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REVIEW ARTICLE

Social skills and school coexistence in children aged 4–5: a literature review

Habilidades sociales y convivencia escolar en niños de 4-5 años:
una revisión de literatura

Jennifer L. Caicedo[1] ● Cecilia I. Vega[2]

Abstract This study reviews recent literature on social skills and school climate in children aged 4 to 5 years, to synthesize key theoretical and empirical advances in this field. The analyzed studies show that, during this stage, children consolidate fundamental socio-emotional competencies such as self-regulation, empathy, communication, and peaceful conflict resolution, which directly contribute to the quality of school climate. Evidence indicates that factors such as family environment, educational setting, and teacher involvement significantly influence the development of these skills. Likewise, effective interventions are identified, including play-based strategies, emotional education, and cooperative learning activities. However, important challenges persist, particularly in Latin American contexts, where limitations are reported in teacher training and in the resources available to implement socio-emotional strategies. The review concludes that strengthening pedagogical practices and promoting collaboration between school and family are key elements to fostering more inclusive educational environments and enhancing socio-emotional development in early childhood.

Keywords social skills; school climate; early childhood education; social–emotional development.

Resumen La presente investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar y sintetizar los principales aportes teóricos y empíricos encontrados en la literatura reciente sobre el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales y la convivencia escolar en niños de 4 a 5 años. Los estudios analizados muestran que, durante esta etapa, los niños consolidan competencias fundamentales, como la autorregulación, la empatía, la comunicación y la resolución de conflictos, las cuales garantizar la formación integral de los niños y contribuyen de manera directa a la calidad de la convivencia escolar. La evidencia indica que factores como el clima familiar, el ambiente educativo y el rol del docente influyen significativamente en el desarrollo de estas habilidades. De igual manera, se identifican intervenciones eficaces basadas en el juego, la educación emocional y las dinámicas cooperativas. No obstante, persisten desafíos importantes, especialmente en contextos latinoamericanos, donde se reportan limitaciones en la formación docente y en los recursos disponibles para la implementación de estrategias socioemocionales. Se concluye que el fortalecimiento de las prácticas pedagógicas y la articulación entre escuela y familia son elementos clave para promover entornos educativos más inclusivos y favorecer el desarrollo socioemocional en la primera infancia.

Palabras clave habilidades sociales; clima escolar; educación de la primera infancia; desarrollo socioemocional.

✉ Jennifer L. Caicedo
jlcaicedov@ube.edu.ec

[1]Universidad Bolivariana del Ecuador, Durán, Ecuador.
[2]Unidad Educativa Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Portoviejo, Ecuador.

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Introduction

Social skills constitute a set of abilities that allow individuals to interact naturally with their social environment, establishing positive relationships and resolving conflicts constructively (Lacunza et al., 2009). In the context of early childhood education, specifically for children aged 4 to 5, these abilities acquire particular relevance, as they are in a crucial period of socio-emotional development that lays the foundation for their academic performance and future well-being (Alwaely et al., 2021).

School coexistence, the ability to interact harmoniously within the educational context, is closely linked to the development of social skills from early childhood (Fierro-Evans & Carbajal-Padilla, 2019). This link is crucial in the preschool stage, a period in which children experience their first structured interactions with peers and authority figures outside the family (Peguero, 2020). Research has shown that the proper development of social skills at this stage helps prevent behavioral problems and facilitates adaptation to the school environment (Justicia-Arráez et al., 2021).

Scientific literature has extensively documented that early childhood social skills include components such as effective communication, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution (Abugattas-Makhlouf, 2016; Jaramillo & Guzmán, 2019). These competencies not only foster interpersonal relationships but also positively impact children's academic performance and socio-emotional well-being (Walker & Rinaldi, 2020). Furthermore, positive school coexistence is characterized by respectful relationships, democratic participation, and constructive conflict management (Fierro-Evans & Carbajal-Padilla, 2019).

Several authors have highlighted the need for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social skills and school coexistence in early childhood, considering that experiences during early education have lasting effects on subsequent socio-emotional development (Castrejón, 2019; Crispin & Gonzales, 2022; Frogner et al., 2022; Caicedo et al., 2024). In this regard, a systematic analysis of the existing literature allows for the identification of patterns, trends, and knowledge gaps that can guide future research and interventions in the educational context.

Despite the growing attention this topic has received in the last decade, particularly in Latin America, there is a clear need for comprehensive syntheses that integrate the available findings specifically for the 4- to 5-year-old age range (Chicaiza, 2022). This developmental stage presents unique characteristics that require differentiated approaches, as children transition from family dependence to greater social and emotional autonomy (Villarroel, 2015).

This literature review aims to analyze the available scientific evidence on the relationship between social skills and school coexistence in children aged 4 to 5, identifying the main factors influencing their development, the intervention strategies implemented, the assessment instruments used, and future research perspectives in this field. The results of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon and guide educators, researchers, and educational policymakers interested in promoting the comprehensive socio-emotional development of early childhood.

Methodology

This research was conducted under the paradigm of a narrative literature review, with the purpose of synthesizing and critically analyzing the available scientific evidence on social skills and school coexistence in children aged 4 to 5 years. This approach allows for the integration of knowledge from diverse sources, the identification of trends, and the provision of a comprehensive view of the state of the art in the subject of study (Cortés & Garcia, 2017).

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for the selection of documents. The inclusion criteria were: (a) studies focused on children between the ages of 3 and 6, with particular emphasis on the 4-5 year age range; (b) research addressing social skills, school coexistence, or the relationship between these two variables; (c) works published preferably within the last 15 years (2008-2023); and (d) studies conducted in formal educational contexts, particularly in early childhood or preschool education.

The exclusion criteria considered: (a) studies focused exclusively on populations with special educational needs without comparative analysis with typical development; (b) research focused solely on age ranges outside the period of interest; and (c) documents without evident methodological rigor or without empirical support.

Various academic sources were consulted, including scientific databases, institutional repositories of Latin American universities, and publications in journals specializing in education and child psychology. The primary sources included research from institutions in Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and other countries in the region, thus ensuring the contextual relevance of the findings to the Latin American educational landscape.

The search process was carried out in several stages. Initially, keywords related to the topic of study were identified: social skills, school coexistence, early childhood education, early childhood, socio-emotional development, pedagogical strategies, and preschool education. Subsequently, an exhaustive search was conducted for documents containing these topics, prioritizing empirical research, graduate theses, and articles in indexed journals.

The analysis of the selected documents was carried out through critical reading and systematization of the main findings. Emerging categories were identified related to: (a)

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conceptualization and relationship between social skills and school coexistence in early childhood education; (b) contextual factors that influence their development; (c) pedagogical intervention strategies; and (d) assessment instruments used.

The collected information was organized thematically, identifying core concepts that would allow for a coherent structuring of the review results. Special attention was paid to studies reporting intervention experiences, pedagogical programs, and teaching strategies implemented in educational contexts similar to Ecuador's, to draw applicable and relevant conclusions.

The analysis considered both theoretical and empirical aspects, seeking to bridge the gap between conceptual foundations and practical evidence available in the literature. Convergences and divergences in the findings were identified, as well as areas requiring further research, with the aim of providing a comprehensive and critical view of the current state of knowledge in this field.

This review was conducted following principles of academic integrity, properly citing all sources consulted and respecting copyright. The aim was to present the information in a balanced manner, acknowledging the limitations of the included studies and avoiding generalizations not supported by the available evidence.

Results and discussion
Conceptualization and relationship between social skills and school coexistence in early childhood education

Social skills in children aged 4 to 5 have been conceptualized from various perspectives that converge on understanding them as a set of learned behaviors that facilitate interaction with peers and adults, including competencies such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. This multidimensional conceptualization is consistent with contemporary theories of socio-emotional development, which emphasize the interdependence between cognition, emotion, and behavior in early social interactions.

The literature agrees that early childhood social skills encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Jaramillo & Guzmán, 2019). Among the most relevant competencies are the ability to initiate and maintain conversations, share materials, take turns, express emotions appropriately, and resolve conflicts non-aggressively (Cotrina, 2015; Huertas, 2017). Teachers' perspectives indicate that the most valued skills in the preschool context include cooperation, following instructions, appropriate emotional expression, and the ability to establish positive peer relationships (Maleki et al., 2019). Furthermore, effective communication develops through interactions among children, constituting a critical period for the development of communicative competencies that underpin more complex social relationships

(Murni et al., 2023).

School coexistence in early childhood education has been approached as a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends the mere absence of conflict. It is conceptualized as the collective and daily construction of interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect, democratic participation, and the constructive management of differences (Fierro-Evans & Carbajal-Padilla, 2019). In children, school coexistence is characterized by the establishment of shared norms, the development of affectionate bonds, and the learning of peaceful ways to resolve disagreements (Gutiérrez-Méndez & Pérez-Archundia, 2015). Research identifies three fundamental dimensions: the relational, which involves the quality of interactions between children and adults; the normative, referring to the establishment and adherence to agreed-upon rules; and the participatory, related to the inclusion of all members of the educational community (Algara-Barrera, 2016; Carrasco-Aguilar & Luzón, 2019).

Violence-free school environments are fundamental to children's well-being and have lasting effects on socio-emotional development (Corominas, 2022). Shared play experiences provide privileged contexts for building rules of coexistence and strengthening peer bonds (Nanjari et al., 2021).

Accumulated evidence demonstrates a significant bidirectional relationship between the development of social skills and the quality of school life in children aged 4 to 5. Children with higher levels of social skills exhibit better indicators of positive school climate, characterized by greater participation in group activities, fewer conflicts, and more harmonious relationships with peers and teachers (Bonoso & Oyague, 2021). Statistically significant positive correlations have been reported between the dimensions of social skills (communication, cooperation, assertiveness) and indicators of positive school climate (respect, participation, conflict resolution) in 5-year-old children (Castrejón, 2019). This finding was confirmed by evidence demonstrating that strengthening social skills in early childhood education directly contributes to improving the classroom climate (Caicedo et al., 2024).

Longitudinal studies provide important evidence on the stability and change in the development of early social skills, demonstrating that social skills developed between the ages of 4 and 5 significantly predict subsequent school performance and the quality of social interaction in later years (Frogner et al., 2022). These results highlight the preventive value of early interventions in social-emotional skills, suggesting that investing in the development of these skills during early childhood can prevent later behavioral problems, reducing the need for more costly remedial interventions in subsequent educational stages (Frogner et al., 2022; Justicia-Arráez et al., 2021). Communication and cooperation skills in young children are longitudinally associated

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with the quality of friendships and a reduction in depressive symptoms, indicating that the development of social skills in preschool not only promotes immediate social interaction but also protects long-term mental health (Krygsman et al., 2024).

Contextual factors that modulate development

The literature recognizes multiple contextual factors that influence the development of social skills and school coexistence in children aged 4 to 5, organized at various ecological levels with dynamic interactions. This ecological perspective is consistent with contemporary approaches that consider multiple levels of influence: individual, family, school, and community (Sánchez & Romero, 2021).

The family context consistently emerges as a fundamental determinant in the development of early social skills. The relationship between family social climate and social skills performance shows that families characterized by high levels of cohesion, expressiveness, and organization foster the development of stronger social skills (Chicaiza, 2021). The family constitutes the primary context of socialization, whose practices and relational climate are transferred to the school setting through the repertoire of social skills that children bring with them when entering early childhood education (Bolaños & Stuart, 2019). Authoritative parenting styles, characterized by a combination of emotional warmth and the establishment of clear boundaries, predict higher levels of social skills compared to authoritarian or permissive styles.

Variables such as family structure, parenting practices, and parents' educational level significantly influence the repertoire of social skills that children demonstrate in the school context (Sánchez & Romero, 2021). Children from families with emotionally warm and stimulating environments exhibit better emotional regulation, greater empathy, and more frequent prosocial behaviors. Parenting practices characterized by constructive dialogue, modeling peaceful conflict resolution, and establishing agreed-upon rules at home encourage children to replicate these interaction patterns in the school setting, a transfer effect particularly evident in children who are actively developing their social interaction patterns (Bolaños & Stuart, 2019).

Although family structure per se does not determine the development of social skills, children from single-parent families may face additional challenges related to less parental time, economic stress, and more limited support networks. This underscores the need for social skills optimization programs to consider these contextual differences to design more effective interventions (Luminita et al., 2022). Factors such as domestic violence, substance use in the home, and parental neglect are significant risk factors for the development of deficient social skills and problems with school coexistence, while families that prioritize quality time, structured routines, and affectionate communication promote more robust social skills (Pinto, 2019).

Socioeconomic status, and particularly the context of poverty, were identified as critical contextual variables requiring special consideration. The relationship between self-esteem and social skills in children from impoverished backgrounds shows that, although these children can develop specific social competencies such as solidarity, cooperation in the face of adversity, and creative problem-solving with limited resources, they frequently exhibit lower levels of social self-esteem, which can limit their willingness to initiate interactions with peers from other socioeconomic contexts (León & Lacunza, 2020). Factors such as exposure to community violence, residential instability, and overcrowding constitute environmental stressors that negatively affect the development of emotional self-regulation skills and, consequently, competencies for peaceful coexistence (Bejar, 2023). The context of poverty does not inevitably determine deficits in social skills, but it does pose specific challenges that require context-sensitive pedagogical interventions that recognize and value the social strengths developed in these environments while providing opportunities to expand the repertoire of competencies.

The organizational and pedagogical characteristics of early childhood education institutions also emerge as relevant contextual factors. Institutions with explicit policies promoting positive coexistence, clear conflict management protocols, and spaces for children's participation show better indicators of school climate and social skills development (Gutiérrez, 2021). Children's perceptions of the respect they receive from their teachers influence their own respectful behavior toward peers, which underscores the importance of teacher modeling as a contextual factor that shapes implicit norms of coexistence in the classroom (Carrasco-Aguilar & Luzón, 2019). However, there is little attention paid to the specific role of early childhood educators in promoting social skills and positive school coexistence, requiring further research on the professional competencies, beliefs, and specific pedagogical practices that facilitate socio-emotional development at this educational level.

Multiple institutional factors affect school coexistence, including the teacher-student ratio, the availability of adequate recreational spaces, the clarity and consistent application of rules of coexistence, and the existence of effective communication channels between teachers and families (Olea & Palomo, 2021). Institutions that incorporate contemplative and mindfulness practices into their daily routines can foster the development of emotional self-regulation skills that underpin both social skills and harmonious coexistence (Calderón et al., 2018).

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Emotional development mediates between a child's individual characteristics and their performance in social interaction situations, following individual trajectories influenced by temperamental, maturational, and experiential factors that must be considered when designing interventions (Alwaely et al., 2021). The age of entry into early childhood education, the quality of early institutional socialization experiences, and continuity of attendance are variables that modulate the development of social skills. Children with more experience in group care settings tend to show more developed peer interaction skills, although not necessarily superior in all dimensions of social competence (Aubone et al., 2016). Individual characteristics such as a tendency toward social anxiety or withdrawal can limit opportunities to practice social skills, creating negative feedback loops that require early intervention (Walker & Rinaldi, 2020).

An emerging contextual factor is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of health restrictions on the development of social skills in early childhood reported significant negative effects related to reduced opportunities for social interaction with peers, limited experiences in structured educational contexts, and increased screen time, suggesting that cohorts of children who went through their 4- to 5-year-old years during pandemic restrictions may require specific compensatory interventions to recover lost socio-emotional development opportunities (Culma et al., 2022).

These contextual factors do not operate in isolation, but rather interact dynamically. Observation of social skills during play activities concludes that the immediate context of the activity interacts with family, institutional, and individual characteristics to shape the specific opportunities and constraints for the deployment of social skills (Cotrina, 2015). This ecological and interactional perspective suggests that effective interventions must consider multiple contextual levels simultaneously, recognizing that modifications at one level can be amplified or attenuated depending on conditions at other levels of the system.

Pedagogical intervention strategies

The review identified a wide variety of intervention strategies designed to promote social skills and improve school coexistence in children aged 4 to 5 years. Play-based learning strategies emerged as the most frequently reported approach in the Latin American literature, reflecting the recognition that there is no single approach valid for all contexts and populations (Beltrán et al., 2015; Gómez, 2016; Martínez-Burbano et al., 2022).

Play as a pedagogical strategy has been widely documented as an effective means for developing social skills. Structured play programs in kindergartens show significant improvements in participants' social skills, particularly in the dimensions of cooperation and communication (Loukatari et al., 2019; Tersi & Matsouka, 2020). This finding is consistent with Piaget's (1956) theoretical postulates on play as a privileged context for learning and development in early childhood. The use of movement stories as a strategy for developing social skills shows favorable results in terms of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced aggressive behaviors (Aquino & Macay, 2022). Cooperative games have also been identified as valuable tools, with evidence demonstrating their effectiveness in strengthening cooperation, empathy, and peaceful conflict resolution (Ylarragorry, 2018; Ramón et al., 2020).

Cooperative learning programs emerged as particularly promising strategies for simultaneously strengthening social skills and school coexistence. Structuring activities that require positive interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing appears to create optimal conditions for learning social skills in authentic, interactive contexts (Ramón et al., 2020). Musical and artistic activities constituted another important group of strategies, with research exploring the use of the music corner for social development (Espinoza & Gómez, 2023) and the impact of performance on the development of social and communicative skills (Benavides & Ortega, 2022).

Specific social skills training programs were also positively evaluated. Implementing training programs as an intervention strategy to strengthen school coexistence has resulted in significant improvements in participants' social skills and a reduction in the frequency of classroom conflicts (Ahumada & Orozco, 2019). The development of intervention programs for institutionalized children has proven effective in increasing appropriate social behaviors (Arabacıoğlu & Kahraman, 2020).

Emotional education has emerged as a cross-cutting strategy in multiple interventions. Comparative analysis of emotional education in early childhood education in Ecuador and Spain identifies effective practices in both contexts (Araque-Hontangas, 2017), although it reveals significant differences in cultural conceptions of emotional expression, children's autonomy, and expectations of social behavior that influence how social skills are addressed pedagogically in each context. The implementation of emotional intelligence as a pedagogical strategy to improve school coexistence shows positive results in emotional self-regulation and conflict management (Castellanos-Sotelo et al., 2019). The effectiveness of these emotional education programs suggests that emotional recognition and regulation constitute cross-cutting competencies that mediate both social skills and the ability to participate constructively in school life, supporting the integration of social-emotional education as a fundamental curricular component in early childhood education.

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Drama education has proven particularly effective in promoting inclusion and positive interaction among children of varying abilities in preschool classrooms with inclusive practices (Şenol & Metin, 2021), although further research is needed on differentiated strategies and specific supports to promote genuine inclusion in early childhood education. Social skills training not only improves peer interaction but also increases intrinsic motivation toward learning activities (Özbey & Köyceğiz, 2019).

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into interventions for the development of social skills represents an emerging trend identified in some studies (Acosta et al., 2022; Alfonso & Sosa, 2020). Although the evidence is still limited, particularly for the 4- to 5-year-old age group, these studies suggest that the mediated and pedagogically sound use of ICTs can complement traditional strategies, especially in remote or hybrid learning contexts.

The importance of coexistence agreements and the participatory construction of norms as strategies to promote democracy and citizenship from an early age was also identified (Algara-Barrera, 2016). These approaches, which promote children's participation in defining norms and consequences, favor the internalization of rules and the development of moral judgment; however, empirical evidence on their effectiveness in 4- to 5-year-old children is still limited.

Assessment tools: progress and persistent challenges

The review identified a variety of instruments developed, adapted, and used to assess social skills and school coexistence in children aged 4 to 5, with significant variations in their theoretical foundations, psychometric properties, and practical applicability. Research on assessment instruments reveals important advances in the cultural adaptation of tools for Latin American contexts, although the need persists to develop instruments that capture the particularities of the social competencies valued in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, avoiding the uncritical application of instruments developed in Anglo-Saxon contexts.

The pioneering work in constructing and validating a social interaction skills test specifically for children aged 3 to 6 in urban contexts in Lima, Peru, assessed five dimensions: communication skills, expression of feelings, social interaction skills, conflict resolution, and play skills (Abugattas-Makhlouf, 2016). The validation process included internal consistency analysis with alpha coefficients greater than 0.80 in all dimensions, construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis, and the establishment of age- and sex-specific norms. The cultural relevance of the instrument is supported by the fact that the items were developed from social situations significant to Latin American children and validated through expert judgment in the region.

The construction, validation, and standardization of a behavioral scale for early elementary school children, which can be completed by teachers, assesses five dimensions: emotional regulation, social skills, behavioral problems, academic skills, and executive functions (Muchiut et al., 2019). The validation process included exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, with satisfactory fit indices (CFI=0.94; RMSEA=0.05) and adequate internal consistency (alphas between 0.78 and 0.88 depending on the subscale). The advantage of this instrument is its ecological applicability, as it leverages the systematic observations that teachers make of children's behavior in natural classroom contexts, with norms specific to the Argentine population, differentiated by age and geographic region.

Other studies used instruments originally developed in Anglo-Saxon contexts that were translated and adapted for Latin American populations. The use of an adaptation of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) for assessing social skills in 4-year-old children in Peru included translation, back-translation, review by expert judges, and piloting to verify the comprehensibility of the items in the local context (Huertas, 2017). Although acceptable psychometric properties were reported in the Peruvian sample (alpha of 0.79), limitations were noted related to some items that did not fully capture culturally specific manifestations of social competence.

The use of structured observation protocols for social skills during play activities includes predefined categories of social behaviors that were coded by trained observers, reporting satisfactory inter-observer agreement indices (Cohen's kappa between 0.75 and 0.89 depending on the category) (Cotrina, 2015). The advantage of this type of protocol is that it captures social behavior in natural contexts, overcoming limitations of report-based instruments that can be biased by subjective perceptions. The implementation of participant observation systems complemented by checklists and rubrics provides rich and contextualized information, although it presents challenges in terms of standardization and comparability between studies (Mazo, 2020).

A significant group of instruments consists of scales and questionnaires designed to be completed by early childhood educators, based on the assumption that educators, due to their prolonged and systematic interaction with children, can provide valid assessments of their social skills. The use of structured questionnaires to explore teachers' perspectives on social skills in preschoolers demonstrates good internal consistency (alpha of 0.85) and significant correlations with sociometric measures of peer acceptance, supporting the validity of the approach (Maleki et al., 2019).

Several Latin American studies have developed specific checklists for teachers to use in the ongoing assessment of

social skills (Córdova, 2017; Dávila, 2018; Guerra, 2018). These tools, while less psychometrically sophisticated, offer practical advantages in terms of ease of application and usefulness for guiding individualized pedagogical interventions. Observation instruments specifically designed for Ecuadorian contexts have been used (Gárate & Mendoza, 2022), as well as assessment instruments adapted to specific programs that allow for monitoring children's progress in specific dimensions of social competence (Gutiérrez et al., 2023).

Although less frequently reported due to cognitive developmental limitations at this age, some studies used adapted sociometric procedures to assess social acceptance and friendship patterns. Peer nominations adapted for early childhood education as a measure of social acceptance developed a simplified pictorial procedure that proved understandable to 4-year-olds and provided valid information about classroom social structure and individual sociometric status (Molinero-González et al., 2023).

The specific assessment of school climate in early childhood education presents particular challenges, as most available instruments were developed for higher educational levels. The development of ad hoc questionnaires to assess school climate in 4-year-old children, considering dimensions such as respect for classroom rules, participation in group activities, frequency of interpersonal conflicts, and conflict resolution strategies, demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (alpha of 0.76), although the need for further validation studies is acknowledged (Bonoso & Oyague, 2021). The use of adapted empathy scales as a proxy indicator of school climate suggests that empathic capacity is a significant predictor of the quality of interpersonal relationships in the educational context (Tama, 2019).

Some studies have adopted alternative assessment approaches based on the analysis of portfolios and products generated by children, considering that social skills can be evidenced through the analysis of drawings depicting social relationships, dramatic representations of interaction situations, and children's verbal reflections on social experiences (Chicaiza, 2022). Furthermore, assessments supplemented with parental information have been found to capture variations in social behavior between home and school (Llalla & Challco, 2023). Likewise, triangulation of information from multiple informants is considered an optimal practice for obtaining comprehensive assessments of social skills.

While progress has been made in this area, a review of the literature reveals psychometric limitations and unresolved challenges. Among the most frequently cited issues is the scarcity of research evaluating the predictive validity of the instruments, understood as their ability to anticipate future social performance or relevant medium- and long-term outcomes. This deficiency is particularly relevant in the study of social skills, given that the objective is not limited to describing the current situation, but also to identifying children at risk of developing social difficulties later in life.

Another significant challenge relates to the cultural sensitivity of assessment tools. Many scales adapted from other contexts are based on conceptions of social competence typical of individualistic cultures, where behaviors such as assertiveness, autonomy, and self-expression are prioritized. In contrast, in collectivistic contexts, group harmony, respect for authority, and cooperation are often valued more highly. This conceptual divergence can lead to children who demonstrate adequate social performance according to local standards being incorrectly classified as having deficits when instruments poorly suited to the cultural context are used.

Likewise, the assessment of social skills in very young children also faces methodological challenges related to the variability of development at this age, the influence of situational factors on behavior, and the limitations of self-report in preverbal or developing language children, underscoring the importance of using multiple methods and multiple informants to obtain valid and reliable assessments.

Implications and future directions

One limitation that emerges in multiple reviewed studies is the predominance of cross-sectional or quasi-experimental designs with limited samples, which restricts the possibility of establishing robust causal relationships and generalizing the findings. The scarcity of longitudinal studies, particularly in the Latin American context, represents a gap that future research should address (Frogner et al., 2022). The review also reveals an uneven distribution of research in the region, with greater scientific output in countries such as Peru, Colombia, and Chile, while other national contexts remain underrepresented. This disparity may limit the understanding of how cultural factors and specific educational policies shape the development of social skills and school coexistence in different Latin American realities.

In the Ecuadorian context specifically, although the Constitution of the Republic (Constituent Assembly, 2008) recognizes the importance of early childhood education for holistic development, the practical implementation of evidence-based strategies to promote social skills and positive school climate still faces challenges. Several Ecuadorian studies reviewed (Araque-Hontangas, 2017; Chicaiza, 2022; Caicedo et al., 2024) highlighted the need to strengthen teacher training in socio-emotional strategies and improve the resources available in early childhood education institutions.

The practical implications of this review include the need to: (a) incorporate the development of social skills and school coexistence as explicit curricular objectives in ear-

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ly childhood education; (b) strengthen initial and ongoing teacher training in evidence-based socio-emotional strategies; (c) develop and validate culturally relevant assessment instruments; (d) implement comprehensive programs that combine multiple strategies and consider contextual factors; (e) actively involve families as co-protagonists in children's socio-emotional development; and (f) establish monitoring and evaluation systems that allow interventions to be adjusted according to the specific needs of each context.

In terms of future lines of research, the following are required: longitudinal studies that examine socio-emotional development trajectories from early childhood education to later levels; experimental research with greater methodological rigor that allows establishing causal relationships; comparative studies that explore cultural variations in conceptions and practices related to social skills and coexistence; research on the mediating role of specific contextual variables; cost-effectiveness analyses of different interventions; and studies on the transfer of learning from intervention contexts to everyday situations of social interaction.

Conclusions

The reviewed evidence shows that early childhood social skills are an essential component of socio-emotional development and the quality of school life. Studies agree that between the ages of four and five, children consolidate key skills such as self-regulation, cooperation, conflict resolution, and assertive communication. These processes are strongly influenced by contextual factors such as family climate, classroom environment, and teaching practices. Furthermore, the literature shows that pedagogical interventions focused on play, emotional education, and cooperative activities generate consistent improvements in social interactions and prosocial behavior. However, significant challenges remain, especially in Latin American contexts and, in particular, in Ecuador. These include the need to strengthen teacher training in socio-emotional strategies and the limited institutional resources available to implement systematic and sustainable practices.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Jennifer L. Caicedo. **Research:** Jennifer L. Caicedo. **Methodology:** Jennifer L. Caicedo, Cecilia I. Vega. **Writing the original draft:** Jennifer L. Caicedo. **Writing, review and editing:** Cecilia I. Vega.

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