

Board Game Play and Its Implication on Friendship Development for Lower Primary Children in Singapore

Research Overview

This study investigates the impact of collaborative board game play on friendship development among seven-year-old Primary One students in Singapore. Using a mixed-method embedded design (QUAL+quan), it examines how structured play sessions influence friendship quality, guided by Selman's Five-Stage Model.

Purpose of Study

Young children's friendships play a crucial role in their social-emotional well-being, happiness, and ultimately their academic performance yet structured classroom settings often limit opportunities for spontaneous social interactions. In Singapore, spontaneous play opportunities are increasingly constrained within the structured academic environment of primary schools. While schools prioritize social-emotional (SE) competencies, the standard 30-minute Form Teacher Guidance Period (FTGP) may be insufficient for children to internalize and practice interpersonal skills such as initiating conversations. Recess, a key time for self-and social play, is also often too short (30 minutes) for deeper peer connections.

Research shows that early friendships influence children's self-esteem, school engagement, and social success, which impacts children's well-being. By implementing structured and spontaneous, collaborative board game play, educators can create an engaging, inclusive environment that supports relationship-building and cooperative learning.

The primary objectives were to determine if collaborative board games could influence friendship quality, especially for the less popular ones, and to understand children's unique perspectives on their play experiences and peer relationships. The study also sought to fill a research gap in the local Singaporean context on how providing board game play opportunities can facilitate a smoother transition for young children entering formal schooling.

Research Methods

The study employed a mixed-method embedded design (QUAL+quan), prioritizing qualitative insights supported by quantitative measures, to investigate the impact of collaborative board game play on the quality of friendship development among Primary One children (7-year-olds).

Data collection included sociometric friendship nomination activities, semi-structured interviews, observational notes during board game play sessions, and a happiness survey. The conceptual frameworks applied were Selman's (1981) Five-Stage Model of Friendship Development and Bukowski et al.'s (1994) Friendship Quality Model, focusing on dimensions of companionship, conflict, help, and closeness.

The research was conducted in three distinct phases involving a class of 30 Primary One children (13 girls and 17 boys) in a local primary school.

1. Phase 1 (Pre-board game play): All 30 children participated in a sociometric friendship nomination activity and semi-structured interviews to establish a baseline of class dynamics. Children categorized peers as "Good Friend," "Just-a-Friend," "Classmate," or "Others". Based on this, 12 children identified as being "at risk" of social isolation (those frequently nominated as "Classmate" or "Others" categories) were shortlisted for the intervention. A Happiness survey was also conducted in this phase.
2. Phase 2 (Board game play): The 12 shortlisted children were divided into three groups to play the collaborative board game "Race to Treasure" over four 15-minute sessions during recess. Observational notes were taken during the board game play sessions.
3. Phase 3 (Post-board game play): Data collection was repeated with the 12 children, including a final round of friendship nominations, a happiness survey, and a drawing activity to capture their perspectives on the gameplay experience.

Results and Discussion

Findings revealed a qualitative shift in perceptions of friendship. Initially, the 12 children's views aligned with Selman's Stage 0 (Momentary Physicalistic Playmates), where proximity was the dominant factor in nominations (53.19% of reasons cited). Following the intervention, there was a transition toward Stage 1

(One-Way Assistance) and Stage 2 (Fair-Weather Cooperation). "Personal Qualities"—such as "playing properly" and helping—became the leading nomination factor at 51.85%. Quantitatively, 58.3% (n=7) of participants showed an improvement in individual mean friendship ratings.

The observational data and drawing activity highlighted that children found the collaborative nature of the game highly engaging. 75% of the children (n=9) explicitly stated they enjoyed the sessions, and 66.7% of the children (n=8) reported positive emotions like being "super excited". Drawings frequently depicted teamwork and shared victory, reflecting an emerging understanding of reciprocal support and togetherness. While the happiness survey showed that overall school happiness remained stable (Mean = 3.42 to 3.46), 91.6% of children (n=11) attributed their happiness to friendships and recess, validating the importance of social play.

This study underscored the potential of collaborative board games as an effective, sustainable tool and play opportunity for enhancing social-emotional learning in primary schools. By providing a structured yet enjoyable environment, these games facilitate the transition from situational playmates to reciprocal partners, helping to prevent social isolation and promoting a positive school experience for all children. The findings also highlighted the importance of integrating structured yet enjoyable activities into the primary school timetable and teachers must actively support children's friendships because their happiness depends on it. Teachers should take a proactive approach by organizing shared play experiences that allow each child's unique qualities to emerge.

The limitations of the study are that it is constrained by a small sample size (n=12), which prioritized qualitative depth over broader statistical significance. Methodologically, the single-researcher observation of three concurrent groups may have resulted in incomplete data capture. The homogeneous demographic (all participants were of Chinese ethnicity) limits the applicability of findings to more diverse populations. Furthermore, the one-group pretest-posttest design lacked a control group, making it difficult to isolate the effects of the intervention from natural social development or external classroom variables.

References

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