

Bridging Opportunity Gaps in Education: Empowering Learners and Families Through a Community-Based Initiative in Malaysia

Merapatkan Jurang Peluang Pendidikan: Memperkasa Murid dan Keluarga Melalui Inisiatif Berasaskan Komuniti di Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the impact of a community-based program to provide equal opportunity for all learners, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). The ultimate objective of this framework is which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education, and provide access to all children to learn. Specifically, this study will investigate the outcomes and participants' experiences of the community-based program called Homework Coaching and Fun Learning, which initiative in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, involving families from an underprivileged background. A descriptive quantitative survey design supported with qualitative insights from open-ended responses was employed in this study. Data were collected from all 20 primary school students and 18 parents after three months of participation in this program. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.1.0, and qualitative data were interpreted using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. The results indicate a notable improvement in students' motivation, confidence, and social skills in their academic participation, accompanied by parents' high satisfaction with the overall outcomes of their children becoming more committed to academic tasks. Alongside, it recommends a more comprehensive program that supports and contributes to direct student achievement, focusing on students who come from underprivileged families, regardless of their diverse socioeconomic, racial backgrounds, or learning needs, by embracing inclusivity. Future research should explore more such interventions to highlight and advance the equity and equality of education in Malaysia and globally.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), equity and equality in education, inclusivity, community-based program, underprivileged students.

Abstrak

Kajian ini bertujuan menilai impak pelaksanaan program berasaskan komuniti dalam menyediakan hak pendidikan sama rata kepada semua murid, selaras dengan Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan 4 (SDG4). Matlamat utama rangka kerja ini menekankan pendidikan inklusif yang berkualiti dan setara serta membuka peluang kepada semua murid untuk belajar sepanjang masa. Secara khusus, kajian ini meneliti hasil dan pengalaman peserta program berasaskan komuniti iaitu Homework Coaching and Fun Learning yang dilaksanakan di Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, iaitu melibatkan keluarga daripada latar belakang kurang berkemampuan. Reka bentuk kajian ini menggunakan tinjauan kuantitatif deskriptif yang disokong dengan data kualitatif melalui soalan terbuka. Data dikumpulkan daripada 20 orang murid sekolah rendah dan 18 orang ibu bapa selepas tiga bulan penyertaan dalam program ini. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan analisis

deskriptif melalui perisian IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.1.0, manakala dapatan kualitatif dianalisis melalui pendekatan analisis tematik berasaskan enam fasa oleh Braun dan Clarke (2006). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat peningkatan ketara dalam aspek motivasi, keyakinan diri, dan kemahiran sosial murid dalam penglibatan akademik, disertai dengan tahap kepuasan yang tinggi daripada ibu bapa terhadap pencapaian anak-anak mereka yang semakin komited terhadap tugas akademik. Kajian ini turut mencadangkan pelaksanaan program yang lebih komprehensif untuk menyokong pencapaian murid secara langsung, khususnya dalam kalangan murid daripada keluarga kurang berkemampuan tanpa mengira latar belakang sosioekonomi, kaum, atau keperluan pembelajaran, dengan menekankan prinsip inklusiviti. Kajian masa hadapan disarankan untuk meneroka lebih banyak intervensi seumpama ini bagi memperkukuh prinsip ekuiti dan kesamaan dalam pendidikan di Malaysia serta di peringkat global.

Kata kunci: Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan 4 (SDG4), ekuiti dan kesamaan dalam pendidikan, inklusiviti, program berasaskan komuniti, murid kurang berkemampuan.

INTRODUCTION

Children are the future of our country. Providing an education that suits the diverse needs of students is pivotal. Aligning with the phrase “Every Learner Matters”, a forum held in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Salamanca Declaration in September 2019, has revived and strengthened inclusive education worldwide (Ainscow, 2020). Today, the global education agenda also emphasizes an important mission with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) that aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote an advancing, continuous learning platform for students (Franco & Derbyshire, 2020). On the other hand, the national target of the SDG Roadmap for Malaysia, Phase II: 2021-2025, also highlights the universal right to high-standard education at all levels, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), which enables students to thrive and contribute back to society.

In the national context, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 framework, with the upcoming ‘*Kurikulum Persekolahan 2027*’, underscores five system aspirations: access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. The blueprint also focused on enhancing and implementing a 21st-century curriculum, pedagogical delivery, teachers’ quality, school leadership, and promoting a good ecosystem of education by partnering with all the stakeholders in children's education, made up of school leaders, teachers, parents, community, and students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In line with advanced educational needs, there is a necessary effort to broaden the initiatives to support the students’ various potential.

Additionally, this program investigation emphasizes three key principles, including inclusivity and equity, lifelong learning, and quality education. The first key principle is inclusivity and equity, which focuses on providing equal access to quality education for all learners who come from marginalized communities and children with disabilities (Vindigni, 2024a). Secondly, according to Kotzmann et al., (2023) also highlighted that promoting education as a lifelong process will enhance learning opportunities. Lastly, to ensure quality education, there is a need to implement high-quality educational impact for the individual and the community improvement (Hossain et al., 2023).

This study underlines the details of the community program's impact, which is called *Homework Coaching and Fun Learning*. This program supports 20 students from all over Pulau Pinang state who are identified as coming from low-income families. The program was conducted over three months, from December 2024 until March 2025, to align with the national schooling calendar and to ensure feasibility for families and facilitators. While short of implementation, this pilot served as an efficacy to demonstrate immediate impact and inform future efforts for longer-term interventions.

To brief, five students from undergraduate and postgraduate students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Pulau Pinang, delivered the program's content. This program also focuses on combining after-school homework coaching and interactive learning activities that emphasize equal learning access to quality education and foster lifelong learning for every child. Next, this program

was held at Dewan MPKK Sungai Dua at Gelugor, Pulau Pinang, twice times week. To sum up, each session was conducted in a fun and engaging structured guided homework and activities, including interactive group games, quizzes, and field trips such as a visit to the USM Archaeology Museum.

Homework coaching is an approach that focuses on improving students' ability to perform and complete given tasks by a school teacher through structured teaching strategies aligned with students' needs and potential (Merriman et al., 2016). Meanwhile, fun learning aims to provide an enjoyable and engaging teaching process while increasing students' motivation and learning outcomes (Tisza, 2021). Evidently, education empowers people globally to live healthier and more sustainable lives (Slamet Rusydiana, 2024) . It also fosters tolerance, respect, and contributes to building more peaceful and cohesive societies.

To add, doing homework tasks given by school teachers is enjoyable, yet can be completed by the given due date, while ensuring the process of homework completion is engaging and fun, is a big challenge for students and parents. As a summary, this study is focused on bridging the educational support gap for children from low-income families who lack motivation and confidence, while improving family participation to enhance the education support system within the targeted community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parents serve as the most effective educators for their children. Thus, their motivation is crucial for their children's education. However, the socio-economic background requires parents to be at home only at night, as they spend the day working to fulfill family necessities, making it difficult to attend their children's academic activities due to daily commitments. Support through a community-based program is a way to enthrall the parental and family involvement by proving that children can succeed through adequate resources and encouragement.

Utami (2022) reported that when active parental involvement is established toward their own children's education, it can positively contribute to enhancing academic achievement, good school attendance, and participation in school events. Literature supported by a study in Turkey also reveals that higher family Socio-Economic Status (SES) influences higher educational outcomes because there are enough resources and cultural capital (Şengönül, 2022). This finding highlights that there is a need for community support for parents and families from low-income backgrounds who identified a lack of academic resources.

According to Edwards (2018), children from low-income families often lack essential academic materials and parental support, which eventually will result in incomplete homework tasks. Moreover, Mehmood, (2024) also agrees that involving families and communities in the learning process will improve support systems for students. Evidently, the targeted group of this particular program is suitable to be studied because low-income families need to be supported first in a way to provide a stepping stone to the success of their children from an early stage.

On the other hand, community support, like a homework coaching program which is implemented with full support and resources, suggests a proven potential for children's success (Merriman et al., 2016). In the Malaysian context, Abu et al. (2024) stated that up to 30,527 students face financial challenges in education, highlighting the need for targeted intervention to support students from low-income families.

Furthermore, a similar program called "Naungan Kasih" that runs in Malaysia also aims to improve child academic achievement by implementing strategies using a hybrid method, which includes digital and traditional teaching strategies (Cooper et al., 2023). However, this program directly focused on preschool children and eventually provided a gap in the need for study on primary children if the same method is applied towards them. The proven method of integrating play-based

activities and a targeted group of study.

Based on the literature support and evidence for the gap and benefit of community support to enhance students' achievement, with support of parental involvement through homework coaching and a fun learning approach, this program is the first established in the state of Pulau Pinang that focuses on low-income families. Hence, studies in the Malaysian context regarding the impact of community programs have also been limitedly reported. Thus, this study contributes to the best practices of community support programs for low-income families by documenting parents' experiences and satisfaction, while also examining students' outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), by provides a perspective that parents and the community should be allies to fully support children's growth. This theory is pictured by three domain systems that consist of the mesosystem, macrosystem, and microsystem. However, to highlight this study is focused on the microsystem, which is formed by three key components, including family, school, and peers (Gonzales, 2020). Indeed, within the microsystems of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the innermost represent the influence of the most immediate surroundings of people and institutions on an individual can contribute to the cognitive, emotional, and social development during their childhood and the future (Yang & Eunjoo Oh, 2024).

To emphasize the microsystem rhyme in this study, the three key components of it need to be fully understood. Firstly, the family system is the core of emotional support and socialization that directly shapes the children's values, beliefs, and initial behaviors. Secondly, the school system is very pivotal in shaping cognitive development and social skills that help children to function well in communicating with peers and the community. Lastly, the peer system contributes to creating self-esteem and confidence, which refers to friends and other social groups will help to shape an identity that fits in with social norms (Burakgazi, 2024; Gonzales, 2020).

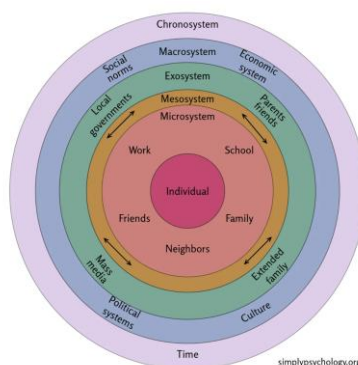


Figure 1: The Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979)

On the whole, the direction of this study can be integrated with this theory by emphasizing the importance of community, parents, institutional education, and friends who are involved. In particular, this microsystem, which consists of family, school, and peers, directly contributes to the children's development (Yang & Eunjoo Oh, 2024). Overall, the model has been applied in education and health research to emphasize the connected system (Appiah et al., 2021).

To strengthen the theoretical framework following Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the important key components, which consist of family support, school engagement, and community support, are essential to facilitate the positive student outcomes. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, the overlapping centers each represent the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program

as a structured system for intervention.

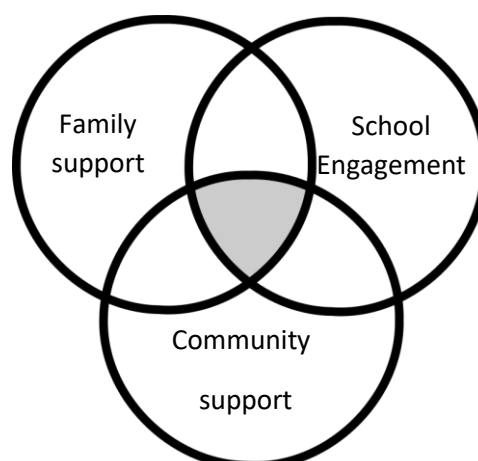


Figure 2: Homework Coaching and Fun Learning Program within the Brofenbrenner Microsystem

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program in promoting students from low-income families in social-emotional development and academic engagement, while exploring parent satisfaction to encourage parent participation in academic commitment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In response to the research objectives, these are the following research questions that proposed:

- i. What is the level of parent satisfaction after their children participated in the 3-month Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program?
- ii. What is the perceived impact of the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program on students' social-emotional growth and academic engagement?
- iii. What best practices can be adopted to recommend to improve future programs?

METHODOLOGY

The direction of this study adopted a descriptive quantitative research design supported with qualitative data collection through open-ended questions. This design is suitable for the primary goal of this study, which is to provide details of the current situations (Alford & Teater, 2025). On the other hand, according to (Koch, 2023) integrating quantitative and qualitative methods will provide a broader contextualization, such as offering a deeper insight into the reasons for the numerical numbers collected.

The program's impact is evaluated through a structured survey for both students and parents. The 20 students who participated in the program answered a physical survey consisting of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. To brief, participants included all 20 students of Homework Coaching and Fun Learning from year two until year five, and also their 18 parents, who were voluntarily involved and gave their feedback via online survey. This approach helps researchers gather all participants' thoughts and feelings after participating in this program through a convenient method, since the participants are tied in time with school and work commitments.

As well as that, data from parents is collected using online surveys via Google Forms to ensure that parents have the flexibility to answer during their free time. Meanwhile, data collection from all students was conducted during the last session of Homework Coaching and Fun Learning to ensure the students understood each item in the structured survey after a briefing session regarding the students' feedback. Every five students were guided and assisted by one facilitator to ensure their understanding of each item in the questionnaire. A Likert-scale item is the most convenient item that helps to access students' feedback. The structure of both surveys is are form with three components.

1. Component A: Background of Participants
2. Component B: Likert Scale item regarding the program outcomes

Table 1 *Likert-Scale Rating Points*

Scale	Point
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly Agree	5

3. Component C: Open-ended questions regarding the best experiences and suggestions for program improvement.

For the data analysis, the descriptive data for the Likert scale item is analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, and (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the six-phase framework is used to identify the answer figure and subject matter from the collected data. The six phases are familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for the themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Reportedly by Villamin et al (2025) stated that one study with the employment of a survey will help to gather the satisfaction of the participants.

Therefore, the validity consideration of the instrument use was based on recent literature support. The instruments were reviewed and validated by two experts in the field of education to ensure the appropriateness of the content. Moreover, the integration of descriptive quantitative data and qualitative data ensures that program outcomes are comprehensively measured and narratively in-depth gathered.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study involved voluntary participation supplemented with informed consent obtained from parents and assent from students. All responses gathered were anonymized, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout data collection and reporting.

RESULT

The results were collected from all 20 students and 18 parents who willingly participated in the study. The participants rate their feelings and express their satisfaction through the survey. Based on the descriptive survey, there are a few factors that have been identified showing the impact of the program on students and parents. The results were divided into two major components, which include (1) descriptive analysis for Likert-scale items, and (2) thematic analysis for open-ended questions.

Descriptive analysis

Drawing from the descriptive analysis, there are a few indicators that describe the Homework

Coaching and Fun Learning program outcomes. The following tables 1 and 2 are as follows.

Table 2 *Students' Response on Enjoyment, Confidence, and Academic Participation*

No	Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Enjoyment	18	90.0
2	Increased confidence	19	95.0
3	Improved academic participation	18	90.0

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 2 indicates that students' responses highlight three main indicators that describe the programs' impact. Results revealed that students increased their confidence by 95% as the highest percentage of the indicator of program outcomes. Followed by both indicators of enjoyment and improved academic participation, with 90%. The result indicates positive program impact from students' ratings.

Table 3 *Parents' Responses on Satisfaction, Academic participation, Social-Emotional Development, and Facilitator Quality*

No	Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Overall satisfaction	17	94.4
2	Improved academic participation	17	94.4
3	Social-emotional development	16	88.9
4	Facilitator quality	17	94.4

Table 3 indicates that parents' responses highlight four main indicators that describe the programs' impact. Results revealed that parents' responses show the highest percentage (94.4%) in the overall satisfaction, improved academic participation, and satisfaction with the facilitator's teaching quality. However, an indicator of improved children's social-emotional development shows that 88.9% of parents respond. To sum up, the result indicates positive program impact from parents' ratings.

Thematic analysis of open-ended answers

In order to demonstrate the in-depth results of this study and weave the narrative of program impact, qualitative data from open-ended answers by the end of the survey are analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) method. There are four themes found in the findings, as stated in Table 3, as follows.

Table 4 *Themes from Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses*

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes of participants' responses
Experiential learning and enjoyment	Happiness and satisfaction feelings when attending the program	"Saya seronok dan gembira ketika berada program ini kerana semasa cikgu mengajar saya rasa lebih faham. Terima kasih cikgu"
Academic confidence development	Students' active participation in the learning process	"Saya yakin untuk menyiapkan kerja sekolah. Saya berasa seronok menyertai program ini. Saya perlu berterima kasih kepada cikgu yang mengajar"

continued

Caring and supportive educational relationship	Closed relationship development between students, parents, and facilitators	<i>“saya mohon mintak ada lagi kerana saya dapat siapkan banyak kerja rumah berkumpul dan tidak dimarahi guru di sekolah lagi. Saya sayang semua guru-guru di sini, terima kasih guru-guru di sini dan semuanya memberi sokongan”</i>
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a. Experiential learning and enjoyment

The experiential learning and enjoyment are the first theme that emerged from the results. The program impact shows that both students and parents are feeling content with their participation in the program. Based on the students' response, 75% which indicates 15 students express that they are happy when learning in the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program. On the other hand, parents' response indicates 56% which indicates 10 parents are happy with their children's improvement in learning progress. One of the participants stated that *“Saya seronok dan gembira ketika berada program ini kerana semasa cikgu mengajar saya rasa lebih faham. Terima kasih cikgu”*. This expression highlights that this program brings out the enjoyment of participants' experiences after 3 months of involvement.

b. Academic confidence development

The second theme that emerged is the positive academic confidence development of students as a program outcome. Students' responses stated that 50% in academic confidence, which is 10 students, expressed that they felt confident in doing their own homework task. On the other hand, 12 parents and 67% expressed their responses, which emphasize that their children develop well in academic confidence by seeing daily improvement. One exact example indicates that *“Saya yakin untuk menyiapkan kerja sekolah. Saya berasa seronok menyertai program ini. Saya perlu berterima kasih kepada cikgu yang mengajar.”* This theme underpins that this program helps boost students' confidence in doing academic tasks.

c. Caring and supportive educational relationships

Lastly, the third theme that emerged is a caring and supportive educational relationship between students, peers, and teachers. Reported students' responses indicated 65% with 13 students expressing that they felt loved by teachers and peers. Moreover, reported parents' responses were 50% with 9 parents agreeing that this program built a support for them with a caring and supportive relationship between all stakeholders. Participants stated that *“saya mohon mintak ada lagi kerana saya dapat siapkan banyak kerja rumah berkumpul dan tidak dimarahi guru di sekolah lagi. Saya sayang semua guru-guru di sini, terima kasih guru-guru di sini dan semuanya memberi sokongan”*. This theme highlights that the community-based program will provide emotional support to children and parents from low-income families who lack access to educational resources.

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that this study underpins the positive outcomes of the community-based program. In response to research question number one, which is to evaluate the level of parent satisfaction after their children participated in the 3-month Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program, the results revealed that over 90% of parents' satisfaction rate is reported by descriptive findings. In support of the findings in other studies, a strong relationship intertwined from parent active participation and high satisfaction after participating in a certain program (Shao et al., 2022).

Next, for research question number two, which is to evaluate the perceived impact of the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program on students' social-emotional growth and academic engagement, the results answer both from numerical and narrative findings, which are over 80% for social development and over 90% reported in increased academic engagement. A similar study also

proved the empirical evidence that highlights the program that involved community and parents succeeds in enhancing the student academic outcomes, improving social-emotional development (Chima Abimbola Eden et al., 2024).

Lastly, in response to research question number three, which is to determine the best practices that can be adopted to recommend to improve future programs, is portrayed from expressive responses from parents, which highlight three best practices. To emphasize, the three best practices that can be further implemented are (1) to extend the program duration, (2) to strengthen parent involvement in program activities, and (3) to expand the reach of the program to benefit more children. To support the result, another recent study also stated that community-based programs should implement flexible communication strategies to collect continuous feedback to enhance program structure (Narapureddy et al., 2021). Meanwhile, providing incentives in any kind of form can supplement the program. Aligning with the study purpose, this impact underscores the community-based program's success in enhancing children's achievement, whether in social or academic scope.

To elaborate more, the study results show that students highly value hands-on and practical activities such as a field trip to Universiti Sains Malaysia Museum, which runs as one of the enrichment and fun learning activities. They feel rewarded as they already work hard twice a week on their homework task. Indeed, results also revealed that there is clear evidence of improved homework completion among participating students, which eventually makes the learning process more memorable and enjoyable. To sum up, reports of strong emphasis from students and parents indicate that this study facilitates personal connections between stakeholders in cooperation in making the targeted community feel supported and valued by highlighting facilitator teaching quality and program coordination.

Furthermore, the results of the study were also captured by linking with the theory integration within the literature support. The grounded theory implementation stressed that the children's shaping behavior is connected with the surrounding factors. Similar to the recent study that supported that children's development is strongly influenced by various connected systems, which ranges from the immediate environment of the growth process (Bagais & Pati, 2023; Flynn, 2020). In justification, the result revealed that the community-based program acts as a microsystem for the children's positive outcomes after participating in the program with peers, teachers, and parent allies. In brief, it shows that community-based programs can benefit well if run in a structured and well-managed environment and with involvement.

Beyond the immediate outcomes, the feasibility of this study demonstrates potential for a replication program across other Malaysian states and other similar contexts of Asian countries. With additional support from the Ministry of Education and Non-governmental organizations, the Homework Coaching and Fun Learning program model could be scaled nationally, integrated into community centers, and adapted for diverse socioeconomic contexts. In fact, this scalability aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the upcoming Kurikulum Persekolahan 2027.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this program highlights the convergent evidence of the community-based support program to bring out the short-term positive impact on students' involvement in the academic process and parents' satisfaction. In alignment with SDG 4 goals, which aim to empower education for all learners with equity and equality, this program can be adopted in any other region or state in the Malaysian context. Furthermore, this program can also be feasible in a global context with suitable strategies according to the local implementation context (Vindigni, 2024).

To conclude, this study contributes to the broader efforts of the Malaysian government to enhance access to the learning opportunities supported by community-based programs in promoting inclusive learning with engaging methods while empowering all the educational stakeholders. Thus,

this study is aligned with the understanding of maximum efforts in providing community services towards the success of children as the future national assets. Researchers also strongly believe that students from low-income families need equal opportunities and have great potential to achieve triumph in life.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Scopus AI, Anara, SciSpace, and ChatGPT to enhance the clarity of the writing. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

FUTURE RESEARCH

A key recommendation for future study, based on the results, revealed that blending the program structure of homework task coaching and experiential fun learning can contribute to the short-term improvement of children's development. Conversely, subsequent investigation can be run in a long-term period within a six-month program, so that a research design of experimental or quasi-experimental can be feasible. Moreover, future research should be expanded into multiple targeted community sites, and a longitudinal design can be adopted to generalize the study findings. Lastly, a gap to deepen the qualitative component by conducting a group interview can be implemented in future research.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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