

Effect of Pre-School Teachers' Experience on Strategies to Scaffold Socio-Emotional Competencies (Sec) Among Pre-School Children in Eldoret Town, Kenya

Elizabeth A. Owino^{1*}; Rose Ruto-Korir²; Hezborn Koder³

¹ Corresponding author, Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University

² Department of Educational Psychology, Moi University;

³ Department of Educational Psychology, Rongo University

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Abstract

The learning process, mental health and well-being of children in the future are founded on their Pre-school experiences. Focal to this is the children's Socio-Emotional Competencies (SEC) which help them recognize, understand and appropriately express their emotions as well as identify and appreciate others' emotional expression. Children with poor SEC end up with deprived overall life outcomes. This paper examines the effect of pre-school teachers' experience on the strategies they use to scaffold SEC in children. Teachers' experience was categorized into: novice; fairly experienced and experienced while socio-emotional competence was examined in four areas including self-awareness, relationship management, social awareness and self-management. Using a mixed method research design 98 private and public pre-schools were sampled; 301 pre-school teachers purposively selected; 6 pre-school teachers interviewed and 2 pre-school classrooms observed. Data was collected using questionnaires, observation checklist and interview schedules. Results revealed a significant effect of pre-school teachers experience on strategies used to scaffold SEC in children at a p value = 0.003; with teachers' strategies to scaffold SEC among children improving with experience. The identified strategies for experienced teachers were that they showed concern for one another as well as taking keen interest in the children's individual differences. The study concluded that pre-school teachers' experience influence scaffolding strategies to children's SEC. The study recommends that efforts be made to control high turnover of pre-school teachers. Professional development and continuing education that focuses on non-cognitive skills in children should be encouraged among all pre-school teachers.

Key Words: Socio-Emotional Competence, Teacher experience, Pre-school children, Scaffold.

Introduction

The question of what qualities define an effective teacher is imperative and will continue to be with us for a long time. This is largely because teachers remain the schools' fundamental resource (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). The lucidity of the reasoning of many scholars is that the better the teacher characteristics the better a child's academic outcome.

From a policy perspective, focusing on children's non-cognitive achievement by examining teachers' experience is an important and sensitive issue given that the provision of pre-school education continues to attract a variety of actors. The fact that many children lack SEC skills important for their future overall life's success is evident (Humphrey, Kalambouka,

* Corresponding author, Email: akinyiliz2012@gmail.com

Wigglesworth & Lendrum, 2010; Republic of Kenya, 2012). With SEC skills, children are able to manage their fears, empathize, develop self-control, interpret emotional states of others, and effectively respond to their environments, amongst other abilities. There is a relationship between SEC, academic achievement and overall life success. However, many parents mainly consider the child's academic outcomes when selecting pre-schools for their children notwithstanding that SEC with academic endowment make a child successful in future (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011; Shanker, 2014).

Previous researchers have disclosed five core components of SEC, thought to be critical for a child's well-being: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and decision making (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Shanker, 2014). Research evidence reveals that the development of SEC components in children is fundamentally linked to their cognitive and academic competencies manifested in how capable they can learn to achieve succession schools (Bierman, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan & Barnett *et al.*, 2010; Joseph & Strain, 2003; Razza, Bergen & Raymond, 2015).

Although scholars have examined the relationship between SEC and children's achievement, few of these studies focus on the strategies that pre-school teachers use to scaffold SEC in children. This is despite the fact that many children have deficiency in essential SEC skills important for overall life success. Consequently, pre-schools should consider ways of promoting the development of these core SEC components to enhance their benefits to children (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Shanker, 2014). The study focused on teachers' experience and how this influenced their strategies in scaffolding self-management, social awareness, relationship management and self-awareness as vital components of SEC in children was the main focus of this study.

Teachers' experience refers to knowledge and mastery of the teaching profession gained through involvement in instructing children over time. Although teachers' experience is an important aspect of a teacher's quality; research of its effect on children's achievement has been inconclusive (Croninger, Rice, & Rathbun, 2007; Guarino, Hamilton, Lockwood, & Rathbun, 2006). Some researchers suggest that teachers' experience is not indicative of high qualifications whereas other studies suggest that it is important and related to children's gains. For example, Coleman (1966) observed that children under instruction of experienced teachers achieved higher outcomes. This was affirmed by Jesper and Rivkin (2002) who also observed that teachers with more experience increased the likelihood of 3rd graders' achievement. This effect is not only confined to academics as seen in Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain's (2005) study in Texas which confirmed that children of experienced teachers had a higher overall level of achievement that entailed non-cognitive skills. Experienced teachers according to Podell and Tournaki (2007) make significantly higher predictions than novice teachers regarding learner behavior and achievement. Teacher's experience, therefore, influence their predictions of learner's success based on learner's behaviour. This has been further affirmed by Wang, Chai and Haron's (2016) study which suggests that teachers' experience affects children's performance. Teachers new to the field have little or no understanding of instructional strategies and may exhibit teaching behaviour contrary to what they believe. However, with time and experience these teachers develop better strategies of helping children learn.

There are scholars however, who have disputed the effect of experience on children's achievement. For example Munoz and Chang (2007) found that teaching experience was not predictive of children's overall achievements. Similarly, Nye, Hedges and Konstanopoulous

(2000) had earlier reported that the effect of teacher's experience on student achievement were not significant in most grades. According to Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011) subsequent years of experience appear to have negative impact on children's achievement with teacher effectiveness increasing during first year or two but leveled off after the 3rd year. From the aforementioned studies, it is clear that the debate about whether teacher experience influences student achievement is far from being concluded. These controversies arising prompted the authors to close the knowledge gap looking at the effect of teachers' experience on the strategies they use to scaffold SEC in children. The study is guided by the two questions: what is the level of experience of pre-school teachers in Eldoret town, Kenya? And how do pre-school teachers' experience influence the strategies used to scaffold SEC in children? A hypothesis that stated: there is no significant relationship between the pre-school teachers' experience and the strategies they use to scaffold SEC among children was developed and tested further in this paper.

Theoretical Development

This study was grounded on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory. UrieBronfenbrenner believed that an individual's development was affected by their surrounding environment. UrieBronfenbrenner had the environment around an individual divided into five varying levels hence, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The environment of Pre-school children would best be explained by the microsystem level as is that environment which is first closest to a child. Their school interactions are with their pre-school teachers and the other children in class. This theory, however, ignores the context in which such interactions occur. The authors herein have based their study on the part of the pre-school teacher focusing on their levels of experience. The paper, therefore, has aimed at examining how the interactions of teachers with varying years of experience would have influence on the development of SECs in children.

Methodology

A mixed method design was employed both for the collection of data process and during analysis. In this design the convergent parallel model was used where both qualitative and quantitative data were collected roughly at the same time and the integration of information done during the overall results interpretation. Pragmatism, an approach that embraces dualism influences the whole research practice and should therefore be acknowledged (Creswell, 2014).

The study population comprised 480 pre-school teachers from 160 registered private and public pre-schools in Eldoret town, Kenya. The study sample however comprised 98 pre-schools of which 78 were private and 20 were public. Pre-school teachers; the children's caregivers at the most critical stage of their development thus were deemed better placed to inform the study. According to (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, and Mashburn (2010), and Feldman (2014); children at pre-school are at a stage when they can best acquire skills including SEC thus best fitted for the study. The study used stratified sampling where pre-schools in Eldoret town were stratified into public and private with a 5% margin of error and a confidence level of 95% based on Raosoft's (2004) sample calculator. To reduce bias and make the study representative, the pre-schools were randomly selected for the study (Serem, Boit & Wanyama, 2013). The selected schools, however, had to meet the following criteria: (1) consent from the school administration and the teachers (2) had the children taught in three developmental levels (baby class, middle class and top class). (3) only one teacher considered per class. Where there was more than one

teacher, a further random sampling was done. The study focused on the teachers who regularly taught the children and not those who were on teaching practice. For the qualitative aspect of the research, six pre-school teachers were purposively selected based on the following criteria; (1) were typical of other teachers in relation to strategies they used to scaffold SECs (2) were from private and public pre-school (2) had high scores from the questionnaire (3) had over 20 children in their classes (4) showed willingness to participate in the study. Teacher interviews were done in schools with a follow up interview was conducted on phone for confirmatory purposes. Two classrooms were identified for observation based on the following criteria (1) Teachers' willingness to participate (2) private and public pre-schools (3) high class size (4) baby class developmental level. High class size was taken to mean parental preference and the baby class was chosen because in second term, children were still reporting to school and a lot of adjustment had to be made on the part of the teacher and the child. The total number of teachers who participated in the study was 301. Qualitatively, an interview was carried out for six teachers one of whom was a male and the rest were females. Two baby classrooms private and public were observed for four consecutive days.

The author used questionnaires in gathering quantitative data and observation checklist and interview schedules for qualitative data. In this way, it was possible to use the qualitative results to explain the quantitative ones (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Generating both qualitative and quantitative data was meant to expand the understanding of strategies that pre-school teachers used to scaffold SEC components in children (Creswell, 2014; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2004). Qualitative research is often used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem Ayiro, (2010).

In this study, both descriptive Kothari (2004) and inferential statistics Creswell (2014) were used to analyse the quantitative data generated using the questionnaire. The analyses employed Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 in the case of descriptive analysis and ANOVA was employed at a significance level of .05 for inferential statistics analysis.

Results

Demographic Description of Participants

The established the experience of the pre-school teachers from the selected schools in Eldoret town and results are as shown in Figure 1.

The results revealed that majority 131 (43.5%) of pre-school teachers in Eldoret town are averagely experienced (5-10 years). Pre-school teachers with less than five years' experience were 96 (31.9%) while those with over 10 years' experience who were considered the most experienced were only 74 (24.6%). Cross tabulation results revealed that whereas in private pre-schools, the highest number of teachers were those with average experience 109 (45%), in public pre-schools, the majority 26 (44%) of the pre-school teachers had experience of over ten years teaching in pre-school.

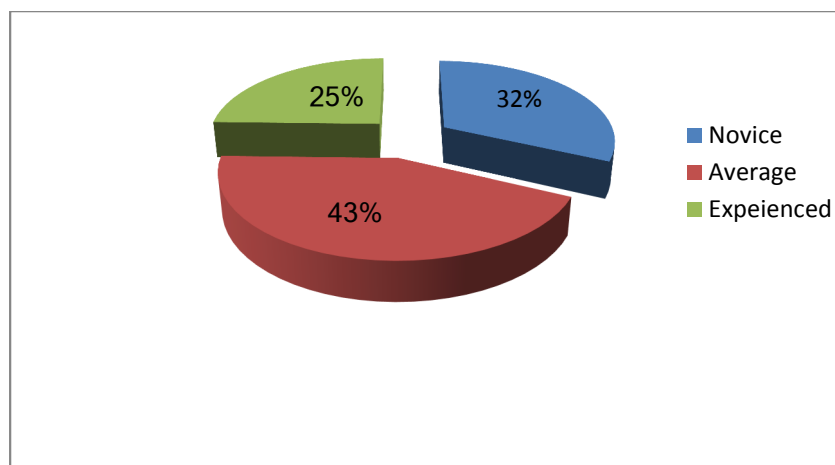


Figure 1: Categories of pre-school teachers in terms of experience

As earlier stated in this paper, the authors considered four Socio-Emotional components which included: Self-management, Self-awareness, Social awareness and relationship management among pre-school children. To test the hypothesis that there is no significant influence of pre-school teachers' experience on strategies used to scaffold SEC in children the participants demonstrated their experience. Table 1 shows the findings.

Table1: Mean SEC Components scores by Experience Levels

SEC Components	Teachers Experience Level								
	Novice (0-5 years)			Averagely experienced (5-10 years)			Experienced (over 10 years)		
	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	N	$\bar{x}$	SD
Self-management	96	40.0	5.8	131	39.7	5.4	74	39.7	4.7
Self-awareness	96	32.9	5.6	131	34.1	5.0	74	33.2	4.8
Social-awareness	96	40.3	4.6	131	42.2	4.3	74	42.5	4.2
Relationship management	96	43.0	4.6	131	43.1	4.6	74	43.6	3.8

The findings revealed that the levels of experience in the pre-schools ranged from novice, who had less than 5 years' experience, averagely experienced with 5-10 years to experienced who had more than ten years' experience. Based on the mean scores for the SEC components, the study findings revealed that the novice teachers had less competence in scaffolding social-awareness in children. It was found out that pre-school teaching experience had the greatest effect on the social-awareness of children. The results were indicative that 'Novice' teachers with less than 5 years (40.3, 4.6) had less competence with scaffolding social-awareness compared to those considered to have over 10 years' experience of pre-school teaching (42.45, 4.2).

To test the effect of teachers' experience level on each of the four SEC Components, a one way ANOVA was conducted. The results of the analyses showed that there was a significant effect of teacher's experience on strategies they use to scaffold social awareness skills in children, $F(2, 298) = 6.045$, $p = .003$. On further analysis, a post hoc test revealed that the teachers' strategies

to scaffold social awareness improved with experience. Pre-school teachers' experience, however, did not have a statistically significant effect on other constructs; self-management $F(2, 298) = .116$, $p = .891$; Self-awareness $F(2, 298) = 1.537$, $p = .217$ and relationship management $F(2, 298) = .403$, $p = .669$.

Interview results supported the quantitative data. It was evident that the public pre-school teachers who were more experienced taught children to show more concern to each other and appreciated individual differences. This was further confirmed by observation data. Children were given different tasks according to their ability and the pre-school teacher was very patient with the children. The teacher ensured that the children completed their tasks at their own pace. Every morning for the four days of observation the more experienced pre-school teachers took time to ask the whereabouts of all children and even gave the children time to give their explanations. Similarly, all children in the more experienced teachers' classrooms were given time to complete tasks at their own pace. It was only in 'waiting for turns' as a strategy that the more inexperienced teacher exhibited competence.

Further observation data revealed that in the public pre-school where the pre-school teacher had over 10 years of experience the teacher engaged the children in conversations regularly which contributed to the scaffolding social awareness skills in children. The teacher also structured activities in a way that catered for individual differences more compared to the private pre-school teacher. During teaching, the experienced pre-school teacher appeared more composed, handled the children with warmth, interacted more with the children and was in control. The pre-school classroom routines observed included, bathroom breaks, snack breaks, schedule of learning activities, with physical education just before lunch break every day. The novice teacher did not appear confident with the daily routines. On two consecutive days, the novice pre-school teacher seemed not decided on what schedule was to come first.

Discussion

The results of this study make a contribution to the longstanding debate on whether pre-school teachers' experience has a significant effect on children's performance (Greenwald et al., 1996; Jesper & Rivkins, 2002; Rivkin et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2016). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [30] acknowledges that experience improves professional development and this significantly contributes to quality of pre-school education. Such quality education in the pre-school classrooms is highly correlated with better child outcomes, cognitively and socio-emotionally. According to Banu (2014) and, Thao and Boyd (2014) experienced teachers are more likely to hold child-centred beliefs and engage in similar pedagogical practices, which can be associated with better learning outcomes for children. This has been affirmed by other scholars (Coleman, 1966; Felters, 2001; Jesper & Rivkin, 2002).

The fact that the study found a statistically significant relationship between pre-school teacher's experience and the strategies they use to scaffold the social awareness component of SEC in children is interesting. Social awareness is critical as it lays the foundation upon which other skills, both cognitive and non-cognitive are based (Denham, 2006; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Given that most pre-school classrooms were actually found to have a greater than the recommended class size, the pre-school teachers' focus was mainly on classroom control.

By focusing on social awareness, the pre-school teachers help to scaffold children's ability to take other's perspectives, show empathy, and predict the feelings and reactions of others as well as recognize how their own actions or speech affect others (Shanker, 2014). Brofenbrenner's

theory highlights the importance of interactions and within the microsystem, children often duplicate relational values and skills modelled around them and have a great influence on each other (Bronson, 2000).

Despite the fact that from the findings pre-school teachers' experience had a statistically significant influence on strategies that pre-school teachers used to scaffold social awareness component of SEC, majority of the teachers (4) interviewed had no intention of staying long in the profession. The pre-school teachers were of the opinion that should they advance in their careers, they had no option but to find alternative jobs. One teacher explained that having a master's degree in early childhood would open up 'green pastures' for her (Teacher 1 personal communication, 16th April, 2016).

The lack of a high number of experienced pre-school teachers in Eldoret and in Kenya as a whole can be attributed to high turn-over that characterises the early childhood teaching profession compared to other professions. This high turnover is ascribed to the fact that pre-school teachers are poorly paid, have limited chances for growth and advancement and have little guidance and support (Cobbold, 2015). High turnover which results in pre-schools having a majority of teachers with low teaching experience denies the children the opportunity to form meaningful child-teacher relationships important in development of SEC (Cobbold, 2015). Greater stability among pre-school teachers however, comes with years of experience.

Experienced teachers have been found to have a higher level of interaction with children. This has further been supported by Harter (2006) who suggested that interactions between pre-school children and teachers increased with experience and greatly benefited the development of children's self-awareness. This relationship between pre-school teachers and children is a building block upon which further self-awareness and other SEC components take place. Emotional quality of interactions lays foundation for secure attachment bond and development of secure working model of self and others.

Experience in pre-school teaching culminating from long years of dealing with children is, therefore, one way of ensuring secure attachment with children. This helps children develop SEC skills. As has been observed by Wang et al. (2016) time and experience enables teachers develop better strategies of helping children learn. It is a widely-held belief that in order to retain pre-school teachers they should be rewarded on performance, given reasonable workloads, have better career paths, be given clear performance expectations, be given opportunities for training and development, and be given adequate compensation (Landry, 2005). This way, pre-school children can gain from the accumulated effects of experienced teachers.

Implication to Research and Practice

Early childhood programs are intended to help children's social and emotional development in addition to fostering academic school readiness. The transition in education is falling out with changes occurring where pre-school children can now acquire education from structured setting with different expectations and rules as compared to earlier on home environment. The need for early socio -emotional interactions therefore has become vital for their growth and development. While adaptability to these changes may determine a child's future success or failure, pre-school teachers' have a responsibility to deliver a curriculum, teach and manage this transition in a way

that will ensure children's social and emotional needs are catered for. Just like this study, various studies have shown that teachers' experience influence the strategies teachers use to support the SEC among pre-school children. It is more to this paper however that the authors identify the significance of the teachers' experience on specific components of SEC as self-management, self-awareness, relationship management and social-awareness. To this end, the influence that teachers' experience has on scaffolding the socio-emotional competencies should play a significant role in meeting the children's life success needs.

Conclusion

From the results of the study, the importance of pre-school teachers' experience in pre-school teaching is obvious. The study confirms that the benefit of teachers' experience in a child's overall life outcomes outweigh the costs. Pre-schools should have strategies to retain teachers long enough to have an impact on the life of the pupils. This can be satisfactorily achieved by giving pre-school teachers attractive pay and benefits that includes conducive working environment given the lifelong impact that they have on the children. This requires concerted efforts of all stakeholders.

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