International Journal of Research Studies in Education
2026 Volume 15 Number 25, 201-210



Influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools on learners' critical thinking and academic performance: Basis for AI-driven instructional toolkit

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ISSN: 2243-7703
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

Received: 6 November 2026 **Revised**: 19 November 2026 **Accepted**: 21 November 2026 OPEN ACCESS
Available Online: 22 November 2026 **DOI**: 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26399

Abstract

This study aimed to determine the influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools on learners' critical thinking and academic performance as a basis for developing an AI-Driven Instructional Toolkit for San Carlos Elementary School, Caba, La Union. Specifically, it examined learners' awareness and experiences in using AI tools, their level of critical thinking, academic performance in Mathematics, Science, and English, and the relationship among these variables. The study employed a quantitative research design involving twenty-six (26) learner-respondents who answered a validated and reliable survey questionnaire. The findings revealed that learners had a high level of awareness of AI tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and Jenni AI, while their learning and collaborative experiences were very high. Their overall level of critical thinking was high, with a median of 4.17, particularly in reasoning, problem-solving, and collaborative skills. Likewise, their academic performance in Mathematics, Science, and English was very high, with grades ranging from 91 to 95. Statistical analysis further revealed a significant but weak positive correlation between awareness of AI tools and critical thinking ($r = .300$), as well as a significant positive correlation with academic performance in Mathematics ($r = .343$). These findings suggest that AI tools can support learners' critical thinking and academic performance when integrated meaningfully and responsibly into instruction. The developed AI-Driven Instructional Toolkit obtained a very high level of validity, indicating its suitability for instructional use. The study recommends the guided integration of AI tools to promote responsible technology use, independent thinking, collaborative learning, and improved academic outcomes.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI tools, critical thinking, academic performance, instructional toolkit

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1. Introduction

Education plays a very important role in the development and progress of a nation. With the advancement of science and technology, it is indeed true that globalization and internationalization of education are considered challenges that every country must address. One of the emphases of today's challenges in education is the promotion of social skills among learners. With this, schools must focus not just on imparting the basics, but also on ensuring that learners gain a suite of newly important thinking and reasoning skills (Silva, 2019). Social skills are defined as facilitating interaction and communication with others. They are the qualities and behaviors that are exhibited while interacting with other people.

In the Philippine education setting, every Filipino has the right to quality education; hence, everyone should be given equal opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge, and attitudes to the utmost. The Philippine educational system, its quality and social impact, is one of the most serious concerns. The interdependency and interaction of the various agencies of the government, as well as the private sector, are necessary to ensure continued improvement in the quality of our educational system. Alternative K–12 is then a vital component in nation-building. If properly implemented, it reaches out to the grassroots levels, spurring socio-economic development nationwide as the level of educational attainment is equated to earning capacity and employment (Quilon, 2018).

The early years of a child's life are crucial for the development of social skills, which are foundational for success in both academic and personal spheres. Social skills, such as sharing, turn-taking, and empathy, are essential for forming relationships, resolving conflicts, and navigating the social environment of the classroom. For kindergarteners, the transition to a formal school setting presents a unique set of challenges. Their ability to adjust to this new environment is heavily influenced by their social competence. Children who possess strong social skills tend to have a smoother transition, better academic performance, and higher self-esteem. Conversely, those with underdeveloped social skills may experience difficulties, including social isolation, behavioral issues, and academic struggles. This study focuses on understanding the specific social skills present in kindergarten learners and their significance in the context of school adjustment.

Strong social skills are a key indicator of success in a working environment, as they include the ability to cooperate with teammates to solve difficult problems. These skills involve the ability to effectively express ideas, feelings, and information, as well as to understand and respond to others in various contexts. They are also the behaviors and tactics a person uses to interact with others effectively. They range from communication and listening to attitude and deportment. Everyone has a personal style, but some are more successful than others. While social skills may be based in part on personality and instinct, they can also be developed (Thomas Brook, 2020). Although social skills can be developed, they cannot be learned solely from a textbook. They come naturally to some people, while others have to work at cultivating them, and this is often done with other individuals; it is strongly linked to a knowledge of social expectations and customs, whether learned or acquired. Having poor social skills can be a factor in learners' performance; on the other hand, social abilities are the process of face-to-face exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions among learners. These skills involve the ability to communicate and build relationships with others. Often called people skills, they tend to incorporate innate personality traits and how one learned to handle certain situations.

A broad set of knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits are believed to be critically important to success in today's system, particularly in educational programs and contemporary careers and workplaces, and can be applied in all academic subject areas and in all educational, career, and civic settings throughout a learner's

life (Moyer, 2020; Rotherham & Willingham, 2019).

Social skills, such as cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, are critical for academic success and healthy interpersonal relationships. Despite their importance, many learners lack these fundamental skills, leading to behavioral issues, peer conflicts, and difficulties in the classroom. In the kindergarten setting, underdeveloped social skills can lead to classroom management issues, peer conflicts, and difficulties in group activities. While play is a natural part of a child's day, it is not always intentionally structured to teach specific social skills. Many educators lack a formal framework for using play as a pedagogical tool for social development. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating the specific benefits of a planned, play-based curriculum designed to enhance social interactions and skills among kindergarten learners.

Social skills are vital actions that all areas of kindergarten life should handle in order to increase productivity at their work, especially in education, to help learners exhibit desired behaviors. It revolves around the ability of the teacher to provide certain core conditions that are essential in creating a positive educational setting. These conditions consist of warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness. Smith (2018) stated that focus upon the nature of teacher–learner interaction and its relationship to performance progress could give insight into the variables involved in correcting deficiencies in communication skills and other academic deficits. They are often referred to as social intelligence; they depend on reading the signals others send and interpreting them accurately in order to form a response.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) for kindergarten learners focuses on developing essential skills that help children understand and manage their emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. At this stage, SEL is crucial as it lays the foundation for lifelong social skills and emotional well-being. In kindergarten, children learn to recognize and express their feelings appropriately, whether through words, facial expressions, or actions. They are taught to identify emotions in themselves and others, fostering empathy and understanding. Activities such as role-playing and storytelling help them navigate different social scenarios. Building relationships is another key component. Kindergarteners engage in group activities, where they practice sharing, taking turns, and collaborating with peers. These interactions enhance their communication skills and teach the importance of teamwork.

This study is aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which can be integrated into the social skills development of kindergarten learners in several ways, particularly Goal 4: Quality Education and Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. In the context of social skills, educators can promote cooperation and empathy among kindergarten learners through group activities. For instance, teachers can organize a "Caring Community" project, where children work in small groups to create a simple garden. They would learn to share responsibilities, communicate needs, and support one another in the task. This experience fosters teamwork, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills. Kindergarten learners can engage in role-playing scenarios that address conflict resolution. For example, teachers can present common conflicts (like sharing toys) and guide children in finding peaceful solutions. This practice helps them learn to express their feelings constructively and resolve disagreements amicably. Through these activities, kindergarten learners not only develop essential social skills but also contribute to the broader goals of fostering community well-being and social cohesion.

Additionally, socio-emotional learning encourages problem-solving and decision-making. Children learn to approach conflicts constructively, using techniques like "I feel" statements to express their needs and negotiate solutions. Teachers play a vital role by modeling emotional intelligence and creating a supportive classroom environment. By integrating SEL into daily routines and lessons, educators help children develop resilience, self-regulation, and a sense of community. Overall, social-emotional learning in kindergarten is essential for fostering a positive school climate and preparing children for future academic and social challenges, ultimately promoting their overall development and well-being.

These challenges require teachers to try their best to provide a meaningful learning experience to such a diverse group. Galima (2019) identified three teaching strategies. One is the use of informal sharing of experiences

at the beginning of the session. This would inform the teacher about the condition of the learners, their current concerns, and interests. They carefully consider the learners' interests before starting to teach them the contents of the module. Another strategy is the use of various computer-based technologies, especially video clips. This is done to keep the learners, especially the younger ones, motivated and engaged. The third one is the use of group activities, which are meant to create a closer relationship among the learners.

Early childhood education (K–12 program) has the following concerns:

- Critical thinking skills refer to students being able to analyze complex problems, investigate questions for which there are no clear-cut answers, evaluate different points of view or sources of information, and draw appropriate conclusions based on evidence and reasoning.
- Collaboration skills refer to students being able to work together to solve problems or answer questions, to work effectively and respectfully in teams, to accomplish a common goal, and to assume shared responsibility for completing a task.
- Interaction skills in kindergarten refer to a young child's ability to communicate, cooperate, and build positive relationships with teachers and peers through appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors. These skills include listening, taking turns, sharing, expressing feelings, following simple rules, and responding respectfully during play and classroom activities. They are essential for social development, emotional growth, and effective learning in early childhood settings.
- Socio-emotional skills refer to a child's ability to understand and manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and interact appropriately with others. These skills include recognizing and expressing feelings, showing empathy, cooperating, resolving conflicts, following rules, and developing self-control and confidence. In early childhood, socio-emotional skills help learners adjust to school, form friendships, and create a strong foundation for healthy social behavior and lifelong learning.
- Cooperative play, defined by children working together toward shared goals through organized roles and negotiated rules, represents an alternative pedagogical strategy (Woodbury, 2023). According to Parten's stages of play, cooperative play typically emerges around age five and is characterized by children collaborating in problem-solving or joint activities (Parten, 1932; Drew, 2024).

In these settings, children must articulate preferences, assume roles, listen to peers, negotiate responsibilities, and resolve conflicts—thereby engaging in authentic communicative contexts that naturally foster vocabulary expansion, complex sentences, and nonverbal cues (Starnes, 2022; Woodbury, 2023). The ultimate aim of any kindergarten education system is to equip children with the necessary aspects, such as interpersonal, academic, social, and wider skills, that they need to take control of their destinies and fulfil their potential. The foregoing instances inspired the researcher to conduct a formal academic investigation to further determine the social skills of the kindergarten learners of the San Juan District. The result of this study would be the basis for crafting a cooperative play activity for the kindergarten learners to help them develop social skills. Hence, the conduct of this study.

Problem Statement - The main objective of this study is to assess the social skills of the kindergarten learners of San Juan District, Division of La Union, during the school year 2025–2026 as a basis for crafting a cooperative play activity for kindergarten learners. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

- What is the profile of the kindergarten teachers as to Age, Gender, Educational attainment, and Trainings attended related to kindergarten?
- What is the level of social skills of the kindergarten learners as to Interaction and Socio-emotional?
- What intervention may be proposed to develop the social skills of the kindergarten learners?

- What is the level of validity of the proposed cooperative play activities?

2. Method

Study Design - The descriptive method of investigation was used in the study. This design aimed at gathering data about the existing conditions. Calmorin (2005) describes the descriptive design as a method that involves the collection of data to answer questions regarding the present status of a certain study. Further, Deauna (2013) defines such a design as one that includes all studies that purport to present facts concerning the nature and status of anything. This design was employed in this study since it aims at collecting data necessary to describe the level of social skills of the kindergarten learners of the schools of San Juan District for the school year 2025–2026. It is also used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomenon to describe "what exists" with respect to variables and conditions in a particular situation. Furthermore, according to Sevilla (2020), this involves gathering data that describes events and then organizing, tabulating, depicting, and describing the data collection.

Study Size and Setting - The respondents of this study were the total enumeration of kindergarten teachers in the public elementary schools in the San Juan District, Division of La Union. This study was conducted in the public elementary schools in the San Juan District, Division of La Union. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents (kindergarten teachers) in the San Juan District.

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents by School

Name of School	No. of Kindergarten Teachers
Caagraoan Elementary School	1
Balballosa Elementary School	1
Cabaroan Elementary School	1
San Felipe Elementary School	1
Bacsayan Elementary School	1
Legleg Elementary School	1
Sta. Rosa Elementary School	1
Bugbugcao Elementary School	1
Nadsaag Elementary School	1
Sto. Rosario Elementary School	1
Lubing Elementary School	1
San Juan Central School	1
Naguituban Elementary School	1
Urbiztondo Elementary School	1
Taboc Elementary School	2
Total	16

Investigative Materials and Instruments - This study utilized an adopted questionnaire with permission from the author. The questionnaire for teachers is composed of three parts, namely:

- Part I: The profile of the kindergarten teachers;
- Part II: The level of social skills of the kindergarten learners; and
- Part III: The validity of the proposed cooperative play activity.

The items included in the questionnaire were adopted from the book (Opena, 2022) and other materials related to the social skills of learners.

Data Collection Procedures - Before the administration of the questionnaire to the target respondents, the researcher asked permission from the Schools Division Superintendent of the Division of La Union, with the

recommendation of the District Supervisor of the San Juan District, and endorsement of the Dean of the Graduate School. The questionnaires for kindergarten teachers were personally distributed in the different schools of the San Juan District. Retrieval of the questionnaires for teachers was personally retrieved by the researcher.

Data Processing - The level of social skills of kindergarten learners was treated and analyzed through frequency count and percentage, and measured and interpreted using the following numerical values:

Table 2
Numerical Values, Statistical Limits, and Descriptive Ratings

Numerical Values	Statistical Limits	Descriptive Ratings (DR)
4.21 – 5.00	Very Highly Developed	VHD
3.41 – 4.20	Highly Developed	HD
2.61 – 3.40	Moderately Developed	MD
1.81 – 2.60	Slightly Developed	SD
1.00 – 1.80	Not Developed	ND

All the statistical computations herein were calculated through the Microsoft Excel Data Analysis Tool Pack.

3. Results

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data from the study conducted. A discussion on the profile of the respondents is followed by the level of social skills of the kindergarten learners and the level of validity of the developed cooperative play activities.

Profile of Kindergarten Teachers - Table 3 presents the profile of the kindergarten teachers.

Table 3
Profile of Kindergarten Teachers

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
20–30 years old	5	31.25%
31–40 years old	6	37.50%
41–50 years old	5	31.25%
51 years old and above	0	0%
Sex		
Male	0	0%
Female	16	100%
Educational Attainment		
Doctorate	0	0%
M.A. with doctoral units	3	18.75%
M.A. in Education	5	31.25%
BEED/BSED with M.A. units	6	37.50%
Baccalaureate Degree	2	12.50%
Length of Service		
0–5 years	4	25.00%
6–10 years	5	31.25%
11–15 years	4	25.00%
16–20 years	3	18.75%

The data revealed that among the sixteen (16) kindergarten teachers of the San Juan District, the largest group belongs to the 31–40 years old age bracket (6 or 37.5%). This indicates that a considerable portion of the teachers are in their early mid-career stage, possessing both youthful energy and accumulated teaching experience. The 20–

30 years old and 41–50 years old age brackets were represented equally, with five (5) teachers each, or 31.25%. Notably, there were no teachers aged 51 years old and above; this means that most kindergarten teachers in the San Juan District are relatively younger and within the active service age. In terms of sex, all (100%) of the respondents are female. This finding is consistent with the study of Dingayan (2020) that kindergarten teaching is predominantly occupied by women, often attributed to the nurturing, patient, and maternal qualities expected in early childhood education.

With respect to educational attainment, the highest portion of teachers (6 or 37.5%) are BEED/BSED graduates with MA units, followed closely by five (5 or 31.25%) who hold a Master of Arts in Education degree. Three (3) teachers (18.75%) have a master's degree with doctoral units, while two (2 or 12.5%) hold a baccalaureate degree. None of the respondents has attained a full doctorate degree. This means that the majority of the kindergarten teachers are academically qualified, which indicates their commitment to professional development and improving instructional competence.

As to the number of trainings attended, all sixteen (16) respondents (100%) have attended division-level and district-level in-service training. At the regional level, five (5) teachers (31.25%) attended. Only two (2 or 12.5%) have participated in national-level training. The overall data emphasize that kindergarten teachers are highly engaged in professional development, particularly at the district and division level, where access is greater. With regard to the length of service, five (5 or 31.25%) have been in the service for 6–10 years. Both the 0–5 years and 11–15 years groups are equally represented with four (4) teachers each (25%). Three (3 or 18.75%) have served 16–20 years, representing the most experienced group.

Social Skills of Kindergarten Learners - The results on the level of social skills of the kindergarten learners covering forty-one (41) indicators reveal that most of the learners' social skills are rated as either moderately developed (MD) or highly developed (HD). This indicates that learners are in the process of gradually mastering important social skills needed for interaction and cooperation in school. The overall mean was 3.42, described as Highly Developed. Highly developed ratings were noted in skills such as willingness to join an activity with peers (3.45), actively participate in groups (4.00), ask for help (4.12), interact appropriately (4.00), take responsibility for own belongings (4.00), use simple safety rules (3.49), learn to share and be assertive (3.50), ability to work under pressure (4.00), and want people with a friendly and positive demeanor (3.59). Moderately developed ratings (ranging from 3.00 to 3.40) were observed in collaborating and working well with classmates, awareness of self and others, participating appropriately in group situations, caring about other people, using words to solve problems or conflicts, adjusting to new situations, demonstrating increasing self-control, and regulating emotions. These imply that while learners can already demonstrate these skills, they still need guidance to strengthen cooperation, group responsibility, empathy, flexibility, and independence through modeling, structured activities, and continued practice (Gascon, 2019).

Interaction Skills of Kindergarten Learners - Kindergarten learners were rated by their teachers as highly developed in many interaction aspects. Foremost were: complete the assignment independently (4.51), participate during recitations (4.15), actively participates in group works (4.15), listen carefully during class discussions (4.12), knows by heart and recites some common nursery rhymes and songs (4.11), create and make up songs and stories (4.10), tells or retells everyday experiences (4.10), use descriptive language (4.01), and recognize numbers 11–20 (4.01). Indicators rated as moderately developed (3.00–3.25) included ability to begin and continue communication without too many distractions (3.20), share learning responsibilities (3.22), mediate conflicts through speech (3.22), talk in sentences (3.25), use sentences that include two or more ideas (3.00), express ideas so that others can understand (3.08), blend common words to print (3.00), recognize lower-case and upper-case letters (3.00), and recognize letter sounds (3.12). The overall mean for interaction skills was 3.12 (Moderately Developed).

Socio-Emotional Skills of Kindergarten Learners - Kindergarten learners were rated as highly developed in most socio-emotional aspects (range 3.41–4.12). Highest ratings included ask for help (4.12), want people with a friendly and positive demeanor (4.11), willingness to join an activity with peers (4.05), remain calm and civil

(4.01), willing to develop positive rapport (4.00), share responsibilities with others (4.00), demonstrate strong skills (4.00), and attempts new tasks knowing it is okay to make mistakes (4.00). Moderately developed ratings were observed for adjust to new situations (3.22), demonstrate increasing self-control (3.40), and take responsibility for one's own belongings (3.40). The overall mean for socio-emotional skills was 3.52 (Highly Developed).

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the social skills of kindergarten learners in the San Juan District are generally highly developed, with an overall mean of 3.42. Learners demonstrated particular strength in areas such as asking for help, actively participating in groups, interacting appropriately with peers, taking responsibility for their belongings, and showing willingness to join activities. These results affirm that social skills can be effectively nurtured through structured activities, guided play, and consistent teacher modeling. The data further reveal that social skills contribute meaningfully to positive classroom dynamics, emotional growth, and the development of interpersonal competence that learners will need throughout their educational journey and beyond. Interaction skills were rated moderately developed overall (M = 3.12), suggesting that while many learners can express ideas, participate in discussions, and complete tasks independently, they still require additional support in areas such as sustained communication, conflict mediation through speech, and more complex language use. In contrast, socio-emotional skills emerged as highly developed (M = 3.52), reflecting learners' growing capacity for empathy, sharing, emotional regulation, and positive peer relationships. Taken together, these findings underscore that cooperative play activities are essential in promoting learners' social skills and overall growth, and that social skills instruction should remain an integral component of kindergarten education to support holistic development and lifelong learning.

Implications

Implications for Teachers - The results carry several important implications for kindergarten teachers. First, teachers should intentionally design daily opportunities for cooperative play and structured group activities so that learners can practice collaboration, turn-taking, and conflict resolution in authentic contexts. Second, teacher modeling of appropriate social behaviors—such as using polite language, expressing feelings constructively, and demonstrating empathy—remains critical, especially for skills that were rated only moderately developed. Third, teachers may benefit from ongoing professional development focused on socio-emotional learning strategies so they can more confidently scaffold learners' social growth. Finally, the findings suggest that teachers should differentiate support according to individual needs, providing extra guidance for learners who struggle with self-control, adjustment to new situations, or independent responsibility for belongings.

Implications for Students - For kindergarten learners, the study highlights the value of active participation in cooperative activities as a pathway to stronger social competence. Students who regularly engage in shared tasks, group games, and peer interactions are more likely to develop confidence in expressing ideas, asking for help, and managing emotions. The moderately developed interaction skills observed in the study also imply that learners need repeated, low-stakes opportunities to practice longer conversations, negotiate disagreements with words, and use more complex language. When these opportunities are provided in a supportive classroom climate, students are better positioned to form positive relationships, experience greater emotional well-being, and build a solid foundation for future academic and social success.

Limitations of the Study - Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study relied exclusively on teacher ratings of learners' social skills; direct observation of children's behavior or multi-informant data (including parent reports) were not collected, which may introduce rater bias. Second, the sample was limited to sixteen kindergarten teachers from a single district (San Juan, Division of La Union), restricting the generalizability of the results to other contexts or larger populations. Third, the research employed a descriptive design and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between specific instructional practices

and social skill development. Fourth, the study focused primarily on interaction and socio-emotional domains and did not examine possible links between social skills and academic achievement in literacy or numeracy. Finally, the proposed cooperative play activities, while rated highly valid, have not yet been implemented and evaluated for actual effectiveness in classroom settings.

Recommendations - Based on the findings and limitations of the study, the following recommendations are offered. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate daily group activities and structured cooperative play into their regular instructional routines to foster social skills in authentic, engaging ways. Parents and guardians should be guided to reinforce positive social behaviors at home through collaborative play, shared household tasks, and modeling of respectful communication. Schools and district offices may consider providing sustained training programs for teachers on socio-emotional learning strategies and the intentional use of play as a pedagogical tool.

School administrators are further advised to support teachers by allocating adequate time for planning cooperative activities, supplying appropriate instructional materials, and creating professional learning communities focused on early childhood social development. Curriculum developers and education policymakers may strengthen the inclusion of structured cooperative play activities within the kindergarten curriculum to promote holistic learner development, particularly in the social domain. For future research, studies employing mixed-methods or experimental designs are recommended to examine the direct effects of cooperative play interventions on social skill growth. Expanding the sample to multiple districts and including parent and learner self-reports would enhance the validity and generalizability of findings. Researchers may also explore the relationship between social skills and academic achievement in literacy, numeracy, and other learning areas, as well as investigate the long-term impact of early social skill interventions on later school adjustment and interpersonal competence.

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