

Learning Environment and Early Childhood Character Development in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Sofni Indah Arifa Lubis¹, Zannatun Nisya², Yuliana Lubis³

^{1,2,3}Department of Early Childhood Islamic Education, Faculty of Islamic Religion and Humanities, University of Pembangunan Panca Budi, Medan, Indonesia

email: sofni.lubis@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id

Abstract. *An early childhood child is an individual who actively interacts with individuals around them. From these direct interactions, children learn social norms and ethics that shape and develop their character. This study focused on the process of early childhood learning from the environment in developing their character from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory framework. Eleven interviewees participated in this qualitative research. The findings revealed that at the mesosystem level, a learning environment in the community that is safe and supportive of children's growth and development will develop children's positive character. These results corroborated that positive interactions within the environmental layers in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will contribute positively to children's development. Parents and RuPin Coordinators unanimously stated that education contributes positively to children's growth and development. Even the smallest knowledge gained by children will affect their mindset and behavior, so a commitment to providing a safe and positively stimulating learning environment is important. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, an adequate learning environment for young children should involve positive interactions between various environmental systems: family, school, peers and community.*

Keywords : *Learning Environment, Character Development, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Positive Interactions, Early Childhood*

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning, according to Skinner (in Djamaluddin & Wardana, 2019) is an ongoing process of behavioral adjustment. This definition validates the popular understanding that we can learn every day, everywhere, and using diverse sources. However, the true definition of learning is still commonly seen from the traditional learning culture, which is receiving formal education in a formal institution, such as schools, colleges and universities. The understanding of learning in a fixed place reflects the important role of an environment for someone to learn. If there is a teacher, there are students, and there is knowledge being transferred then the learning process is underway. However, along with the development of human understanding of science, the learning environment is not only at school but also at home (family), and society.

Indonesia has several learning environments and each individual can decide for themselves which learning environment suits their needs. For this reason, research on conducive and safe learning environments should be carried out to ensure that each individual gains the knowledge they need. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a report entitled *Violence and Bullying in Schools: A Global Status Report* (cited in 2019). This report reveals that the issue of a safe learning environment

for children has become a special concern for UNESCO because it is a major obstacle in achieving quality education for children. In addition, an unsafe learning environment will adversely affect the physical, psychological development and well-being of children for life.

This study analyzes the community learning environment. A child learns from the environment (Nitecki & Chung, 2016). Before learning at school, a child's learning environment is at home with family and in the neighborhood with peers and other community members. The learning environment plays an important role in developing a child's academic and non-academic potential, behavior, and attitude. A safe and conducive learning environment will develop children's motivation to learn, increase children's participation and achievement while a non-conducive learning environment will hinder children's learning process. Therefore, understanding the influence of the learning environment and how to create a safe and secure learning environment for children is important for decision makers, educators and researchers.

Yayasan Fajar Sejahtera Indonesia (YAFSI) is a non-profit organization in Medan City. Established on May 15, 2018, YAFSI focuses on child protection and women empowerment issues. In the same year YAFSI launched the Rumah Pintar (RuPin) program in Lingkungan VIII Pengilar Village, Amplas Sub-district, Medan City. RuPin provides a safe and comfortable learning environment for children in the area. RuPin stands in the community and becomes part of a community, by organizing various activities that support children's right to growth and development in a safe and fun learning environment. This approach creates and strengthens strong reciprocal relationships and builds awareness between families and communities that a safe learning environment for children is a shared responsibility and obligation to achieve quality education and human resources (UNESCO, 2022). Literacy development, positive character development, understanding of climate change, dance activities, photography activities are some of the activities that take place there. Children aged 5-18 years old are the most active in participating in the activities. RuPin does have a simple goal to develop children's potential so that they become independent and noble individuals in adulthood.

Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 60 of 2013 concerning Holistic Integrative Early Childhood Development Article 1 Paragraph 1 states that early childhood is an individual aged 0-6 years. During this period, children will develop optimally through the learning process, participating in various activities, interacting with other people besides family members (Parapat et al., 2023; (Nofianti, 2020). The main indicators in the process of child development are ensuring that children live in an environment that is safe, conducive, supports their growth and development, carries religious values, teaches culture,

and develops personal potential (Amali et al., 2023; Nurhasanah, 2022; Rahman & Kencana, 2020).

This study utilizes Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory framework. The ecological perspective offers a framework to focus analysis on the individual and the environment simultaneously and the interdependent relationship between the two systems (Jugessur, 2022; Evans, 2023; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is a theory that emphasizes the influence of the environment on the development of each individual. This development is the result of the child's interaction with the surrounding environment. There are five layers of the environment, namely Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. This study will focus on the Mesosystem layer. The second layer of children's interaction in the Microsystem environment and the dynamics of the Mesosystem. In the context of early childhood development, the ecological perspective provides a new perspective in analyzing child development in a broader scope such as digitalization and climate change.

The Microsystem layer is the first layer that contains children's interactions with the people around them, such as parents, siblings, peers, teachers, neighbors, and others. Each of these individuals cannot stand alone. They need and influence each other. The Mesosystem layer contains a track record of the interactions of the individuals in the Microsystem layer that have a positive or negative impact on the child. The interaction between teachers and parents will affect the child's growth and development. In this study, interactions between parents, community members, and RuPin influence child development.

This study used Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory framework to analyze the story and answer the question: How does early childhood character develop in the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Environment

One of the learning resources that influences student learning outcomes and the learning process is the learning environment. The state of classrooms and school buildings, which affect learning activities, the teacher-student interaction, the sufficiency of student facilities, and the infrastructure and facilities that support learning activities are all part of the learning environment. The environment is everything found in the natural world that affects people in a particular way. Accordingly, a truly accommodating environment that promotes the continuity

and ease of the teaching and learning process is an effective learning environment (Pomarida & Nagoklan, 2022).

Early Childhood Character Development

Early character development lays the groundwork for a child's personality as they mature into adulthood. A child's self-identity is shaped in large part by the foundation that is laid throughout the early years for sensory ability, critical thinking, and the acceptance of moral and religious ideals. A child's character can be shaped and instilled during this time because they are very open to learning and often imitate behaviors from those around them. Teachers and school administrators must carefully create a variety of well-designed programs and activities that can assist kids in developing strong character in order to foster character values and carry out character education in schools in an effective manner. Classroom-based character education, school culture-based character education, and community-based character education are the three pillars of character education design that schools can use. These three approaches to character education can successfully develop children with admirable qualities when they are appropriately used in classrooms. Therefore, in order to actively participate in establishing character traits in children, a strong commitment and teamwork from all stakeholders—including parents, school personnel, the community, and the government—are required (Samsinar et al., 2023).

The creation of the character values serves as a framework for the school community's development of character values, encompassing knowledge, awareness, willingness, and action to apply these principles in a way that is both honorable to God Almighty and to oneself. People become more human through the educational process. Being able to evaluate its effects and efficacy requires time. As a result, parents and teachers must be more kind, patient, and cognizant of the fact that teaching children morals takes time. Positive values are so assimilated from those learned at home and at school. The objectives of character values development can be separated into two categories: institutional and personal changes. Personal transformations help people develop strong personalities that are difficult to be carried away by negative consequences and serve as role models for others around them. Strong-willed people will eventually create a well-balanced culture that stems from their positive traits. They will also shape the culture of every educational institution into that of the home and the school (Marlina, 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, a child's development is a process of reciprocal, two-way interactions between the developing person and those in their immediate surroundings, such as parents and teachers in a microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's framework, which is depicted in Figure 1.0, is composed of the following levels: "the individual level," or the child; the microsystem, wherein the child's immediate relationships with teachers and families develop; the mesosystem, wherein the child interacts with local communities; the exosystem, which includes neighbors and social services; and, lastly, the macrosystem, which consists of the effects of media and culture on the child's development (Antony, 2022).

The value of a healthy relationship in mitigating the possible harm brought on by a depressing and ineffectual atmosphere. According to him, without a loving and caring connection, even a very pleasant environment could not be enough to promote emotionally healthy development. Two people build a relationship, and either party can change it if the other person behaves differently. A dyad becomes evident once a relationship has been formed between the developing person and another (such as a teacher or peer). In terms of personal growth, this dyad is essential. Since it enables people to form larger interpersonal relationships—known as triads and tetrads, or interactions with several people—the dyadic relationship is an essential component of the microsystem (Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

3. METHODS

This study was prepared to understand how children develop while interacting with the environment in the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory at RuPin YAFSI. Starting with a qualitative approach. The goal of a descriptive study was to describe contemporary phenomena, such as natural and man-made occurrences. Descriptive research aims to provide a comprehensive, accurate, and authentic description of the traits and conditions of a particular population (Ependi et al., 2023). Sugiyono (2019) states that the qualitative approach seeks to understand a symptom as the respondent under study with an emphasis on the subjective aspects of a person's behavior.

Beginning with observing the various activities that take place at RuPin in developing the potential of early childhood and analyzing them within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Furthermore, researchers extracted information from coordinators, facilitators, and parents of children. Data were collected through participant observation and interviews and then analyzed by condensing data, presenting data, verifying data, and drawing conclusions.

4. RESULTS

Play and learning are important components in child development (Trimulina, 2022; Wahyuni & Azizah, 2020). These two elements stimulate a child's physical, psychological and social development and are fundamental to a child's growth and well-being. One of the duties of adults to ensure that children play and learn well is to provide safe learning spaces for early childhood.

Children learn from the environment to grow and develop. They need a safe and comfortable environment for them to learn new things. A safe and comfortable environment will stimulate all aspects of child development (Nitecki & Chung, 2016). The principle of a safe learning environment is the process of a child learning about various things that hone all their potential. Learning directly from nature, interacting directly with individuals from different age levels is an interesting thing for early childhood. For adults, seeing young children learn directly and alone from the environment will remind us that children need good role models so that children imitate and practice good things to others (Nofianti et al., 2022; Yang & Mujahidah, 2015; Sujiono, 2013; Yuliawan & Taryatman, 2020).

The results of interviews and observations conducted by researchers with the Rupin Coordinator found that RuPin does not tolerate all forms of violence, both verbal and non-verbal. All children who do activities there should not mock, hit, push or other violent acts. If someone is caught mocking or hitting his friend, the RuPin coordinator or facilitator will 'return' the taunts and punches to the child who mocked and hit him and then ask how he felt when he was mocked and hit. The researcher witnessed a 5-year-old child who mocked his older friend who was climbing a tree, "Ih brother climbs like a monkey". The RuPin coordinator immediately asked the mocking child, "Are you a monkey? If you are a monkey, does that mean you and your other friends are monkeys too? If you were mocked as a monkey, how would you feel?". This method is effective in making children realize that when they mock someone, they are hurting that person's feelings. So RuPin invites children to empathize, respect others, appreciate their friends because all of these are positive characters that must be developed in children. Parents who attended the activity said that since doing activities at RuPin, their 4-year-old children have not uttered harsh words anymore and do not mock each other at home. Everything needs a process.

This method for children has a positive impact on their development. In the Microsystem layer, the child's interaction with the people closest to him will affect his mindset and behavior. (Jugessur, 2022; Amali et al., 2023; Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Yang & Mujahidah, 2015). Children who interact with adults who provide stimulation of positive values will internalize these positive values in speech and behavior (Nofianti et al., 2022; Rozana & Nofianti, 2021), In line with the UNESCO report (UNESCO, 2023) that children who live in a safe environment will automatically get good stimulation and have positive relationships with the people around them. Therefore, it is important to study the initial residence of a child to be able to analyze in detail the various problems in child development.

RuPin was built to provide a safe learning and playing environment for children in Neighborhood VIII of Pengilar Village. Five parents (all mothers) who attended expressed their excitement about RuPin. RuPin encourages children to have useful out-of-school activities, various activities at RuPin aim to develop children's positive character, and RuPin is a safe place to leave children for activities. Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, children have a sense of security in their environment because children already have the belief that the environment where they live and socialize is an environment that will develop positive values in themselves.

The next observation finding was time discipline. The meeting was scheduled to start at 09.30 a.m. on Sunday and at 09.20 a.m. all 9 (nine) children were present. The RuPin coordinator revealed that the process of guiding children to be disciplined in time was very long. Consequences were imposed if someone came late. For example, when they had to perform at an event using a bus. Children who are late must still come to the event but leave on their own. Children who arrive late at RuPin's routine activities must follow the activities without any direction and may not ask how to do the activities. The mothers said that the children already respect time even though they are disciplined only for school, Quran and RuPin activities. But this is a significant development and will continue to process until they grow up.

5. DISCUSSION

Discipline is a basic need to be taught from an early age. The age range of 0-6 years is the most effective time to shape children's behavior. Discipline needs to be taught to help children adjust personally and socially. Children who are educated to be disciplined will respect time and the people around them (Shihab et al., 2017). A positive environment will spread a positive atmosphere for children so that the mutual relationship between children and the

environment is well established. This mutual relationship is formed at the Microsystem layer through a long process. It begins with children interacting with friends and community members where they live. Positive interactions that are established underlie children to believe in the surrounding environment. Children will go through a process of growing their trust in their environment. This process will be different for each child and also depends on the age level of the child.

The way of learning applied at RuPin is a way of learning that must run intensely to early childhood (Yuliawan & Taryatman, 2020)) reveals that getting used to children's speech and good behavior will significantly develop children's potential and positive character. In the Microsystem layer, an individual's personality, values, and temperament are influenced by their interactions with the surrounding environment. The community around RuPin, who knew RuPin from the beginning and provided support until now, provides its own strength for RuPin as a forum and for the children involved in RuPin. According to Bronfenbrenner, the child's relationship with the environment at this layer is a crucial relationship that will determine the child's psychological and character development (Crawford, 2020; Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The experiences experienced by children during interactions in this Microsystem layer will affect children's development. If a child directly experiences an event, the impact will be different than if the child hears someone's experience or watches it. However, according to Bronfenbrenner, if a child directly or indirectly experiences an event, the experience will still affect the child's point of view, character, and mindset.

The observations made by the researcher found that the children did not fight over answering the questions. They only made noise when raising their hands and saying their names. But when one child answered a question or expressed an opinion, the other children listened quietly. This behavior also goes through a long process of guidance. Starting from introducing the concept of mutual respect and respect for others, role playing while introducing consequences, to habituation.

Mutual respect in fact gives children a sense of security. It is a commonly held value in social life. From an early age children need to be taught about respect for individual rights and the recognition that everyone has the right to be respected and valued. We are obliged to respect and appreciate others (Rusmiati, 2023). The values of respecting others are important to teach to create a society that values diversity, non-discrimination, and without prejudice. Nowadays, children grow and develop in a multicultural world so we must prepare them with the values of mutual respect so that in adulthood they can adapt and interact with people from various social, cultural, religious, educational, and occupational backgrounds as well as those with

physical and cognitive limitations. (Qi & Yang, 2024) revealed that children's cognitive and emotional aspects will develop significantly as they grow older, school loads increase, and friendship networks expand.

A safe and fun learning environment will stimulate children to develop optimally. They will learn from mistakes, learn to express opinions, see things from diverse perspectives, and not hesitate to help or ask for help (Amali et al., 2023; Nitecki & Chung, 2016; UNESCO, 2023). All of these elements are reflected in the various activities at RuPin. Early childhood children who participate in RuPin are not afraid to be wrong because they have been taught that there will always be a first experience in everything. The observation found that when asked what activities they would like to do the following week, all 9 children expressed their opinions, such as dancing, photography, drawing, watching YouTube, and just playing around. This is also practiced by parents at home. To divide household chores, for example, children are given the choice of taking out the trash or drying the napkins. Children are educated to be able to make choices. The goal is for children to learn that in life there are several choices and we choose which options we like and dislike.

Microsystem layer that looks at the dynamics of interaction with those closest to them. A child will become a productive individual if the surrounding environment directs him to be productive. Even though they are still at an early age, educating, guiding and teaching children to become independent individuals is a natural thing. If examined in the framework of macroeconomic thinking, unproductive human resources will have an impact on high rates of social assistance, health assistance, old age protection guarantees, and low political participation (OECD, 2021). Therefore, ensuring that every individual grows and develops in a safe environment and hones their full potential is imperative and starts from an early age. To achieve this goal, RuPin invites the participation of parents and the community to create a safe and fun learning environment for children. (Fauziddin et al., 2022; Nofianti et al., 2022; Nofianti & Rozana, 2019).

The children who work at RuPin are the next generation of the nation who are vulnerable to the impact of various social, economic and political issues that will hinder their optimal growth and development. The activities at RuPin aim to develop their potential regardless of the children's background. To produce human resources with global quality in the future, the involvement of parents and the community is needed. In the Microsystem layer of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory, children's intense interactions with parents, friends, siblings, neighbors, and other community members will influence children personally and as part of a society, positively and negatively (Gowinda & Safitri, 2023).

Parents and RuPin Coordinators unanimously stated that education contributes positively to children's growth and development. Even the smallest knowledge gained by children will affect their mindset and behavior, so a commitment to providing a safe and positively stimulating learning environment is important. Children will be able to develop themselves within the framework of a supportive environment. Education should provide opportunities for each individual to develop positive qualities.

6. CONCLUSION

A safe learning environment will have a positive influence on children's growth and development. To make this happen, collaboration between parents and the community is needed. The Microsystem Layer in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory examines the positive interactions between children and those closest to them, namely parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and neighbors in the neighborhood. Each of these individuals will play a role in shaping the child's mindset and character. Children will grow and develop into a positive person if the surrounding environment supports children to learn safely and pleasantly. Positive interactions between children and individuals in their immediate environment will contribute to their character development.

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, an adequate learning environment for young children should involve positive interactions between various environmental systems: family, school, peers and community. Each of these elements contributes to children's character development, helping them to become individuals who are able to adapt well to various situations. Good character development in early childhood requires support from the entire social and educational environment around them.

7. LIMITATION

One significant limitation is the complexity of the ecological systems framework itself, which comprises multiple layers of influence—from the immediate family and school environments (microsystem) to broader societal and cultural contexts (macrosystem). This complexity makes it challenging to isolate specific factors that contribute to character development, as interactions among the various systems can be intricate and dynamic.

Moreover, the research may rely heavily on qualitative data, which, while rich and informative, can introduce biases based on the researchers' interpretations or the subjective perceptions of participants. Quantitative measures, though more objective, may not fully capture the nuances of children's character development or the subtle influences of their

environments. Additionally, there is often a lack of longitudinal studies in this area, which are crucial for understanding the long-term impacts of early learning environments on character development. Without long-term data, researchers may struggle to draw definitive conclusions about causality and the lasting effects of early experiences.

Another limitation is the cultural variability in character values and developmental expectations. Bronfenbrenner's theory was developed with a focus on Western contexts, and applying it universally can overlook cultural differences that influence child development. For instance, notions of character and morality can vary significantly across cultures, which may lead to different interpretations of what constitutes effective character development in diverse populations.

Finally, practical constraints such as limited funding, access to diverse participant groups, and ethical considerations can hinder the scope and depth of research. These factors may result in underrepresentation of certain demographics, limiting the generalizability of findings. Overall, while the research offers valuable insights into the interplay between learning environments and character development, these limitations must be acknowledged to fully understand the complexities involved in early childhood development within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

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