



The Application of the Four Pillars in Improving the Education Paradigm for Soft Skills of Children Aged 5-6 Years

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Abstract

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan penerapan empat pilar Pendidikan United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) dalam meningkatkan paradigma pendidikan soft skill anak usia 5-6 tahun di lembaga pendidikan anak usia dini. Paradigma pendidikan yang sebelumnya berorientasi pada aspek akademik telah bergeser ke pendekatan holistik dan child-centered, melalui penerapan empat pilar utama, yaitu belajar mengetahui, belajar melakukan, belajar menjadi, dan belajar hidup bersama. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus yang dilakukan di RA Al-Muttaqin. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi partisipatif terhadap 3 peneliti dan wawancara mendalam dengan dua peserta, yaitu guru kelas dan kepala sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keempat pilar tersebut diterapkan secara kontekstual dalam kegiatan pembelajaran berbasis pusat, praktik langsung, pengembangan karakter, dan kerja sama sosial. Aplikasi ini berdampak positif pada penguatan soft skill anak, seperti komunikasi, empati, kerja sama, tanggung jawab, dan kemandirian. Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya mengubah paradigma pendidikan anak usia dini dari berfokus pada prestasi akademik menjadi pembelajaran humanistik dan komprehensif, serta pentingnya penguatan kompetensi guru dan kurikulum berbasis nilai.

Kata Kunci: Empat Pilar Pendidikan, Paradigma Pendidikan, Soft Skill, Anak Usia Dini

Abstract

This study aims to describe the implementation of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Four Pillars of Education in improving the soft skill education paradigm for children aged 5–6 years in PAUD institutions. The educational orientation has shifted from academic-center to a holistic, child-center approach through four main pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. This qualitative research used a case study method at RA Al-Muttaqin. Data were collected through participatory observation by three researchers and in-depth interviews with two participants: the class teacher and the principal. Findings revealed that the four pillars were applied contextually in center-based learning, hands-on activities, character building, and social interaction. These practices positively contributed to the development of children's soft skills, including communication, empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and independence. The study highlights the urgency of transforming early childhood education from an academic focus to a more humanistic, integrated model. It also underlines the importance of strengthening teacher competencies and implementing a value-based curriculum to support this shift. In conclusion, the application of the Four Pillars promotes a more meaningful and effective early education experience.

Keywords: The Four Pillars of Education, Educational Paradigm, Soft Skills, Early Childhood

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (PAUD) has a strategic role in forming the foundation of child development as a whole. The age period of 5-6 years is a golden phase in a child's life that greatly determines the direction of character formation, personality, and readiness to face the next level of education (Azizah, 2024; Suryadi & Daryati, 2022). Education is not only the mastery of cognitive aspects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic (calistung), but also the development of *Soft Skills* or social-emotional skills that support the formation of students' character. Skills such as the ability to work together, empathise, manage emotions, and communicate effectively are fundamental needs amid complex social development. The development of educational needs encourages the need for a more holistic approach, one of which is through the implementation of UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education.

The concept of education in the context of early childhood education must be comprehensive and integrated, which includes the development of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of children (W.- Apriani et al., 2021; Neneng Neneng et al., 2023). *Soft skills* include the ability to communicate, collaborate, manage emotions, and form positive characteristics such as responsibility, empathy, and tolerance. In line with the opinion (Mawardi, 2019) States that *Soft Skills* children who have psychological skills (such as critical thinking, commitment, and motivation), social skills (such as respecting others and being able to work together), and communication skills (such as expressing opinions, answering questions, and asking questions). *Soft Skills* are very important because it is the foundation for establishing social relationships and adapting to the surrounding environment.

One of the approaches that is believed to be able to accommodate the development of *Soft Skills* in early childhood is the application of the four pillars of UNESCO education, namely *learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together* (Handayani, 2023). These pillars provide a comprehensive framework for learning, where children are not only taught knowledge but also trained to act, know themselves, and live with others in harmony. The application of these pillars in teaching and learning activities is believed to be able to improve the educational paradigm that focuses more on the development of children's character and society.

The four pillars of education emphasize learning as a comprehensive process that not only relies on mastery of the material, but also the formation of character and social competence (Daryati et al., 2022; Mahmud, 2022). Global changes marked by the challenges of globalization, digitalization, and shifting social values require the provision of adaptive skills and the inculcation

of human values to children from an early age. Therefore, the transformation of the education paradigm is urgent, not only to improve the quality of learning but also to form a generation that is ready to face the future with noble values and integrity.

The challenges of modern education show that many PAUD institutions have not been able to implement a balanced learning approach between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. The main focus of learning is often stuck on mere academic mastery, such as *calistung*, so that the development of Soft Skills is neglected in children (Daryati, 2023). Social and emotional skills are very important for children to interact and adapt to their environment from an early age. Teachers' lack of understanding of how to translate the concept of the Four Pillars of Education into learning practice is also one of the main obstacles. Many teachers have not received clear training or guidance on the implementation of these pillars in the context of early childhood education. As a result, learning is still conventional and centered on the teacher, not on the child as the subject of learning. This makes it difficult for teachers to design activities that truly reflect the values of the pillars.

This research aims to answer the challenges of implementing the Four Pillars of Education in the context of early childhood education through observation-based case studies and interviews. The application of the Four Pillars needs to be an integral part of daily learning practices to support the development of *soft skills* for children aged 5-6 years. Interactions between teachers, children, and the learning environment were observed to understand how the Four Pillars principles are reflected in learning activities.

Education in the 21st century era no longer focuses only on cognitive aspects, but also on the development of non-academic or *Soft Skills*, which include the ability to communicate, work together, think critically, have empathy and leadership. Increased competence in *Soft Skills* is a goal in the world of education, in addition to improving hard skills, which is emphasised a lot (Mahmudah, 2023). Complex and rapidly changing global dynamics demand the presence of students who have a balance between hard skills and *Soft Skills*. Mastery of *Soft Skills enables* students to interact effectively with teachers and peers, develop presentation skills, and collaborate on group projects. The sociological term "soft skills" refers to emotional intelligence, personality traits, social and communication skills, language use, personal habits, friendly attitudes, and optimism that reflect the way a person interacts with others (Dahlia et al., 2024).

A number of international and national studies have highlighted the importance of implementing the Four Pillars of Education in the 21st-century education system. Countries such as

Finland, Japan, and New Zealand have successfully adopted these principles into their basic education curriculum, including at the level of early childhood education (Suryadi & Daryati, 2022; Wahidah & Ibad, 2023). The learning model in these countries emphasises holistic learning that fosters the value of cooperation, empathy, creativity, and independence from an early age. The conditions for the implementation of the Four Pillars of Education at the PAUD level in Indonesia have not shown optimal results. Previous research has tended to address one or two pillars separately, such as *learning to do* or character education that refers to *learning to be*. Comprehensive studies that integrate the four pillars in their entirety and are applicable are still limited.

As a reinforcement of the issues raised, the main focus of this research is directed at how UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education are implemented in real life in the early childhood education environment to support the development of soft skills of children aged 5–6 years. This research specifically wants to explore the extent of teachers' understanding and application of these four pillars in daily learning activities. Through the mapping of learning practices that take place, it is hoped that this research can provide a comprehensive picture of the learning model that not only emphasises academic achievement but also prioritises the formation of children's character, social skills, and personality as a whole.

The novelty of this research lies in its approach that comprehensively integrates the four pillars of UNESCO education in the context of early childhood learning, something that has not been done much in previous research. If previous research tended to discuss one or two pillars separately, this study offers the application of the four pillars in a complete and contextual manner in the PAUD environment to support the development of *soft skills* for children aged 5–6 years. This research also introduces the transformation of the educational paradigm from academically oriented to holistic, humanistic, and child-centered learning. Thus, this research makes a new contribution to early childhood education practices that are relevant to the needs of the 21st century and emphasizes the importance of strengthening character and social skills from an early age.

This research is expected to be able to provide a concrete picture of the application of the Four Pillars of Education in learning activities in early childhood education, as well as its impact on the development of early childhood soft skills. The results of this study are expected to be material for evaluation and development of more effective learning strategies, especially in shaping children's

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character and social competence from an early age. The benefits of this research are not only felt by educational institutions, but also by teachers, parents, and policymakers. Teachers can use the results of this research as a practical guide in designing and implementing value-based learning. Parents can understand the importance of the role of the family in supporting the formation of children's soft skills. Meanwhile, governments and policymakers can use these results as a basis for decision-making to strengthen character education in the national education system.

METHODOLOGY

Types of Research

A qualitative approach with a case study method is used in this study to explore in depth the meaning and dynamics of the phenomenon being studied. (Nurahma & Hendriani, 2021). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the meaning and interpretation of the research subject, as well as to see the complexity of the phenomenon from various points of view.

Research Time and Place

The research was conducted at one of the PAUD institutions in the city of Tasikmalaya, namely RA Al Muttaqin, which has implemented a value- and character-based learning approach. The research subjects consisted of 2 people, namely the teacher of the class of children aged 5-6 years and the principal. The selection of subjects is carried out purposively, which is based on certain considerations that are relevant to the purpose of the research. Data collection is only carried out through observation and interviews with teachers and school principals, without directly involving children in the interview process. Before the research was carried out, the researcher obtained written consent (*informed consent*) from the school and parents/guardians.

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

The data collection technique in this study was carried out through participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Observation is carried out directly in the classroom during the learning process, using observation sheets developed based on UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education indicators, such as exploration, hands-on practice, cooperation, and character development of children. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted with

classroom teachers and principals using a semi-structured interview guide that contained open-ended questions about the understanding and application of the Four Pillars of Education and its impact on *children's soft skill* development. These two instruments were compiled to obtain relevant and contextual data according to the research objectives.

Data Analysis Techniques

This study uses qualitative descriptive analysis techniques to process and interpret the data obtained. The data obtained from observations and interviews were analysed by reducing the data, arranging the data into thematic categories by the Four Pillars of Education, and then drawing meanings or conclusions from the patterns that emerged. The analysis was carried out systematically to describe the application of the Four Pillars in learning and its impact on the development of *soft skills* of children aged 5–6 years. This process helps researchers understand phenomena in depth and contextually, according to the focus of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The results of the study show that the implementation of UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education has been implemented gradually and contextually in teaching and learning activities at RA Al-Muttaqin and has a significant impact on the development of children's *soft skills*. This is in line with the statement of the results of the interview delivered by the principal of RA Al Muttaqin that *"Schools do not specifically include soft skills in the learning curriculum, but in practice, the school center applies them. In addition, new teachers must undergo a mentoring period before teaching fully. In addition, our school routinely holds training and imitation studies so that teachers can continue to learn and develop soft skills and applied learning methods."* These pillars are indeed applied in learning, but for this school, it can indeed be seen from the teacher recruitment process, interview selection process, and performance practice tests in the initial process is one of the ways we can see the soft skills that teachers have.

The implementation of the four pillars of education has an impact on improving teachers' teaching skills and communication with children. Teachers at RA Al-Muttaqin play a dual role as teachers as well as facilitators who guide the development of students in exploring the world around

them. In improving teacher competence, schools hold regular training and coaching in the form of mock studies and present resource persons who provide insight into the latest learning methods. Teachers are also equipped with good communication skills to build effective relationships with children.

In addition, RA Al-Muttaqin implements a mentoring system for new teachers, where prospective teachers first become companion teachers before finally holding classes independently. This process provides time for teachers to adapt and understand the dynamics of learning in schools, so that they can apply learning methods that are in accordance with the vision and mission of RA Al-Muttaqin. The application of the four pillars of education at RA Al-Muttaqin leads to the establishment of a learning environment that supports children's cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual development in a balanced manner.

The first pillar is *Learning to Know*, implemented through center-based learning that provides opportunities for children to explore various new concepts actively. Based on the results of the interview with the principal, RA Al-Muttaqin develops children's cognitive abilities through learning. "Learning at RA Al-Muttaqin is center-based; children can explore various concepts through exploratory activities such as natural materials centers, block centers, and science centers. *This activity fosters children's curiosity*". This is in line with Sukiyasa's opinion in (Handayani, 2023) that *Learning to Know* is the principle of learning to know and understand. Learning based on this principle needs to be conditioned so that children are active, and an atmosphere is created that encourages curiosity about new things. Thus, the learning process should be able to foster curiosity in children, so that they are encouraged to continue learning and exploring deeper.

The second pillar is *Learning to Do*, realized through hands-on practical activities, such as interviews with classroom teachers. In some centers, our children are invited to experiment directly, such as when they use a magnifying glass to see small objects, as well as practice an *obstacle course in nature*. *It trains children to think critically and solve problems on their own*". This is in line with Rusman's opinion in (Pratama, 2021a) that *Learning to Do* is an aspect of experience and practice, where learning is not only limited to listening and seeing to acquire knowledge, but also acting to master important competencies. Children are allowed to do various activities, so that the learning process is oriented to direct experience. For example, in a science center,

children are invited to experiment with various materials to understand the basic concepts of science. In Creativity and problem-solving, children gain exploratory experiences through various activities at the center. For example, at the Natural Materials Center, they learned about natural phenomena such as how a magnifying glass can burn paper. This trains critical thinking skills and solving problems independently.

Meanwhile, the third pillar, *Learning to Be*, according to Rusman, in (Pratama, 2021b) It is an aspect of personality and conformity to the child. This is in line with the results of interviews with teachers, *"We provide space for children to develop independence, such as taking off shoes and tidying them up again when they are about to enter class"*. The school implements *Learning to Be* by giving children space to express themselves, develop independence, and build positive character. Children are allowed to make their own decisions in learning, so that they are able to hone their creativity and confidence. In addition, the application of School Discipline It also contributes to the formation of the child's character and social control. For example, the habit of taking off shoes before class, keeping shoes neat, and following the rules of eating together helps children understand the importance of discipline and responsibility in daily life.

Finally, the fourth pillar, *Learning to Live Together*, according to Rusman, in (Pratama, 2021b) It is a social aspect of children, such as socializing and living in tolerance in the diversity that exists around children. Based on the results of the interview with the principal, *"Through group learning and role-playing, children learn to interact, share tasks, and respect each other. In the block center, they must work together to build one project"*. The school implements *Learning to Live Together*. It is instilled through group learning that teaches children how to work together, share, and respect each other. Role-playing activities are one of the effective methods in shaping their social skills. In addition, Skills in Communication and cooperation It is also developed through group activities, such as in the block center and the role play center. Children learn to share tasks, discuss with friends, and strategize in building a project together. This builds their social interaction skills from an early age.

In its implementation, the development of *soft skills* at RA Al-Muttaqin faces several challenges. One of the main challenges is *"Every child is different, some adapt quickly to group work, but some need more time"*, one of the challenges is the readiness of children to work with peers. Each child has a different character, so some are more adaptable in group work, while others need more time and guidance. In addition, teacher adaptation in implementing soft skill-based learning methods

is also a challenge in itself. Teachers must continue to develop their teaching skills in order to provide an optimal learning experience for children.

In overcoming these challenges, RA Al-Muttaqin implements strategies to improve children's social, communication, and leadership skills. One strategy is to provide a variety of group-based activities in each center, such as project-based learning and group discussions. This aims to build children's independence and get them used to working together in completing tasks. On the other hand, to improve the quality of teachers, schools continue to hold periodic coaching and evaluation programs. The training provided includes curriculum development, exploration-based teaching methods, and effective communication strategies. In addition, teachers also receive regular evaluations to ensure that the learning methods applied are in accordance with the needs of children and the school's vision.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the implementation of UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education contributes significantly to the development of *Soft Skills* early childhood at RA Al-Muttaqin, as can be seen from the children's ability to cooperate during group activities, the courage of children in expressing opinions during class discussions, and the increased sense of responsibility that is directed through the habit of cleaning up toys after play. This finding was reinforced by the results of interviews with teachers who stated that Approaches based on human values, global cooperation, and lifelong learning are routinely applied through daily thematic activities and character habituation. Holistic learning has also been shown to support children's character development, including emotional intelligence, social skills, and morals (L. Apriani, 2025).

This research is in line with a constructivist approach that places children as active subjects in the learning process. 21st-century education demands reinforcement of *Soft Skills* such as communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, which are integrated in the learning process (Surbakti et al., 2021; Utami et al., 2025). This is evident from the results of observations at RA Al-Muttaqin, where children are actively involved in group discussions, designing artwork from recycled materials, and solving simple problems with their peers. Based on interviews with teachers, this activity is designed to foster creativity and critical thinking, as well as train communication skills by working together from an early age.

Soft Skills, such as communication and empathy, play an important role in the learning process as well as readiness to face a dynamic life and world of work (Trilling, B., & Fadel, 2009). *Soft Skills*. It is also part of emotional and social intelligence that reflects how individuals interact with their social environment (Dahlia. Therefore, integrative learning must lead to strengthening the character and personality of students, not just the achievement of academic grades (Mahmudah, 2023b).

Pillar *Learning to Know*: Playing a role in developing children's thinking skills and curiosity through the exploration of a learning environment rich in concrete experiences. The center-based learning used by RA Al-Muttaqin has proven to be effective in facilitating children to actively recognize new concepts. Based on the results of observations, the children seemed to be fully involved in sharing activities at the role-playing center, block center, and art center. For example, in role-playing, children play traditional market scenarios, where they learn the concepts of buying and selling, numbers, and social roles naturally through dialogue and interaction with peers. In the block center, children arrange buildings according to their imagination, which indirectly hones their understanding of space, balance, and logical thinking skills. While at the art center, children express themselves through painting, drawing and collage activities that stimulate creativity and fine motor coordination (W.- Apriani et al., 2021; Surbakti et al., 2021).

Conversations with teachers show that children understand the concepts of colors, shapes, and numbers faster when they are directly involved in contextual and fun activities. The teacher also emphasized that through this approach, children learn not only from instruction, but from exploration, interaction and direct experience. This is in line with the opinion Nurdyansyah & Fahyuni (2016) The learning process must be designed so that children are able to understand and comprehend information about the world around them, not just memories. Real-life experiential learning forms the basis for the development of critical thinking and early childhood independence. Pillar *learning to know*, emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning as well as critical and analytical thinking skills. Students are encouraged to understand and process information independently, not just receive knowledge. This ability is closely related to the development of *Soft Skills* such as curiosity, time management, and self-study skills. (Sutrisno, 2019). approach *learning to know* trains students to be active learners who are critical, independent, and adaptive to change. The focus is not only on academic readiness, but also on the ability to think rationally and continuously learn in daily life.

On the pillars *Learning to Do*, the study found that hands-on practice activities such as role-playing, science experiments, and building with blocks became effective mediums in instilling soft skills such as responsibility, cooperation, and perseverance. These findings support the results of the study by Mahmudah (2023), which states that practice-based learning can significantly increase children's activeness and participation. In this process, children not only absorb information but also learn how to act, face challenges, and solve problems independently. The second pillar, *learning to do*, emphasizes the ability to apply knowledge in a real context, both in the world of work and in social life.

Learning processes such as project-based learning and experiential learning have been proven to be effective in improving students' competencies in terms of creativity, initiative, and teamwork (Bell, 2010). In its application in schools, project-based learning or student entrepreneurial activities have shown a positive impact on their collaboration and leadership abilities (Susanto, H., & Suryani, 2020). This approach also trains problem-solving and decision-making skills, which are an important part of *Soft Skills* needed in today's world of work. By providing space for students to try, fail, and learn from experience, learning to do encourages the growth of confidence and responsibility. Practice-oriented education also bridges the gap between the educational and professional worlds, so that graduates are not only academically prepared but also functionally and socially skilled

Application *Learning to Be* foundation in character formation and recognition of children's identity. Teachers at RA Al-Muttaqin actively guide children to recognize emotions, foster confidence, and affirm the positive attitude shown by children. This reflects the importance of social support from teachers in the process of forming children's personalities. In line with Dahlia et al. (2024), soft skills such as empathy, emotional control, and self-confidence are part of emotional intelligence that is essential in the educational process from an early age. Pillar *learning to be* leads to the formation of a whole individual character. Education not only produces intelligent human beings, but also ethical, independent, and resilient human beings. *Soft Skills* Such as empathy, emotional control, and self-awareness can be cultivated through reflective activities and value-based learning (Penimang, T., 2022).

Pillar *Learning to Be* is also in line with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum which emphasizes differentiated learning and character strengthening (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). By providing space for students to explore their interests, recognize their potential, and express their

opinions freely and responsibly, this pillar encourages the growth of confident individuals and strong identities. Education that internalizes moral and spiritual values consistently contributes to shaping individuals who are not only intellectually competent, but also emotionally and socially mature. Therefore, learning to be is the foundation in equipping future generations with the skills and character needed to answer global challenges with integrity and strong leadership.

Pillar *Learning to Live Together* It is realized through collaborative activities such as playing in groups, discussing, and completing tasks together. Children learn to understand differences, resolve conflicts peacefully, and appreciate the contributions of friends. This supports the growth of social awareness from an early age. *Learning to Live Together* emphasizing the importance of coexistence in a plural and multicultural society. This pillar is in line with the value of mutual cooperation in the Pancasila Student Profile (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). Group-based learning also improves communication skills and empathy (Rohman, F., & Lestari, 2021). By getting used to living in harmony from an early age, children grow up to be tolerant and caring citizens. The application of this pillar is an important provision to face the global community. Education that emphasizes inclusive values encourages the formation of a culture of peace and social solidarity.

In general, the four pillars complement each other and form a comprehensive educational framework oriented towards child development as a whole. This research emphasizes the importance of the role of teachers as facilitators, not just conveyors of material. The role of teachers is crucial in creating a learning environment that encourages children to think, act, behave, and live together in harmony. It also shows that the application of UNESCO's education pillar is not an abstract concept, but can be realized through concrete learning activities tailored to the local context and the child's developmental needs.

However, in its implementation, challenges remain. Some teachers still need to improve their professional capacity in designing and implementing soft skill-based learning consistently. In addition, the implementation of the pillars relies heavily on institutional support, such as teacher training, school policies, and parental participation. Therefore, synergy is needed between various stakeholders in early childhood education to ensure that learning not only emphasizes the academic aspect, but also shapes the character of children from an early age.

Thus, the results of this discussion show that there is an increase in the educational paradigm from an academic approach to a holistic approach centered on children. Through the implementation of UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education, namely *Learning to Know*, *Learning to Do*, *Learning to Be*,

and *Learning to Live Together*, early childhood education no longer only focuses on cognitive abilities, but also develops *soft skills* such as empathy, communication, cooperation, and responsibility. This new paradigm places teachers as facilitators who create contextual and meaningful learning environments, as well as encourage the formation of children's character from an early age. The results of the study show that the application of these pillars is able to create comprehensive learning that is relevant to the needs of the 21st century, thereby strengthening the role of early childhood education to form a generation that is not only intellectually superior, but also has emotional maturity and social skills.

CONCLUSION

UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education at RA Al-Muttaqin have been running effectively and have a positive impact on the development of soft skills for early childhood 5–6 years old. The four pillars of education include learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together, being able to form a holistic and child-centered learning paradigm. Center-based learning activities, exploration, group work, and self-reflection successfully foster important skills such as communication, responsibility, cooperation, empathy, and independence in children.

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