



## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION GOALS ON THE OVERALL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

*Malini Munasinghe\**

*Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka*

### INTRODUCTION

Educational research provides evidence that preschool education is an important factor in the provision of equal opportunities for all children. Children between the ages of three and five are enrolled in preschools. According to research, the general principles of preschool education should aim to provide a safe and stimulating environment in which children can feel happy and secure, and which encourage their emotional, social, physical, creative, and intellectual development. In addition, preschool education should encourage positive attitudes towards the self and others, develop confidence and self-esteem, and support children to explore and respect their environment. Preschool education extends children's abilities to communicate ideas and feelings in a variety of ways. According to the latest research findings, this is the time of rapid growth in all aspects of a child's development. Therefore, the main aim of this document review is to explore how selected countries have developed their preschool education, aiming to cater to the total development of a child.

The preschool education system in Sri Lanka still functions in a non-formal manner although necessity was made evident a few decades ago, even as far back as 1943 when the Kannangara Committee proposals first showed the necessity for nursery schools. The Report of the Special Committee on Education of 1943 stressed on importance of nursery education further. There was a strong belief that the government would pay more attention and provide necessary public support for establishing nursery schools (Pre-school). The report, however, considered various difficulties - administrative and financial - on establishing nursery schools either separately or in connection with primary schools.

The 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka declared, in Article 13, that the state shall promote, with special care, the interests of children and youth to ensure their full development - physical, mental, moral, religious, and social - and to protect them from exploitation and discrimination.

In Sri Lanka, the state intervened in preschool education only after the establishment of the Children's Secretariat in 1979. The Children's Secretariat gave priority to child growth and development, and released in 1986 a report on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), which had been prepared by a committee. The report and its recommendations were accepted by the government and published as Sectional Paper 111 of 1986 but appears to have been shelved aside without much action. In the 1990s, the Children's Secretariat was moved to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and then to the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Early Childhood Development Standards for Sri Lankan Children (2016) has mentioned the rationale for setting early childhood development standards (ECDS) for Sri Lankan children (Start Right, 2016). These standards are to:

- Ensure culturally sensitive and appropriate national standards,
- Support children to develop to their full potential through high quality early learning environments,
- Guide families and programs to provide high quality experiences for Sri Lankan children, and
- Enable the child to transfer smoothly to formal school.

It has further described that child development cannot be divided into separate compartments. Psychologists accept that it is easy to understand the characteristics of human development as falling under domains. Therefore, domains can be defined as the dimensions of the child's



holistic development. The following domains of early childhood development standards have been identified:

- Language and Early Literacy
- Cognitive
- Health and Physical
- Social and Emotional
- Aesthetic and creative art

Each domain has been divided into sub domains and specific aspects.

In Sri Lanka, the goals and aims of preschool education have been mentioned in the 2021 proposed preschool curriculum and it has suggested the following aims, considering the total development of an individual:

1. Creating an environment conducive to the development of good health habits, as well as physical fitness and safety;
2. Creating an essential learning environment in which an inquisitive investigative mind can understand the world around, experiment, and think logically about the various events of daily life;
3. Laying the foundation for a child who can demonstrate socialist behavior and have good social relations with others;
4. Laying the foundation for a child to have emotional balance, who has developed positive attitudes based on cultural and religious values that are in tune with the Sri Lankan identity;
5. Creating an environment conducive to the acquisition of basic literacy skills that enable one to handle the language properly, to express one's ideas correctly, and to understand ideas; and
6. Creating an environment conducive to expressing one's creative ability while enjoying the creative arts with an aesthetic appreciation mindset.

Further, it has very clearly mentioned the learning approaches for preschool children. Different approaches can be used to provide learning experiences. It has been highlighted that learning through play is the best method for children. It also identifies adult-led play. It is necessary to provide challenging experiences to develop high-level thinking skills in children. Children, especially, can be given exploratory experiences through play. Also, it is important that the child can explore, experiments, imagine, imitating be created through play activities.

Singapore's Ministry of Education operates a network of MOE Kindergartens (MK) across the country. MKs offer an affordable and holistic preschool education to children aged four to six. There are over 20 MKs in Singapore today There are also a large number of privately owned preschools in Singapore. Private preschools have the freedom to develop their own curricula and programmes. These preschools are also open to children of expatriates. Children from these preschools typically transition to international schools for their primary school education and beyond.

In Singapore, both preschools and pre-Kindergartens emphasize on importance of play, discovery, and hands-on learning. Activities such as music, dance, art, physical exercise, and dramatic play can be found in both preschools and pre-Kindergartens. The Singapore kindergarten curriculum for most international schools follow the Montessori programme, the Reggio Emilia approach, or play-based learning. In play-based learning, children learn by interacting with the world around them. Activities include doing puzzles, playing with blocks, painting, drawing, reading books, and listening to stories or poetry. Children also play dress up and participate in music, dance, and drama activities. In terms of physical exercise, children



climb and play on outdoor equipment; or run, swing, and jump with other children. Playing with clay, sand, water, paint, paper, and colours are also common in play-based learning.

The preschool age in Singapore is four years old. Preschool education lasts up to four years for the standard kindergarten age in Singapore. Although it is not compulsory for children to attend preschool in Singapore, many parents see the benefits of a preschool education and have enrolled their children in government-operated preschools or international preschools.

The Ministry of Education kindergarten (MK) provides holistic, accessible, and affordable early childhood education to Singaporean citizens (Ministry of Education, Singapore). Preschool education is highly encouraged for all children to achieve important learning goals such as:

- Building confidence,
- Learning social skills, and
- Developing a good foundation in literacy and numeracy.

Sweden (2017) Kindertagens shall respect and safeguard the intrinsic value of childhood. Helping to ensure that all kindergarten children can enjoy a good childhood with well-being, friendships, and play is essential. Kindergarten also prepares children for active participation in society and helps lay the foundations for a good life. The following objectives can be identified for preschool education in Sweden:

1. Kindertagens shall meet the children's need for care,
2. Kindertagens shall meet the children's need for play,
3. Kindertagens shall promote formative development.
4. Kindertagens shall promote learning,
5. Kindertagens shall promote friendship and community, and
6. Kindertagens shall promote communication and language.

Kindergarten content includes comprehensive, varied, and adapted to each individual child and the group of children. In kindergarten, children are able to play and explore their creativity, and sense of wonder and inquisitiveness. Care, formative development, play, learning, social skills, and communication and language processes shall be seen in context, and together they are to contribute to children's total development.

In Sami kindertagens, are processes based on the Sami language, culture, and traditions. The kindergarten environment is to be safe and challenging, and give children opportunities for engaging in varied forms of movement. Staff should design the physical environment so that all children are given the opportunity to actively participate in play and other activities, and so that toys and equipment are accessible to children.

In Finland, National Curriculum Guidelines shows, preschool education is to ensure that the following three educational goals (for development as a human being) is considered in activities in a balanced and sufficiently profound manner: the promotion of personal well-being, reinforcement of considerate behavior and action towards others, and gradual build-up of autonomy.

In achieving these, the country has proposed that children are naturally curious and want to learn new things to do and repeat. They learn in a holistic way. They practice and learn various skills and, when encountering new things, they make use of all their senses in the process of learning. Interacting with the environment and people, children combine things and situations with their own experiences, feelings, and conceptual structure. They learn best when active and interested. When they act in a meaningful and relevant way, they can experience joyful learning and feelings of success.



## **Objectives of the study**

The purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of preschool education aims and to identify the extent to which those aims are focused on the overall development of the child.

The specific objectives of this study are

1. To identify the main aspects of child development in Sami kindergartens, development by reviewing the existing curricula of the selected countries,
2. To examine how far the selected countries have considered the aims of preschool education in the holistic development of the child,
3. To find out the methods/strategies used to achieve these aims,
4. To identify the difference between the preschool education aims in the selected countries and the preschool education aims in Sri Lanka, and
5. To make comparatively appropriate suggestions to fill the gaps in Sri Lanka's aims for preschool education.

## **Research questions**

1. What are the main aspects of child development?
2. What are the concepts that have been considered to develop the aims of preschool education in the selected countries?
3. What are the methods or strategies used in the teaching learning process?
4. What are the similarities and differences of concepts among the aims of the preschools under study?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The documentary survey method was used as the research design in this study.

### **Sample of the Study**

Two South Asian countries and two European countries were selected for this research.

### **Research procedure**

This study is a comparative study that compares the existing curricula of two South Asian countries and two European countries where preschool education is active. Comparative analyses were used for data analysis. Data was analyzed descriptively.

There were four stages to this comparative analysis. In the first stage, relevant information, from existing documents, was described. In the second stage, the researcher organized the literature and contextualized the research to examine the extent to which preschool education aims for the overall development of the preschool child. At the third stage, the researcher combined the information and arrived at terms for comparison. In the final stage, the similarities and differences between the countries were summarized, and suggestions made to bridge the gaps.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Preschool education system in Sri Lanka still functions in a non-formal manner and can be identified mainly as government and non-government preschools. A majority of the preschools are non-government preschools. In Singapore, preschools are run by the government (MOE), private/international schools, and the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA). Sweden's Kindergartens are run by the government and it is compulsory for all children. Preschool education in Finland is offered a year before compulsory schooling, and usually when children turn 6 years old. This is organized by the municipalities in the country.

Generally, it can be identified that each country has focused on providing in different ways, a conducive environment to be a good citizen.

### Aims of preschool education in the selected countries

The primary aim of preschool education is to prepare children for the formal education of primary school. The other aims include the development of social skills and easier transition of infants from sheltered home environments to a semiformal setting.

**Table 1.1 Concepts related to Aims/ Objectives of preschool education**

Sri Lanka	Singapore	Finland	Sweden
Good health habits	Discovery of the world	Personal well-being	Care
Good social relations with others	Social and emotional development	Reinforcement of considerate behaviour and action towards others	Play
Basic literacy skills	Language and literacy	Gradual build-up of autonomy	Formative development
Emotional balance	Motor skills development		Learning
Cultural and religious values	Numeracy		Friendship and community
Creative arts with an aesthetic appreciation mindset	Aesthetics and creative expression		Communication and language
Physical fitness and safety			

**Source:** National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2004);  
Framework Plan for Kindergarten, Sweden (2017);  
National preschool education curriculum (unpublished) Preschool Guidebook, National institute of Education, Sri Lanka (2021); and  
Curriculum and programmes, Ministry of Education, Singapore (2021).



From the table above, it is possible to identify the concepts of preschool education in each country.

### Main aspects of child development

Preschool education concepts have been built according to the vision of each country.

In the development of a child, Sri Lanka considers aspects such as language and early literacy, cognitive, health and physical, social and emotional, aesthetics, and creative art while Singapore has considered aspects related to the social and emotional, language and literacy, motor skills development, numeracy, aesthetics, and creative expression. In contrast, Finland mainly focused on the child's personal well-being, the reinforcement of considerate behaviour and action towards others, and gradual build-up of autonomy. Sweden has focused on care, formative development, learning, friendship and community, and communication and language of a child.

The aims of Sri Lanka and Singapore clearly outline the areas of learning that should be provided to the child. In addition, Singapore has focused on giving opportunities to enter the world in different ways. Although Finland and Sweden demonstrate a depth of presentation of concepts, in the process of its content, children have been presented with simple, basic concepts to develop the overall development of a child.

Finland has paid more attention to providing basic foundational needs to maintain the well-being of the individual and guide behaviour in society while ensuring the autonomy of a child.

Sweden has focused on communication skills and language, maintaining friendships and community relationships, how to learn, childcare, and systematic development. The religious, cultural, political, social, and economic backgrounds of each of these countries has influenced the development of these concepts.

Singapore has focused on exploring the world from an early age. Also, as table 1.1 shows, Finland and Sweden have focused on the child's growth and development systematically. They have been more focused on child care, protection, and the behaviour of the child.

### 2.0. Teaching-Learning methods or strategies

Sri Lanka	Singapore	Finland	Sweden
Play-based	Play-based	Play-based learning	Play -based
Explore	Discovery	Problem-solving	Exploration
Imitate	Hands-on learning	free discovery,	Movement
Experiment	Puzzles	Questions	
Imagine		Collaboration,	
		Interaction,	
		Own initiative,	
		Concentration, and learning	

The above table 2.0 shows the teaching-learning methods that they have been used in each country.

### Methods or strategies used in the teaching-learning process



To achieve their aims/objectives, each country uses different approaches in the teaching-learning process.

Play is the best method suggested for Sri Lankan preschool children. Other countries have also paid more attention to the play as the learning approach for their preschool children.

In addition to that, each country has suggested the importance of practical activities. For those activities various learning methods have been proposed such as in Singapore discovery, hands-on learning, physical activities, puzzles, playing with blocks, problem-solving activities; They covered each aspect of child development.

In Sweden, in kindergarten, children have opportunities explore their creativity, and sense of wonder and inquisitiveness. Care, formative development, play, learning, social skills, and communication and language processes should be seen in context and contribute to the children's total development.

Finland also practice different activities, such as playing, movement, exploration, and self-expressions through different forms of acting and thinking that is specific to children. According to its curriculum, such activities enhance children's well-being and perception of themselves, and increase their opportunities for participation.

### **Similarities and differences of the aims of the selected preschools**

The concepts mentioned in the aims for preschool education in Sri Lanka are focused on the basic needs of the child. The other countries have also paid similar attention to child development. Taken as a whole, each of these countries has sought to provide basic conceptual attitudes, skills, and knowledge to the learning experiences of preschool children. All four countries are focused primarily on the systematic development of a child

Each country is focused on learning through play, discovery, and observation, as well as experiments.

However, in presenting the purpose for preschool children in Sri Lanka, the different aspects of a child have been emphasized. Although there is no such distinction in Finland and Sweden, the basic concepts relevant to the overall development of a child are emphasized in their aims and content.

Table 1.1 shows that Finland has been increasingly inclined towards children's independence from childhood onwards, but it is clear that Sri Lanka has given less attention this approach. Sri Lanka and Singapore have paid attention to integrated subject areas in setting their preschool education aims, while the other two countries have not.

Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Sweden have paid more attention to develop language development, while Finland has paid more attention gradual build-up of autonomy of children.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Sweden and Finland have preschools with full public sector intervention while in Sri Lanka, public sector intervention is very minimal. In Singapore, preschools are run by the government and non-government organizations. Preschools/Kindergarten education is compulsory in Finland. It is clear from the aims that each country is focused on developing the basic skills required for child development. Each country uses different approaches to provide learning experiences. Each country has identified the need to provide basic concepts and needs throughout the learning experience of preschool children. It is clear that every country



uses learning and teaching methods and techniques that are appropriate for a child's age and maturity. All four countries have pointed out the importance of the play method for young children. Preschools also provide opportunities for activity-based learning. It is more important to provide different activities that suit the different abilities and interests of the children. It is important to focus on the systematic development of a child.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that a child should focus on developing independently and systematically from an early age. Therefore, a suitable environment should be created in the preschool as well as at home.

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