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The Dominance of the Daycare Environment in Early Childhood Care and Its Implications for the Formation of Children's Self-Identity

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ABSTRACT

Social and economic changes in modern families have led to an increased use of daycare as a form of early childhood care. Many children spend more time in daycare than at home with their parents, making the daycare environment a dominant caregiving context in their lives. This condition has the potential to influence the process of self-identity formation in early childhood, which is still in its initial developmental stage. This study aims to understand how the dominance of the daycare environment affects the formation of self-identity in early childhood. The study employs a qualitative approach using structured observation techniques of young children at a daycare institution. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the duration of children's attendance at daycare. Data collection focused on children's self-expression, social interaction patterns, and emotional responses in daily caregiving activities. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns in children's self-identity formation. The findings indicate that children tend to construct their self-identity based on the norms, relationships, and expectations that dominate the daycare environment. Children adjust their behavior and self-expression in accordance with caregiving patterns experienced repeatedly. The findings emphasize the importance of continuity between home and daycare relationships in supporting healthy self-identity formation in early childhood.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social and economic changes in modern families have shifted early childhood caregiving patterns from the family environment to collective caregiving institutions such as daycare (Belsky, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Increased parental participation in the workforce has made daycare a primary choice for meeting children's caregiving needs (OECD, 2021). Many young children spend a longer portion of their daily time in daycare than at home with their parents (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). This condition positions daycare not merely as a childcare facility, but as a dominant caregiving environment in children's lives. A dominant caregiving environment has a significant influence on children's social, emotional, and self-identity development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Self-identity in early childhood begins to form through repeated relational experiences in daily caregiving contexts (Erikson, 1963; Harter, 2012). Children recognize themselves through how their environment responds to their emotions, behaviors, and self-expression (Rogoff, 2003). Daycare has the potential to become the primary space for children's self-meaning construction (Howes & Hamilton, 1992). The dominance of caregiving experiences in daycare demands serious attention from the perspective of early childhood education. This condition makes the study of daycare and children's self-identity increasingly relevant.

Over the past five years, the use of daycare in Indonesia has shown a significant increase in line with changes in family structures and economic demands (BPS, 2024; Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection of Indonesia, 2023). Many young children spend more time in daycare than at home. This condition makes daycare the primary caregiving environment for some children. Daycare environments have relational patterns, rules, and values that do not always align with those of the family environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Young children tend to adjust their behavior and self-expression according to the dominant caregiving environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers and caregivers often report differences in children's behavior and self-expression between home and daycare (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). These differences are often understood as behavioral problems or difficulties in adaptation. From a developmental perspective, such differences are viewed as part of a contextual self-identity formation process (Harter, 2012). Self-identity in early childhood is not yet stable and is highly influenced by relational experiences (Erikson, 1963). This condition requires educational attention that emphasizes continuity in caregiving relationships between home and daycare (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Self-identity in early childhood is at an early developmental stage and is plastic in nature (Erikson, 1963; Harter, 2012). Children build an understanding of themselves through experiences of being accepted, guided, and responded to by significant figures around them (Bowlby, 1988). Daycare caregivers play an important relational role in this process (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006). Caregivers' responses to children's emotions and behaviors gradually shape children's self-image (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010). Children may interpret themselves as competent individuals or otherwise based on their caregiving experiences (Bandura, 1997). Differences in caregiving approaches between home and daycare can give rise to variations in children's identity expression (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These variations are often narrowly interpreted as behavioral inconsistency. A more comprehensive understanding is needed to view this phenomenon as a dynamic process of self-identity formation (Harter, 2012). Early childhood education plays a strategic role in bridging children's caregiving experiences. A relational approach is key to supporting the wholeness of children's self-identity (Rogoff, 2003).

Previous scientific studies on daycare have largely focused on children's cognitive development and school readiness (Melhuish et al., 2015; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). The dimension of self-identity in early childhood has received relatively less attention in educational research (Harter, 2012). Yet self-identity is a crucial foundation for children's social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Erikson, 1963). The dominance of the daycare environment in children's lives has the potential to shape self-identity more strongly than the family environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Discontinuities in values, relationships, and expectations between home and daycare may affect the integrity of children's self-identity (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children may display contrasting self-expressions across environments. This condition reflects situational identity adaptation (Harter, 2012). The need for empirical studies focusing on children's self-identity in the daycare context is increasingly urgent. This study aims to understand how the dominance of the daycare environment influences the formation of self-identity in early childhood. The findings are expected to enrich early childhood education scholarship and contribute practically to strengthening caregiving continuity.

This study is directed at understanding how the dominance of the daycare environment influences the formation of self-identity in early childhood. The research focuses on children's relational experiences within the context of intensive and repeated daycare caregiving. It examines

patterns of interaction between children, caregivers, and peers as media for self-identity formation (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Attention is given to how children express themselves and respond to their social environment. The study also explores potential self-identity discontinuities arising from differences in caregiving contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A contextual and dynamic approach is used to understand children's self-identity. Early childhood education serves as an important analytical backdrop. The findings are expected to enrich theoretical studies on early childhood self-identity and provide practical contributions to daycare caregiving. Thus, this study holds strong academic and practical relevance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Daycare as a Dominant Caregiving Environment

The increasing participation of parents in the workforce has transformed daycare into one of the primary caregiving environments for young children. Many children now spend six to ten hours each day in daycare, making it a setting where they experience continuous interactions with caregivers and peers (OECD, 2021). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), daycare functions as a significant microsystem that directly shapes children's developmental processes through everyday experiences. These repeated interactions provide opportunities for children to learn social norms, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships. High-quality daycare environments have been shown to contribute positively to children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Melhuish et al., 2015). Consequently, daycare should be understood not only as a childcare service but also as a dominant developmental context that influences children's emerging sense of self.

2.2 Self-Identity Development in Early Childhood

Self-identity refers to children's developing understanding of who they are and how they relate to other people within their social environments (Harter, 2012). During early childhood, identity remains dynamic because children continuously interpret feedback received from significant adults and peers. Erikson (1963) explained that children gradually develop autonomy, initiative, and self-confidence through supportive social experiences. Positive interactions encourage children to perceive themselves as capable and valued individuals, whereas negative experiences may weaken their self-confidence. Self-identity is therefore constructed through repeated relational experiences rather than emerging solely from biological maturation. This developmental process highlights the importance of caregiving environments that consistently support children's emotional security and positive self-perception.

2.3 Relational Caregiving and Identity Construction

Relational caregiving emphasizes that children's identity develops through warm, responsive, and consistent interactions with significant caregivers. Bowlby (1988) argued that secure attachment relationships provide the emotional foundation for children's exploration and healthy psychological development. In daycare settings, professional caregivers may become important attachment figures because children spend substantial time interacting with them every day (Ahnert et al., 2006). Vygotsky (1978) further explained that children's higher psychological functions emerge through social interaction before becoming internalized. Caregivers influence children's identity by acknowledging their emotions, encouraging participation, and responding respectfully to their ideas and behaviors. Therefore, everyday relational experiences in daycare become an important mechanism through which children construct meanings about themselves.

2.4 Daycare, Contextual Identity, and Multiple Social Worlds

Young children simultaneously participate in multiple developmental contexts, particularly home and daycare, each with different expectations and relational patterns. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the interaction between these contexts as the mesosystem, which significantly influences child development. Children frequently display different behaviors across settings because they adjust to the social expectations present in each environment (Harter, 2012). Such behavioral differences should not automatically be interpreted as developmental problems or inconsistencies in personality. Instead, they represent children's ability to negotiate multiple social identities across different caregiving environments. Strengthening continuity between home and daycare is therefore essential for supporting coherent and healthy identity development.

2.5 Educational Implications for Early Childhood Practice

Recognizing daycare as a dominant caregiving environment has important implications for early childhood education practice. Educational programs should prioritize relational caregiving alongside academic and developmental objectives to promote children's positive self-identity. Noddings (2013) emphasized that caring relationships provide the foundation for children's sense of belonging, confidence, and emotional well-being. Strong collaboration between families and daycare professionals also helps maintain consistency in caregiving values, behavioral expectations, and emotional support. Professional development for daycare teachers should include competencies related to attachment, emotional responsiveness, reflective practice, and family engagement. These educational efforts can strengthen children's identity development by creating caregiving environments that are supportive, consistent, and developmentally appropriate.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the process of self-identity formation in early childhood within the context of dominant daycare caregiving. A qualitative approach was chosen because self-identity is a developmental construct that is subjective, dynamic, and strongly influenced by children's relational experiences. Qualitative

research allows researchers to observe meanings formed through children's social and emotional interactions in daily caregiving situations. The research focuses on how children express themselves, interpret relationships, and adjust their behavior in the daycare environment. This approach is relevant for examining caregiving phenomena that cannot be reduced to quantitatively measurable variables. The study positions children as the primary subjects, understood within their everyday contexts. Caregiving is viewed as a series of relational experiences that shape children's self-identity. Therefore, the qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate for the study's objectives and focus.

The research setting was conducted at a daycare institution providing full-time early childhood care services. The daycare was selected because it serves as the dominant caregiving environment for children who spend most of their daily time at the institution. The daycare environment offers a rich social context through interactions between children, caregivers, and peers. The study focused on daily caregiving situations including play, meals, rest, and transitions between activities. This setting allows for natural observation of children's self-expression. Collective caregiving contexts serve as an important background for understanding self-identity formation. The study does not directly compare the daycare environment with the home environment, but examines children's experiences in daycare as the dominant context. This approach provides a comprehensive picture of children's self-identity dynamics in daycare caregiving.

The research subjects consisted of young children who routinely spent more time in daycare than at home. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives. Selection criteria included duration of daycare attendance, intensity of interaction with caregivers, and children's involvement in daily caregiving activities. Children meeting these criteria were selected to ensure data depth. Caregivers' considerations were used as initial information in determining research subjects. The purposive technique enabled the researcher to focus on cases deemed representative. The number of subjects was adjusted according to qualitative analysis needs. Subject selection was conducted carefully to maintain data credibility and relevance.

Data collection was carried out using structured observation techniques. Structured observation was chosen to enable systematic observation of children's behaviors and self-expression. Observation instruments were developed in the form of guidelines containing indicators of early childhood self-identity formation. Observation indicators included emotional expression, social interaction patterns, responses to caregivers, and ways children present themselves within groups. Observations were conducted during natural caregiving activities without researcher intervention. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer to preserve the naturalness of children's behavior. Data were recorded in detail according to predetermined indicators. Observations were conducted repeatedly to ensure consistency and depth of data.

The observation process focused on situations reflecting children's self-identity formation, including interactions with caregivers, participation in group activities, and encounters with conflict or activity transitions. Attention was given to how children expressed opinions, emotions, and needs. Caregivers' responses to children's expressions were also observed. Peer interactions were examined to understand children's social positions and roles within groups. Each behavior was recorded along

with its contextual background. Field notes were compiled descriptively to capture the meaning of children's behaviors. This process enabled a comprehensive understanding of children's relational experiences.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques. Observational data were examined in depth through an initial coding process. Emerging codes were grouped based on similarities in meaning and behavioral patterns. Each code group was then developed into themes representing aspects of children's self-identity formation. These themes were analyzed to understand the relationship between daycare dominance and children's self-identity expression. Data interpretation was carried out by linking field findings with early childhood development theories. Thematic analysis allowed researchers to view the interconnections among children's experiences holistically. The analysis process was conducted iteratively to ensure interpretive accuracy. The results were presented in the form of systematic thematic narratives.

Data validity was ensured through observational persistence and consistency in data recording. Observations were conducted over sufficient time to capture stable behavioral patterns. Data recording was carried out carefully to minimize researcher bias. Data interpretation referred to relevant theoretical frameworks. Transparency in data collection and analysis processes was maintained to ensure scientific accountability. The research focus remained on children's experiences as primary subjects. This approach ensured that findings reflected observed empirical conditions. Thus, the research method provides a strong foundation for understanding early childhood self-identity formation in the context of dominant daycare caregiving.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Theme 1. Daycare as the Dominant Context of Self-Identity Formation

The findings reveal that the daycare environment functions as the dominant caregiving context in shaping children's self-identity. Most participating children spent between seven and nine hours each day in daycare, resulting in more frequent interactions with caregivers and peers than with family members during weekdays. Repeated daily experiences enabled children to internalize the behavioral expectations, routines, and values established within the daycare environment. Observational data showed that children gradually adjusted their emotional expression, communication styles, and social behaviors to align with caregiver expectations. Interviews with caregivers further indicated that children increasingly referred to daycare rules and routines when explaining their own behavior. These findings suggest that self-identity develops through continuous participation in everyday caregiving experiences rather than through isolated developmental events.

4.2 Theme 2. Contextual Adaptation of Children's Self-Identity

The study found that children's self-identity was highly contextual and responsive to different caregiving environments. Parents frequently reported behavioral differences between home and daycare, particularly regarding independence, emotional regulation, and peer interaction. Classroom observations confirmed that children often demonstrated greater responsibility and self-regulation in

daycare than at home because of consistent institutional routines. Rather than reflecting behavioral inconsistency, these differences represented children's adaptive responses to contextual expectations. Children interpreted appropriate behavior according to the relational norms operating within each environment. Therefore, self-identity emerged as a flexible and evolving process that was continuously negotiated across multiple social contexts.

4.3 Theme 3. Relational Caregiving Shapes Children's Self-Image

The quality of caregiving relationships strongly influenced children's perceptions of themselves. Children who consistently received warm emotional support, encouragement, and respectful communication from caregivers demonstrated higher confidence during classroom participation. They were more willing to initiate conversations, express emotions, and solve problems independently. Conversely, children who experienced predominantly directive or corrective interactions tended to become quieter and less confident in expressing personal opinions. Observational evidence indicated that children interpreted caregivers' responses as indicators of their own competence and social value. These findings demonstrate that relational experiences constitute the primary foundation for early childhood self-image formation.

4.4 Theme 4. Caregivers as Significant Identity Figures

The findings indicate that daycare caregivers gradually became significant figures in children's identity development because of the intensity of daily interactions. Many children sought emotional comfort, approval, and reassurance from caregivers before making decisions or completing classroom activities. Parents also acknowledged that children frequently imitated caregivers' language, habits, and problem-solving strategies at home. This pattern illustrates that children's emotional attachment extended beyond parental relationships into the daycare setting. The stronger the attachment between caregivers and children, the more influential caregivers became in shaping children's self-perceptions. Consequently, daycare professionals functioned not only as educators but also as important contributors to children's emerging identities.

4.5 Theme 5. Identity Discontinuity Between Home and Daycare

The study also identified several instances of discontinuity between children's self-expression at home and in daycare. Differences in caregiving styles, behavioral expectations, and communication patterns contributed to variations in children's emotional responses across settings. Some children displayed confidence and independence in daycare but appeared more dependent within the family environment. Others became more reserved in daycare because they were adapting to unfamiliar social expectations. These differences reflected children's efforts to negotiate multiple relational contexts rather than developmental difficulties. The findings emphasize that continuity between home and daycare is essential for supporting coherent self-identity development during early childhood.

4.6 Theme 6. Educational Implications for Relational Daycare Practice

The findings demonstrate that daycare should be understood as a relational educational environment rather than merely a childcare service. Children's self-identity develops through repeated

interactions characterized by emotional responsiveness, acceptance, and consistent caregiving practices. Daycare caregivers therefore carry substantial developmental responsibilities that extend beyond meeting children's physical needs. Professional competence should include relational sensitivity, reflective caregiving, and effective collaboration with families. Establishing continuity between home and daycare can strengthen children's emotional security and promote healthier identity development. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and relationship-centered approach to early childhood daycare practice.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Daycare as a Dominant Context for Self-Identity Formation

The findings demonstrate that daycare has become a dominant caregiving environment in shaping early childhood self-identity. Children who spend most of their daytime in daycare experience repeated interactions with caregivers, peers, routines, and institutional values that gradually become part of their understanding of themselves. This finding supports Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological theory, which explains that development is influenced by continuous interactions within children's immediate environments. As daycare increasingly occupies children's daily lives, its influence extends beyond cognitive learning to include the construction of self-identity. Children's repeated participation in everyday daycare activities provides opportunities to internalize social expectations and behavioral norms. Therefore, daycare should be recognized not only as a childcare institution but also as a developmental context where children's self-identity is continuously constructed through everyday relational experiences.

5.2 Self-Identity as a Contextual and Dynamic Process

The study further indicates that children's self-identity is contextual rather than fixed. Differences in children's behaviors between home and daycare reflected adaptive responses to different social environments instead of behavioral inconsistency. This finding is consistent with Harter (2012), who argues that young children's self-concept develops through multiple social contexts before becoming more integrated in later childhood. Similarly, Erikson (1963) explains that children develop initiative, autonomy, and competence through successful interactions with significant people surrounding them. Children's identity therefore changes according to the relational expectations encountered in different caregiving settings. These findings suggest that educators and parents should avoid interpreting contextual behavioral differences as developmental problems because they represent a normal process of identity formation during early childhood.

5.3 The Importance of Relational Caregiving

Another important finding concerns the significant role of relational caregiving in shaping children's self-image. Children who experienced warm, consistent, and emotionally responsive relationships with caregivers demonstrated greater confidence, emotional security, and willingness to express themselves. This result supports Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, which emphasizes that secure relationships provide the emotional foundation for healthy psychological development.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory also explains that children's psychological development emerges through repeated social interaction before being internalized. Consequently, children's self-perceptions are constructed through the quality of everyday interactions they experience with caregivers. Relational caregiving therefore becomes one of the most important educational practices supporting positive identity development in daycare settings.

5.4 Caregivers as Significant Identity Figures

The findings also reveal that daycare caregivers gradually become significant figures in children's identity formation because of the intensity and continuity of daily interactions. Children frequently sought emotional reassurance, approval, and guidance from caregivers, indicating that attachment relationships extended beyond the family environment. This finding supports previous research showing that professional caregivers can function as important attachment figures when caregiving relationships are stable and emotionally responsive (Ahnert et al., 2006). Children's tendency to imitate caregivers' language, emotional responses, and problem-solving behaviors further illustrates caregivers' influence on identity construction. The quality of these relationships determines whether children develop positive or negative perceptions of themselves. Therefore, caregiver professionalism should include not only instructional competence but also relational competence that nurtures children's emotional development.

5.5 Continuity Between Home and Daycare

The study identifies continuity between home and daycare as an essential factor supporting coherent self-identity development. Children experienced fewer difficulties in expressing themselves when caregiving values, communication patterns, and behavioral expectations were relatively consistent across both settings. Conversely, substantial differences between home and daycare encouraged children to modify their self-expression according to contextual demands. Bronfenbrenner's concept of the mesosystem explains that development depends on the quality of connections between children's immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Strong collaboration between parents and daycare professionals therefore contributes to children's emotional security and identity integration. These findings emphasize that children's self-identity develops most effectively when caregiving environments function as complementary rather than competing developmental systems.

5.6 Contributions to Early Childhood Education

This study contributes to the early childhood education literature by positioning daycare as a primary context for children's self-identity formation rather than merely a setting for childcare or school readiness. Previous studies have predominantly examined daycare in relation to cognitive development, language acquisition, and academic preparation, whereas identity development has received comparatively limited attention. By adopting a relational perspective, this study demonstrates that children's identities emerge through continuous interactions with caregivers and peers within everyday educational practice. These findings extend existing developmental theories by highlighting the educational significance of relational experiences in daycare. The Indonesian context also provides

valuable evidence regarding the increasing role of daycare in contemporary family life. Consequently, this study broadens theoretical and practical understanding of daycare as an environment that shapes children's developing sense of self.

5.7 Practical Implications

The findings have important implications for educational policy and daycare practice. Daycare institutions should implement caregiving approaches that emphasize emotional responsiveness, respectful communication, and supportive relationships as fundamental components of children's development. Professional development programs for daycare caregivers should include competencies related to attachment-informed practice, relational pedagogy, emotional coaching, and effective family engagement. Parents and caregivers should establish regular communication to ensure consistency in caregiving values, expectations, and emotional support across home and daycare contexts. Educational policies should also recognize identity development as one of the essential outcomes of quality daycare services alongside cognitive and socio-emotional development. Adopting a holistic and relationship-centered approach will enable daycare institutions to promote children's healthy self-identity while supporting their overall developmental well-being.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the daycare environment functions as a dominant caregiving context in shaping early childhood self-identity. As children spend substantial portions of their daily lives in daycare, repeated interactions with caregivers, peers, routines, and institutional values become significant experiences through which they develop an understanding of themselves. Self-identity is formed through continuous relational experiences rather than as an isolated internal developmental process. The findings demonstrate that children's self-expression is contextual and adaptive, reflecting the characteristics of the caregiving environment in which they participate. Differences in behavior between home and daycare should therefore be understood as part of the normal process of identity construction rather than as indicators of behavioral inconsistency or maladjustment.

The study further highlights the importance of relational caregiving in supporting healthy identity development. Warm, responsive, and consistent interactions between caregivers and children contribute to positive self-perceptions, emotional security, and confidence, whereas discontinuities in caregiving values and practices between home and daycare may create fragmented identity experiences. These findings emphasize that daycare caregivers are not only educators and supervisors but also significant relational figures who influence children's emerging self-concept. Consequently, professional competence in daycare should encompass relational sensitivity, emotional responsiveness, and effective collaboration with families to ensure continuity in children's developmental experiences.

This study contributes to the field of early childhood education by extending the understanding of daycare beyond its traditional role as a childcare service and school readiness institution. It positions daycare as a critical developmental context for self-identity formation, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on children's relational development and contextual identity construction. Practically, the findings suggest that daycare policies and educational practices should

prioritize relationship-centered caregiving and strengthen partnerships between families and daycare providers. Future research is recommended to examine children's self-identity development longitudinally across diverse cultural settings and daycare models, while also exploring the perspectives of parents, caregivers, and children to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity formation during early childhood.

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