

The Role of Peer Interaction in Forming Early Childhood Social Behavior at Pelangi Batu Bara Preschool

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the role of peer interaction in shaping the social behavior of early childhood children at Pelangi Batu Bara Preschool. This research used a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data collection techniques included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The results indicate that peer interaction significantly contributes to the development of children's social behavior, such as the ability to share, cooperate, empathize, and resolve conflicts independently. These interactions occur naturally through free and structured play activities in a supportive learning environment. Teachers play an active role as facilitators by guiding children in interactions and reinforcing positive behaviors. The conclusion of this study is that peer interaction is a crucial factor in fostering social behavior in early childhood and needs to be continuously facilitated through a fun and communicative learning approach.

Keywords: Peer Interaction, Social Behavior, Early Childhood, Preschool, Social Learning

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as a fundamental stage in shaping children's social behavior and core values. At this age often referred to as the golden age children begin to interact with individuals beyond their families, including peers. Peer interaction becomes the first social medium that directly fosters essential skills such as sharing, empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. This reality positions peer interaction as a crucial aspect warranting in-depth study within ECE institutions like PAUD Pelangi in Batu Bara Regency.

PAUD Pelangi has actively implemented social character development programs through group activities and thematic play. However, observations reveal varying interaction styles among children: some are expressive and socially proactive, while others appear withdrawn, reluctant to share, or struggle to adapt. These conditions raise an important question: to what extent does peer interaction influence the formation of social behavior among children at PAUD Pelangi?

Theoretically, peer interaction plays a significant role in the social-emotional development of early childhood. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) emphasizes that children learn through interactions with others where peers are part of the "zone of proximal development" contributing to their understanding of social norms, emotional regulation, and social identity formation. Likewise, Elkind's Play-Based Learning Theory (2007) highlights that peer play enhances children's ability to share, take turns, and resolve conflicts constructively. However, the quality of interaction depends on the learning environment, teacher readiness to facilitate social inclusion, and parental communication support.

Previous studies such as Nuryanti and Sari (2022) conducted in urban kindergartens, have shown that structured peer interactions (e.g., pair assignments, group games) significantly improve empathy and collaboration among children. Nevertheless, many ECE units in non-urban areas face challenges like high teacher-to-child ratios, limited group play space, and lack of teacher training in managing social interaction. As a non-urban institution, PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara experiences similar dynamics, highlighting the need to investigate the current peer interaction practices and their effectiveness in fostering children's social behavior.

Moreover, developing children's socio-emotional abilities through peer interaction has long-term benefits, including better adaptation to elementary school environments, improved communication skills, and the development of pro-social character traits. Therefore, this study aims to explore: (1) the forms and intensity of peer interaction at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara; (2) its direct influence on the development of social behavior; and (3) the challenges and opportunities affecting the quality of peer interaction.

This research is significant as it generates contextual empirical data on how peer interaction develops at PAUD Pelangi and its implications for shaping children's social behavior. The findings are expected to serve as valuable input for ECE teachers, institutional management, and policymakers through recommendations on more effective and inclusive facilitation of social interactions.

Literature Review

2.1 Early Childhood and Social Development

Early childhood refers to individuals aged 0–6 years who are undergoing rapid development in various aspects, including social development. Social behavior in early

childhood encompasses the ability to interact with others, cooperate, share, take turns, and exhibit empathy and helpfulness (Suyadi, 2020). These behaviors do not develop instantaneously, but rather through a prolonged process influenced by the environment, particularly social environments such as family, school, and peers.

According to Hurlock (2002), children's social development is shaped through the process of socialization, which enables them to learn societal norms and rules. In the context of early childhood education, this process is significantly influenced by interpersonal relationships, especially peer interactions.

2.2 Definition of Peer Interaction

Peer interaction refers to social relationships that occur among children of similar age and developmental levels. This interaction includes both verbal and nonverbal communication that takes place during play, learning, or shared activities (Santrock, 2011). Through these interactions, children learn to recognize others' emotions, understand different perspectives, and develop genuine social skills. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning and cognitive as well as social development in children primarily occur within social contexts, including peer interactions. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) indicates that children can achieve higher levels of development with assistance from more capable peers.

2.3 The Role of Peer Interaction in Developing Social Behavior

Peer interaction plays a significant role in shaping the social behavior of early childhood learners. When children play together, they learn to understand concepts such as sharing, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and empathy. Elkind (2007) stated that playing with peers not only enhances social skills but also fosters self-confidence and social responsibility. Several studies have shown that children who have ample opportunities for peer interaction tend to exhibit better emotional regulation, empathy, and group cooperation (Nuryanti & Sari, 2022). Peer interaction can also foster pro-social character traits such as honesty, tolerance, and solidarity. However, not all peer interactions result in positive outcomes. In certain conditions, negative interactions such as bullying, exclusion, or ridicule may reduce self-confidence and trigger aggressive behavior. Therefore, the teacher's role in guiding and facilitating healthy peer interaction is essential.

Factors Influencing Peer Interaction

Several factors influence the quality of peer interaction, including:

1. **Physical Environment:** Adequate play space, educational play tools, and open classroom layouts encourage children to interact more actively (Yuliani, 2021).
2. **Parenting Style and Teacher Roles:** Teachers who provide collaborative play opportunities and are able to facilitate conflict resolution fairly help shape healthy social behavior.
3. **Individual Child Characteristics:** Age, temperament, and family background all influence how children interact with peers.
4. **School Policies:** Programs that support social development such as group play, drama activities, or joint projects greatly enhance positive peer interaction.

Previous studies have affirmed the importance of peer interaction in children's social development. Research by Nuranti and Sari (2022) indicated that the intensity of group play

interaction significantly correlates with the increase of prosocial behavior in children at Kindergarten X in Jakarta. Similarly, a study by Mufidah (2020) found that peer interaction during free play activities improved empathy and cooperation skills among TK B students. Nevertheless, there remains a contextual research gap in non-urban areas such as Batu Bara. Therefore, this study seeks to address that gap by examining how peer interaction contributes to the formation of social behavior in early childhood at PAUD Pelangi, Batu Bara.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to deeply understand the social phenomena occurring in the research subjects in this case, peer interaction and its impact on the social behavior of early childhood learners (Moleong, 2017). This approach was chosen because the researcher seeks to describe and explain the processes, meanings, and dynamics of peer interaction within a natural and contextual early childhood education (ECE) environment.

3.2 Type of Research

This research is a case study, focusing on a single location PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara as the primary setting for examining the role of peer interaction in shaping children's social behavior (Creswell, 2014). The case study design allows for in-depth exploration of the context, actors, and social environment within the educational unit.

3.3 Research Site and Duration

The study was conducted at PAUD Pelangi, located in Lima Puluh Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra. This location was selected based on its active implementation of group play approaches and the diverse social behaviors among children, making it a compelling context for analysis. The research took place over a period of two months.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using the following techniques:

1. Participant Observation

The researcher directly observed children's activities during both structured and unstructured play. The aim was to examine forms of peer interaction such as cooperation, sharing, and emerging conflicts as well as the social behaviors being formed (Sugiyono, 2019).

2. In-Depth Interviews

Interviews were conducted with classroom teachers, the head of PAUD, and several parents. These were intended to gain deeper insights into how these stakeholders perceive the role of peer interaction in shaping children's social behavior.

3. Documentation

Documentation involved collecting photos, children's daily journals, and other supporting data provided by teachers. These documents served as additional evidence and were used for data triangulation.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique used in this research follows the model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three stages:

1. **Data Reduction:** The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting raw data obtained from the field.
2. **Data Display:** Organizing the data into descriptive narratives, tables, or diagrams to facilitate understanding of relationships among phenomena.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Conclusions are drawn based on patterns found in the analyzed data. Verification is conducted through triangulation of sources and data collection techniques.

Data analysis was conducted continuously from the initial data collection phase to the final stages, ensuring that the findings were in-depth, valid, and contextually relevant.

Research Findings

4.1 General Findings at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara, it was found that the institution has integrated learning activities emphasizing social interaction among early childhood learners. PAUD Pelangi has two main learning groups with approximately 40 students and an ideal teacher-student ratio (1:10). Daily activities focus on free play, structured play, group activities, and storytelling sessions.

The school environment supports collaborative child activities through open classroom layouts, a playground, and designated areas for role play and shared reading. Observations revealed that children had the freedom to interact both spontaneously and under the teacher's guidance. Teachers actively guided children through conflict resolution, taught turn-taking, and reinforced positive behavior during sharing and collaboration.

Interviews with teachers indicated that most children aged 4–6 years were beginning to show fundamental social skills, such as greeting peers, sharing toys, helping struggling friends, and resolving minor conflicts. However, a few children especially those attending school for the first time or with shy dispositions showed passive behavior or social difficulties.

4.2 Implementation of Social Behavior Development in Early Childhood

At PAUD Pelangi, the development of children's social behavior is implemented through play-based learning and early habituation of social values. Learning activities are designed to promote peer interaction using various media, including:

1. **Role Play** – Children act as doctors, teachers, or shopkeepers to develop communication, empathy, and cooperation.
2. **Group Activities** – Children collaborate on joint projects like collages or planting, encouraging task-sharing and responsibility.
3. **Storytelling and Light Discussions** – Stories teach positive values such as honesty, helpfulness, and friendship.
4. **Traditional and Relay Games** – These help children learn turn-taking, teamwork, and how to handle winning or losing.

Teachers frequently provide positive reinforcement such as praise and small rewards when children display prosocial behavior. Social values are also introduced through songs,

movement, and morning routines, such as greetings and exchanging salutations. This aligns with the core goals of early childhood education, which emphasizes affective and social development.

4.3 The Role of Peer Interaction in Shaping Children's Social Behavior

Data from interviews and observations revealed that peer interaction plays a critical role in shaping the social behavior of early childhood learners. Such interactions took various forms, including:

1. Sharing – Children regularly shared toys such as building blocks, crayons, or musical instruments, promoting generosity and caring.
2. Cooperation – During group tasks, children learned to collaborate and complete assignments like puzzles or tidying up toys.
3. Conflict Resolution – Children were guided or gradually learned to resolve minor disputes, such as toy disagreements.
4. Empathy – Children began showing empathy, such as comforting a crying friend or cheering up a peer after losing a game.
5. Social Communication – Children frequently engaged in verbal and non-verbal communication, helping develop language and emotional expression.

Peer interaction offers children concrete and contextual experiences for learning social values. Concepts like “sharing” or “helping others” become meaningful through direct peer relationships.

Teachers noted that children who actively interacted with peers tended to exhibit higher self-confidence and found it easier to express ideas or feelings. In contrast, less socially engaged children appeared more withdrawn and struggled with emotional regulation.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the role of peer interaction in shaping the social behavior of early childhood learners at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara. Findings indicate that such interaction contributes significantly to the development of social behavior, including the ability to share, cooperate, resolve conflicts, and develop empathy.

At PAUD Pelangi, daily interactions particularly during play naturally foster social values. This supports Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which posits that children develop through social interaction with others, including peers. Peer interaction acts as a stimulus that encourages children to adapt to social norms and build mutually beneficial relationships. At PAUD Pelangi, children learn to share, collaborate in small groups, and express empathy. This process represents early socialization, which is fundamental to character and social attitude development.

Teachers at PAUD Pelangi play a vital role in creating a socially conducive environment. They not only provide the tools and space for interaction but also facilitate conflict resolution and reinforce positive social behavior. This aligns with Santrock (2011), who argues that children's social development is influenced by environmental support and reinforcement, including from teachers as facilitators.

Teachers at PAUD Pelangi also apply role play, group activities, and moral storytelling to instill social values. Through these methods, children learn group behavior, rules, and respect for differences among individuals.

Direct peer interaction significantly influences the formation of children's social behavior. Socially active children exhibit better communication, confidence, and adaptability in group settings. Conversely, those with fewer opportunities for interaction tend to be more passive and less confident. This supports previous research by Nuryanti and Sari (2022), who found a positive correlation between the intensity of peer interaction and children's social behavior development. Similar findings by Mufidah (2020) show that group play enhances children's cooperation and tolerance.

While peer interaction provides numerous benefits, some challenges persist such as shyness or communication difficulties in certain children. In such cases, PAUD Pelangi teachers apply individualized approaches and gradual social integration strategies to encourage participation in group activities.

A supportive physical environment, such as open play areas and adequate learning tools, also helps children engage more actively with their peers. This supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), which asserts that microsystems like the family and school have a direct influence on children's social development.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that peer interaction at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara plays a significant role in shaping the social behavior of young children. With the support of teachers and a conducive environment, children are able to learn social values in a contextual and enjoyable manner. Behaviors such as sharing, helping peers, and cooperating are formed through daily interactions in a safe and positive atmosphere.

The research conducted at PAUD Pelangi Batu Bara confirms that peer interaction is highly influential in the development of early childhood social behavior. Children acquire social values such as sharing, collaboration, mutual assistance, and conflict resolution through play and communication with their peers. These interactions occur naturally during daily activities such as role play, group work, and resolving minor conflicts. Teachers play a central role as facilitators by creating a positive social environment, guiding children in their interactions, and reinforcing desirable behaviors. An open learning environment, adequate play materials, and a play-based learning approach further enhance the process of social character development. Therefore, peer interaction in early childhood education is not merely a means of play, but also serves as a foundational element in nurturing social attitudes that will continue to grow as the child matures.

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