Exploring the Mechanisms Influencing Young Children's Learning Initiative in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: Learning initiative is a critical foundation for young children's long-term learning engagement. Existing research has predominantly viewed it as an individual trait, with limited focus on interactional mechanisms in daily educational contexts. This qualitative study explores how adult support shapes children's learning initiative in early childhood education settings. Drawing on classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and parent questionnaires, the findings identify three core mechanisms: adult verbal encouragement as an immediate trigger, emotional safety as a mediating condition for sustained engagement, and home–school alignment as a reinforcing factor. By reconceptualizing learning initiative as an interactionally constructed process, this study advances sociocultural and autonomy-supportive perspectives, offering practical insights for educators and parents.

Keywords: Learning initiative; Verbal encouragement; Emotional safety; Early childhood education; Home–school alignment

1. Introduction

Learning initiative, defined as children's willingness to initiate tasks, persist in challenges, and explore new ideas, is pivotal for long-term educational success [1]. Rooted in sociocultural theory, children's learning behaviors are co-constructed through interactions with adults [2,3]. However, existing research has focused on individual-level variables or isolated contextual factors, overlooking the dynamic interactional processes and cross-contextual consistency that shape sustained initiative.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a qualitative, mechanism-oriented approach. Research questions include: (1) What key mechanisms influence young children's learning initiative in early childhood education (ECE)? (2) How do adult support practices (teachers and parents) shape initiative development? (3) How do home and school contexts interact to influence initiative? The findings aim to provide a relational account of learning initiative, bridging theoretical and practical gaps in ECE research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizing learning initiative

Learning initiative is a context-dependent, malleable construct, manifested in behaviors such as independent activity selection, questioning, and persistence [4]. Unlike achievement-focused constructs, it emphasizes process and agency over outcomes, shaped by social interactions and environmental conditions.

2.2. Key influencing factors

Socio-cultural perspectives highlight the role of adult scaffolding and guided participation in fostering initiative [2]. Process-oriented verbal encouragement, which emphasizes effort and strategy, is more effective than outcome-focused praise [5]. Emotional safety reduces fear of error, enabling risk-taking [6]. Autonomy-supportive environments, balancing structure and choice, enhance engagement [7]. Home–school alignment, as emphasized by ecological systems theory [8], reinforces consistent expectations, while misalignment undermines initiative [9].

2.3. Research gaps

Prior studies lack exploration of interactional mechanisms, cross-contextual dynamics, and multi-source qualitative data. This study addresses these by examining how verbal encouragement, emotional safety, and home–school alignment jointly construct learning initiative.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A qualitative exploratory design was employed, integrating classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and parent questionnaires.

3.2. Participants

Purposive sampling included 9 teachers (28–45 years, 3–15 years of experience), 18 parents of 4–6-year-old children, and 24 children observed in ECE settings.

3.3. Data collection

Interviews: 30–60-minute sessions with teachers and parents.
Observations: 24 sessions (2 hours each) capturing task initiation and persistence.
Questionnaires: Open-ended responses on home learning support.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis [10] was conducted using NVivo, involving familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and triangulation. Trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation, audit trails, and peer debriefing.

4. Findings

4.1. Verbal encouragement as an immediate trigger

Classroom observations showed that process-oriented verbal encouragement (e.g., "You're thinking carefully") immediately activated children's initiative. Teachers noted that acknowledging effort, rather than correctness,

reduced hesitation. For example, a child who hesitated to draw began independently after the teacher affirmed their thinking process. Encouragement also supported persistence: a child resumed block-building after the teacher acknowledged their resilience following collapses.

4.2. Emotional safety as a mediating condition

Emotional safety determined whether the initial initiative was sustained. In supportive environments, children persisted after mistakes. A teacher's response, "Let's count together again—you were close," helped a child resume numeracy tasks. Normalizing errors ("There's no wrong way here") fostered exploration. Home experiences influenced emotional security: children whose parents tolerated mistakes were more confident in school [6].

4.3. Home–school alignment as a reinforcing mechanism

Consistent expectations across home and school strengthened stable initiative. Children whose parents emphasized effort and choice demonstrated confident task initiation. Misalignment, such as parents prioritizing perfection, led to hesitation even in supportive classrooms. Communication between teachers and parents bridged gaps: parents adjusted practices after understanding classroom emphasis on effort [9].

5. Discussion
5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study reconceptualizes learning initiative as an interactionally constructed process, extending sociocultural and autonomy-supportive theories. It identifies three interrelated mechanisms: verbal encouragement (immediate trigger), emotional safety (mediator), and home–school alignment (reinforcer).

5.2. Practical implications

Teaching: Adopt process-oriented encouragement and responsive scaffolding.
Classrooms: Balance structure and choice to support autonomy.
Families: Encourage independent attempts and tolerate mistakes.
Collaboration: Enhance home–school communication to align expectations.

5.3. Limitations

The study's context-specific qualitative design limits generalizability. Future research could use mixed methods or longitudinal designs to validate findings across diverse settings.

6. Extended discussion
6.1. Comparison with previous studies

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of adult scaffolding and autonomy support in early learning environments [2,3,7]. Unlike prior studies that focused mainly on cognitive outcomes, this research highlights emotional and relational mechanisms as central contributors to learning initiative. This expands current understanding by integrating emotional safety and contextual alignment into a unified framework.

6.2. Implications for policy and curriculum design

Educational policymakers should consider integrating emotional safety indicators into early childhood curriculum standards. Teacher training programs should include modules on process-oriented feedback, relational pedagogy, and parent–teacher collaboration. These measures can help ensure that learning initiative is systematically supported across institutions.

6.3. Cultural and contextual considerations

This study was conducted in Malaysian early childhood settings, where collectivist cultural values may influence adult–child interactions. Respect for authority and emphasis on harmony may shape children's responses to encouragement. Therefore, future research should examine cross-cultural variations to determine the generalizability of the proposed mechanisms.

7. Recommendations for practice

7.1. Teacher professional development

Teachers should receive continuous professional training on autonomy-supportive communication strategies. Workshops and peer mentoring programs can facilitate reflective practices and improve classroom interaction quality.

7.2. Parent education programs

Parent seminars and digital guidance platforms can be developed to promote supportive home learning environments. These programs should emphasize effort-based feedback and emotional regulation strategies.

7.3. Institutional support systems

Schools should establish structured communication channels, such as regular conferences and online platforms, to promote home–school alignment.

8. Future research directions

Future studies should adopt mixed-method and longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of verbal encouragement and emotional safety on academic trajectories. Quantitative validation of the proposed framework may further enhance its theoretical robustness.

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that young children's learning initiative is not merely an individual trait but a socially constructed process shaped by verbal encouragement, emotional security, and contextual consistency. By identifying these mechanisms, the research provides a comprehensive framework for enhancing early learning engagement and supports evidence-based practice in early childhood education.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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