

The Role of Play-Based Learning in Moral Development: Insights from the DAMTSI Program for ECCDs in Bhutan

Abstract

This study examines the role of play-based learning in promoting moral development in young children, focusing on findings from Bhutan's Developing Accountable and Moral, Trustworthy, and Successful Individuals (DAMTSI) program for Early Childhood Care and Development Centres (ECCDs). The DAMTSI program, which focuses on children aged 2 to 5, uses play-based activities like games, songs, and creative arts to inculcate key values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility. Using the data from the DAMTSI program evaluation report, this study investigates the mechanisms by which play-based learning contributes to moral development in children and identifies best practices for effective early childhood education programs. The findings emphasize the importance of play in establishing moral beliefs and offer policymakers tangible guidelines for encouraging ethical growth in young learners.

Keywords: Play-Based Learning; Moral Development; Education; DAMTSI; Values; ECCDs

1. Introduction

Early childhood education is critical in shaping children's moral and ethical foundations, the framework for their subsequent interactions and decision-making processes. According to Thompson and Nelson (2001), the formative years, particularly those between the ages of two and five, are critical for imparting essential values such as honesty, accountability, empathy, and justice. During this vital period, youngsters absorb information, navigate social relationships, and comprehend the repercussions of their actions (Thompson & Nelson, 2001). As a result, the tactics used in early childhood education can have long-term consequences for moral development.

Among various educational approaches, according to Lieberman and Goltsman (2018), play-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a particularly effective method for promoting moral development in young children. This approach recognizes that children learn best through active engagement and exploration, allowing them to make sense of the world around them (Edwards et al., 2011; Montessori, 1964). By incorporating play into the learning process, educators can create rich environments where children can experiment with social roles, negotiate rules, and practice empathy, all fundamental components of moral reasoning.

The Developing Accountable and Moral, Trustworthy, and Successful Individuals (DAMTSI) program in Bhutan exemplifies this innovative approach by integrating play-based activities into its curriculum to cultivate moral values in early learners. The DAMTSI program allows children to explore ethical dilemmas and develop a sense of social responsibility through engaging games, storytelling, and collaborative projects. This hands-on learning environment fosters critical thinking and encourages children to reflect on their actions and their impact on others [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023]. In a world increasingly challenged by ethical dilemmas and social discord, investing in the moral development of young citizens is not just beneficial but imperative. By prioritizing play-based learning, we can nurture a generation of children who are not only knowledgeable but also empathetic, accountable, and prepared to contribute positively to their communities.

This paper explores the transformative role of play-based learning in moral growth, using the DAMTSI program as a case study. By examining how structured play experiences contribute to ethical reasoning and social responsibility development, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers alike. The findings underscore the importance of integrating play into early childhood curricula, demonstrating that fostering moral development through play-based learning enriches children's educational experiences and lays the groundwork for a more compassionate and responsible society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Play-Based Learning

A fundamental question in 21st-century education is how to prepare children for an increasingly technological and globalized world effectively. One widely recognized approach is play-based learning (PBL), which integrates play into the learning process to enhance children's educational experiences. According to Wood (2004), PBL encompasses the strategies and decisions made by early childhood professionals to facilitate play-based teaching and learning. This includes designing conducive environments and employing various pedagogies to support children's development.

PBL is generally categorized into two contrasting methods: free play and guided play (Weisberg et al., 2015). Free play refers to child-led activities that are engaging, flexible, and intrinsically motivated (Holt et al., 2015). Since children dictate the nature of their play, it fosters holistic development across cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Gray, 2016). However, some scholars argue that free play presents challenges in structured educational settings. Geary (2007) contends that teaching culturally evolved "biological secondary" skills such as literacy and numeracy requires direct instruction, as these skills are not naturally acquired through play alone. Despite its benefits, direct instruction positions children as passive recipients of information, restricting their opportunities for exploration and independent learning (Gray, 2016).

Researchers have proposed guided play as a balanced alternative to address the limitations of both free play and direct instruction (Weisberg et al., 2013). Guided play retains the child-directed nature of free play while incorporating facilitator guidance to align with learning objectives. This approach allows children to explore their environment autonomously while receiving scaffolding and support from educators (Weisberg et al., 2013). Additionally, research highlights that facilitators' involvement in play can range from collaboration to direct instruction, depending on the context and learning goals (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

2.2 The Importance of Moral Development in Early Childhood

Moral development in early childhood lays the foundation for ethical behavior, social responsibility, and navigating complex interactions. According to Kohlberg (1981), children begin understanding right and wrong during their formative years, shaped by interactions with caregivers, peers, and educators. These experiences shape their moral compass and societal norms. Nucci (2001) highlights that moral education should focus on empathy, justice, and respect, values essential for a just society. Integrating moral development into early childhood curricula significantly impacts long-term ethical behavior and societal contributions (Paananen et al., 2015). This stage prepares children to make ethical decisions and fosters belonging and community.

Children who develop strong moral reasoning early on are more likely to exhibit advanced moral cognition (Chiasson et al., 2017). Early interventions and supportive environments help children navigate moral dilemmas and understand others' perspectives (Hoffman, 2000). A solid moral foundation also enhances social relationships and academic performance. Children with ethical awareness and prosocial behaviors form stronger peer bonds and excel academically due to better cooperation, conflict resolution, and social comprehension (Gilliland & Dunn, 2003; Zins et al., 2018).

Moral development also fosters emotional intelligence, enabling children to effectively manage emotions, relationships, and social cues (Brackett et al., 2019). These skills are vital for communication and collaboration in today's interconnected world (Durlak et al., 2011). Parents, educators, and policymakers are critical in fostering ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and cultural sensitivity through inclusive settings and modeling ethical behavior (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2019). Tools like collaborative play, community service, and storytelling instill values and encourage reflection on actions and their impact (Berkowitz & Bier, 2016).

2.3 Theoretical Foundations of Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is rooted in constructivist theories, emphasizing active engagement and discovery. Piaget (1952) argued that play helps children explore ideas and develop problem-solving skills, while his moral development theory (1932) posits that moral reasoning evolves from externally imposed rules to self-regulated principles. However, Yalcin (2021) challenges this, suggesting that preschoolers demonstrate moral reasoning earlier than Piaget proposed.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory highlights that children learn morality through observing and imitating peers and caregivers. Similarly, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores the role of adult guidance in bridging a child's current abilities and potential growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding by educators enhances learning, with play enabling children to engage in real-world scenarios, follow rules, and develop cognitive and social skills (Haile & Ghirmai, 2024).

Recent research shows Computational Thinking (CT) as a key component of play-based learning, fostering problem-solving, critical thinking, and moral reasoning. Leung et al. (2023) found that combining free play with structured problem-solving improves ethical decision-making. Welch (2022) noted that CT activities like coding enhance teamwork and communication. These exercises develop moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. Critten (2021) demonstrated that role-playing games aid perspective-taking and collaboration, even in children as young as 34 months.

Metacognitive awareness, or the ability to reflect on one's thoughts and learning processes, is essential for moral development. Bartsch et al. (2003) state that preschoolers begin discussing their learning experiences at age four. However, Sobel et al. (2007) argue that newborns learn intents and behaviors necessary for ethical decision-making. Structured environments that include critical thinking and supervised play help children develop the cognitive, social, and moral abilities needed for future success (Su, 2023). Furthermore, play-based education promotes lifelong learning and ethical reasoning through social interaction, problem-solving, and guided learning, ultimately developing the core abilities that enable moral development in children.

2.4 Play-Based Learning as a Tool for Moral Development

Play-based learning makes complex topics engaging and accessible for children. It allows them to explore and manipulate materials, fostering knowledge through hands-on experiences (Deshpande & Ranavaade, 2022; Davis & McCallum, 2017). Constructive play, using objects like blocks and clay, is critical in early education but often overlooked compared to symbolic play (Wardle, 2000; Park & Han, 2017). A needs-based approach that involves parents and tailored curricula enhances its effectiveness, especially for special education (Deshpande & Ranavaade, 2022).

Activities such as games, role-playing, and creative arts help children analyze moral dilemmas, develop empathy, and enhance problem-solving skills. Role-playing promotes perspective-taking and emotional awareness, while collaborative games teach teamwork, fairness, and accountability (Paananen et al., 2015). Research shows play-based learning improves moral reasoning and ethical behavior, making it a vital tool in early childhood education (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). It aligns with children's natural curiosity and supports cognitive, social, and emotional development (Ginsburg, 2007; Duncan, 2024).

Play fosters 21st-century skills such as cooperation, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and emotional regulation (Parker et al., 2022; Caven, 2022). Unstructured, child-directed play enhances collaboration, justice, and empathy, while competitive play teaches fairness and rule-following

(Miller & Almon, 2009; Berk, 2013). Peer play helps children regulate emotions, resolve conflicts, and work toward shared goals, promoting teamwork and social competence (Scott & Cogburn, 2023; Denham et al., 2012).

Early play experiences significantly shape cognitive, social, and emotional development (Fadda et al., 2017; Nijhof et al., 2018). Garaigordobil et al. (2022) highlight its role in enhancing social-emotional skills, creativity, and intelligence. Play also teaches children how to collaborate and manage relationships (Knee et al., 2006). Despite pressures to prioritize academics, play remains essential for holistic learning (Broadhead, Howard, & Wood, 2004).

Play therapy offers additional benefits, helping children process emotions and solve problems (Alexandria et al., 2022). Piaget (1952) emphasized that play bridges concrete experiences with abstract thinking, enabling children to express themselves freely and understand concepts like empathy, fairness, and cooperation (Landreth, 2002). Through play, children communicate feelings and internalize moral values effectively.

2.5 The DAMTSI Program: A Case Study in Play-Based Moral Education

ECCD programs are vital in shaping children's values and fostering responsibility. Globally, integrating value-based education into ECCD curricula is increasingly recognized as a way to instill principles like integrity, accountability, and transparency from an early age. Approaches such as the Reggio Emilia method, Montessori education, and Finland's holistic system emphasize moral development through collaboration, self-discipline, and empathy (Asl et al., 2022). Bhutan uniquely embeds these values within its Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, prioritizing honesty, compassion, and collective well-being.

The DAMTSI program, developed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bhutan in collaboration with ECCD and SEN Division under the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), aligns with these principles. It aims to nurture accountable, moral, trustworthy, and successful individuals by integrating integrity education into ECCD. A key component is the DAMTSI Activity Book for children aged 2-5, featuring 57 interactive activities focused on honesty, responsibility, and fairness.

This emphasis on moral education aligns with Bhutan's educational philosophy, which prioritizes character development as part of holistic growth (Kunz, 2020). Research highlights the long-term benefits of value-based education on social-emotional development, behavior, and academic achievement (Miller & Almon, 2009). Programs integrating responsibility and community engagement lay the foundation for lifelong moral reasoning (Berk, 2013). Bhutan's GNH framework reinforces these principles by promoting integrity, compassion, and fairness as essential for balanced development (Ura, 2015). Studies show that consistent value-driven education enhances behavior, social interactions, and emotional regulation, which is critical for effective communication and relationship-building (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005; Denham et al., 2012).

2.6 Challenges and Opportunities in Play-Based Moral Education

While play-based learning (PBL) is widely recognized as effective for moral development, its implementation faces significant challenges. These include funding constraints, insufficient facilitator training, and low parental involvement (OECD, 2015). Research highlights various barriers: lack of suitable play materials hinders meaningful engagement (Pyle et al., 2022), while overcrowded classrooms and inadequate outdoor spaces limit PBL in urban settings (UNESCO, 2023). Schools in underserved areas often rely on outdated resources, restricting high-quality play-based activities (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2023).

Moreover, inexperienced facilitators struggle to balance structured learning with free play, leading to overly rigid or disorganized sessions (Fleer, 2021). Increased focus on academic schedules reduces opportunities for spontaneous interactions and creative play, diminishing PBL effectiveness (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Additionally, a shortage of qualified facilitators and homogeneous teaching teams can lower the quality of play-based approaches (Vitiello et al., 2020; Davis & McCallum, 2017). Facilitator beliefs significantly shape classroom practices, yet many educators remain unprepared due to underfunded or unavailable professional development programs (Weisberg et al., 2022). Despite evidence supporting PBL, time constraints and a preference for traditional methods persist (Zosh et al., 2023), exacerbating educational inequality between affluent and disadvantaged students (Brooker, 2023).

While increased PBL time may enhance literacy and math skills, it often comes at the expense of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Vitiello et al., 2020; Lillard et al., 2013). Similarly, reducing playtime for academic-focused curricula limits meaningful facilitator-student interactions, hindering social-emotional development (Chien et al., 2010).

A study by Haile & Ghirmai (2024) noted that to implement PBL effectively, the responsible bodies must prioritize providing teachers with appropriate training. PBL demands creativity and adaptability in various teaching methods, and teachers may struggle to demonstrate these essential qualities without proper training. One significant challenge educators encounter in implementing PBL is the lack of awareness among parents and sometimes even school principals about the effectiveness of learning through play. To address this, schools, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) unit, and the Ministry of Education should work collaboratively to communicate the value of PBL and increase societal awareness about its benefits.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of play-based learning (PBL) in fostering moral development among young children, leveraging data from the *Evaluation of the Developing Accountable and Moral, Trustworthy and Successful Individuals (DAMTSI) Program for Early Childhood Care and Development Centres* conducted by Anti-Corruption Commission of

Bhutan in 2025. The evaluation included surveys with 613 facilitators and 385 parents, assessing awareness levels, implementation level, and observed behavioral changes in children aged 2–5 years. However, the evaluation had certain limitations. The short assessment period restricted the ability to measure long-term behavioral impacts, and self-reported data from parents and facilitators introduced potential response bias. Additionally, the lack of direct observation meant that findings were based on stakeholder perceptions rather than firsthand child assessments.

To contextualize the findings, the study supplemented the evaluation data by synthesizing the relevant literature on PBL and moral development, drawing on scholarly works. Sources such as Lieberman and Goltsman (2018), Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009), and Wood (2004) provided foundational insights into the mechanisms of PBL, while studies by Paananen et al. (2015), Nucci (2001), and Piaget (1952) informed the understanding of moral development in early childhood. This literature was critically examined to align global best practices with the unique cultural and educational context of Bhutan, particularly its emphasis on Gross National Happiness (GNH) principles. This dual approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how structured play experiences contribute to ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and the internalization of values like honesty, fairness, and accountability.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 DAMTSI Program as a Tool for Moral Development

Measuring moral development is essential to understanding how effectively children internalize values and adopt ethical behaviors. A study in an Icelandic preschool explored how young children prioritize values during play, identifying three key categories: ownership of toys, others' well-being, and community belonging. These findings resonate with play-based learning (PBL) objectives, highlighting its potential to instill core values such as ownership, empathy, and a sense of community through interactive and meaningful play experiences.

However, assessing moral development in young children is complex and challenging, often complicated by factors such as short evaluation timeframes, limited baseline data, and inadequate assessment tools (Implementation Science, 2023). Many play-based interventions, including the DAMTSI program, encounter these obstacles. Early evaluations can produce inconclusive or premature results, particularly in emerging early childhood care and development (ECCD) programs where play skills still develop and require mature time (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The absence of robust baseline data further complicates efforts to attribute changes in moral reasoning, such as improvements in honesty, responsibility, and empathy, to specific activities like role-playing, storytelling, or games. Moreover, current evaluation tools focus on adult-guided play, often neglecting the richness of child-controlled experiences, thus providing an incomplete picture of social-emotional growth (Moreno et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, the DAMTSI program, implemented in 2021, has demonstrated positive outcomes, as reported by facilitators and parents, particularly in fostering honesty, responsibility, and fairness among children (ACC, 2025). Role-playing activities encouraged honesty, leading to noticeable improvements in behaviors such as admitting mistakes and returning lost items. Turn-taking games promoted justice by teaching children the importance of waiting their turn and treating others equally. Meanwhile, storytelling enhanced empathy and reinforced better behaviors, such as asking for permission and following rules (ACC, 2025). These findings underscore the potential of play-based interventions to meaningfully contribute to children's moral and social-emotional development, even as systemic challenges in measurement persist. Fun activities are instrumental in capturing children's interest and boosting their engagement, which are key to fostering moral development through PBL. The DAMTSI program exemplifies this by using enjoyable, interactive activities like Musical Runs, Vegetable Races, and Memory Games to instill values such as honesty, responsibility, fairness, and empathy (ACC, 2025). These activities make learning enjoyable while embedding moral lessons into play, ensuring children internalize values naturally and meaningfully.

A significant strength of PBL is its ability to sustain attention and foster intrinsic motivation. Storytelling and role-playing, for instance, allow children to explore emotions, practice social interactions, and develop essential life skills in a safe environment. Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) found that such activities enhance social competence, narrative skills, and literacy, while McGinn (2017) highlighted the positive link between play and improved academic and social outcomes. Children engage more deeply when intrinsically motivated, leading to meaningful behavioral changes. Facilitators and parents observed heightened interest and sustained engagement during DAMTSI activities in ECCD centers and at home (ACC, 2025). This aligns with research by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009), emphasizing that play promotes deeper learning, sustained attention, and lasting behavioral change. Activities like creating storyboards, nurturing plants, or playing collaborative games like Domino encourage teamwork, problem-solving, and empathy, contributing to holistic development. Notably, children's continued engagement with these activities outside the classroom underscores the program's success in integrating moral lessons into daily life.

By combining fun with structured, value-based experiences, the DAMTSI program demonstrates that play-based learning captures children's interest and nurtures their moral reasoning skills. This approach ensures that children remain engaged, motivated, and receptive to ethical learning, laying a strong foundation for long-term moral development.

4.2 Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Play-Based Moral Education: A Case of DAMTSI Program

It is consistently indicated in PBL literature that pedagogy comes with various application difficulties (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). A study by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) suggests that the

play-based curriculum lacks a clear and consistent conceptualization of play, confusing teachers about implementing PBL. Teacher education and qualification are another challenge in implementing PBL in early childhood education. In the studies by Cheng (2001) and Gray (2016), teachers reported their limited understanding of PBL. Hence, teachers are inclined to create either a classroom environment where child-directed activities dominate learning or a class where scripted teaching and didactic instruction dominate (Miller & Almon, 2009).

According to the DAMTSI program evaluation report, parents faced significant challenges at the household level in implementing DAMTSI activities (ACC, 2025). The most common issues were a lack of time and resources and a struggle to teach young children. Parents cited insufficient training and support as barriers, while a smaller proportion mentioned other factors like children's moods (ACC, 2025). These challenges suggest that more parental support, training, and resources are needed to ensure effective program implementation at home. This finding points to a broader issue within early childhood education, where parental involvement is essential but often hindered by inadequate resources or time (Vygotsky, 1978). Strengthening these areas would support the sustainability and broader impact of the DAMTSI program.

Facilitators also encountered difficulties while implementing DAMTSI activities (ACC, 2025). The most significant issues were resource shortages and inadequate learning materials and activity guides, forcing facilitators to create materials and add to their workload. Additionally, facilitators identified the need for more training, particularly for new facilitators without in-depth instruction. Findings by Fler (2021) also noted that inexperienced facilitators often struggle to balance structured learning and free play, resulting in either overly rigid or disorganized sessions. Facilitators could draw on pedagogical frameworks emphasizing child-centered approaches to address this. For instance, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the "zone of proximal development" suggests that facilitators should scaffold learning by providing enough support to challenge children without overwhelming them. Similarly, Dewey's (1938) emphasis on experiential learning highlights the importance of creating environments where children can actively construct knowledge through exploration and reflection. Incorporating these theoretical perspectives into training programs could help facilitators develop a more nuanced approach to implementing DAMTSI activities.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of play-based learning (PBL) in fostering moral development in early childhood, as demonstrated by Bhutan's DAMTSI program. Implemented since 2021, the program uses engaging activities like role-playing, storytelling, and collaborative games to instill values such as honesty, responsibility, and fairness. These activities promote behavioral changes, including improved rule-following, empathy, and accountability, extending beyond the classroom into children's daily lives.

Despite its success, challenges like limited parental involvement, insufficient facilitator training, and resource shortages hinder the full implementation of PBL in facilities. Early evaluations also face limitations, such as short timeframes, lack of baseline data, and overemphasizing adult-guided play in assessment tools. Addressing these barriers through stronger support systems, professional development, and holistic evaluation methods is essential to maximizing PBL's impact.

The findings underscore the potential of PBL to nurture morally aware, accountable, and compassionate individuals. They emphasize integrating play into early childhood education for balanced cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Expanding such approaches can lay the foundation for a more ethical and responsible future generation.

7. References

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