Traditional Games: A Powerful Tool to Strengthen Social Skills in Early Childhood

Juegos tradicionales: una herramienta ponderosa para fortalecer las habilidades sociales en la infancia temprana

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Abstract

This research analyzes the influence of traditional games on the development of social skills in five-year-old children at an educational institution, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and quality education from early childhood. The relevance of the study lies in demonstrating how traditional play experiences strengthen interaction, empathy, and communication in preschool. The overall objective was to determine the influence of traditional games on the development of social skills. The research was framed within an applied study, with a quantitative approach and pre-experimental design. The sample consisted of 23 five-year-old children, and the data collection instrument was a structured observation guide with 16 items, organized on a Likert-type ordinal scale. The results showed significant improvements after the intervention. Before the program, no child reached the high level of development in the dimensions observed; however, after the 15 sessions of traditional games, notable progress was recorded. The Student's t-test yielded a p-value of 0.000, confirming that the differences observed were statistically significant. It is concluded that traditional games are an effective pedagogical strategy for strengthening social skills in childhood by promoting teamwork, mutual respect, and active participation in meaningful educational contexts.

Keywords: play, social skills, child development.

Resumen

La presente investigación analiza la influencia de los juegos tradicionales en el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales en niños de cinco años de una institución educativa, en consonancia con el Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible 4 (ODS 4), que promueve una educación inclusiva y de calidad desde la primera infancia. La relevancia del estudio radica en evidenciar cómo las experiencias lúdicas tradicionales fortalecen la interacción, la empatía y la comunicación en la etapa preescolar. El objetivo general fue determinar la influencia de los juegos tradicionales en el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales. La investigación se enmarcó en un estudio de tipo aplicado, con enfoque cuantitativo y diseño preexperimental. La muestra estuvo conformada por 23 niños de cinco años, y el instrumento de recolección de datos fue una guía de observación estructurada de 16 ítems, organizada en una escala ordinal tipo Likert. Los resultados mostraron mejoras significativas tras la intervención. Antes del programa, ningún niño alcanzaba el nivel alto de desarrollo en las dimensiones observadas; sin embargo, después

de las 15 sesiones de juegos tradicionales, se registraron avances notables. La prueba t de Student arrojó un valor p = 0.000, confirmando que las diferencias observadas fueron estadísticamente significativas. Se concluye que los juegos tradicionales constituyen una estrategia pedagógica eficaz para fortalecer las habilidades sociales en la infancia, al fomentar el trabajo en equipo, el respeto mutuo y la participación activa en contextos educativos significativos.

Palabras clave: juego, competencias sociales, desarrollo del niño.

Introduction

This study examines the role of traditional games in the development of social skills in five-year-old children. Currently, one of the most significant challenges in early education is promoting the comprehensive development of children, where social skills are an essential component for emotional well-being, harmonious coexistence, and success in the learning process. The problem motivating this research stems from the decrease in opportunities for meaningful social interaction in school environments, particularly due to excessive use of electronic devices and a reduction in group activities (Ministerio de Educación del Perú [MINEDU], 2023).

Internationally, over 1.6 billion students were affected by school closures during the pandemic, which limited the development of social skills in childhood (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura [UNESCO], 2022). In Latin America, studies indicate that at least 60% of preschool-aged children face difficulties in peer interactions (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia [UNICEF], 2023). In Peru, it has been reported that 57% of children in early education struggle to express emotions, share, or resolve conflicts, while 7 out of 10 use mobile devices for more than two hours daily, significantly impacting their socialization (MINEDU, 2023). If this situation is not addressed, it could jeopardize their emotional well-being and proper school adaptation.

The relevance of this study is justified by theoretical, practical, social, and contextual criteria. From theoretical and practical perspectives, it aims to reclaim playful pedagogical strategies that favor direct interaction among children. In this sense, traditional games emerge as an accessible, culturally significant, and effective educational tool to promote skills such as empathy, cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution (Solís, 2018; Pazos & Sánchez, 2021). Socially and contextually, the research responds to the need to strengthen children's socialization, which has been affected by excessive use of technology and weakened group dynamics. Furthermore, it aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), "Quality Education," by fostering inclusive and effective learning environments.

The study is grounded in a solid theoretical foundation. From the perspective of cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1962; Bodrova & Leong, 2015), play allows children to construct knowledge and actively adapt to their environment through exploration. In turn, the sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lillard, 2017) considers play as a privileged space for social interaction where cultural norms are internalized, roles are assumed, and language is developed. Additionally, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992) emphasizes observation, imitation, and modeling as key mechanisms in the acquisition of social skills during play. Finally, the ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) highlights the influence of various environments—family, school, and community—on the process of child socialization (Tudge et al., 2009). These theories converge to underscore the importance of play as a catalyst for social and emotional development in childhood.

Regarding previous research, various international studies demonstrate that the implementation of structured playful programs significantly improves social skills in children (Vorkapic et al., 2024; Cámara et al., 2023; Tsamitrou & Plumet, 2023). In the Peruvian context, research by Guerrero-Gonzales (2022) and Guardamino and Silvia (2024) corroborates that traditional games strengthen social competencies from an early age. However, gaps remain in the literature regarding their systematic application in urban educational institutions, as specifically addressed in this study.

The research context is an early education institution, where preliminary observations identified behaviors reflecting difficulties in coexistence: low tolerance, limited cooperation, and inadequate emotional responses. These phenomena are related to early and prolonged use of technology, as well as the limited implementation of structured group activities.

In this framework, the general objective of the research is to determine the influence of traditional games on the development of social skills in children at an educational institution. The specific objectives are: (1) to evaluate the influence of traditional games on children's self-management; (2) to examine their impact on communication; (3) to analyze their effect on peer relationships; and (4) to assess their contribution to group

collaboration. Finally, the general hypothesis posits that traditional games significantly improve social skills in five-year-old children.

Methodology

This research adopted a quantitative approach, as it sought to objectively measure the influence of traditional games on the development of social skills in five-year-old children. The type of research was applied, aimed at addressing a specific educational problem with the intention of implementing directly applicable strategies in the classroom. Furthermore, it is classified as descriptive, as it described the observed effects on the variables before and after the intervention.

The methodological design was pre-experimental with a single group and measurements taken before and after, without a control group. This design allowed for an initial approximation of the effects of the independent variable (traditional games) on the dependent variable (social skills), facilitating the identification of possible significant trends.

The study population consisted of 70 children enrolled in an educational institution. The sample, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling, included 23 five-year-old children, considered a key stage in the development of social skills. Only students with active enrollment and informed consent from parents or legal guardians were included. Exclusion criteria limited participation to children with medical conditions or disabilities that would hinder their integration into group activities.

For data collection, a structured observation technique was utilized, applying a guide of 16 items distributed across four dimensions: peer interaction, self-management, communication skills, and group collaboration. The instrument employed a Likert-type scale and was subjected to expert judgment to validate its content. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, achieving a value greater than 0.70, ensuring the internal consistency of the instrument.

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS v.26 and Microsoft Excel, presenting results through tables and graphs. Prior to this, a normality test was applied, and as significance values greater than 0.05 were obtained, the Student's t-test for related samples was employed to compare scores obtained before and after the intervention.

Regarding ethical considerations, the physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being of participants was ensured. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and the principles of autonomy, justice, equity, and non-discrimination were respected. The designed activities focused on promoting the comprehensive development of children, under constant supervision and with the implementation of appropriate safety protocols.

Results and discussion

The following presents the results obtained from the data analysis. First, the initial diagnostic assessment of social skills and their dimensions is provided to describe the starting situation of the participants. Second, data comparing pretest and posttest results are shown to highlight the magnitude of the changes achieved and the statistical significance of the differences found after implementing playful strategies in the classroom.

3.1 Diagnostic analysis of the pretest

Table 1 presents the initial results of social skills and their dimensions before the playful intervention was applied. The overall average was 37.6 points, indicating that most children were at the Beginning and Process levels, without reaching the Achieved level. Specifically, the Communication Skills dimension showed a higher percentage at the Beginning level (65%), followed by Peer Relationships (61%). These findings reflect that social competencies were still limited, underscoring the need to implement didactic strategies aimed at strengthening them.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and achievement levels of the pretest for social skills and their dimensions
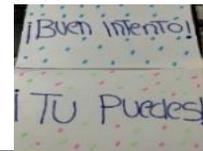
Variable/Dimension	Descriptive statistics					Achievement levels		
	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum	% Initial	% In-progress	% Achieved

Social skills	37.6	36	5.93	29	47	39%	61%	0%
Peer relationships	10.1	10	3.03	4	15	61%	39%	0%
Self-management	9.17	9	2.23	4	13	39%	61%	0%
Communication skills	9.43	9	2.46	5	15	65%	35%	0%
Group collaboration	8.91	8	2.04	6	13	57%	43%	0%

3.2 Intervention design

Based on the pretest results, a significant proportion of children were found at the initial and in-progress levels across various dimensions of social skills, indicating difficulties in interacting with peers, self-regulating, and effectively expressing ideas. In response to this situation, a playful intervention was designed based on traditional games, structured into 15 progressive sessions aimed at strengthening empathy, cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. Activities were selected for their pedagogical value, accessibility, and cultural relevance, ensuring a participatory, inclusive, and meaningful experience for the children.

Table 2 shows the five most representative activities of the proposal, selected for their direct impact on the development of social skills observed during the intervention.

Activities	Game	Materials	Purpose	Evidence of Learning
1	Tug of War	Ropes, boundary tape	Promote group cooperation and coordination through "Tug of War"	Children collaborate to win as a team, follow directions, and motivate each other
2	Tag	Balls, cones, whistle	Promote respect for turns and rules through "Tag"	Children respect turns, follow rules, and have fun without conflicts
3	Blind Race s	Adhesive tape, large space	Stimulate empathy and body expression in "Blind Race"	Children communicate verbally and non-verbally, guide carefully, and support each other
4	Catch the Handkerchief	Colored handkerchiefs	Develop emotional self-management with "Catch the Handkerchief"	Children identify emotions when winning or losing, control impulses, and self-regulate
5	Secret Mailbox	Cards with images and phrases	Foster assertive communication skills in "Secret Mailbox"	Children express ideas and feelings respectfully, responding to peers with empathy

3.3 Comparison of Pretest and Post-test

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics obtained before and after the intervention for the variable of social skills and their dimensions. The overall mean increased from 37.60 points in the pretest to 66.73 in the posttest, representing an average increase of approximately 29 points. Similarly, all dimensions show increases in their mean values, with the Group Collaboration dimension standing out. These preliminary results suggest a generalized improvement, subsequently confirmed through the appropriate statistical test.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and achievement levels of the post-test for social skills and their dimensions

Variable/Dimension	Descriptive statistics					Achievement levels		
	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum	% Initial	% In-progress	% Achieved
Social skills	66.74	71	6.56	56	73	0%	35%	65%
Peer relationships	16.39	18	1.88	13	18	0%	30%	70%
Self-management	16.57	16	1.50	14	18	0%	30%	70%
Communication skills	17.35	17	1.77	15	19	0%	30%	70%
Group collaboration	16.43	18	2	12	18	0%	30%	70%

Figure 1 illustrates the trend in achievement levels for social skills, comparing pretest and posttest scores. A significant reduction in students at the initial and in-progress levels is observed, while the Achieved level notably increased, rising from 0 to 20 cases after the intervention. This finding evidences the positive impact of the implemented playful strategies, promoting a greater mastery of the evaluated social competencies.
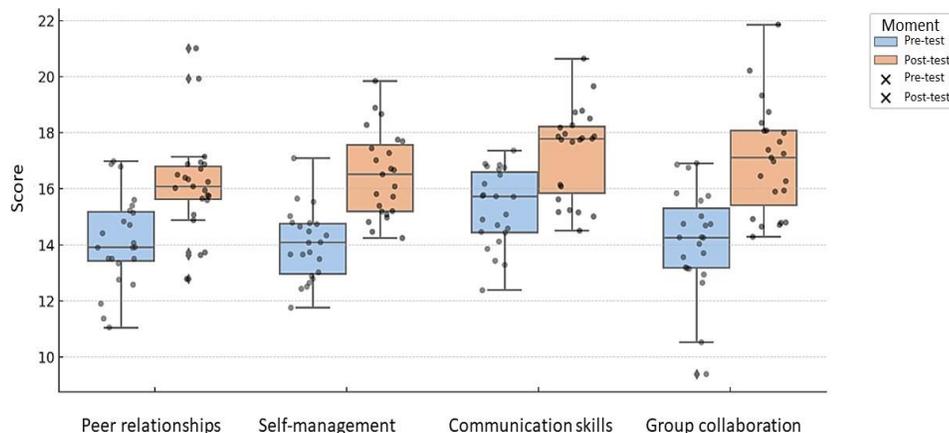

Figure 1 Trend in achievement levels of social skills: Pretest–Post-test comparison

To determine the magnitude and consistency of the improvements achieved, the Student's t-test for related samples was applied. The results show that the overall social skills variable increased from an average of 37.60 in the pretest to 66.73 in the posttest, with an average difference of 29.13 points (t = 17.169; p < 0.001), demonstrating a statistically significant increase. When analyzing specific dimensions, Peer Relationships increased by more than 6 points (t = 9.176; p < 0.001), Self-Management showed an improvement of 7.4 points (t

= 16.037; p < 0.001), while Communication Skills and Group Collaboration presented increases between 7.5 and 7.9 points, all with high t-values and significance levels below 0.001.

This pattern of results confirms that the intervention had a widespread impact on the development of social skills and strengthened key dimensions that favor effective peer interaction, autonomy, and collaboration in group contexts. The consistency of increases across each dimension, along with the high statistical significance, supports the effectiveness of the applied strategies and evidences a solid and comprehensive improvement among the participating students.

Table 4
Significant differences in social skills and their dimensions: results of the t-test for related samples (Pretest–Post-test)

Variable/Dimension	Moment	Average	Difference	Student's t	Significance
Social skills Peer relationships	Pre-test	37.60	29.13	17.169	0.000
	Post-test	66.73			
Self-management Communication skills	Pre-test	10.08	6.304	9.176	0.000
	Post-test	16.39			
Group collaboration Social skills	Pre-test	9.17	7.391	16.037	0.000
	Post-test	16.56			
Peer relationships Self-management	Pre-test	9.43	7.913	11.542	0.000
	Post-test	17.34			
Communication skills	Pre-test	8.91	7.522	15.089	0.000
	Post-test	16.43			

Finally, **Figure 2** presents the distribution of scores obtained in the social skills variable and in each of its dimensions, comparing pretest and posttest results. A significant shift in the median and the shape of the distribution towards higher values is observed in most analyzed dimensions. In particular, the overall variable shows a consistent increase accompanied by a reduction in dispersion, reflecting greater homogeneity in results following the intervention. Similarly, the dimensions of Self-Management, Group Collaboration, Communication Skills, and Peer Relationships exhibit similar improvement patterns, highlighting the concentration of cases in higher score ranges. These descriptive findings, in agreement with the inferential results, reinforce the conclusion that traditional games constitute an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing social skills in childhood.

Figure 2. Comparative distribution of social skills and dimensions: improvement trend between Pretest and Post-test
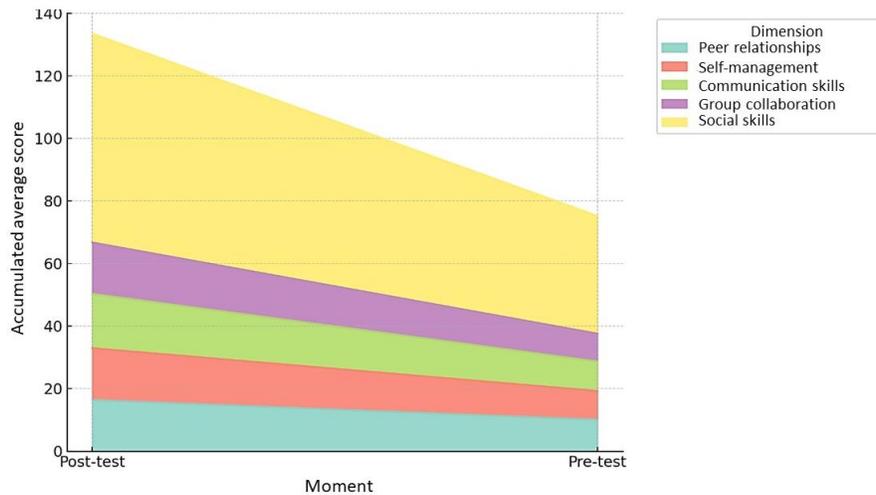

Figure 3. Flowchart of the proposal of traditional games to improve social skills
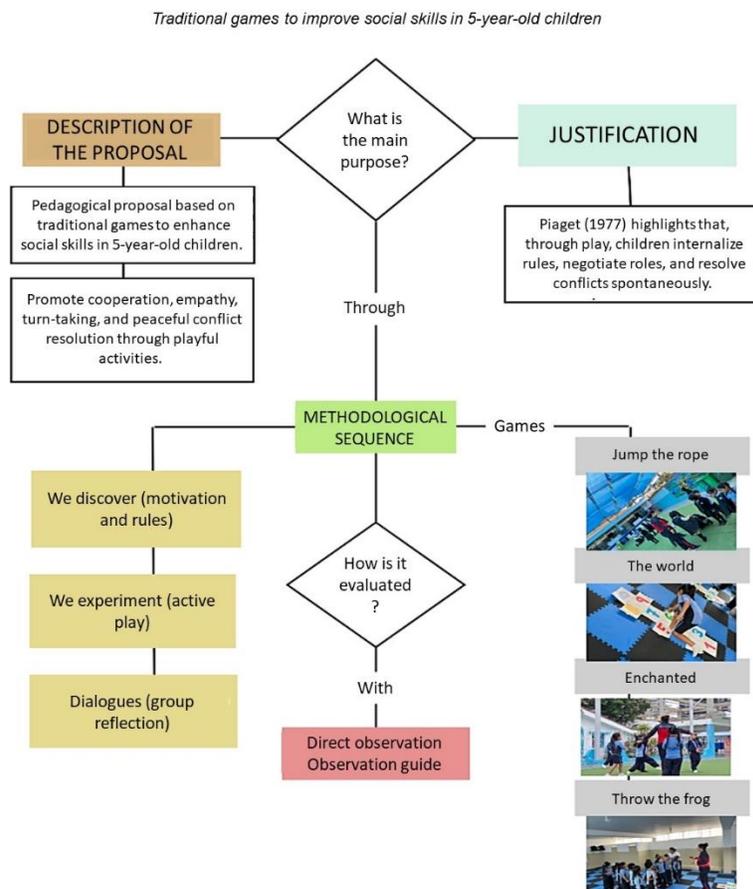

Figure 3. The flowchart clearly and orderly presents the pedagogical proposal based on traditional games to strengthen social skills in five-year-old children. It details the central purpose, its theoretical justification, the

methodological sequence (discovering, experimenting, dialoguing), the applied games, and the evaluation method (direct observation and observation guide).

Discussion

The findings confirm the hypothesis that traditional games significantly influence the development of social skills in five-year-old children. After the intervention, improvements were observed in all analyzed dimensions: self-management, communication, peer relationships, and group collaboration.

These results align with previous research (Guardamino & Silvia, 2024; Guerrero & Gonzales, 2022; Tsamitrou & Plumet, 2023), which demonstrate that traditional games are an effective pedagogical tool for fostering empathy, self-regulation, cooperation, and communication in early childhood.

From the theoretical framework, the findings can be explained through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which recognizes play as a mediated learning space where children internalize norms and develop higher psychological functions. Bandura (1977) reinforces this perspective by considering that children learn social skills through observation and imitation within their peer group.

Self-management showed a notable increase, supporting Joseph and Strain's (2003) assertion regarding the importance of playful contexts for self-regulation. Additionally, the improvement in communication coincides with studies such as those by Soto et al. (2021) and Cámara et al. (2023), who highlight that traditional games stimulate verbal expression in meaningful situations.

Regarding peer relationships, the playful dynamics facilitated the development of positive bonds, consistent with the contributions of Baque and Rosero (2023) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979). Group collaboration, in turn, was strengthened through the implementation of games that require coordination, role distribution, and adherence to shared rules, which aligns with the premises of social constructivism (Piaget & Vygotsky).

This research confirms that traditional games, when properly implemented, constitute an effective tool for enhancing social competencies in contemporary educational settings, especially following the pandemic. Their systematization in teaching practices represents a didactic strategy with scientific, cultural, and social value.

Conclusions

The empirical evidence obtained allows us to affirm that the systematic use of traditional games in early education contexts not only responds to a current pedagogical need but also constitutes a strategy of high formative value. Its effectiveness lies in the relational structure it promotes and the activation of fundamental socio-emotional processes for coexistence. This study demonstrates that the intentional design of culturally significant playful activities can transform the classroom into a space for regulated socialization, favoring the gradual and sustained development of essential social skills, thus theoretically supporting Vygotsky and Bandura's propositions regarding situated learning and observational learning.

However, the applied intervention raises a relevant line of inquiry: what is the permanence of the social learnings acquired through these types of strategies? While the short-term results were consistent, future research is needed to evaluate the consolidation of these skills over time and in natural interaction scenarios outside the classroom. Additionally, designing interventions tailored to children with special educational needs or in rural contexts, where traditional games may acquire different meanings, presents a challenge. Therefore, this study lays the groundwork for a research agenda with potential for expansion and contextualization.

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