Chapter 4

Leadership Education and Leadership Skills in Early Childhood Education ⛓

Pınar Ayyıldız[1]

Abstract

This study aims to explore the individual and societal impacts of leadership education in early childhood. Leadership skills contribute to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, strengthening critical competencies such as empathy, collaboration, and problem-solving. Through methods like play-based learning, storytelling, and group projects, children can experience leadership roles. This process fosters self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, and social awareness, promoting both individual growth and social solidarity. The study argues for the integration of leadership skills into educational policies and highlights the importance of teacher guidance and parental involvement. The incorporation of digital technologies into leadership education offers children opportunities to develop digital leadership skills. Additionally, culturally and socially sensitive leadership education can foster an inclusive leadership perspective in children. The findings suggest that leadership education can enhance individuals' personal and professional success and contribute to the development of a more harmonious society.

1. Introduction

Leadership is a pivotal concept at the core of societal structures and individual development. Throughout history, leadership skills have played a crucial role in shaping societies and advancing individual careers (Northouse, 2019). In this context, fostering leadership skills during early childhood establishes a foundational base for individuals to exhibit effective leadership later in life. Specifically, introducing leadership education in the preschool years can directly enhance children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. However, the impact of leadership education on this age group

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1   Assoc. Prof. Dr., Lokman Hekim University, pinarayyildiz@yahoo.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2644-7981

remains relatively underexplored in the educational literature (Hughes, 2018). Preschool period is indeed a critical phase for laying the groundwork for children's personality and social skills. According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, this stage is when children begin to develop problem-solving skills and make sense of their surroundings (Piaget, 1964). In a similar fashion, Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory suggests that children can acquire complex skills like leadership through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). These theoretical perspectives support the idea that leadership skills can be cultivated during early childhood. In education, leadership should not only be viewed as the ability to guide a group or manage an organization but also as the capacity to develop self-management, decision-making, and empathy skills (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Öztürk & Demiroğlu Çiçek, 2024). Leadership education in the preschool years empowers children to boost their self-confidence, enhance their communication with peers, and develop collaborative abilities (Muijs et al., 2006). Therefore, leadership education should be integrated into preschool curricula and nurtured at an early age.

1.1. The Importance of Leadership Education in Early Childhood

Preschool years are critical for learning and development. Education during this period significantly shapes individuals' lifelong learning abilities and personal growth (Heckman, 2006). Developing leadership skills at an early age not only contributes to individuals realizing their potential but also fosters social solidarity and collaboration (Smith et al., 2020). Hence, leadership education should be viewed as a developmental process beginning in childhood rather than a process exclusive to adults. Children naturally express leadership qualities through play and social interactions. Research shows that children exhibit leadership behaviors during play, and supporting these behaviors can help them form stronger social bonds (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013). For instance, when a child takes on a guiding role in group play, they demonstrate and enhance leadership traits such as empathy, communication, and problem-solving.

1.2. Leadership in Educational Programs

Current educational programs often address leadership education indirectly. Howbeit, a structured approach to fostering leadership skills in early childhood education is largely absent (Rodd, 2013). This indicates the need for more deliberate and systematic efforts to integrate leadership education into preschool settings. Educational policies and curricula must incorporate appropriate methods and content for leadership education.

Leadership education can be implemented in preschool settings through approaches such as play-based learning, storytelling, and group projects. These methods allow children to develop leadership skills organically. Furthermore, teachers play a vital role in encouraging leadership skills. By modeling and fostering leadership traits, teachers can help children internalize these skills and become role models for their peers (Hall et al., 2004).

1.3. Objective of the Study

This book chapter aims to explore how leadership skills can be developed in early childhood and examine the individual and societal impacts of this process. Specifically, it seeks to address the contributions of leadership education to social, emotional, and cognitive development in preschool children. Additionally, the chapter aims to fill gaps in the relevant line of literature by presenting effective teaching methods and practical applications for fostering leadership skills in this age group. In contemporary society, leadership skills are indispensable for individuals to succeed both personally and professionally. Leadership education in early childhood enables children to acquire these skills early in life, contributing significantly to their future achievements. In this regard, educational policies and practices need to be restructured to support the development of leadership skills. Equipping children with leadership skills not only enhances individual growth but also initiates a process that promotes social solidarity and collaboration.

2. Leadership and Leadership Skills

2.1. What is Leadership?

Leadership can be defined as the ability to influence, guide, and motivate individuals or groups toward achieving a common goal. This definition underscores that leadership is not merely a managerial tool but also an art of communication and relationship-building. Throughout history, leadership has been examined from diverse perspectives, ranging from an innate trait to a skill that can be cultivated (Northouse, 2021). Traditional leadership theories often focus on the influence of adults in business, politics, or society. That said, contemporary research provides significant insights into how leadership begins to emerge during early childhood (Rodd, 2013). Leadership in childhood primarily manifests through play, social interactions, and collaboration with peers. These activities provide a natural environment for children to experience leadership roles. Cultivating leadership skills early in life can enhance individuals' capacity to assume leadership roles throughout their lives.

Key Dimensions of Leadership

Leadership is generally understood through its core dimensions, which include vision development, interaction, power, and influence. In early childhood, these dimensions take simpler forms that children can experience and learn:

- **Vision Development:** Guiding children in setting goals and understanding the steps required to achieve them.

- **Interaction:** Sharing ideas during social play and group projects.

- **Power and Influence:** Organizing and guiding peer groups toward common objectives.

These dimensions provide a framework for understanding how children exhibit and develop leadership skills.

2.2. What are Leadership Skills?

Leadership skills refer to the core competencies that enable an individual to lead effectively. These skills are critical in both individual and group contexts, encompassing various sub-skills. During early childhood, fostering leadership skills contributes significantly to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Smith et al., 2020).

Core Leadership Skills

- **Communication Skills:** The ability of children to clearly express their emotions and thoughts is foundational to leadership. These skills are honed during group activities and classroom interactions.

- **Empathy:** A key element of leadership, empathy enables children to understand and respond to the feelings of others. Studies reveal that children with higher empathy levels demonstrate stronger leadership capabilities in group settings (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013).

- **Decision-Making:** The ability to evaluate multiple options and choose the best solution to a problem helps children take initiative in leadership roles.

- **Problem-Solving:** Effectively addressing challenges during group activities reflects the development of leadership skills.

- **Teamwork:** Collaborating with peers to achieve shared goals is a vital component of leadership (Muijs et al., 2006).

Benefits of Acquiring Leadership Skills

Children who develop leadership skills are better equipped to build healthy relationships, boost their self-confidence, and achieve academic and social success in later stages of life. For instance, a child with advanced problem-solving skills is more likely to overcome challenges both in school and in broader societal contexts (Heckman, 2006).

2.3. Leadership Development in Children

Leadership Through Play and Social Interaction

Play is one of the most effective mediums for leadership development in early childhood. During play, children naturally take on leadership roles and develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills. For example, a child guiding a group during play develops the ability to organize and motivate others while refining their communication and decision-making abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Peer Interaction and Leadership

Children reinforce their leadership skills through positive interactions with peers. Research indicates that children who engage in meaningful peer interactions are more successful in assuming leadership roles (Smith et al., 2020). Peer interactions also provide opportunities to cultivate empathy and communication skills.

Leadership Development in Educational Programs

Educational programs play a pivotal role in fostering leadership skills. Play-based and project-based approaches used in preschool education aim to develop leadership skills naturally. Teachers act as facilitators in this process, guiding children to recognize and nurture their leadership potential (Hall et al., 2004).

Confidence and Leadership

Developing leadership skills is an effective tool for building children's self-confidence. Confident children are more likely to assume leadership roles and establish healthier relationships with peers. Activities centered around play provide a significant avenue for nurturing confidence (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013).

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Models of Leadership Development

Piaget's Perspective on Leadership Development

According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, children acquire leadership and other complex skills through their exploration and understanding of the world (Piaget, 1964). For instance, when a child takes on a leadership role in group activities, the process enhances their cognitive and social development.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Approach

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in the development of leadership skills. Peer groups and teacher guidance are crucial for children to develop these skills effectively (Vygotsky, 1978).

Contemporary Leadership Models

Modern leadership models view leadership as a developmental process and investigate how this process can begin in early childhood (Northouse, 2021). These models argue that leadership skills can be cultivated through environmental influences, structured education, and experiential learning.

The Significance of Early Leadership Development

The acquisition of leadership skills at an early age equips individuals to become effective leaders later in life. Play, social interaction, and structured educational programs provide critical opportunities for children to develop leadership competencies. This process not only fosters individual growth but also promotes social cohesion and collaboration, laying the foundation for a more resilient and adaptive society.

3. Leadership in Early Childhood Education

3.1. Leadership in Early Childhood Education Programs

Early childhood education is a critical period during which children develop fundamental cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Incorporating leadership education into this stage can help children navigate challenges they may encounter later in life. That being said, leadership skills are rarely explicitly targeted in existing early childhood education programs (Küçük-Demir, 2023; Rodd, 2013). Leadership education should be recognized as a core element that enhances lifelong learning competencies. Educational programs often address leadership skills indirectly. For example, group activities and creative tasks provide opportunities for children to explore leadership traits. Yet, these activities typically focus on general social skills

rather than consciously fostering leadership abilities (Smith et al., 2020). Educational policies and curriculum content must include specific strategies and objectives for leadership development.

3.2. Approaches to Leadership Education

Various approaches can be employed to support leadership skills in early childhood, including play-based learning, storytelling, and project-based education. These methods create natural environments for children to develop leadership competencies.

Play-Based Learning: Play is one of the most organic tools through which children can exhibit leadership. In group games, children who assume leadership roles develop communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013). For example, activities like a "leadership game" allow children to guide their peers and experience leadership first-hand.

Storytelling: Storytelling is an effective tool for fostering leadership skills. Through stories, children learn empathy, problem-solving, and decision-making. Characters with leadership traits in stories serve as role models for children (Nicolopoulou, 2014).

Project-Based Education: Project-based learning offers a platform where children can take on leadership roles. As children collaborate to complete a project, they naturally exhibit leadership qualities. This approach allows children to discover their leadership potential within both individual and group dynamics (Bell, 2010).

3.3. The Role of Teachers

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering leadership skills. They act as facilitators who guide and encourage children to explore their leadership potential. Research shows that when teachers create an environment conducive to leadership development, children are more likely to exhibit leadership traits (Muijs et al., 2006; Yılmaz, Uysal & Nacar, 2024).

Teachers must carefully observe and support children's natural leadership tendencies. Furthermore, diversifying classroom activities and employing various strategies to encourage leadership are essential. For instance, a teacher can rotate leadership roles among children during group activities, ensuring that each child has the opportunity to lead.

4. The Gains of Leadership Education

4.1. Effects on Socio-Emotional Development

The acquisition of leadership skills during early childhood plays a crucial role in children's socio-emotional development. Research indicates that leadership education enhances children's abilities such as empathy, self-regulation, and self-confidence (Elias & Arnold, 2006). Socio-emotional development forms the foundation of leadership and enables children to establish healthy social relationships. In particular, empathy and emotional awareness are critical for effective leadership processes.

Leadership education helps children communicate more effectively and collaborate within peer groups. Through this process, children learn to understand diverse perspectives and manage conflicts. For instance, a child who assumes a leadership role during group play learns to both advocate for their ideas and respect the ideas of others (Goleman, 2000). These skills contribute to forming healthier social bonds in later life.

4.2. Teamwork and Collaboration Skills

Leadership education contributes to the development of teamwork and collaboration skills in children. Children who take on leadership roles in group activities gain the ability to identify the strengths of others and organize these strengths toward achieving a common goal. Research demonstrates that the acquisition of collaboration skills in early childhood correlates with success in professional life later on (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Yılmaz, Şahin-Atılgan & Güzel-Sekecek, 2024).

4.3. Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Abilities

The development of leadership skills positively influences children's decision-making and problem-solving abilities. These skills help children cope with challenges and produce effective solutions in complex situations. For instance, when a child leads a group project, they evaluate the ideas of others and make decisions to find the most suitable solution (Ayyıldız & Yılmaz, 2023a; Dweck, 2006; Öztürk, 2023). This process is essential for both cognitive and social development.

4.4. Boosting Self-Confidence

Children who acquire leadership skills tend to have higher self-confidence. Self-confidence is a critical factor for children to embrace leadership roles and succeed in them. Leadership education provides children with experiences

that bolster their confidence. For example, when a child leads a classroom activity, this experience can enhance their belief in their abilities (Bandura, 1997).

4.5. Academic and Social Success

Leadership education significantly enhances children's academic and social achievements by fostering essential skills that contribute to success in various settings. Academically, children who acquire leadership skills demonstrate higher levels of engagement in classroom activities and are more likely to take initiative in collaborative and individual tasks. This proactive attitude stems from the confidence and problem-solving abilities cultivated through leadership education. Such children are often better equipped to tackle academic challenges, approach complex tasks with resilience, and seek innovative solutions to problems (Marzano et al., 2005).

Socially, leadership education prepares children to navigate interpersonal relationships with empathy, effective communication, and teamwork. These skills not only help them build stronger bonds with peers but also enable them to mediate conflicts and foster a sense of community within group settings. For instance, a child who has developed leadership skills may naturally assume the role of a mediator during a disagreement, promoting harmony and collaboration. This proactive social engagement often translates into greater participation in extracurricular activities, where children can further hone their leadership abilities (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Furthermore, leadership education instills a sense of responsibility and purpose in children, encouraging them to actively contribute to their classroom and social environments. This active engagement not only enhances their immediate social interactions but also lays the foundation for lifelong skills in civic responsibility and community involvement. By fostering a balance between individual confidence and collective collaboration, leadership education equips children with the tools to excel both academically and socially, setting them up for success in future endeavors.

5. Practical Examples

5.1. The Role of Classroom Activities in Developing Leadership Skills

Classroom activities provide a fundamental platform for children to acquire and develop leadership skills. These activities offer children hands-on opportunities to practice problem-solving, collaboration, communication,

and decision-making. Research highlights that structured activities are effective in fostering leadership qualities and that the classroom environment plays a crucial role in supporting this process (Ayyıldız & Yılmaz, 2021; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015).

Group Games and Interactive Leadership Activities: Play-based learning serves as a powerful tool for children to experience and learn leadership skills. For example, the activity "Who's the Team Leader?" allows each child to assume a leadership role in a group project, enhancing their responsibility and team management skills. During group games, children learn to coordinate peers, make decisions, and work collaboratively. Such activities also boost children's confidence (Fisher, 2013).

Problem-Solving and Creative Thinking Exercises: Classroom activities can present children with real-world scenarios where they are required to devise solutions. For instance, teachers can create a classroom scenario and ask children to propose a solution. A child in a leadership role may evaluate the ideas of peers and choose the most effective solution. This process reinforces both analytical thinking and leadership skills (Pellegrini & Smith, 2005).

Storytelling and Role-Playing: Storytelling is an ideal method for instilling leadership traits such as empathy, problem-solving, and decision-making. Leadership-themed stories provide children with opportunities to analyze the behaviors of leader characters and draw lessons from them. For example, children can role-play as the leader from a story, critically examine the leader's decisions, and suggest alternative solutions. This activity strengthens children's critical thinking and leadership potential (Nicolopoulou, 2014).

5.2. The Role of Families and Parents in Leadership Education

Parents play a fundamental role in developing children's leadership skills. Reinforcing what children learn at school in the home environment contributes to the natural growth of leadership abilities. Research shows that parental involvement strengthens the leadership education process and positively impacts children's socio-emotional development (Epstein, 2011; Yılmaz, 2021).

Leadership Practices at Home: Parents can provide opportunities for children to practice leadership at home by assigning responsibilities. For instance, planning a family meal allows a child to develop organizational skills. Similarly, children can act as mediators during family discussions, enhancing their empathy and communication abilities (Sanders & Epstein, 2005).

Parent-Teacher Collaboration: Collaboration between parents and teachers ensures that leadership skills are developed consistently in both school and home settings. For example, teachers can share details of leadership-themed activities conducted in the classroom and provide guidance to parents on how to reinforce these activities at home. This collaboration enhances the effectiveness of the learning process (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

5.3. Teachers' Role in Supporting Leadership Development

Teachers are pivotal actors in leadership education. For leadership education to be effectively implemented, teachers need the right tools and strategies. Accumulated research points to that teachers who create environments conducive to leadership development significantly impact children's ability to develop these skills (Ayyıldız & Yılmaz, 2023b; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Classroom Management and Leadership Opportunities: It is essential for teachers to offer every child the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the classroom. For example, teachers can organize weekly classroom duties, ensuring that each child takes on a leadership position. These duties provide a platform for children to develop responsibility and leadership skills.

Differentiated Instruction Strategies: Every child develops leadership skills at a different pace and in unique ways. Thus, it is crucial for teachers to adopt differentiated instruction methods. For instance, one child may excel in individual leadership, while another may thrive in group leadership. Teachers can enhance the effectiveness of leadership education by recognizing these differences and tailoring their strategies accordingly (Tomlinson, 2001).

Feedback Processes in Leadership Development: Teachers' observations and feedback on children's leadership experiences are critical. For instance, after a leadership activity, teachers can provide constructive feedback on what children did well and areas for improvement. This process helps children develop their leadership skills more consciously.

6. Future Contributions of Leadership Education to Society and Individuals

6.1. Impact of Leadership Education on Individual Development

Leadership education profoundly influences individuals' personal development. Acquiring leadership skills at an early age enhances self-confidence, self-awareness, and emotional resilience. These skills play a critical role not only in academic and professional success but also in

equipping individuals to navigate social and personal challenges throughout life (Day et al., 2014).

Self-Management and Emotional Intelligence Development: Leadership education contributes to the development of individuals' emotional intelligence (EQ). Emotional intelligence encompasses skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, self-awareness, and understanding others, which are essential for effective leadership at both individual and group levels (Goleman, et al., 2013; Yılmaz, 2023).

Strengthening Critical and Analytical Thinking Skills: Individuals who receive leadership education early in life tend to think more analytically and creatively when solving problems. For instance, the ability to evaluate diverse perspectives during group work helps children become more effective leaders in both academic and social contexts (Seibert et al., 2017; Yılmaz, 2024).

Personal Responsibility and Self-Efficacy: Leadership education strengthens individuals' sense of responsibility. Through leadership experiences, children gain the confidence that comes with completing tasks or projects, which in turn enhances their belief in their own abilities. This sense of self-efficacy encourages individuals to embrace leadership roles with greater courage (Bandura, 1997).

6.2. Contributions of Leadership Education to Social Solidarity and Collaboration

Leadership education enhances individuals' contributions to society. Those who receive leadership education at an early age play active roles not only in their personal achievements but also in projects that promote social solidarity.

Fostering a Sense of Social Responsibility: Leadership education increases individuals' awareness of societal responsibilities. Individuals who are sensitive to social issues often take active roles in addressing challenges such as environmental problems, inequality, and human rights. When instilled at a young age, this awareness leads to lifelong social engagement (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Empowering Community Leadership: Leadership skills enable individuals to become more effective leaders within their communities. For instance, individuals who lead local community projects motivate others to unite and achieve common goals. This process strengthens social cohesion (Komives et al., 2013).

Sensitivity to Cultural and Social Diversity: Leadership education promotes sensitivity to cultural and social diversity. The ability to respect diversity and integrate different perspectives makes leaders more inclusive and effective. Such leaders play a significant role in fostering societal harmony and peace (Northouse, 2021).

6.3. Leadership Education for Future Societies

Leadership education plays a critical role in shaping the societies of the future. In a rapidly changing technological and social environment, leadership skills help individuals adapt to these transformations. Thus, it is essential to emphasize the future importance of leadership education.

Supporting 21st Century Skills: Leadership education today is a vital tool for developing skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, which are essential in the 21st century. These skills enable individuals to become more effective leaders in a globalized world (Sevgi, Ayyıldız & Yılmaz, 2023; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Technology and Digital Leadership: In the digital age, leadership education equips individuals to effectively use digital tools and lead in virtual environments. Skills such as managing virtual teams, analyzing data, and communicating online will become fundamental for future leadership (Avolio et al., 2009).

Sustainability and Environmental Leadership: Leadership education encourages individuals to take initiative in sustainability and environmental awareness. Environmentally conscious leaders can develop solutions to environmental challenges at both individual and societal levels (Kemp, 2011).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusion

This study comprehensively explored the individual and societal benefits of fostering leadership education in early childhood. Leadership skills not only support individual confidence and responsibility but also strengthen social and emotional abilities such as empathy, collaboration, and problem-solving. Related studies indicate that leadership skills acquired in early childhood contribute significantly to individuals' lifelong success and societal contributions (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Heckman, 2006).

Integrating leadership skills into education enables individuals to better navigate the social, academic, and professional challenges they will face

throughout their lives. Play-based learning, storytelling, and group projects have proven to be effective tools for developing children's leadership potential. With that being said, the active involvement of both teachers and parents is crucial for the successful implementation of leadership education (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

This study underscores that leadership education is not merely a tool for personal gain but also a mechanism to strengthen societal solidarity. Leadership skills encourage individuals to take on social responsibilities, embrace diversity, and collaborate effectively. Therefore, leadership education contributes not only to individual development but also to the formation of a more equitable, sustainable, and harmonious society (Komives et al., 2013).

7.2. Recommendations

To effectively implement leadership education, the following recommendations are proposed:

7.2.1. Integration of Leadership Education into Curricula

Leadership skills should be systematically integrated into preschool curricula. This enables children to develop their leadership potential at an early age and lays the foundation for future success. Educational programs should include play-based and project-based learning strategies that support leadership skills (Smith et al., 2020).

Practical Example: Activities such as "weekly leadership roles" can be incorporated into the preschool curriculum. Each child can take turns assuming a specific responsibility in the classroom to gain leadership experience.

7.2.2. Investment in Teacher Training

In-service training programs should be organized to ensure that teachers are competent in fostering leadership skills. These training sessions should educate teachers on the principles of leadership education and practical methods for implementation (Rodd, 2013; Sevgi & Yılmaz, 2023).

Practical Example: Workshops on leadership education can be held for teachers, providing them with skills to design activities that promote leadership in the classroom.

7.2.3. Strengthening Parental Involvement

Parents should be encouraged to actively participate in the leadership education process. Activities and guidance programs that enhance school-home collaboration should be developed. Parents can support their children by providing daily activities that allow them to practice leadership skills at home (Epstein, 2011).

Practical Example: Parents can assign small tasks to their children to support leadership development at home. For example, a child can be allowed to set an agenda item during a family meeting.

7.2.4. Use of Digital Tools

Incorporating technological advancements into leadership education processes is essential. Digital games and leadership-themed mobile applications can provide children with enjoyable ways to develop their leadership skills (Avolio et al., 2020; Ayyıldız, Yılmaz & Baltacı, 2021).

Practical Example: Leadership-focused digital games can be used to develop children's teamwork, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. For instance, an application like "Virtual Leadership Simulation" can allow children to experience leadership roles in a digital environment.

7.2.5. Sensitivity to Diversity and Inclusivity

Leadership education should be designed with sensitivity to cultural and social diversity. Themes of diversity and inclusivity should be central to leadership education, encouraging children to respect different perspectives (Northouse, 2021).

Practical Example: Classroom activities can include stories and leadership examples from different cultures, enhancing children's cultural awareness.

7.2.6. Research and Evaluation

Longitudinal research should be conducted to measure the impact of leadership education, and educational programs should be adjusted based on these findings. Standardized assessment tools should be developed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational practices (Komives et al., 2013).

Practical Example: Observation forms and surveys assessing children's leadership skills can be utilized. These tools can guide teachers in understanding children's developmental processes.

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