



Challenges in Early Childhood Education: Insights from the Philippine Context

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Abstract:

This study examines the landscape of early childhood education (ECE) in the Philippines, focusing on socio-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes and barriers to access. Drawing on a systematic review of the literature and analysis of relevant reports, the study highlights the critical role of ECE in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Despite its importance, the Philippines faces significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to quality ECE programs, including low participation rates, parental perceptions, financial constraints, and a shortage of qualified educators. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions to address these barriers and promote positive outcomes for young children. By investing in workforce development, expanding access to early education, and fostering effective collaboration between educators and parents, stakeholders can create a more equitable and prosperous future for all children in the Philippines.

Keywords: Early childhood education, socio-emotional learning, Philippines, barriers to access, parental involvement

Introduction:

Early childhood education (ECE) is a critical period in human development that lays the foundation for future cognitive, emotional, and social growth. During these formative years, children's brains undergo rapid development, creating more than one million new neural connections per second, which forms the architecture for future learning and behavior (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). These early experiences are pivotal as they can establish either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all subsequent development.

Research has consistently shown that high-quality ECE can significantly enhance children's socio-emotional learning (SEL), which is crucial for their overall well-being and success in life (Mondi, et al. 2021). Socio-emotional skills, including emotion regulation, empathy, and social competence, are interlinked with cognitive abilities and are essential for academic and social success. Early deficits in SEL can lead to long-term risks for psychopathology, illustrating the concept of developmental cascades where early difficulties can influence future challenges (Rutter et al., 2006; Loeber & Burke, 2011).

Furthermore, the interaction between genetic and environmental factors, such as the quality of caregiver-child relationships, plays a significant role in shaping the developing brain. Positive, responsive interactions, often described as "serve and return" exchanges, are crucial for healthy brain development (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Conversely, toxic stress, resulting from chronic adversity without adequate adult support, can impair brain architecture, leading to lifelong issues in learning, behavior, and health.

Given the profound impact of early experiences, there is a strong case for early intervention programs that promote SEL and mitigate the effects of toxic stress. Effective ECE programs not only support cognitive development but also foster emotional and social competence, preparing children for success in school and beyond (National Research Council, 2008; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016).

This study aims to explore the various dimensions of early childhood education and its impact on children's socio-emotional development. By examining the effectiveness of different types of ECE programs, this research seeks to identify best practices and inform policy and practice to optimize early childhood outcomes.

Literature Review:

Early childhood education (ECE) is recognized as a crucial period for cognitive, emotional, and social development. High-quality ECE programs provide children with foundational skills that significantly impact their future learning and overall well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research has shown that early experiences are critical in



forming the brain's architecture, which influences a child's ability to learn and adapt throughout life (National Research Council, 2000).

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is an integral component of early childhood education, encompassing skills such as emotion regulation, empathy, and social competence. SEL not only contributes to academic success but also to children's overall mental health and interpersonal relationships (Zins et al., 2004). Studies have demonstrated that children who participate in SEL programs tend to exhibit improved behavior, better academic performance, and greater emotional resilience (Durlak et al., 2011).

Quality ECE programs that incorporate SEL components are particularly effective in fostering children's development. Such programs provide a structured environment where children can develop essential social and emotional skills through guided interactions and activities (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Research indicates that early interventions focusing on SEL can reduce the incidence of behavioral problems and promote positive outcomes in adulthood (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015).

The quality of caregiver-child interactions is a significant factor in children's socio-emotional development. Positive, responsive interactions, often referred to as "serve and return" exchanges, are critical for healthy brain development (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). These interactions help children learn to regulate their emotions, develop social skills, and build secure attachments, which are foundational for later success (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1988).

The Effects of Toxic Stress

Conversely, exposure to toxic stress—prolonged activation of the stress response system in the absence of protective relationships—can have detrimental effects on brain development and function. Toxic stress can impair children's ability to learn and regulate emotions, leading to long-term negative outcomes (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Early interventions that provide stable, supportive environments can mitigate the impact of toxic stress and promote resilience (Garner et al., 2012).

The effectiveness of ECE programs heavily depends on the quality of early childhood educators. Professional development and training for educators are essential in ensuring they are equipped to support children's socio-emotional and cognitive development (Pianta et al., 2009). Studies have shown that ongoing professional development can improve teachers' instructional practices and, consequently, children's outcomes (Zaslow et al., 2010).

Despite the recognized importance of ECE, numerous challenges persist, particularly in low-resource settings. These challenges include inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, and a shortage of trained educators (Yoshikawa et al., 2007). Additionally, disparities in access to quality ECE programs can exacerbate existing inequalities, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to benefit from high-quality early learning experiences (Heckman, 2006).

Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education

Parental involvement is another critical factor in children's early learning and development. Engaging parents in ECE can enhance children's learning experiences and outcomes (Epstein, 2001). Research suggests that programs that foster strong parent-teacher partnerships and provide parents with resources and training on how to support their children's learning at home are particularly effective (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006).

Given the evidence on the importance of ECE and SEL, it is imperative to advocate for policies that support the expansion and improvement of early childhood programs. Policymakers should prioritize funding for ECE, provide incentives for professional development, and ensure equitable access to high-quality programs (Barnett, 2011). Additionally, integrating SEL into the early childhood curriculum can enhance children's readiness for school and life (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The body of research underscores the critical importance of early childhood education and socio-emotional learning in shaping children's developmental trajectories. Quality ECE programs that incorporate SEL, supported by well-trained educators and engaged parents, can significantly enhance children's cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes. Addressing the challenges in ECE through targeted policies and interventions is essential for fostering a more equitable and prosperous future for all children.

Methodology:

This study utilized a systematic review methodology to comprehensively examine the literature on early childhood education (ECE) and socio-emotional learning (SEL). The systematic review process was conducted in several stages, following established guidelines to ensure rigor and transparency.



The initial step involved developing a detailed search strategy to identify relevant studies. Multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and ERIC, were systematically searched. Keywords and phrases related to ECE and SEL, such as "early childhood education," "socio-emotional learning," "preschool," "early intervention," and "child development," were used in combination with Boolean operators to refine the search results.

To evaluate the quality of the included studies, a set of established criteria was applied. This assessment considered factors such as study design, sample size, data collection methods, and the robustness of the findings. The quality assessment helped in determining the strength of the evidence and in identifying potential biases or limitations in the studies.

The findings from the selected studies were synthesized using a narrative approach. This involved summarizing the key themes and patterns that emerged across the studies, with particular attention to the impact of ECE on SEL outcomes. The synthesis also included an analysis of the contextual factors that influenced the effectiveness of ECE programs, such as teacher qualifications, curriculum design, and family involvement.

Given the diversity of study designs and contexts, the potential for heterogeneity in the findings was addressed. Studies were grouped based on common characteristics, such as geographical region, age group, and type of ECE program. This facilitated a more nuanced comparison and interpretation of the results.

Findings and Discussion:

Challenges in Parental Engagement in ECE

The study revealed significant challenges faced by parents in the Philippines in engaging with their children's early childhood education (ECE). One of the primary issues is the difficulty in balancing work schedules with the demands of homeschooling, a challenge that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many parents reported that their busy work schedules and limited knowledge of the curriculum hindered their ability to actively participate in their children's education. This lack of involvement is particularly prevalent in low-income families, where financial constraints further impede parents' ability to engage in educational activities.

Research consistently underscores the importance of active parental involvement in ECE, noting that it is crucial for the success of these programs (Epstein, 2001; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Parental engagement is linked to better educational outcomes for children, including higher academic achievement, improved social skills, and better emotional development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, in the Philippine context, the socioeconomic challenges and lack of resources significantly limit parents' capacity to engage, highlighting a critical area for policy intervention and support.

Effective collaboration between teachers and parents is essential for the success of ECE programs. This study found that such collaboration is often lacking in the Philippine setting. Teachers reported difficulties in maintaining consistent communication with parents, which is crucial for aligning home and school learning experiences. Effective communication and collaboration between teachers and parents have been shown to significantly enhance children's learning and development (Zaslow et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 2009).

In the Philippines, logistical challenges and a lack of structured communication channels often hinder such collaboration. For instance, many parents may not have access to the necessary technology for regular communication with teachers, or they may not have the time to engage due to work commitments. Additionally, cultural factors and educational backgrounds may also play a role in the varying levels of engagement and collaboration between parents and teachers. Addressing these barriers requires targeted strategies to foster more effective partnerships, such as providing parents with resources and training to support their children's education and creating more accessible communication platforms.

The study highlighted that socio-economic status is a significant determinant of access to quality ECE programs in the Philippines. Children from low-income families were less likely to participate in high-quality ECE programs due to financial barriers and limited availability of resources. Socio-economic disparities lead to unequal educational opportunities, with children in economically disadvantaged areas facing greater challenges in accessing early learning programs.

The literature supports these findings, emphasizing that early childhood education is critical for long-term educational success and social mobility (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Yoshikawa et al., 2007). However, the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities means that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to benefit from these programs. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive policy measures to ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, have access to high-quality early childhood education.



The qualifications and professional development of ECE teachers are pivotal in determining the quality of early childhood education. The study found that teachers with higher qualifications and specialized training in early childhood education were more effective in delivering quality education and addressing the diverse needs of young children. Well-trained teachers are essential for creating enriching learning environments that promote cognitive, social, and emotional development (Barnett, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

However, the study also found that many teachers in the Philippines lack access to continuous professional development opportunities, limiting their effectiveness. This lack of ongoing training and support can result in suboptimal educational outcomes for children. Ensuring that teachers receive regular professional development and support is critical for maintaining and improving the quality of early childhood education. Policies that provide funding for professional development and create pathways for teachers to gain advanced qualifications can help address this issue.

Underpaid and Unstable Workforce in Early Childhood Education:

The issue of compensation and stability within the early childhood education sector in the Philippines has garnered significant attention due to its implications for workforce quality and retention. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (Edcom II) report sheds light on the profound challenges faced by child development workers and teachers (CDW/Ts) in this sector, particularly concerning their remuneration and job security (Edcom II, 2022).

Edcom II's findings reveal that CDW/Ts are confronted with financial insecurity, as many of them receive inadequate monthly honorariums and hold nonpermanent positions (Edcom II, 2022). This situation not only diminishes the perceived value of the profession but also acts as a deterrent for qualified individuals considering careers in early childhood education. The inability to secure stable employment within the sector undermines the professionalization and sustainability of the workforce, ultimately affecting the quality of care and education provided to young children (Edcom II, 2022).

Furthermore, the inadequacy of child development centers (CDCs), particularly in economically disadvantaged areas, exacerbates the challenges faced by CDW/Ts (Edcom II, 2022). Limited resources and infrastructure constrain the capacity of these professionals to deliver high-quality early childhood education services, further perpetuating inequalities in access and outcomes.

The implications of underpaid and unstable employment conditions for CDW/Ts reverberate throughout the early childhood education system, ultimately impacting the well-being and development of young children. Research by Kusma, et al. (2012) corroborates the detrimental effects of inadequate compensation and job insecurity on workforce motivation, performance, and retention in the education sector. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions to address the compensation and stability issues faced by CDW/Ts in the Philippines.

To attract and retain qualified professionals in the early childhood education sector, the government must prioritize initiatives aimed at improving remuneration, providing job security, and enhancing professional development opportunities for CDW/Ts. Evidence-based policy recommendations, such as those proposed by Edcom II, emphasize the importance of investing in the workforce as a crucial component of efforts to ensure quality early childhood education for all children in the Philippines (Edcom II, 2022).

Addressing the underpaid and unstable workforce in early childhood education is paramount to advancing the quality and accessibility of early childhood education services in the Philippines. By implementing strategic policy interventions informed by research evidence, stakeholders can work towards creating a supportive and sustainable environment for CDW/Ts, thereby laying the foundation for positive outcomes for young children and their families.

Low Participation Rates and Barriers to Access:

Despite legislative efforts to broaden access to early childhood education in the Philippines, participation rates remain disproportionately low, particularly among children aged 3 to 4 years old. This discrepancy underscores significant barriers to access that hinder the realization of equitable educational opportunities for all children. Various factors contribute to these challenges, including parental perceptions, financial constraints, and structural limitations within the education system (Edcom II, 2022).

One of the primary impediments to increased participation in early childhood education programs is the lack of awareness among parents regarding the long-term benefits of preschool education. Studies have shown that parental attitudes and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping decisions related to children's educational experiences (Del Rosario, et al., 2018). In many cases, parents may perceive educational activities at a young age as premature or unnecessary, leading them to opt out of early education programs for their children (Edcom II, 2022). This highlights the importance of targeted outreach and educational campaigns aimed at informing parents about the value of early childhood education in promoting children's holistic development and future success.



Financial constraints also pose significant barriers to access for many families seeking early childhood education opportunities for their children. The cost of enrollment fees, transportation, and related expenses can place a considerable burden on households, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Edcom II, 2022). Research suggests that socioeconomic status is a key determinant of early childhood education participation, with children from disadvantaged families being disproportionately affected by access barriers (Morgan et al., 2015). Addressing these financial barriers requires targeted interventions, such as subsidies, scholarships, or sliding-scale fee structures, to ensure that all children have access to quality early learning experiences regardless of their family's income level.

Furthermore, the availability and accessibility of early education programs vary significantly across different regions, with rural areas often facing greater challenges in terms of infrastructure and resources. The uneven distribution of daycare centers and child development facilities exacerbates disparities in access, leaving many children without convenient or affordable options for early childhood education (Edcom II, 2022). Research by Rubiano and Urban (2014) highlights the importance of geographic proximity and convenience in shaping parental decisions regarding childcare arrangements, underscoring the need for equitable distribution of early education services to address access disparities.

In addition to parental perceptions and financial constraints, the shortage of qualified daycare or child development workers further compounds the accessibility challenges faced by families seeking early childhood education opportunities. The Philippines currently lacks standardized salaries and sufficient numbers of trained professionals within the early childhood education workforce, leading to disparities in the quality and availability of services (Edcom II, 2022). Research by Ogawa and Aggarwal (2019) emphasizes the critical role of well-trained and adequately compensated childcare providers in promoting positive developmental outcomes for young children, highlighting the urgent need for investments in workforce development and support.

Addressing these barriers to access requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy interventions, community engagement, and targeted investments in infrastructure and human resources. Legislative measures aimed at expanding access to early childhood education, such as the provision of subsidies for low-income families and the establishment of new daycare centers in underserved areas, can help alleviate financial and geographic barriers (Edcom II, 2022). Moreover, efforts to professionalize and strengthen the early childhood education workforce through training programs, certification requirements, and competitive salaries are essential for ensuring the availability of high-quality services for all children (Ogawa & Aggarwal, 2019).

The low participation rates and barriers to access in early childhood education is essential for promoting equity and improving outcomes for all children in the Philippines. By addressing parental perceptions, financial constraints, and structural limitations within the education system, policymakers can create an environment that fosters equal opportunities for early learning and development. Investing in early childhood education is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic investment in the future well-being and prosperity of the nation.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within the realm of early childhood education (ECE) in the Philippines. Early childhood is a critical period in human development, laying the foundation for future cognitive, emotional, and social growth. High-quality ECE programs have the potential to significantly enhance children's socio-emotional learning (SEL), contributing to their overall well-being and success in life.

However, several barriers hinder the realization of equitable access to quality ECE programs for all children in the Philippines. Challenges such as low participation rates, parental perceptions, financial constraints, and a shortage of qualified educators underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions and strategic investments.

The issue of underpaid and unstable employment conditions within the early childhood education workforce is a pressing concern that requires immediate attention. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (Edcom II) report highlights the profound challenges faced by child development workers and teachers (CDW/Ts), emphasizing the critical role of compensation and stability in attracting and retaining qualified professionals. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring the availability of high-quality early childhood education services and promoting positive outcomes for young children.

Similarly, efforts to address low participation rates and barriers to access must prioritize targeted interventions aimed at addressing parental perceptions, financial constraints, and structural limitations within the education system. By expanding access to early childhood education, providing financial support for low-income families, and investing in workforce development, policymakers can create an environment that fosters equal opportunities for all children.



Moreover, promoting effective collaboration between educators and parents is crucial for maximizing the impact of ECE programs. Creating opportunities for parental involvement and engagement can enhance children's learning experiences and outcomes, ultimately contributing to their long-term success.

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping the developmental trajectories of children in the Philippines. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities identified in this study, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can work together to build a more equitable and prosperous future for all children. Investing in early childhood education is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in the nation's human capital and future prosperity.

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