

Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction among Preschool Children

SOLITUDE ET INSATISFACTION SOCIALE PARMI LES ENFANTS D'AGE PRESCOLAIRE

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Abstract: This study aimed to identify the feeling of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children in preschool. About 36 children of a private kindergarten have been chosen as respondents for this study. The study uses structured interview to gather data from the respondents regarding their self reported feelings on loneliness and social dissatisfaction at their school. The result shows that a considerable number of children expressed their feeling of loneliness and social dissatisfaction at school. The present study also found moderate but positive relationship between children's level of education and the self reported feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

Key words: loneliness; social dissatisfaction; preschool; social interaction

Résumé: Cette étude visait à identifier le sentiment de solitude et d'insatisfaction sociale parmi les enfants d'âge préscolaire. Environ 36 enfants d'une école maternelle privée ont été choisis comme les répondants de cette étude. L'étude utilise l'entretien structuré pour recueillir des données auprès des répondants en ce qui concerne leurs propres sentiments de solitude et d'insatisfaction sociale à leur école. Le résultat montre qu'un nombre considérable d'enfants ont exprimé leurs sentiments de solitude et d'insatisfaction sociale à l'école. La présente étude a également constaté une relation modérée mais négative entre le niveau d'éducation d'enfants et leurs sentiments autodéclarés de solitude et d'insatisfaction sociale.

Mots-clés: solitude; insatisfaction sociale; préscolaire; interaction sociale

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is seen as a powerful force that systematically transmits knowledge, skills and cultural values to the society (Kendal, 2007). For any children, apart from the early socialization within the family through informal education, education make its way for the development of socialization among peer group in a more formal setting – the school. The transition of a child from the family to school is a critical process where the child needs a serious adjustment at school environment especially with his peer group. In the

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process of social adjustment, a child's credibility to form a satisfactory relationship with his peers resembles the level of social satisfaction he has.

However, not all the children at school could form a satisfactory relationship with their peers through social interactions. It is well noted that many students are lonely and they have difficulty in developing their peer relationship (Asher, et al., 1984). Thus, difficulty in forming satisfactory peer relationship at school is a crucial factor for the development of loneliness among the children (Yu, et al., 2005).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, researches have shown an increased interest in the phenomenon of loneliness in children (Asher, et al., 1984; Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Bakkaloglu, 2010; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999; Han & Choi, 2006; Jobe and White, 2007; 2007; Margalit, 1998; Margalit & Efrati, 1996; Moore & Schultz, 1983; Page et al., 1994; Parker & Asher, 1993; Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Quay, 1992; Sanderson & Seagal, 1995; Singleton & Asher, 1977; Yu, et al., 2005). Data from several studies (Asher, et al., 1984; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1993; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) have identified that a child who does not have close friends believed to be lonelier. Research has also indicated that children who were rejected by their peers also reported greater feelings of loneliness (Asher, et al., 1984; Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Yu, et al., 2005). In another major study, Sanderson & Seagal (1995) found that children who were rejected by their peers are lonelier than the neglected children. Some researchers have also attempted to draw fine distinction on loneliness among children with learning disabilities (Jobe and White, 2007, Margalit & Efrati, 1996; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). For example, Jobe and White (2007) in their study on individuals with autism found that loneliness related to lack of social skills and understanding to sustain a successful friendship. The individual with stronger autism reported more loneliness, had only few friends and experienced short duration of friendships.

Numerous studies have attempted to explain further on the relationship between children's level of education and the feelings of loneliness. A study by Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi (1999) on fourth and six-grade children indicated that sixth graders are lonelier than the fourth graders. Similar to Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi's result, Parkhurst & Asher (1992) showed that adolescence reported more loneliness than children in elementary school. Quay (1992) analyzed the data of fourth-grade kindergarten children and concluded that loneliness among the older children were higher than the younger ones. It is important to note here that children in higher grade of education have reported more feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. In another study, Moore & Schultz (1983) pointed out that adolescence who are lonely exhibited low level of social risk taking and high level of social anxiety. A study carried out by Page, et al. (1992) indicated that children in elementary school who scored high on loneliness were lacked in social skills which are needed to develop social interaction among their peers. This group of children appears to be less physically active and fit.

Although a considerable amount of literature has been published on loneliness and social dissatisfaction, the number of research focused on children at preschools remains unsatisfactory. There has been little discussion about loneliness and social dissatisfaction among preschool children. Thus, more studies need to be carried out to add to the growing body of knowledge so that the available information can be used to construct a framework to alleviate loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children at preschool.

In accordance to that, the objective of this research is to determine the existence of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children in preschool. The main questions addressed in this research are: (a) what is the level of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children in preschool; (b) to what extent children's level of education in preschool affects loneliness and social dissatisfaction among these children.

There are several reasons in emphasizing the importance for learning the loneliness and dissatisfaction among these preschool children. First, the development of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children in early years of childhood could lead to serious adjustment problem during their transition from preschool to primary school. Second, children's loneliness also could lead to serious measure on adjustment and social adaptation later in their life (Asher, et al., 1984). Third, research on loneliness and social dissatisfaction is needed to clearly understand the extent of loneliness and social dissatisfaction

encountered by preschool children. The understanding on loneliness and social dissatisfaction is extremely important in order to accumulate these children in various classroom activities and practices to provoke social interaction as a process in forming a sustainable peer relationship. Finally, it is important to venture on loneliness and dissatisfaction among preschool children since far too little attention has been paid on the phenomenon especially in relating to the preschools.

3. METHODOLOGY

Sample

Sample was drawn from a private preschool (kindergarten) in Taiping located in the state of Perak Darul Ridzuan, Malaysia. Thirty-six children from forty-two children participated in this study. Because of the repeated school absences, six of the forty-two children could not participate. Of the thirty-six children, 20 children who were in lower kindergarten (3-5 years old) and the other 16 children were in upper kindergarten (6 years old). Overall, the children in the study were originally Indian (75.0%) and Malay (25.0%) by race.

Procedure

The study was conducted during school days in the seventh month of the school year. The teachers were told about the study. Children were interviewed individually in one of the classroom set for the purpose of the interview. All the 36 children interviewed by the researcher himself. Children were assured of the confidentiality of the interview. They responded to the entire question asked by the researcher without any difficulties. Each interview took about 20 minutes. At the end of the interview, each child was given a set of pencil as a token of appreciation on their participation.

Measures

A questionnaire was developed to assess loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children in preschool. The questionnaire was formatted into two different sections. For the first section of the questionnaire, six items were focused on children's background (i.e., gender, religion, age, parent's background, child's level of education at preschool and number of friends at school).

Table 1: Questionnaire Items

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1. Is it easy for you to make new friends at school?
 2. Do you like to read?
 3. Do you have other kids to talk to at school?
 4. Are you good at working with other kids at school?
 5. Do you watch TV a lot?
 6. Is it hard for you to make friends at school?*
 7. Do you like school?
 8. Do you have lots of friends at school?
 9. Do you feel alone at school?*
 10. Can you find a friend when you need one?
 11. Do you play sports a lot?
 12. Is it hard to get kids in school to like you?*
 13. Do you like science?
 14. Do you have kids to play with at school?
 15. Do you like music?
 16. Do you get along with other kids at school?
 17. Do you feel left out of things at school?*
 18. Are there kids you can go to when you need help in school?
 19. Do you like to paint and draw?
 20. Are you lonely at school?*
 21. Do the kids at school like you?
 22. Do you like playing card games?
 23. Do you have friends at school?
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Note: Items 2, 5, 7, 11, 13, 15, 19, 22 were filler items that focused on hobby or interest items.

* Items for which response order was reversed in scoring.

The second section of the questionnaire contained adopted version of Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire. The original 24-item Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire designed by Asher, et al. (1984), as modified by Cassidy & Asher (1992) used in the present study. Of 24 items of Asher, et al. (1984) one item was omitted in the modified version of Cassidy & Asher (1992). The new version of the questionnaire contained 15 principle items and 8 filler items (see Table 1). For each item, children responded to each question by answering 1 = yes, 2 = sometimes or 3 = no. Only for item 6, 9, 12, 17 and 20 the response order was reversed in scoring. The 15 item scale was internally consistent. The Cronbach's alpha measure was 0.88 which indicates that the measure of these items were reliable.

4. RESULTS

Table 2 presents the children's responses to the questionnaire designed to assess the feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction in their preschool environment. It shows the children's responses to each of the 15 principle items used in this study. The other eight filler items are not listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Children's Responses to Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction

Items	Yes (%)	Sometimes(%)	No (%)
1. Is it easy for you to make new friends at school?	63.9	25.0	11.1
2. Do you have other kids to talk to at school?	66.7	27.8	5.6
3. Are you good at working with other kids at school?	63.9	27.8	8.3
4. Is it hard for you to make friends at school?*	38.9	16.7	44.4
5. Do you have lots of friends at school?	80.6	16.7	2.8
6. Do you feel alone at school?*	52.8	16.7	30.6
7. Can you find a friend when you need one?	58.3	33.3	8.3
8. Is it hard to get kids in school to like you?*	25.0	30.6	44.4
9. Do you have kids to play with at school?	75.0	19.4	5.6
10. Do you get along with other kids at school?	66.7	30.6	2.8
11. Do you feel left out of things at school?*	11.1	30.6	58.3
12. Are there kids you can go to when you need help in school?	66.7	27.8	5.6
13. Are you lonely at school?*	44.4	19.4	36.1
14. Do the kids at school like you?	77.8	19.4	2.8
15. Do you have friends at school?	86.1	13.9	0.0

Note: Filler items are not listed in the table.

* Items for which response order was reversed in scoring.

As shown in Table 2, 52.8% of children responded 'yes' to the question 'Do you feel alone at school?'. Moreover, about 44.4% of children responded 'yes' to the question 'Are you lonely at school?'. Furthermore, 38.9% of children were found to have difficulty to make friends in school and 25.0% of children were found to have difficulty to get other children to like them. It can be seen from the table above that 11.1% of children reported that it was not easy to make friends at school and 13.9% of children reported that they do not have friends at school. The explanation above justifies that a sizable number of children in this study indicated loneliness and social dissatisfaction at their school.

Turning now to the evidence on correlation between children's level of education at preschool and the fifteen responses of the children on loneliness and social dissatisfaction at their school, six of the observed relationship was significant. Table 3 provides the correlations between children's level of education and children's responses to loneliness and social dissatisfaction. As shown in Table 3, the bivariate relationship between children's level of education and children's responses to loneliness and social dissatisfaction did show an average relationship with six of the fifteen principle items. Interestingly, there was a significant positive correlation between children's level of education and children's responses to loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

Based on Table 3, there were four items significant at the $p = 0.01$ level. The result shows a positive and average relationship between children's level of education and the feelings of being left out of things at

school ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) and the feelings of being liked by other children at school ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$). The response order was reversed in scoring for the first item meaning that children in upper kindergarten do feel left out of things at school. They also feel not being liked by other children at school. An average correlation is also seen between children's level of education and their feelings on getting along with other children at school ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) and their feelings on finding a friend when they need one ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). Hence, children in upper kindergarten had found some difficulties on getting along with other children at school and, in finding a friend when they need one.

Furthermore, children's education status at preschool was also shown to have an average association with two of the fifteen principle items. The result was a significant positive correlation but at the $p = 0.05$ level. As can be seen from the table above, children in upper kindergarten were not good at working with other kids at school ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$) and they found hard to get other children in school to like them ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 3: Correlation between Children's Level of Education at Preschool and Children's Responses to Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction

Items	Correlation Coefficient (r)
1. Children's Level of Education	1.00
2. Is it easy for you to make new friends at school?	n.s.
3. Do you have other kids to talk to at school?	n.s.
4. Are you good at working with other kids at school?	0.338*
5. Is it hard for you to make friends at school?*	n.s.
6. Do you have lots of friends at school?	n.s.
7. Do you feel alone at school?*	n.s.
8. Can you find a friend when you need one?	0.433**
9. Is it hard to get kids in school to like you?*	0.422*
10. Do you have kids to play with at school?	n.s.
11. Do you get along with other kids at school?	0.441**
12. Do you feel left out of things at school?*	0.534**
13. Are there kids you can go to when you need help in school?	n.s.
14. Are you lonely at school?*	n.s.
15. Do the kids at school like you?	0.454**
16. Do you have friends at school?	n.s.

n = 36

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

n.s. = not significant

Note: Filler items are not listed in the table.

* Items for which response order was reversed in scoring.

5. DISCUSSION

A prevailing perception among some earlier researcher is that children of younger age do not experience loneliness and social dissatisfaction (Weiss, 1973 cited in Cassidy & Asher, 1992). In present decades, researchers have shown an increased interest in the phenomenon of loneliness and social dissatisfaction in children. However, very little was found in the literature on the question of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among preschool children. This study was set out with the aim of determining the existence of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children in preschool.

It is interesting to note that in four negatively stated items, the percentage of loneliness and social dissatisfaction reported by the children was between 25.0% and 53.0%. The most interesting findings were 'Do you feel alone at school?' and 'Are you lonely at school?' which rated 52.8% and 44.4% respectively on self reported feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. These two items were followed by another two items (e.g., 'Is it hard for you to make friends at school?' and 'Is it hard to get kids in school to like

you?") which rated 38.9% and 25.0% respectively on self reported feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. The results of other items in this study indicates that even though the percentage of children who experience loneliness and social dissatisfaction was not large (a minimum of 2.8% and a maximum of 13.9%) but to one extent it did show a sizable number that justifies the existence of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among children in preschool. These findings of the current study are consistent with those of Asher, et al. (1984) and Cassidy & Asher (1992) who found that a considerable number of children on the majority of the items expressed the feeling of loneliness and social dissatisfaction at school. However, the percentage on loneliness and social dissatisfaction for the four negatively stated items was unexpected. These items have shown a high percentage of loneliness and social dissatisfaction than those reported by Asher, et al. (1984) and Cassidy & Asher (1992).

The present study also found a moderate relationship between children's level of education and self reported feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Surprisingly, the level of education was positively related to the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children in the preschool. This finding justified that children with higher level of education that is for those in upper kindergarten have greater feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction than children in lower level of education. The study found that children in upper kindergarten were not good at working with other children at school, could not find a friend when they need one and hard to get children in school to like them. The current study also found that they could not get along with other children at school, feel left out of things at school and they had the feelings that children at school do not like them. Even in this small sample of young children at preschool, feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction are undeniable and it is higher among children who were in upper kindergarten (6 years) than the lower kindergarten (3-5 years). These findings corroborates the ideas of Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi (1999), Parkhurst & Asher (1992) and Quay (1992) who suggested loneliness and social dissatisfaction somewhat greater in older children.

The reason for why older children feel lonelier is not clear but it definitely may have something to do with peer rejection. One possible thought for this might be that these children lack opportunity to form social interaction when the children move to upper level of education at preschool. It may be explained by the fact that when the children move to upper kindergarten, the traditional method of continuous teaching and learning in classroom on the basis of reading, writing, coloring, painting and memorizing (if it was the case applied); it would certainly emphasized more on individual focused activities rather than group focused activities which could lead to good cooperation and a better social interaction among children in wider perspective. The upper kindergarten at preschool often has been a platform in preparing children's transition to primary schools. Hence, a strong emphasis may be given by the teachers more on knowledge oriented skills as the preparation to locate the children in the right track of education before the children step in their primary school than the continuous emphasis on socialization and adaptation as provided at their lower kindergarten. In this case, it might cause some difficulties for the children to relate with other children, hinders their social interaction and create the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children. The feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction are often accompanied by peer rejection (Asher, et al., 1990 as cited in Cassidy & Asher, 1992).

The present study suggests three important avenues for action. The evidence from this study suggests that there is a need on developing a good classroom environment that creates opportunities for social interaction among children. A teacher should not only perceive as a leader of academic environment but also as a facilitator of social relationship among the children at school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). A considerable level of loneliness and social dissatisfaction is identified among students within their school environment and within their peer group. Childhood loneliness intervention strategies should be focused on reducing the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness among the children (Page et al., 1994). Thus, teachers should advance their knowledge in collaborating the social skills and social interaction of the children along the syllabus of education being taught in the classroom. This effort will enhance children's ability to form a close relationship with their peer group.

The results of the study also indicate the importance of teacher's educational program for preschool. Preschool teacher's educational program could be designed by taking into account a module on loneliness and social dissatisfaction in children. The module should include the role of teachers to help the students in developing skills to alleviate loneliness and social dissatisfaction in classroom. Teachers need to be addressed with various strategies in the forms of activities that can be used in classroom which could

enhance participation and cooperation among children as a tool for constructing a close friendship among the peers.

Taken together, teacher's training program is needed especially for those teachers in private preschools. Contrary to the public preschool teachers who undergo trainings, the private preschool teachers were not well trained. They might be a secondary school leaver with a weak or moderate academic achievement. But, they could be entirely absence of the formal knowledge about preschool education. An appropriate formal training in preschool education need to be made a compulsory to all private preschool teachers; not only as a mechanism to deliver a proper knowledge but also to enhance the emotional and social development of the children before their transition to primary schools.

The research has thrown up many questions in need for further investigation. Besides the private preschools, further work needs to be done to examine the differences on the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children in public preschools. A comparative study on public and private preschools is needed to see the level of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the children in these two types of schools. Further research might also explore the causes of loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the preschool children. Research is also needed to determine the differences in the strategies implemented by the teachers (both public and private preschools) to help the children to cope or alleviate the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction at school. More broadly, future research should also concentrate on the investigation of children's family characteristic and its influence on loneliness and social dissatisfaction among the preschool children.

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