

Positive Mental Health in the Perspective of Early Childhood Care & Education

Nagamani Krishnamurthy^[1]

Dr. Kalpana Venugopal^[2]

Dr. S. K. Tripathi^[3]

Abstract:

The rich developmental trend in the first years of life draws the attention of early childhood educators to provide stimulating, engaging and developmentally appropriate practices to ensure positive developmental changes in the young children. It has focused the attention of researchers from time immemorial on the amazing aspects of child development and the skills and techniques, knowledge and strategies that could be utilised in the development of positive personalities through ECE participation. Traditionally, the impact of structural characteristics of school environments like teacher credentials, classroom materials, etc have been observed in the literature but the recently emerging findings are indicative of the power of process oriented components of development like teacher-child interactions, classroom emotional climate, etc on predicting child outcomes. The current paper is a case study of a child's academic and socio-emotional success due to the powerful influence of a high quality teacher-child relationship and a positive emotional tone in the classroom environment. The paper is a depiction of the positive impact of a healthy, high quality relationship between the teacher & child on the child's academic and socio-emotional success.

I. INTRODUCTION

Young children in early childhood eagerly look forward to a loving, caring, affectionate and nurturing environment so that they can be at peace wherever they are. Hence, relationships lie at the heart of early childhood settings (MWCD,2005). Building relationship with children is not the only task one has as an early childhood educator but also need to establish and nurture positive relationships with colleagues, support staff and parents (McLaughlin and McLaughlin,2015). Research suggests that teacher-child relationships play a very significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development. It demonstrates the good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school when the children had a secure relationship with their preschool and kindergarten teachers (Ostrosky and Jung,2005). On the Contrary, an insecure relationship with kindergarten teachers results in children facing more difficulty interacting with peers and engage in more conflict with their teachers in elementary school (Gasbarro 2008). The present generation of children needs a very strong cultured, ethical and moral personality as their early childhood educator as they are born with high skills and knowledge in every walk of life in a world full of vices and crimes (Nagmani and Tripathi,2017).

Balavikasa, a preschool was established in the year 2006 with the motto of creating wonderful personalities through its preschool program based on the concept of building positive relationships. The curriculum is weaved on the threads of Multiple Intelligence theory with the roots of Indian culture and value system. The curriculum creates a motivating environment where the child is encouraged to explore, learn and apply what is learnt in varied situations. As children are in

a stress-free environment with constant encouragement from both teachers as well as peers, they feel committed to their own learning and responsible for their own success and hence become independent learners – learning for life! Learning is based on the motivation one possesses and in the early childhood, this could very well be only limited to extrinsic motivation. Balavikasa provides a platform for children to internalise this motivation through positive relationships with peers and teachers so that they learn for self-improvement and not for exams. The preschool curriculum incorporates an in-built continuous evaluation system to promote systematised self-paced learning. Instruction is individualised and development in all the domains is achieved through stimulation of multiple intelligences. Teaching-learning strategies adopted are directed towards learning for life and the same is shared with the parents so that the child is surrounded by a learning environment everywhere. Learning is oriented towards connectivity with real life and applicability so that the child feels that learning is essential in life. Life skills and self-management skills are provided for the child as a primary source for school-readiness (Nagmani And Tripathi 2016).

Children are developed into wholesome, independent, thinking, learning, caring and responsible personalities as the entire system at Balavikasa is based on building positive relationships between all stake holders. From the past decade, Balavikasa has been striving hard to create a positive environment not only at the preschool setting but also at home through regular collaborative techniques with parents and teachers. At Balavikasa, the positive relationships between teacher and child, teacher and parent, parent and child and

^[1] Research Scholar, RIE, Mysore Email: vantagenagmani@gmail.com

^[2] Professor, RIE, Mysore NCERT

^[3] Dy. Director, NIPCCD Bangalore Email: drtripathi12@gmail.com

between teachers and assistants have paved way to developing beautiful personalities in children.

This is in line with the National Curriculum Framework Final Draft for Early childhood care and education. (2005). According to NCF, ECCE, teachers and caregivers have a distinct role as follows:

- Develop responsive relationship with children and understand that transactions within the classroom is a journey of mutual learning between the child and herself so that she can continue to learn and help the children in her care.
- Respect the child and the social environment the child comes from.
- Focus not only on planning and conducting activities but also on continuous processes for interaction and relating learning to child's environment.
- Create nurturing and positive relationships with children and among children.
- Interact verbally with children in a calm, respectful and friendly manner.
- Ensure social inclusion of children with disability in the ECCE classroom.
- Work in partnership with parents.

II. POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP" AND PERSONALITY MAKEUP

The principle objective of the program is to ensure positive environment for the child wherever it is – school or home and establish positive, healthy relationships with children to develop them into positive personalities. Balavikasa believes that building and nurturing relationships is the most essential factor in moulding children into wonderful personalities. The objectives of building and nurturing positive relationships are :

- Providing children with confidantes in teachers and parents.
- Helping children to build friendships and maintain the same.
- Enabling children to acquire techniques of self-regulation.
- Empowering children with the skills of maintaining emotional stability.
- Nurturing children's attitude towards harmonious living.
- Nurturing children's adaptability, co-ordination and co-operative skills.
- Ensuring emotional well-being through understanding and expression of emotions.

It seems natural for parents to establish a positive relationship with their children but in the present scenario, every parent requires the support of an external source like a preschool to do so. Balavikasa has taken the onus of creating avenues, providing strategies and techniques for building positive relationships with each other. The objectives of the program can be listed as follows :

- ✓ To create an awareness among parents about the need for building a positive relationship with their children.

- ✓ To equip the parents with the skills of building an active open communication channel with their children.
- ✓ To create a positive environment in the preschool setting in such a manner that children are surrounded with positive thoughts, motivated and inspired to build and maintain positive relationships in life.
- ✓ To empower the teachers with the skills of handling children positively, communicate with them positively and establish positive open relationship with children.
- ✓ To create an environment in the preschool which will build and nurture positive relationships among the staff members – teaching and supporting staff.
- ✓ To support teachers and parents to establish and nurture the positive relationships.

Balavikasa has been working with every child and its family since 10 years to support children's positive personality development. One such child was little Krishna who joined Balavikasa when he was one and half years old in 2013.

Unique qualities of this child were :

- Extraordinary curiosity in the world around him, especially on why things are the way they are.
- Highly energetic and active.
- Healthy and happy all the time.
- Highly self-centred - unable to make friends with anyone.
- Aggressive.
- Emotionally very attached to the mother.
- Questioning the rules and ways of performing daily tasks.

III. STRATEGIES USED TO NURTURE A POSITIVE PERSONALITY IN KRISHNA

1. Planned activities to cater to the curiosity of the child : Balavikasa individualises the instruction for each child using the principles of Differentiated Instruction(DI). This caters to individual child's curiosity, pace and style of learning. Activities were created for little Krishna to meet his high curiosity in understanding the world around him. Krishna was always kept active in the center and he enjoyed coming to the center. His curious little questions were answered in simple ways and scientifically supported with hands on experience of the concepts wherever possible.
2. Collaboration with the parents to support child's learning at school: regular meetings and sessions were organized to enable parents to equip themselves with the techniques and skills of handling the little one's curious questions. Parents were encouraged to provide the scientific answers for the curious questions with the help of technology.
3. Training the parents with techniques to support positive child development: Sessions were arranged to train the parents with various techniques of nurturing positive child development. Use of positive sentences, active listening of the child's narratives, consequential teaching, quality time with the child, use of story books and all kinds of creative activities were taught to the parents to make them proactive towards nurturing positive child development.

4. Collaborating with the teacher and assistant to build a positive personality in the child: Indeed it takes a whole village to raise a child ! The saying is very true because to raise a child in the present world, you require the support of all the stakeholders – for ex: If the teacher was involved in the learning corner and if the child was showing little or no interest in the activity, then the assistant used to pitch in and involve him in activities which would enhance his concentration and enlighten him about the need to stay focussed in any activity. For over a year, the child was not able to sit in a place and stay focused in an activity for more than 5 minutes. But, the team of teachers and assistants involved the child in concentration techniques and helped him to become focussed.
5. Training the teacher to use techniques for helping the child achieve all of the above: The teacher was trained to be low voiced all the time, patient, seek support from assistants to handle the child. The teacher was also trained to build a rapport with the child, use only positive statements to instruct the child and befriend the child to lead him in the positive direction.
6. Ensuring positive environment at school and at home: The child was always in the company of children who were caring, understanding, supportive and motivating him to stay in the right direction.

Across the world, countries have been working on building positive relationships for children with the respective stakeholders. Among these, mention has to be made about the policy in New Zealand which is one of the first to incorporate relationships in early childhood education. TeWhariki – ministry of education’s early childhood curriculum policy statement of New Zealand is a framework for providing children’s (tamariki) early learning and development within a sociocultural context. It emphasises learning partnership between teachers (kaiako), parents, and families (whanau). Kaiako weaves a holistic curriculum in response to Tamariki learning and development in the early childhood setting and the wider context of the child’s world. Interestingly, the principles of TeWhariki include

1. Empowerment – empowers the child to learn and grow.
2. Holistic development – curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow.
3. Family and community – wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.
4. Relationships – Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

Also, in the USA, the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL) identifies, develops and promotes evidence-based teaching and learning practices to help Head Start programs in the country to achieve the best possible outcomes for young children. As we all know, quality teaching and learning occurs in the context of supportive relationships and intentional learning activities along with quality teacher-child interactions. NCQTL has designed a guide – “Improving Teacher-Child interactions : Using CLASS in Head Start Preschool Programs to achieve such relationships and interactions. The tool is called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) . Research

shows that this tool can help programs build and measure the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions and environments.

It is obvious that the “building positive relationship” program of Balavikasa is a much needed one to bring out the best socio-emotional development in children.

IV. TECHNIQUES EMPLOYED

- Behaviour management – role play, consequential teaching, simulations with older and younger children. A half an hour slot is created everyday where children across the age groups come together to learn appropriate behaviour in varied situations. Here, several techniques like role play, simulations and consequential teaching techniques are used to help children understand the behaviour in different situations. Krishna was taught how to make friends, retain the friendship and be friendly with everyone using all these techniques.
- Whispering into the child’s ears about what he needs to do when he went aggressive – the child used to get very aggressive when any other child used to even say hello to him. The minute teacher used to notice that the child is getting aggressive, she used to whisper in his ears that he is a very good child and he should shake hands with the child who created lot of repulsion in his mind. Initially the child used to ignore the instructions given in the ears making one to believe that it doesn’t work. However, repeated use of the technique has resulted in the child calming down and following the instructions.
- Using a network of a team of teachers and assistants to channelize his aggression towards leadership qualities – the child almost always used to dislike the instructions given by the teacher for a particular task. In such circumstances, the assistant has inspired the child, motivated him to fall in line with the teacher and follow instructions. Alone, the teacher wouldn’t have been able to steer the child in a positive direction.
- Ensuring that the parents show a lot of patience while answering his questions.
- Supporting the parents in retaining their patience and love towards the child – parents were constantly reassured that this is a growing up phase and if positive qualities are nurtured they will be able to see the child imbibing these qualities in the coming years.
- Activities for nurturing his curiosity about the world around him – activities were planned both at school and at home to provide opportunities for the child to explore basic concepts.
- Apportioning more time with older emotionally mature, stable and socially adaptive children – The child was made to spend more time with older and more mature children for long durations of time to enable him to acquire the skills of social adaptation.

V. OUTCOMES

The child showed the following development at different intervals of time and is still with Balavikasa continuing his developmental activities.

- ✓ At the end of six months, the child was able to build a relationship with the caretaker and started following instructions given by her alone. However, the child had still not developed relationships with either the teacher or the peers. The teacher persisted in establishing a rapport with the child in spite of repeated rejections from the child.
- ✓ The child enjoyed the activities for exploration and started learning a lot of concepts about the world around him.
- ✓ The child started observing the other children though he did not make friends with them.
- ✓ The child was able to understand the concept of staying away from the mother during class time and enjoyed his time at school.
- ✓ At the end of first year, the child had established a relationship with the teacher to the extent of following instructions given by her and always staying next to her.
- ✓ All the comforts of staying at Balavikasa got disturbed for Krishna when a new girl Radha joined the school. Krishna did not like her presence and used to show his aggression on Radha. However, with the constant support which he got from teachers, caretakers and children, he started developing a distant relationship with Radha but barely managed to converse or play with her.
- ✓ The continuous support from older mature children as well as Radha enabled him to understand the beauty of a friendship.
- ✓ At the end of one and half years, he had accepted friends and had built an intimate friendship bond with Radha so much so that he was unable to stay in the class without her. Little Krishna had matured into an emotionally stable and socially adaptive personality.
- ✓ The child had emotionally become quite stable and was able to think logically yet creatively.
- ✓ The child now understood the rules and laws of performing daily tasks.
- ✓ With parental collaboration and training, the parents were able to build an open communication channel and are continuing to work on it.
- ✓ At the end of two years, the child is emotionally stable, socially active, logical, creative, independent, emotionally mature and responsible.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper clearly explains that the foundation of social and emotional development of a child rests entirely on building positive relationships with all the stakeholders in child development. As more and more countries are working towards building positive relationships, the world is able to cull out the best strategies for bringing out the best social and emotional development in children. This will lead to a community of personalities who are emotionally mature and stable and bring about social transformations for a peaceful world. Hence, efforts need to be made in our country to design strategies and tools for building and maintaining

relationships for young children. This will enable the young children to develop into positive, socially active, emotionally stable and mentally healthy individuals.

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