intuition, reasoning and creativity, where the child friendly environment fosters their inborn abilities. Piaget's social transmission is the collaboration and cooperation of a person with other people and is quite important for the development of logic in a child's mind (Bell, 1978). This theory describes fostering a learner's intellectual development, where the learner enters a classroom with their innate intellectual abilities and the child friendly environment in the classroom fosters a more effective, and better quality of education. The classroom is not just sitting out there waiting to be uncovered but gets progressively shaped and transformed through the child's personal experience, which is only possible by creating a child friendly environment. The implication of this theory for this study is that it describes how an opportunity is afforded to the child to receive

education in accordance with his/her developmental and environmental condition that will help low performing learners to perform better. The teacher plays a significant role in the classroom teaching learning process and in school, and thus, a teacher's attitudes must be positive enough to create an innovative, meaningful, child friendly environment in, for example, mathematics classrooms. The classroom is the platform to exchange, transform and respect diversified behaviors and the teacher is the source who can promote it effectively. Therefore, the teacher plays a noteworthy role in the child-friendly classroom

Methodology:

Description of the research methodology

This section discusses the target population, sampling methods, and the methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Target population

In this study, the Batticaloa district was selected by the researcher purposefully from the Eastern Province. This is because the Batticaloa zone represents people from all social and economic categories, such as urban, rural, and state sectors.

Sampling methods

A mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data can provide a comprehensive understanding of the use of CFLEs in pre-schools in the Batticaloa zone, and the factors that contribute to their effectiveness. For the quantitative aspect of the research, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire to gather data from a sample of pre-school teachers in the Batticaloa District and narrative analysis was conducted to gather data from interviews with a sample of school principals, and an observation schedule was also undertaken.

Sample size

In the Batticaloa zone, 99 Pre-schools in 10% were selected (13 pre-schools) in stratified random sampling, and teachers 5%, principals 10%, and schools were selected 10% through purposive sampling.

Research Design:

The research design helps ensure that the research methods match the research aims, that the research collects high-quality data, and that the right kind of analysis is used to answer the questions, utilizing credible sources. In this research study, quantitative data and information gathered with the Teacher Questionnaire were presented in table and graphs and analyzed using the descriptive Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and interpreted accordingly. Qualitative data gathered by using observation schedules and interviews was analyzed using narrative and descriptive analysis.

Approach to data analysis.

Quantitative data and information gathered with the Teacher Questionnaire were presented in the table and graphs and analyzed using the descriptive Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and interpreted accordingly. Qualitative data gathered by using the questionnaire, observation schedules, and interviews was analyzed using narrative and descriptive analysis

Data collection Instruments

The "Questionnaire, Interviews, and Observation" section describes the research instruments employed in data collection. Questionnaires gather written responses, interviews involve direct interactions, and observation follows behaviors, contributing to comprehensive research methodologies. In this section, research tools and methods of data collection will be discussed.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of information from the participants of the study, the researchers propose the following recommendations:

- **Rights-Based and Inclusive Approaches**

Pre-schools attempting to educate disadvantaged children must broaden the traditional role of the school. Although inclusive education and awareness of disability rights is an increasingly prominent theme, schools can promote inclusiveness in a number of ways that range from

community mobilization to teacher training programs.

- **High-Quality and Effective Learning Environments**

It is necessary to provide training to pre-school heads and teachers on appropriate pedagogical techniques and methods of instruction for children with disabilities so that more schools can provide high-quality education to children with disabilities. Thus, provision of training to school heads and teachers on assessing the conditions for learning and on appropriate approaches for improving the conditions for learning is vital.

- **Enhancing the Gender Sensitivity of Learning Environments**

CFS schools have been successful in creating an environment where school leaders and faculty are committed to gender inclusiveness, and our survey data suggests that female students appear to feel as included as male students. However, some of our focus group data suggest that traditional gender expectations may still affect opportunities for female students in certain schools. It may be useful to conduct further focus groups to deepen our understanding of this issue and to extend the awareness of all stakeholders regarding the rights to high-quality education of all children.

- **Engaging Students, Families, and Communities**

With respect to child-centred approaches, some parents reported being sceptical of CFS schools because they believe schools should be places of learning and that "friendliness" is secondary to a school's mission. We recommend that CFS develop strategies to enhance parent awareness in a manner that is culturally responsive, and family driven.

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