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Teachers' and Parents' Perspective as How The Social Environment of Immediate Vicinity Can Affect The Academic Learning of a Child 4-6 years Age Group

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Abstract

In the process of human development environment plays a pivotal role. At the age of 4 -6 years, children's immediate vicinity expands from home to school and in his social environment parents and teachers play a vital role. Therefore, in this study which was conducted in Phander district Ghizer, Northern areas; of Pakistan, employing descriptive research design five parents and five school teachers were enrolled. Participants shared their definition and understanding about social environment and immediate vicinity and its effects on academic learning. This research is part of Advanced Diploma in Human Development: Early Child Development Programme, Aga Khan University. Thus clearance was obtained from the University's Ethics Review Committee. After approval of schools' administration teachers were contacted and individual consent was obtained from all the study participants (n=10). Due to specific geographical area and population, its results cannot be generalized but it may provide some guidelines for future studies of similar nature.

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Key words: Human development, Early child development, Social environment, Academic learning

1. Introduction:

Environment is a broad concept and there are number of elements that compose the environment; physical, social, economical and educational are few of these facets but they are not mutually exclusive from each other. Thus, in the process of human development impact of environment starts from the time of conception and remains important till the end of life. Specific to social environment, it expands as the individual grows thus the effects are accordingly.

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In the age of 4 -6 years a child may not be able to differentiate between good and bad consequently he may accept whatever he come in contact with. Hence if he is surrounded by healthy environment including opportunity for play, study, participate in constructive activities and interact with people who are supportive for his development, then the child will be able to develop problem solving, decision making, critical thinking and other soft skills required for healthy life. On the other hand in the absence of such opportunities, developmental process can be affected. The present study is one of the attempts to investigate parents' and teachers' description about affects of social environment of immediate vicinity on 4 – 6 years old children's academic learning.

Significance of the study:

Education plays a pivotal role in human development therefore, formal setups are established and children are provided formal learning experiences. In line with same principle, in Phandar, there are number of schools working under Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES, P) and Social Action Programme (SAP) yet 50% of the population is unlettered. Such situation requires to be investigated. Thus a small scale research was conducted to investigate as how the environment of immediate vicinity can affect on academic learning of children between 4 – 6 years of age. This research was guided by second author's personal experiences, from birth to date, as residence of Phandar and as school teacher/head teacher, Aga Khan Education Service, Northern Areas, Pakistan. In personal life experience the e investigator in his early age was enrolled in school with 43 classmates out of them 20 reached to middle class and only 7 completed their education till 10th grade (matriculation) this is a huge gap between start to end schooling. Findings of this research, will facilitate the process of situational analysis in existing scenario, additionally, it will provide evidence based guidance for policy modification.

Research Objectives:

Research objectives were to explore parents' and teachers' perceptions as how the social environment of immediate vicinity can affect at academic learning of a child in 4-6 years age group.

Research question:

How the social environment of immediate vicinity can affect the academic learning of a child 4-6 years age group?

Research Paradigm and Framework:

Constructivist paradigm was used as research framework. Constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Based on this framework participants' perceptions and experiences were explored as how the social environment of immediate vicinity can affect the academic learning of a child in 4-6 years age group (Ladd, 2003).

Methodology:

Study Design:

A descriptive design was used to conduct this study. The participants described their perceptions as how the social environment of immediate vicinity can affect the academic learning of a child in 4-6 years age group. Participants' perceptions were explored through in-person interviews of the individuals (Burns, and Grove, 2001).

Setting:

The study setting was conducted in Phandar district Ghizer, Northern areas; Phandar is the place situated near "Shandoor Pass" The border between North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Northern Areas. It is an island surrounded by the Ghizer River and also there is a big lake called "Nango Chat Phandar Lake". Seasonal domestic and international tourists come to enjoy the lake. Geographically it is an attractive place there are three

main villages, Sarbal, Dalomal and Phandar itself. The area population consists of 400 households coming from different economical standard having the same culture, customs and social environment. In each village there is a school sponsored by Aga Khan Education Services for Pakistan (AKES, P).

Sample Size:

Ten in-person individual interviews of parents and school teachers conducted. Five parents of 4-6 years old children and five school teachers teaching 4-6 years old children in AKES, P schools located in Pahandar district Ghizer, Northern were invited to participate in the study.

Sampling technique:

Purposive sampling technique was used which allowed to consciously select 4-6 years old children's parents and school teachers (Burns, and Grove, 2001, p. 376).

Ethical review:

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Ethics Review Committee of Aga Khan University as this research was integral part of Advanced Diploma in Human Development: Early Child Development Programme, Aga Khan University. Simultaneously permission was obtained from schools' heads to allow school teachers to be approached for their participation in the study. After approval and clearance of study protocol, teachers of AKS, P teaching 4- 6 years old children were approached and invited to participate in the study. Similarly parents of the same age group children were invited to participate in the study. Based on the individual's consent ten participants; five teachers and five parents were enrolled in the study.

Data Collection Procedure:

In-depth interviews were conducted by using semi structured interview guide. Prior to actual data collection the interview guide was pilot tested with a similar group and forty – five was the average time to collect data from a participant. Prior to data collection the researcher introduced himself as student Advanced Diploma in Human Development, Aga Khan University and the purpose of the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study were given consent form to be signed. This form was in English and in Urdu, the national language. Teachers signed English forms and parents signed Urdu forms.

Before asking question the researcher assured that the tape recorder was put on so the participants' responses are recorded. Then using the interview guide the participants were interviewed. Participants were given choice to record their interview in English or Urdu. All the participants preferred their interviews to be recorded in Urdu. Among the parents two of the participants use 'khawar' the local dialect. Tape recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and all were translated in English. To enhance rigor maximum two interviews were conducted in a day.

Data analysis Procedure:

Transcriptions were reviewed to see participants' responses and to extract categories and themes. Similar responses were grouped together similarly different responses were highlighted. Responses from both the groups; parents and teachers were compared and similarities and differences were identified to formulate categories.

Findings:

Based on participants' view it was revealed that they view home and then valley is the immediate vicinity of children. Whereas, social environment is the society in which different people live and perform different activities. Thus in their view social environment and immediate vicinity is synonym to each other. Surprisingly none of the participant from either group; parents and teachers acknowledged school as part of social environment. In regard to academic learning based on participants' description whatever children learn in the school from his/her teacher in a systematic way called academic learning.

It was identified the word 'how' was perceived by the participants as the word 'factors' thus their responses were accordingly. Hence participants described their views which were categorized and are described succinctly.

Educated parents:

A 16 years practicing teacher responded that:

“Parents’ education plays a vital role in children’s academic learning, and they will show good results”.

On the contrary another respondent from teachers’ group responded that:

“It is not enough that the parents are educated it also matters who the child is being surrounded by”.

Another participant responded that

“If there are well educated people in a valley this will create a good environment for children”

Resources available:

Focussing on importance of access to facilities one of the teachers responded that:

“Television, tuition centres and play-ground are available then the child would get good position (in school). In case of non availability the child would lose (good grades)”.

Similar response was received from another teacher who said:

“Based on my experiences as teacher for 5 years if good social environment where tuition centre, media, playtime and other such things are provided to the children, their learning also improve”.

Environment in surrounding:

A teacher with more than six years of teaching experience responded that:

I have seen that children come from different valleys and different homes. They do have different environment so that environment deeply affects the academic learning. There are children who do not maintain their cleanliness, they are not concentrating on their studies it is because they are not provided with learning environment. Other students who have good environment at home and in their neighbourhood they behave well and they take interest in learning”.

Another teacher said:

“The teacher said, if the children are provided a good environment at home and in the society, he/she becomes a good citizen in future”.

Among the parents’ group one of the participant responded that:

“Good social environment leads towards good academic learning; if not then the child may become ‘Awar’ (follow the behaviours which are not appreciated by the society), bad environment leads towards poor academic result/learning”.

The other parent said:

“Whatever the child learns at home he/she wants to display them in school”

Parental role:

This parent recorded his interview in ‘Khowar’ the local language His responded that:

“Whatever environment exist at home or valley it affects the academic learning of a child. Therefore, parents’ role is very important if parents do not take interest in children, then their children do not take interest in studies”.

Another parent responded that:

“A man is known by the company he keeps if a child lives in a good society than he becomes good. Bad society leads towards bad action Parents should not pressurize children to do work (school home work). In this stage the children need good caring, good society, good social environment, because at this age a child accepts everything from his environment so and his academic learning may not be defective.

Challenges faced by teachers:

Teachers as study participants shared the challenges that face while dealing with 4-6 years old children. One of the teachers said:

“As I have experienced children learn bad things from their home and they want continue the same behaviours at school as well. So it becomes difficult to manage them because these children cannot adapt to the school environment”.

Discussion:

It was interesting to note that almost similar responses were received from the participants of the both the groups; teachers and parents. This could be due to the nature of the study setting as in small villages people are closely relating and interacting with each other thus similar opinions are built.

It was interesting to note that none of the teacher or a parents talked about environment at school and none of them highlighted the role of teacher in child’s academic learning. Whereas, a child spends a good time in school where s/he interacts with other class fellows, teachers and others in the school which is environment and teacher’s role is equally important for a child’s academic learning.

According to ecology theory of development, relationship between different systems influences children’s lives. This model is presented below:

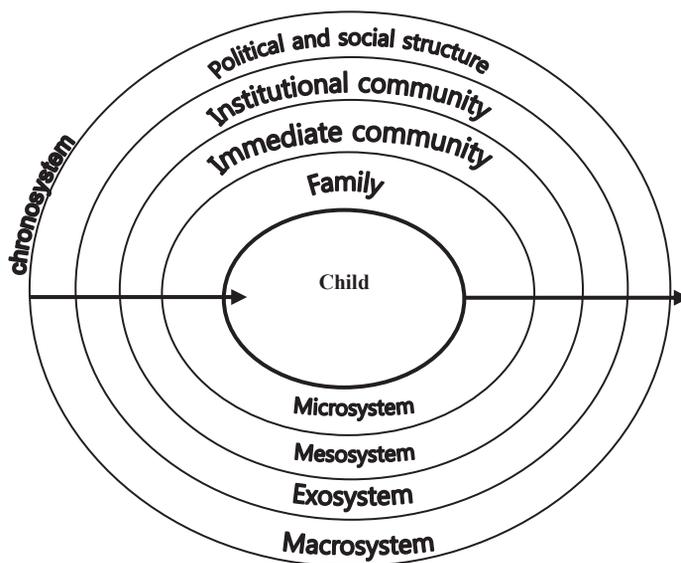


Figure 1- Ecology theory of development

Cited by Ricardo Halpern; Amira C. M. Figueiras. (2004). Jornal de Pediatria. Vol 80, No 2, pp 1-11.

Influence presented through diagram “Children immediate social environment represents family (micro system), in which several process, events and relationships occur, secondly the interaction regarding the relationship of this system with the environment, in its broadest meaning (exosystem/macrosystem) through the time (chronosystem). This model is shown in Figure 1, which describes the relationships between several systems that influence children’s lives, according to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development. The author proposes a model where development occurs through processes of recipient interaction that are progressively more complex between children and all levels of environmental influence.”

In view of the responses received it was evident that all the respondents were converted that availability of resources; television, media, tuition centres and play grounds are essential for academic learning. Contrary there was one parent who believed that parents’ supervision is important too.

In a longitudinal study of 2,857 children recruited from 141 preschool centres, it was reported that “seven social/routine activities (play with friends at home, and elsewhere, visiting relatives/friends, shopping, TV, eating meals with family, regular bedtime) were not significant for under-or-over achievement in literacy and numeracy at

age 5. Consequently, the seven activities providing clear learning opportunities (frequency read to, going to the library, playing with numbers, song/poems/rhymes) had significant positive effects on unexpected achievements” (Mlhuish, Sylva, and Taggar, 2008, pp. 100-101).

According to Mlhuish, et.la (2008) “how parenting may influence educational achievement is not simple matters. Poverty, parental education, culture, ethnicity, parental age, health and other factors are all likely to be important and multiple factors will interact complexly as shown by Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008)” (p. 109).

Coercive parent-child interaction in home may result in child conduct problems. Thus parent training is emphasized. A number of parent training interventions have strong evidence based for improving conduct- problems behaviours in preschool –age children, including helping the noncompliant child” (Mcmahon, 2006, pp3-7).

Ability of a teacher is complex and consists of content knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, and behaviours. Thus a combination of these attributes and skills can portray teacher’s effectiveness.

It was also noted that describing the academic learning there was no discussion about children’s interaction, negotiation; problem solving or decision making skills. Whereas, children develop these skills while sharing their lunch, play and other activities that they do in school and even at home with siblings and other whom they interact with.

In summary of the responses receive it was observed that the participants from both the groups; parents and teachers had similar opinions about their descriptions of the social environment, immediate vicinity and academic learning hence both the groups. The major emphasis was on availability of the resources in the area they live in; home and immediate vicinity. Almost entire responsibility was geared towards parents’ role in academic learning, teachers’ role was not been identified by any of the respondents. Similarly academic learning was considered as results children achieve through their performance. Children’s soft skills such as interaction, getting along with each other were not discussed by any of the participants.

Limitation of the study:

This study was in specific geographical area thus the participants were homogenous thus the results could not be generalized.

Benefits of the study:

Responding to study questions and describing the opinions during data collection process may have provided the participants as parents and teachers to reflect on their personal experiences which facilitated academic learning of a child. On the other hand these participants may reflect on their dealing which may have hindered the academic learning of a child. Thus later on they may either build on the positive role or even may modify behaviours which were not found successful based on their own assessment. Additionally in geographical area which was selected for study concept of participating in research may have also developed which was mainly possible to be accessed because one of the researcher was from the same locality.

Conclusion:

This study was conducted in Phander district Ghizer, Northern areas; of Pakistan, in which participants from two groups; parents and teachers were enrolled. They described their views about social environment, immediate vicinity and academic learning. Based on the responses received from all the participants categories were extracted. Though this study is in very specific geographical area but is important because based on the responses present programmes related to child development could be strengthened and future programmes could be planned.

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