

## Preschool Teachers' Perceptions on Child-Centered Pedagogy

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**ABSTRACT** – Child-Centered Pedagogy (CCP) has been attributed as the best approach to early years education, internationally and as well as by Sri Lankan Early Childhood Policy Framework. However, literature emphasize Sri Lankan preschools practice curricula inappropriate for early years holistic development. Studies reveal teachers' perceptions on pedagogy are a determinant of their actual classroom practices. Further, perceptions - practice association can be mediated by contextual factors, and the factors vary across countries. Thus, the objectives of this study are to identify the level of teachers' perceptions and practices on CCP in Sri Lankan context, the extent to which perceptions predict practices, and to explore the contextual factors influencing the perception-practice association. The theoretical framework of the study integrated Constructivist theories to define CCP with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST). The explanatory sequential mixed method study comprised of a questionnaire based quantitative phase (N = 159) indicated high positive perception level of teachers and moderate level of CCP practices. Pearson Correlation ( $r = .139$ ,  $p = .080$ ) indicated a weak positive relationship among the perception and practices. Hence the results indicated the existence of contextual factors mediating the association either as barriers or enablers. Qualitative phase explored contextual factors using semi-structured interviews from 8 participants. Thematic Analysis with respect to each ecological system of EST, revealed Parental Expectations, Teacher Collaboration, Training & PD, Curriculum Mandates and National Standardized Policies and Regulations as prominent contextual factors. The integration of results concludes implementation of CCP is a systemic issue instead of perception level.

## INTRODUCTION

At the heart of quality early childhood education lies child-centered pedagogy (CCP), an approach that prioritizes each individual child's interests and needs, and promotes holistic development, employing play-based approaches while placing the child at the center of the learning process. Implementation of quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs have become a concern worldwide (UNESCO, 2024). However, pedagogy gains an important role in this context. Even though there are various pedagogical approaches, Child Centered Pedagogy (CCP) has been accepted worldwide to be one of the most effective learning-teaching methods for early years learners (*National Policy on Preschool Education*, 2019; OECD, 2004), CCP sheds light on play-based, individualized, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences tailored according to the interests of each child.

Irrespective of Sri Lankan policy requirements (*National Policy on Preschool Education*, 2019), literature has shown a majority of preschools have deviated from the required ECE standards stated in the policy framework (Pathirana, 2017). Thus, the quality of Sri Lankan ECE programs have now become questionable as preschools claim to be child-centered but in reality, they implement the traditional teacher-directed, rote learning approaches. The situation underscores the importance of investigating into what extent the preschool teachers perceive child centeredness in ECE classrooms and translate CCP into daily practices.

Further, teachers are responsible of planning and implementing such learning experiences. There has been evidences of teacher perceptions have a potential to get translated into their classroom practices (Leng et al., 2021). International research on CCP elicit, teachers perceive a strong support for CCP, however they face difficulties in implementing the child-centered principles in the real classroom setting as a result of contextual factors (Leng et al., 2021; Myagmar, 2010; Puteh & Ali, 2013; Shumetu Taye et al., 2024). However, contextual factors can also enable CCP implementation in the classroom (Múñez et al., 2017).

Through analysis of international and local literature reveals several potential gaps. Firstly, lack of empirical evidence in quantitative studies on Sri Lankan preschool teachers' perceptions and their alignment with CCP practices as many previous studies indicate smaller samples (Balasundaram, 2024; Dietz, 2023). Secondly, there exists a scarcity of studies exploring the effect of contextual factors on shaping teachers' perceptions and practices. Thirdly, limited use of integrated theoretical framework comprising of constructivism and Ecological Systems Theory to examine interplay of different constructs such as perception and practice, effect of contextual factors influencing that relationship and effect of teacher demographics. Finally, there is a scarcity of literature on the discussion of CCP enablers in Sri Lankan context.

As per the observed gap, this study has been designed to address objectives as stated below. To identify the level of teachers' perceptions and practices on CCP and the extent to which perceptions predict practices, while exploring the contextual factors influencing the perception-practice association. Research Questions were formulated in order to accompany above objectives.

**RQ1:** What is the level of preschool teachers' perceptions of child-centered pedagogy?

**RQ2:** What is the level of preschool teachers' self-reported child-centered pedagogical practices?

**RQ3:** To what extent do teachers' perceptions of child-centered pedagogy predict their child-centered practices?

**RQ4:** What are the contextual factors that influence the association between preschool teachers' perceptions and practices of child-centered pedagogy?

**RQ4.1:** *How do the contextual factors shape the association between preschool teachers' perceptions and practices of child-centered pedagogy?*

## METHODOLOGY

Within the Pragmatic research paradigm, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

### Quantitative Phase

This phase considered a total of 272 registered in-service preschool teachers within the Kurunegala Municipal Council and Pradeshiya Sabha areas, as the target population. According to Morgan's table, a sample of 159 participants were randomly selected.

A printed questionnaire composed of three sections was admitted. Section A consisted with demographics such as age, highest qualification of the teacher, years of experience in the industry and the type of preschool the participant is currently working. Section B is composed of 9 items that measure teachers' perceptions using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). Section C, composed of 11 items focuses on self-reported classroom practices, employing a 5-point

Likert scale (from 1=Never to 5=Always).

To ensure reliability and validity, a pilot test was conducted, and the internal consistency of the scales was confirmed with a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha value ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ) for the Perception scale and ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ) for the Practice scale.

SPSS 27.0 was used to conduct descriptive and inferential statistical analysis on quantitative data.

### Qualitative Phase

A set of semi structured interviews were administered via phone, to 8 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Interview schedule was composed of 11 questions to explore contextual factors.

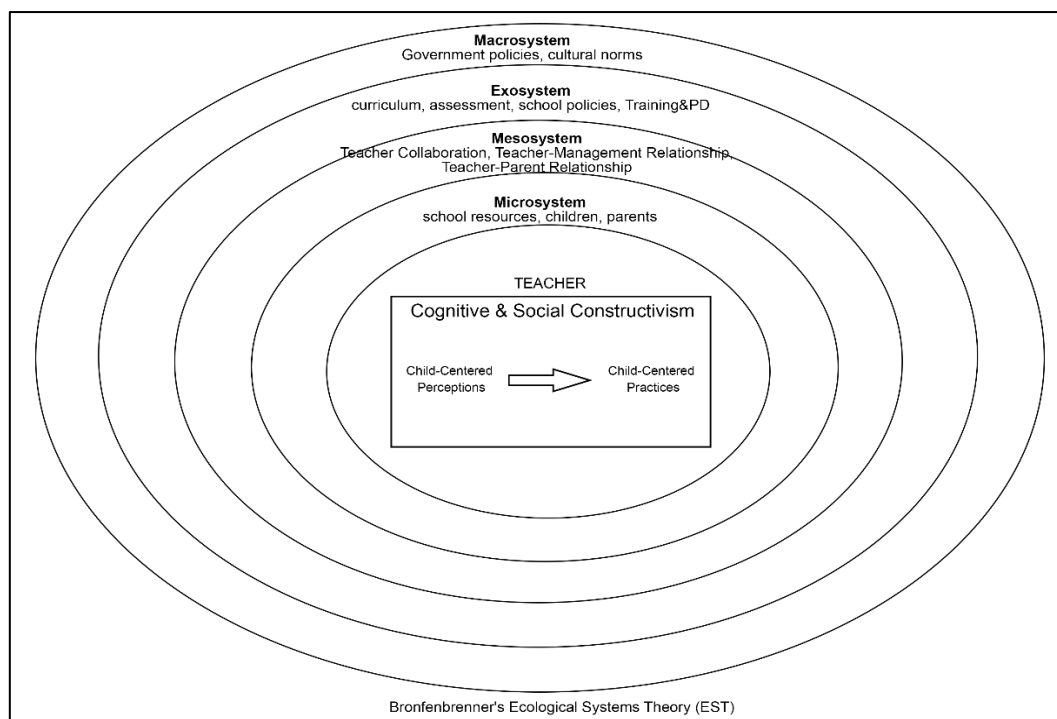
Qualitative Analysis was done through ATLAS.ti. Initially inductive and deductive code development was done. The codes were then grouped according to micro, meso, exo and macro system levels according to EST. It was then followed by a thematic analysis where sub-themes were identified and grouped into main themes.

Finally, quantitative findings were integrated into qualitative findings by means of a joint display table.

In both phases, participant consent was obtained before data collection, and the ethical considerations were highly regarded throughout the study.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As shown in Figure 1, current study utilizes cognitive and social constructivist theories posit by John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky while integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST). Constructivist theories provide a strong foundational framework to identify key characteristics and practices in child-centered pedagogy (CCP). Leng et al. (2021) has adopted EST to investigate the influence of various systems on teachers' beliefs and practices. Youssef & Shukri (2018) had utilized EST in their case study of EFL Teachers. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's EST will aid in the disclosure of the contextual barriers and enablers which shape teachers' perception-practice association.



**Figure 1. Theoretical Framework**

When exploring the global literature on preschool teachers' perceptions on CCP, beliefs on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), play-based learning and teacher's role as a facilitator have been highlighted as major components. Hence the study on nine countries by Shumetu Taye et al. (2024), report that teachers generally value DAP principles. Similarly, Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2009), states teachers with positive CCP perceptions believe children learn best through exploration, hands-on activities, and play, and emphasize individualized learning while positioning the teacher as a facilitator who provides scaffolding. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019), has shown in their review of 62 empirical studies, that many teachers conceptually value the use of play in learning, but their level of perceptions differ according to academic requirements.

Furthermore, literature has discussed Perception-Practice alignment on CCP as beliefs and practices go hand-in-hand in a preschool setting (Leng et al., 2021). A survey conducted with 580 Malaysian private preschool teachers elicits that beliefs and child-centered practices are strongly aligned ( $r = .626$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, Puteh & Ali (2013), have mentioned that even though teachers understand the importance of a play-based approach, they are unsure of how to adopt the play-based approach.

Since Sri Lanka falls under Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC), literature from such contexts was specifically examined. According to Shumetu Taye et al. (2024) preschool teachers from certain countries attribute the value of DAP, while Jordanian teachers do not understand the importance of DAP. In Ethiopia, teachers have knowledge of DAP but are not strictly implementing it in classrooms due to various contextual factors resources (Mengstie, 2023). As opposed to the above LMIC context-based reasons for the perception-practice gap, a Norwegian study highlights the perception-practice gap exists, but due to a lack of professional development, unlike the major causes stated in the LMIC context.

Sri Lankan studies show teachers have positive perceptions on CCP but still practice teacher-directed learning focusing mainly on numeral and literacy or making play highly structured due to various contextual factors (Balasundaram, 2024; Munasinghe, 2018; Rajapaksha, 2015; Samarasinghe, 2021). However, there is scarce literature on enablers of CCP in the local context. International literature emphasizes supportive school leadership, parental awareness and teacher collaboration as enablers of CCP (Leng et al., 2021; Shumetu Taye et al., 2024).

However, local literature has not quantified the teacher perceptions and practices while, they have not attempted to measure the extent to which the perceptions can predict practices. Furthermore, local studies have not examined the influence of contextual factors on perception-practice association in an ecological perspective.

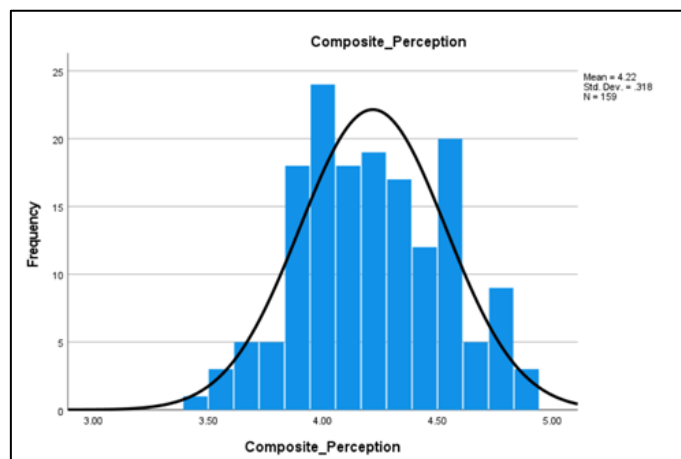
## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A total of 159 preschool teachers completed the survey for quantitative phase, and 8 participants took part in qualitative phase.

Considering the demographics, with respect to age distribution, most participants were aged 25–34 (32.70%), followed by 45+ (25.78%), 18–24 (23.27%) and 35–44 (18.23%). Highest qualification was mainly a Diploma in ECE ( $\geq 1$  year) (61.63%), with some holding a Higher Diploma (18.23%), a short course (8.80%) or a degree (6.28%). Teaching experience was highest at more than 10 years (33.33%). Statistics showed most teachers were from private preschools, revealing the true landscape of sector-wise ownership of preschools through random sampling.

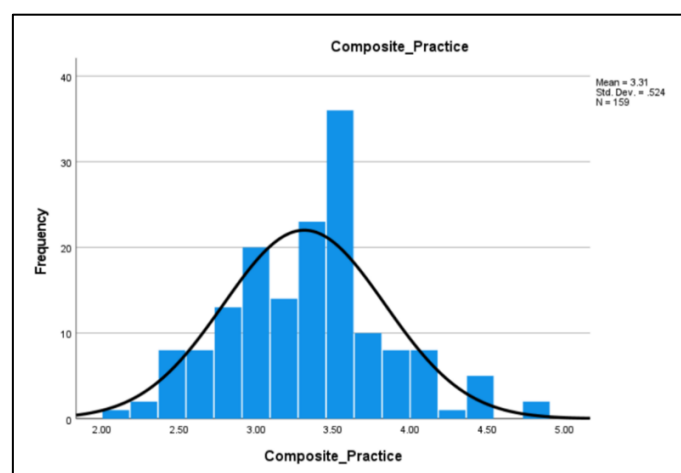
### Preschool Teachers' Levels of Perceptions and Self-Reported Practices on CCP (RQ1 and RQ2)

Item-level descriptive analysis of perception items indicated consistently high means ( $>3.9$ ) and Composite Perception score recorded a Mean = 4.22 and SD = 0.32 (Figure 2). Thus, reporting the existence of strong and positive perception level towards CCP.



**Figure 2 Distribution of Composite Perception Scores**

However, compared to perceptions, practices reported a Composite Practice Mean = 3.31 and SD = 0.52 (Figure 2), indicating that teachers implement CCP practices “sometimes” to “often” in a moderate level.



**Figure 3 Distribution of Composite Practice Scores**

However, the Composite Distributions of both constructs in Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrated acceptable skewness values and the curve represented an approximately normal distribution indicating the suitability of data for parametric analysis.

### **Influence of Teachers’ Perceptions on Self-Reported Practices in CCP (RQ3)**

Thus, a Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted among perception and practice constructs which revealed a positive but weak ( $r = 0.139$ ), statistically non-significant ( $p = 0.080$ ) relationship between the two constructs (Table 1). The finding proved the existence of perception-practice gap where perceptions alone cannot predict the practices.

**Table 1.** Pearson Correlation between Perception and Practice

|                      |                     | Composite Perception | Composite Practice |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Composite Perception | Pearson Correlation | 1                    | .139               |
|                      | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                      | .080               |
|                      | N                   | 159                  | 159                |
| Composite Practice   | Pearson Correlation | .139                 | 1                  |
|                      | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .080                 |                    |
|                      | N                   | 159                  |                    |

In order to understand whether perceptions and demographics together can predict practices, a Multiple Regression was carried out. Type of Preschool was excluded due to category imbalance (private preschools = 72.95% of the sample). Regression results indicate that, even after controlling for demographic characteristics, there is still a non-significant relationship between perceptions and practices ( $p=.171$ ). Further, the adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.059 suggests that other factors beyond these variables influence the relationship between teachers' perceptions and their practices.

### Contextual Factors Influencing the Perception-Practice Relationship (RQ4 and RQ4.1)

As suggested in quantitative findings, in order to explore contextual factors influencing the perception-practice association, participants were categorized into four perception-practice groups (HP–HP, LP–HP, LP–LP, HP–LP) and two teachers from each group were purposively administered a semi-structured interview. Using ATLAS.ti, interview transcripts were assigned codes deductively according to EST and later rearranged inductively. Codes were further classified into Supporting Practices (SP) and Constraining Practices (CP) as this study attends to both enablers and barriers of CCP.

Coding was followed by a frequency analysis of each ecological system (Table 2) and the thematic analysis was conducted (Figure 4.3). Exosystem indicated the highest number of factors influencing CCP. Microsystem analysis illustrated the Parental Expectations as the most influential barrier where parents demand English Medium education and high literacy and numeracy achievements which pressurize the teachers to follow teacher-directed approaches rather than CCP. In the Mesosystem level, Teacher Collaboration was shown as the best supporting factor for CCP where it enables individual attention and better classroom management suitable for CCP. Exosystem highlighted the themes Teacher Training and Professional Development (PD) and Curriculum as both barriers and enablers. Lack of proper training and PD has led the teachers to hold onto teacher centered practices while practical-in-service workshops on child-centered strategies and creative use of everyday material has enabled the teachers to implement CCP at least to a certain extent. Curriculum as a barrier, indicated the lack of a standardized mandatory curriculum for all types of preschools while, the preschools which follow curricula such as Montessori has shown positive effect on CCP. Finally at the Macrosystem level, need for National Standards, fair support, monitoring and regulating mechanisms for all preschools were identified as barriers.

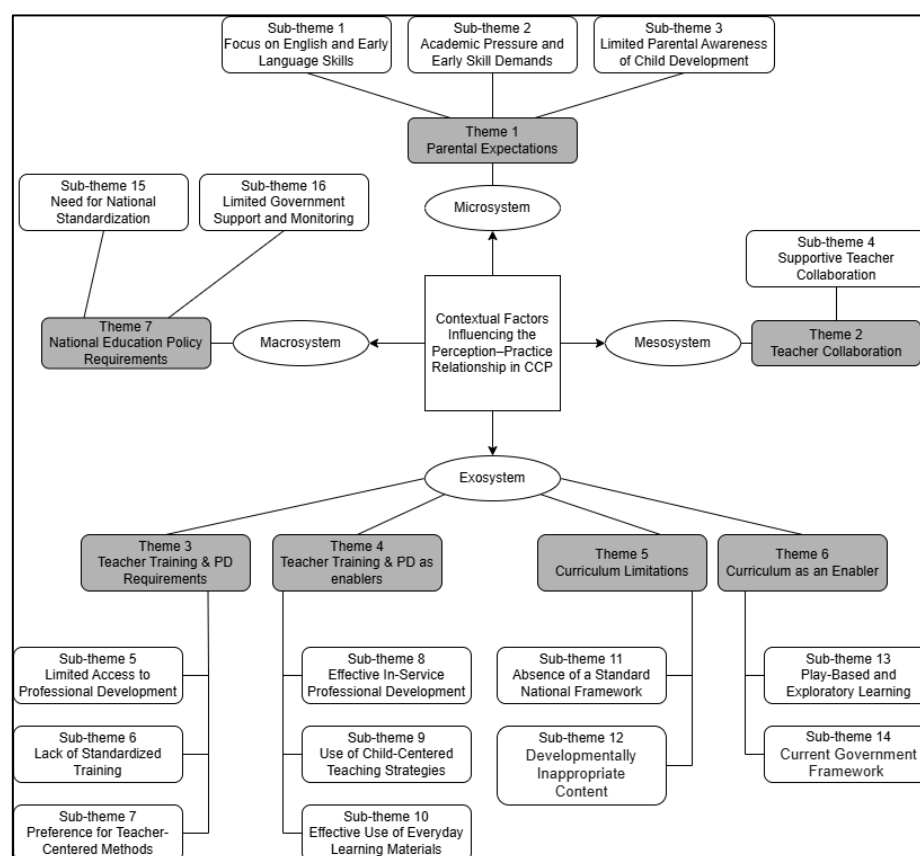
**Table 2.** Frequency Analysis of Ecological System Factors

| EST layer   | Factor Description              | CPF | SPF |
|-------------|---------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Microsystem | Parent Expectations             | 14  | 11  |
|             | Classroom Resources             | 5   | 8   |
| Mesosystem  | Teacher Collaboration           | 2   | 10  |
|             | Teacher–Management Relationship | 3   | 2   |
|             | Parent–Teacher Communication    | 0   | 3   |
| Exosystem   | Training & PD                   | 17  | 19  |
|             | Curriculum Mandates             | 16  | 13  |
|             | Administration Policies         | 8   | 13  |

*continued*

|             |                             |    |    |
|-------------|-----------------------------|----|----|
|             | Assessment Methods          | 4  | 12 |
| Macrosystem | National Education Policies | 14 | 4  |
|             | Societal Norms              | 12 | 0  |

Note: CPF = Constraining Practices Frequency SPF = Supporting Practices Frequency



**Figure 0 Thematic Map of Contextual Factors Influencing Preschool Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Child-Centered Pedagogy.**

### Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Integration of qualitative and quantitative results was done using joint display tables and aided in gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature of the influence of contextual factors on perception-practice association.

At the Microsystem Level, it was identified that parents focus more on academic rigor through English-medium education and oral English from preschools rather than a child-centered curriculum. Therefore, even though High Perception Mean ( $M = 4.22$   $SD = .32$ ) indicated positive views towards CCP; Practice Mean ( $M = 3.31$   $SD = .52$ ) suggested moderate implementation of best practices. However, during the quantitative analysis, some CCP practices were prominent while others were rarely implemented, suggesting that, not all teachers change their practices according to parental demands.

At the Mesosystem Level, Teacher Collaboration was identified as a key enabler which explains the quantitative finding of High mean perception ( $M = 4.22$ ) with selective engagement in practices as only certain teachers have supportive collaboration.

Exosystem being the most influential ecosystem level, some teachers revealed the lack of Teacher Training and Professional Development (PD) as a barrier. For example, "I have not received any training specifically about child-centeredness." (T3). On the other hand, some participants highlighted the effective use of, Teacher Training and PD as an enabler for CCP by stating CCP workshops have guided them for proper implementation. Thus, with Practice moderate level of practice mean and regression results  $r = .139$  ( $p = .080$ ) suggested perceptions are not strongly linked to practice.

Exosystem also indicated Curriculum as both an enabler and a barrier in different contexts. Some preschool teachers reported the existing curriculum supports CCP while some others implementing their own curricula emphasized the need to reduce deskwork and the need of play. Existence of different curricula have produced varied practice quality. Teachers highlighted the importance of having a common curriculum for all preschools. Thus, explaining low practice variability ( $SD = .52$ ) and low-frequency practices.

At the Macrosystem level, National Education Policy Requirements were seen as the most prevalent barrier by teachers. Lack of standardization and weak government monitoring, disparities between private and public preschools were dominant issues under the theme. Thus explaining, even though teachers have high perceptions on CCP, there exists a weak correlation ( $r = .139$ ,  $p = .080$ ) between perception and practice.

## CONCLUSION

The sample of the study justified the existence of high positive perceptions ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ) on CCP among preschool teachers. This addresses RQ1 of the current study. This finding aligns with international literature which informed that preschool teachers in general have positive beliefs on CCP (Shumetu Taye et al. (2024) and Çakın & Sak (2025)). Perceptions of teachers from Low- and Middle-Income Countries such as Ethiopia, also held positive beliefs and attitudes towards CCP (Mengstie, 2023). Prior Sri Lankan studies have also noted existence of positive teacher perceptions towards play-based and CCP (Munasinghe, 2018; Rajapaksha, 2015). However, the said local studies were considering comparatively smaller sample sizes than the current study.

RQ2 was investigated under the quantitative analysis which reported moderate implementation of CCP practices (Mean = 3.31,  $SD = 0.52$ ), where certain items in the questionnaire held high frequency while the rest were reported with a lower frequency. The reported moderate level of practice is consistent with international findings from LMIC contexts Mengstie (2023) Puteh & Ali (2013). Studies from Sri Lankan context also have reported teachers being unable to implement CCP due to various constraints such as resource limitations and lack of institutional support (Balasundaram, 2024; Talagala, 2021). Thus, moderate practices reported in the current study corroborates with previous Sri Lankan studies reporting the perception-practice gap. Further, previous local studies have not quantified the practice frequencies. Even though some international studies (Sandvik et al., 2014) from developed countries also have reported inconsistencies in CCP implementation in the classroom, the underlying causes are different from the causes highlighted in Sri Lankan context.

Thus, the present findings suggest that Sri Lankan preschool teachers conceptually accept CCP as an appropriate approach for early childhood education. However, preschool teachers' self-reported practices on CCP were at a moderate level. This weak, non-significant relationship (Pearson Correlation:  $r = .139$ ,  $p = .080$ ) of perceptions and practices underscores that teacher's beliefs do not translate directly into practices and there exist contextual factors influencing the perception-practice association. Similar gap between teachers' perceptions and practices had been documented in international studies Leng et al. (2021).

The Qualitative analysis of the current study identified key enablers and barriers at each layer of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological framework, influencing the perception-practice relationship through a comprehensive thematic analysis. Findings resonate with Leng et al. (2021), stating that parental pressure, curriculum rigidity and large class sizes as barriers for CCP while supportive preschool leadership act as an enabler but with more emphasize on Parental Expectations and Curriculum rather than the rest of the causes.

Parental Expectations at the Microsystem level has been reported in local and LMIC studies (Myagmar, 2010; Samarasinghe, 2021; Talagala, 2021) making it a critical factor for implementation CCP implementation. Even though local studies have not emphasized Teacher Collaboration as an enabler of CCP at the Mesosystem level, confirming the current finding, an international study from Barr (2005), has highlighted the ability of improving pedagogical quality through kindergarten teacher collaboration. Exosystem identified as the most influential in current study includes both enablers and barriers for CCP. Some local studies have reported similar challenges but in isolation (Balasundaram, 2024; Jazeel, 2021). At the Macrosystem level, absence of National Standards including weak monitoring and regulation and urban rural disparities act as barriers. Hence aligning with findings of NEC (2019) and (Samarawickrama, 2023) which highlights the unequal policies for ECE regulation across Sri Lanka.

Even though different local studies have revealed certain barriers to CCP, the current study attempted to integrate the barriers as well as enablers into a single EST based analysis. If the identified barriers are pruned and enablers are strengthened, CCP can be fostered and implemented in Sri Lankan preschool settings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not applicable.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or writing of this manuscript.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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