



The undesired consequence of teacher-centered approach: Finding solutions to the social skills gap among senior secondary school students in Sri Lanka

Dr. Bhagya kankanamge

Department of Religions and Value Education, National Institute of Education, Maharagama, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This paper examines the unintended consequences of the teacher-centered instructional approach on the social skills development of senior secondary school students in Sri Lanka. While effective in transmitting academic knowledge and ensuring examination success, this approach limits opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and experiential learning. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bandura's social learning theory, the study highlights how restricted peer engagement undermines communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence—skills essential for the 21st century. Drawing on both theoretical insights and the 2023 National Curriculum Framework, the paper proposes strategies to address this gap, including collaborative learning, explicit instruction in social-emotional skills, student-led initiatives, positive classroom climates, and technology-enhanced communication. These recommendations aim to foster socially competent, well-rounded learners equipped for both academic and societal success.

Keywords: Teacher-centered instruction, social skills development, collaborative learning

Introduction

Problem Identified

One of the pertinent problems in the Sri Lankan School education system is the lack of opportunities for senior secondary students to engage in activity-based learning because of the pressure associated with the heavily theoretical and examination-oriented system. This is more prevalent in the G. C. E. Advanced Level classes. Since better grades and a higher Z score determine a place in a university and the seats are limited both teachers and students are pressured to get into a tight competition. As a result, there is only a limited opportunity to engage the students in group activities that involve experiential and collaborative learning to promote their social skills. When the students are compelled to sit down in a tightly packed classroom listening to the teachers who employ lecture method, the students end up by hearing the lessons but never understanding the practical and societal relevance of what they learn.

Teacher-centered instruction, a traditional pedagogical approach prevalent in Sri Lanka, predominantly among the teachers who handle advanced level classes has long been valued for its efficiency in knowledge transmission, its merit for effective classroom management, and its success in supporting the Department of Examination to determine the limited number of candidates to occupy the limited number of seats in the universities. Yet, in the current educational systems, serious concerns are being discussed related to its potential impact on the development of social skills among senior secondary school students. While this approach prioritizes the teacher's role in delivering content, it might invariably limit opportunities for student interaction, collaboration, and the development of essential social competencies, which are identified as necessary for their future. This creates a situation where students, while displaying high level achievements in academic knowledge, might struggle with crucial social skills required for effective communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution, which are among the key 21st century skills

essential for better living. For example, in almost all the senior secondary classrooms across the country, the teacher often assumes the role of the primary knowledge provider, leaving no or limited space for student-led discussions, group activities, or peer-to-peer interaction. While this approach might ensure efficient and sufficient coverage of the curriculum, it could invariably deprive students of opportunities to practice and refine their social skills in a meaningful environment. Similarly, the emphasis on individual assessments and rote learning might undermine the importance of collaborative problem-solving and teamwork, skills that are vital in today's interconnected world. There are numerous consequences of this social skills gap. Senior secondary students might find it challenging to master complex social situations, express their thoughts and feelings effectively, or manage conflicts constructively. The lack of these skills can limit their ability to form healthy relationships, work collaboratively in teams, and to be successful in diverse social settings, both within and beyond the school environment. As a result, it is important to address this issue and find ways to foster social skills development moving away from the framework of teacher-centered instruction. The following sections will create a discussion on the research and theoretical background of this concern, which is followed by a proposal of solutions aimed at nurturing social skills within a context where the best pedagogical approaches to suit the situation will be highlighted.

Research and Theoretical Findings

Extensive research has highlighted the importance of social interaction and collaboration in developing social skills among individuals. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains that learning is a socially mediated process, where interaction with peers and mentors is essential for cognitive and social development. A predominantly teacher-centered approach, which might limit such interactions, could definitely limit the development of social competencies of students because of the inherent features associated with it.

At the same time, Albert Bandura's (1977) ^[1] social learning theory emphasizes the key contribution of observation and modeling in fostering social skills. If students have limited opportunities to observe and interact with peers in a collaborative environment, their ability to learn and practice essential social behaviors might be hindered. In a more recent publication, Kong (2021) ^[4] emphasizes the merits of engaging students in learning activities that motivate students against the teacher centered traditional teaching approach. Empirical studies have also drawn attention to the potential drawbacks of teacher-centered instruction in terms of social skills development. For instance, research by Johnson and Johnson (2009) ^[2] found that while teacher-dominant approaches can be effective for knowledge acquisition, they might not necessarily develop social and emotional aspects if the specific strategies are not employed to encourage collaboration and interaction. Hurst, Wallace, & Nixon (2013) ^[3] in a study, where students are given opportunities to engage in ample interaction, critically analyze the adverse effect of teacher centered, "one way" approach for the students across all the levels from kindergarten to college. Citing student perception on teacher centered pedagogy they explain how students do not prefer classroom contexts where teachers keep on talking. These research findings very smoothly agree with the observations made in the Sri Lankan context as well. National Curriculum Framework (2023) has very clearly mentioned the adverse effects brought to the education system as a result of the prevailing teacher centered practices within the classroom. While highlighting the gap created in social skills development among school students the NCF (ibid) has recommended a constructivist learning approach, where inquiry based blended learning could help solve this issue. Especially, the newly introduced modules such as; Social Services, Media Literacy, Industrial Exposure etc. can be identified as specific innovative solutions proposed within the national frame work. It is in this backdrop the following recommended solutions should be considered by teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers to find solutions for the social gap created by teacher centered pedagogic intervention in the Senior Secondary stage in Sri Lankan general education.

Recommendations and Proposals

To address this social skills gap, it is highly important and essential to integrate opportunities for social interaction and collaboration deviating from the much-celebrated teacher-centered instructional approach. Given below are a few recommendations and proposals, extensively proven both by theory and practice all over the world, as potential solutions teachers can employ:

1. **Incorporating Collaborative Learning Activities:** Teachers can introduce group projects, discussions, and role-plays into their lessons, providing students with opportunities to interact, communicate, and collaborate with their peers. Such activities will invariably motivate students.
2. **Explicit Instruction in Social and Emotional Skills:** Dedicate specific time slots to teach and practice essential social and emotional skills, such as communication, active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution.

3. **Encouraging Student-Led Initiatives:** Empower students to take ownership of their learning by facilitating student-led projects, presentations, debates, and group activities, fostering leadership and communication skills. (every stage of the activity should be planned by the students with necessary guidance from the teacher)
4. **Creating a Positive Classroom Climate:** Foster a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, sharing ideas, and interacting with their peers and teachers.
5. **Utilizing Technology for Social Connection:** Promote technology to encourage communication and collaboration beyond the classroom, providing opportunities for the students to connect with peers, mentors, and experts from diverse backgrounds. (This could involve getting students to be a part of international interest groups as well)

Examples of Application/Implementation

- **Think-Pair-Share Activities:** Encourage students to think individually, discuss their ideas with a partner, and then share with the entire class, fostering active participation and communication skills.
- **Role-Playing Scenarios:** Create scenarios where students can practice engaging in social situations, resolving conflicts, and expressing their emotions critically and effectively.
- **Student-Led Presentations:** Assign group presentations where students research, prepare, and present information to the class, fostering teamwork, communication, data handling, and leadership skills.
- **Class Meetings:** Hold regular class meetings where students can discuss concerns, share ideas, and collaborate on possible solutions, creating a sense of teamwork and belonging.
- **Online Discussion Forums:** Utilize online platforms to facilitate discussions and exchange of thoughts and ideas among students, even outside of school hours reaching out to experts as well.

Conclusion

The teacher-centered approach, an approach widely prevalent in the Sri Lankan education system, possesses undeniable strengths in knowledge transmission and classroom management. However, it is mandatory for the stakeholders to admit its inherent limitations in developing essential social skills among senior secondary school students. By lavishly incorporating collaborative learning activities, explicit instruction in social-emotional skills, student-led initiatives, a positive classroom climate, and technology-enabled social connection, teachers can bridge this gap and equip students with the social competencies they need to succeed amidst the complexities of the 21st century.

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