

Early childhood social-emotional development: an impact on a developing country

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood social-emotional development profoundly shapes a child's well-being and future success. This study explains how legislative and regulatory strategies and policies regarding early childhood social-emotional development impact a developing country, specifically focusing on Thailand. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews with 12 key informants in Thailand were conducted via purposive sampling. Data analysis involved documentary and content analyses. The study unveiled critical policies and strategies to support early childhood social-emotional development. These encompass early childhood education and care programs, enhanced professional development and support for educators, increased family engagement, accessible mental health support, and robust assessment and monitoring systems. Social-emotional development carries substantial economic implications, affecting education, workforce productivity, healthcare, crime rates, and overall societal well-being. Effective early childhood social-emotional development policies and strategies can boost children's well-being and future success. Therefore, investing in early childhood education and care programs, improving professional development for educators, fostering family involvement, offering mental health support, and implementing vigilant assessment and monitoring systems can empower young children to thrive in the short and long term.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood plays a critical role in economics by shaping human capital development, reducing social costs, enhancing workforce productivity, reducing poverty rates, and promoting economic equality. Policies and investments that prioritize early childhood education and development have the potential to yield substantial economic returns and create a more prosperous and sustainable future for individuals, communities, and nations [1]–[3]. Early childhood is a human resource asset that will bring progress and benefit to the nation and state. Children can more easily reach their full potential when they are young because their development is faster than when they are older. Early-childhood development has an impact on the child's development later in life [4]. During the initial five years of life, children's development is

profoundly influenced by their experiences and relationships, leading to the formation of numerous neural connections in their brains. Importantly, it is during this early period that children's brains establish these connections at a faster rate than any other stage of their lives. This critical phase serves as the bedrock for lifelong learning, overall health, and behavioral patterns. Early childhood lays the foundation for how children perceive themselves, interact with others, and comprehend the world around them. The presence of positive emotional interactions between caregivers and children plays a fundamental role in nurturing the social and emotional well-being of infants and toddlers.

To enhance the emotional well-being of children and their families, particularly those confronting heightened vulnerability due to multiple risk factors, professionals working in early childhood settings can implement a holistic approach that integrates the principles of promotion, prevention, and intervention. This comprehensive framework encompasses the child, the parents, and the overall environment [5], [6]. Social and emotional learning, a process that equips individuals of all ages, including children, adolescents, and adults, with the knowledge and skills required to comprehend and manage emotions, set goals, express empathy, cultivate positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, is gaining increased recognition in educational settings. This focus on social and emotional learning extends to professional and continuing education programs and has evolved into a fundamental component of high-quality teaching and learning. It enhances classroom dynamics, academic advancement, motivation to learn, and the engagement between teachers and students through practical techniques and classroom activities that integrate social-emotional competencies into these interactions [7], [8].

While numerous studies have been conducted in the field of early childhood education, some notable examples include Figueiredo *et al.* [9] exploration of initiatives, studies, and projects related to algorithmic thinking in early childhood education in Portugal, Lafave *et al.* [10] examination of the impact of COVID-19 on early childhood educators' perspectives and practices in nutrition and physical activity, and Shonkoff *et al.* [11] investigation into early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the effects of racism on health foundations. Nevertheless, few studies have delved into the strategy of social-emotional development in early childhood and its consequences. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the strategy of social-emotional development in early childhood and its impact in Thailand. This exploration may have far-reaching implications, extending to domains such as education, policy, culture, parenting, mental health, and research. The insights gleaned from this research have the potential to enhance the well-being and future prospects of Thai children and offer broader insights into child development on a global scale.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The early childhood period plays a pivotal role in the development of social and emotional skills, with enduring consequences for a child's future success and well-being [12]. The experiences during these formative years have a profound impact on both biological and psychological aspects, influencing health, well-being, and productivity over the course of a lifetime. This heightened awareness of early childhood science and its long-term implications has spurred political efforts to enhance early childhood development, resulting in increased action at national, regional, and global levels. As a result, the development and maintenance of a framework, measurement tools, and progress indicators have become imperative, both on a global scale and within individual countries [13], [14]. Early childhood social-emotional development policy pertains to the strategies and guidelines implemented to foster the healthy social and emotional development of young children [15]. Social and emotional learning, on the other hand, places emphasis on the cultivation of emotional intelligence skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making [7]. Social and emotional skills are acknowledged as pivotal factors in child development, elevating personal well-being and contributing to enhanced individual, economic, and social welfare. Despite considerable research efforts to explore the mechanisms and consequences of these skills, there has been limited investigation into quantifying their economic significance. The majority of educational research has traditionally concentrated on enhancements in test scores and educational achievements. However, the tangible value of social and emotional skills has remained largely uncharted territory [16].

Tran *et al.* [17] conducted a study to delineate and quantify the links between family poverty, parental caregiving practices, educational access, and child development within low- and middle-income countries. The research highlights that children residing in the most underprivileged strata of their societies, including those in countries with low human development index ratings, face a heightened risk of not reaching their full developmental potential. Therefore, it becomes imperative to enhance the quality of child development care at home to mitigate the detrimental effects of poverty on early childhood development and subsequent life outcomes. Furthermore, in a study by Ng and Bull [18], it is emphasized that many young children spend a substantial portion of their day in preschool settings, underscoring the importance of understanding how teachers create and optimize opportunities for social and emotional learning in the

classroom. The research, conducted in Singapore, investigates how teachers support social and emotional learning, specifically focusing on aspects outlined in the national curriculum, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. The study identified 32 instances where teachers provided support for social and emotional learning in various interactional scenarios, including group size, activity type, and teaching methods. Notably, the study found that small group activities offered more opportunities for social and emotional learning compared to whole group activities. Moreover, outdoor play and planned lesson times were more conducive to such learning than activities in learning centers, mealtimes, or transitions. The research revealed that intentional teaching was more effective than incidental teaching in promoting social and emotional learning. Teachers employed a range of verbal and nonverbal strategies, such as fostering a positive atmosphere, proposing solutions, assigning tasks, and expanding on responses, to support this form of learning.

Rodríguez-Izquierdo [19] explored the intersection of social and emotional learning with intercultural education. The study advocates for increased pedagogical attention to the role of emotions in intercultural education and delves into the synergies between social and emotional learning and intercultural education. It posits that both these frameworks offer opportunities to reshape curricula, school environments, and relationships, ultimately paving the way for equitable and quality education for all. The study contends that this connection is not only necessary but also inevitable and desirable, asserting that social and emotional learning in intercultural contexts is a fundamental human right to which all students are entitled. Failing to uphold this right is deemed a social injustice. According to Lang *et al.* [20], the social and emotional well-being of early childhood teachers plays a pivotal role in their overall quality of life and is closely linked to their classroom practices, relationships with children, and child outcomes. Their research involved an intervention in the form of a brief online course designed to help teachers employ stress management and resiliency practices. The study revealed that teachers exhibited increased knowledge of stress, stress-reduction and prevention strategies, and the use of reappraisal emotion regulation following the intervention. Teachers reported that the course benefited their interactions with children and improved their self-reported responsiveness to children's needs. However, they also noted higher levels of personal stress and increased negative reactions to children's emotions after the intervention.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative approach as its research strategy, involving the use of in-depth interviews. Qualitative research is designed to elucidate the reasons behind specific phenomena by delving into the contexts that influence the decision-making and behaviors of individuals or groups. It emphasizes the importance of two-way communication during interviews for collecting additional data [21]. In-depth interviews offer comprehensive insights into specific topics, yielding precise information to meet the research objectives [22]. To obtain primary data, the researchers employed the documentary method to review secondary data in order to formulate pertinent survey questions. The sampling method used was purposive sampling, a common technique in qualitative research where researchers apply their expertise to select the most appropriate sample. The objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of a specific phenomenon or population [23]. The study's respondents comprised 12 individuals, including academics, educators, experts, and professionals specializing in social-emotional development in early childhood in Pathum Thani, Thailand, all of whom were aged 18 or older.

Documentary analysis, a valuable qualitative research method, involves the systematic examination of documents to extract meaning and gain insight into a specific phenomenon [24]. In this study, the documentary study entailed the review and analysis of documents and literature concerning the concepts, theories, contexts, and issues related to legislative and regulatory strategies and policies pertaining to social-emotional development in early childhood and their effects on a developing nation. Furthermore, content analysis, a qualitative method for systematically and objectively describing and quantifying specific phenomena by making valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data, was employed to analyze the qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews conducted both online and face-to-face [25].

4. RESULTS

The structured interviews conducted with 12 respondents yielded a multi-faceted thematic framework for the study, encompassing an array of pertinent topics: programs dedicated to early-childhood education and care, initiatives aimed at the professional advancement and support of early-childhood educators, strategies to involve families in fostering the social-emotional development of children, the provision of mental health support for children and their families, and an exploration of the relationship between social-emotional development and economic outcomes.

4.1. Early-childhood education and care programs

High-quality early-childhood education and care programs serve as a crucial foundation for children's lifelong learning and development, fostering positive outcomes from an early age. These programs are designed to create a safe and nurturing environment where young children can thrive, feeling secure and supported. By offering developmentally appropriate activities tailored to the unique needs and interests of young children—such as play-based learning, storytelling, and music and movement activities—these programs ensure engaging and enriching experiences. Furthermore, employing qualified and trained staff is essential; these professionals possess the necessary knowledge and skills in child development, early-childhood education, and childcare management to effectively support each child's growth. Additionally, the involvement of parents and families is encouraged, enhancing the child's learning and development through regular communication and opportunities for participation. Regular assessments and evaluations are also integral, allowing for the monitoring of children's progress and the identification of any areas requiring additional support or intervention.

4.2. Professional development and support for early-childhood educators

Investing in the professional development and support of early-childhood educators is crucial for providing young children with the high-quality care and education they deserve. Such investment significantly contributes to the long-term success and well-being of children. Quality pre-service training programs are essential, equipping educators with foundational knowledge in child development, educational theory, and practices specific to early-childhood education. Moreover, in-service training opportunities are vital for educators to remain abreast of the latest best practices and to continuously refine their skills and knowledge. This ongoing professional development can take various forms, including workshops, seminars, webinars, online courses, and personalized coaching or mentoring. Peer support and collaboration offer valuable avenues for early-childhood educators to learn from one another, exchange best practices, and collaboratively address challenges. This communal approach fosters a supportive learning environment among educators, enhancing the overall quality of care and education provided to children. Additionally, leadership development within early-childhood education programs is indispensable. Cultivating leadership skills among educators ensures effective program management and equips staff with the capabilities to lead and uphold high-quality programming. Providing these development opportunities not only enriches the professional lives of educators but also elevates the educational experiences of young children, setting a solid foundation for their future growth and success.

4.3. Family engagement for the child's social-emotional development

Family engagement plays a pivotal role in nurturing a child's social-emotional development. Collaborative efforts between families and educators are fundamental in fostering children's social-emotional skills, leading to positive long-term outcomes. Essential to this partnership is regular and open communication, allowing for the exchange of information about the child's progress, addressing concerns, and sharing effective strategies to enhance social-emotional growth. Educating parents about the nuances of their child's development and social-emotional learning equips them with the knowledge to actively support their child's emotional well-being. Regular parent-teacher conferences serve as a vital platform for discussing the child's progress and devising collaborative strategies for nurturing their social-emotional skills. Furthermore, encouraging family participation in classroom activities strengthens the child's sense of community and supports their social-emotional development. A joint approach to behavior management, wherein families and educators align on expectations, strategies, and communication, significantly contributes to the development of robust social-emotional skills in children. Additionally, acknowledging and embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of families enriches the educational environment. Cultivating a culture of inclusivity and celebrating cultural traditions are key to engaging families and fostering a supportive atmosphere conducive to the child's social-emotional growth.

4.4. Mental health support for children and families

Supporting the mental health of children and their families is a vital aspect of fostering overall health and well-being. Through early identification and intervention, accessible mental health professionals, and comprehensive family support, we can ensure that children and families receive the necessary assistance to flourish. The early identification and intervention of mental health issues are paramount. This process typically includes screening for mental health concerns and facilitating access to assessment and intervention services, which are crucial steps in providing timely support. Additionally, ensuring that children and families have access to mental health professionals, such as child psychologists, social workers, and counselors, is essential. These services can be integrated within early-childhood education programs and extended throughout community settings, making support more accessible. Supporting families directly

influences a child's mental health positively. Offering resources and information to parents, alongside support groups and counseling services, empowers families to navigate mental health challenges effectively. Moreover, prevention and education programs aimed at families and educators play a significant role in promoting mental health. By providing insights into child development, stress management techniques, and positive parenting strategies, these programs contribute to the prevention of mental health issues and the cultivation of a supportive environment for children's growth and development.

4.5. Social-emotional development and economic impact

Social-emotional development, which includes the ability to understand and manage one's emotions and effectively interact with others, plays a crucial role in economic outcomes across society. This development influences education and workforce productivity, leading to significant societal benefits. Educationally, strong social-emotional skills correlate with lower dropout rates, fostering a more educated workforce and boosting economic productivity. These individuals are also more likely to achieve higher education levels, enhancing their job prospects and earning potential. Moreover, children with robust social-emotional skills often require fewer special education resources, easing financial burdens on schools and taxpayers. In the workforce, effective communication and conflict resolution skills, hallmarks of social-emotional competence, improve teamwork and problem-solving, thereby enhancing productivity. Such skills also contribute to superior leadership, which benefits organizational success and efficiency. From a healthcare perspective, individuals with strong social-emotional skills typically enjoy better mental health, resulting in lower healthcare costs and reduced absenteeism due to fewer sick days. Additionally, social-emotional development is linked to reduced criminal activity, offering potential savings in law enforcement and incarceration expenses. Economically, people with well-developed social-emotional skills are more likely to be self-sufficient, diminishing the need for social welfare programs. Entrepreneurs with these skills often excel, driving economic growth and job creation. Furthermore, a society that values social-emotional development is likely to be more innovative and competitive globally, enhancing national prosperity. Investing in social-emotional development is an investment in human capital, essential for sustainable economic growth and the overall prosperity of society.

5. DISCUSSION

Early-childhood social-emotional development policy is an important area of focus because this is a crucial period for the development of social and emotional skills, which can have a long-term impact on a child's success and well-being. Moreover, implementing laws and regulations for social-emotional development support is crucial for a developing country's progress. By prioritizing early childhood education, providing parental support and education, ensuring accessible mental health services, safeguarding child protection and welfare, fostering cross-sector collaboration, conducting research and evaluation, and promoting public awareness and advocacy, societies can create a nurturing environment for young children to thrive. These efforts have a profound impact on various aspects of society, including education, healthcare, and socio-economic development. By investing in the social-emotional well-being of children, countries pave the way for their future success and contribute to building a prosperous and inclusive society. The study's results were consistent with prior research. Belfield *et al.* [16] highlighted the substantial economic value of teaching social and emotional skills in schools. They found that the benefits of social and emotional learning interventions outweigh the associated costs. These skills were recognized as crucial for child development, enhancing personal well-being, and contributing to improved individual, economic, and social welfare.

The key policies and strategies that can be implemented to support social-emotional development in early childhood include: i) early-childhood education and care programs, ii) professional development and support for early-childhood educators, iii) family engagement, iv) mental health support, and v) assessment and monitoring. Leseman and Slot [26] indicated that high-quality early-childhood education and care programs can provide children with opportunities to learn important social and emotional skills, such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation. Meanwhile, Schonert-Reichl [27] confirmed that educators who work with young children should receive training and support to help them promote the social-emotional development of their students. This can include training in how to recognize and respond to the child's emotional needs, as well as strategies for fostering positive relationships with families. Smith and Sheridan [28] proved that policies that encourage family engagement can help to support the child's social-emotional development. This can include programs that provide parents with information on child development and strategies for promoting social and emotional skills at home. Nelson and Mann [29] stated that early-childhood policies should also include provisions for mental health support for children and families. This can include access to counseling or therapy services, as well as early identification and intervention for children who may be experiencing emotional or behavioral challenges. According to

Goldberg *et al.* [30], children and adolescents require a diverse set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills in order to succeed in school, at work, and in life in general.

Regulation strategies aimed at promoting social-emotional development in early childhood can have a significant economic impact on developing countries. Social-emotional development is crucial for building human capital, encompassing individuals' skills, knowledge, and overall well-being throughout their lives. By investing in regulation strategies that support social-emotional development during early childhood, developing nations can enhance their human capital foundation, leading to long-term economic advantages. Shahid and Akhter [31] affirmed that parenting styles serve as a potent predictor of adolescents' social-emotional competence. This discovery provides profound insights into the pivotal role that parents play in molding their children's emotional well-being and social skills. Mahoney *et al.* [32] confirmed that children who develop strong social-emotional skills are more likely to achieve academic success, stay engaged in school, and ultimately become productive members of the workforce. Furthermore, effective regulation strategies can help prevent or alleviate various social challenges associated with poor social-emotional development, as outlined by Malti [33]. These challenges include behavioral issues, aggression, school dropout rates, substance abuse, crime, and mental health disorders. By addressing these challenges early on, developing countries can reduce the social costs linked to remedial interventions, law enforcement, and healthcare expenditures. Additionally, there is a close connection between social-emotional skills and academic performance. According to Alzahrani *et al.* [12], children who can regulate their emotions, display self-control, and establish positive relationships tend to excel in school. This improvement in educational outcomes can have far-reaching economic benefits since a well-educated workforce contributes to increased productivity, innovation, and overall economic growth. According to Morkel and McLaughlin [34] and Juvonen *et al.* [35], regulation strategies that foster social-emotional development contribute to social cohesion within communities. Individuals with strong social-emotional skills are more likely to exhibit empathy, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution. This fosters a harmonious society, characterized by enhanced collaboration and trust, creating a conducive environment for economic development.

Recognizing and effectively managing emotions, navigating social conflicts, and making responsible decisions have demonstrated significant impacts on various social outcomes, encompassing enhanced health, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and a reduced likelihood of engaging in antisocial behavior. To foster these positive outcomes, policies should encompass provisions for continual assessment and monitoring of children's social and emotional development. This approach serves the purpose of identifying children who may be susceptible to social and emotional challenges and offering timely intervention and support as necessary. Policies and strategies related to social-emotional development in early childhood are of paramount importance in promoting the well-being and future success of children. It is imperative to ensure that young children receive the necessary support to thrive both in the short and long term. This can be achieved by investing in early childhood education and care programs, enhancing professional development opportunities and support for educators, encouraging active family engagement, providing access to mental health support, as well as implementing comprehensive assessment and monitoring of children's social-emotional development.

One limitation of this study is the small sample size of respondents. The inclusion of only 12 academics, educators, experts, and workers in social-emotional development in early childhood from Pathum Thani, Thailand may limit the generalizability of the findings. The perspectives and experiences of individuals from other regions or backgrounds may have been excluded, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness and diversity of insights. To address this limitation, future studies should aim to expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of participants. This could involve respondents from different regions within the country, as well as individuals from various professional backgrounds, such as policymakers, parents, and community leaders. Increasing the diversity of participants would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation and impact of laws and regulations on social-emotional development in early childhood across the developing country. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across multiple developing countries would enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings on a broader scale. In addition, quantitative research, such as online questionnaires, should be considered to explain the phenomenon of relationships in a large group in general.

6. CONCLUSION

This research study has shed light on the significance of implementing laws and regulations to promote and support social-emotional development in early childhood within a developing country context. Social-emotional development can have far-reaching economic implications, affecting education, workforce productivity, healthcare, crime rates, and overall societal well-being. Investing in programs and policies that

promote social-emotional development, particularly during early childhood and throughout an individual's life, can yield substantial economic benefits by creating a more skilled, productive, and mentally healthy population. In addition, the findings highlight the crucial role that such policies play in fostering the well-being and future success of children. Through a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews with key informants in Thailand, key strategies and policies have been identified. The study underscores the importance of early childhood education policies that prioritize social-emotional development by integrating social-emotional learning curricula and providing training for educators. Additionally, parental support and education programs are crucial in nurturing children's social-emotional skills from an early age. The availability and accessibility of mental health services for young children and their families were also found to be vital for promoting social-emotional development. Furthermore, child protection and welfare, including robust legal frameworks and mechanisms, are essential to safeguarding children and creating a safe environment that supports their social-emotional well-being. Cross-sector collaboration among education, health, social services, and community organizations is necessary to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Investing in regulation strategies for social-emotional development in early childhood can have profound economic effects in developing countries. These strategies contribute to human capital development, reduce social costs, improve education outcomes, generate long-term economic returns, alleviate poverty, and enhance social cohesion. By prioritizing early childhood development, countries can build a solid foundation for sustainable economic growth and prosperity.




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