

Child-to-Child Pedagogy in Practice: A Qualitative Study of Grade 5 Facilitators in Maldivian Preschools

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ABSTRACT

The Child-to-Child (CtC) approach is well documented, yet research often emphasises outcomes for younger learners while overlooking the development of young facilitators. Using a qualitative narrative case study design, this study explores the lived experiences of four Grade 5 students serving as young facilitators (YFs) in a CtC framework implemented in Maldivian preschools. The study was guided by the research question: How do Grade 5 YFs experience and make sense of their facilitator role within a CtC approach in Maldivian preschool classrooms? The wider SIPCA project also aimed to understand whether the facilitator role could help students with low self-esteem or limited leadership confidence gain confidence, agency, communication skills, and social responsibility. YFs were initially identified through screening and teacher consultation, with attention to students showing low self-esteem or leadership hesitancy at baseline. From this wider cohort, four participants were purposively selected because their interviews, reflective conversations, and journals provided rich, sustained accounts of development across the 25-week intervention. Data were analysed thematically and presented as narrative vignettes. Findings suggest that, from the YFs' perspectives, CtC supported relational interactions marked by emotional bonds, trust, and reduced power differentials. The YFs described using play-based and narrative activities to encourage preschool children's participation, while also reporting gains in self-efficacy, leadership, patience, and moral responsibility. Because preschool children's learning, anxiety, engagement, and emotional safety were not directly measured, claims about these areas are treated as facilitator perceptions and interpretive observations rather than measured outcomes. The study suggests that structured cross-age peer facilitation may support young facilitators' holistic development while offering possibilities for relational classroom practice.

Keywords: Child-to-Child (CtC) pedagogy, Narrative Vignettes, Maldives, Student Agency, Qualitative Research, Young Facilitators

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education establishes foundations for lifelong wellbeing through the quality of relationships, participation, and meaningful engagement. Moving away from passive learning, the Child-to-Child (CtC) approach emphasises peer interaction and relational learning. Originating in 1970s health initiatives, CtC evolved into a rights-based participatory framework outlining children's agency to influence communities (Pridmore & Stephens, 2000). Rooted in sociocultural theories, CtC views knowledge as socially constructed and mediated through interaction, positioning older children simultaneously as experts, learners, and capable facilitators (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). These ideas highlight the importance of interaction and relationship when implementing CtC in learning contexts.

By treating learning as social negotiation rather than a consequence of socialisation, CtC challenges adult-directed teaching models (Vygotsky, 1978). Preschools are inherently relational spaces where cognitive development intertwines with play, emotion, and communication. This environment is continuously co-constructed through participants' actions (Vuorisalo et al., 2015) and mediated by a "relational pedagogy" in which emotional wellbeing, communication, and peer play are fundamentally interdependent (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008). Communication and play serve as psychological tools that transform external social interactions into internal cognitive development.

While historical CtC literature focuses on primary school health metrics, emerging research highlights its dual capacity to boost younger children's learning and older children's leadership. However, existing studies largely prioritise programme evaluations and younger child outcomes, leaving a critical gap regarding the actual lived experiences of young facilitators within preschool contexts. This gap is highly relevant to the Maldives, a nation characterised by geographically dispersed island communities, strong social interconnectedness, and close relationships between schools and families. Despite these enabling conditions, empirical research on peer-mediated and CtC approaches in Maldivian early childhood settings remains limited. Globally, qualitative evidence is lacking regarding how older children experience facilitation roles, interpret their interactions, and develop identity, confidence, and responsibility.

Drawing on a qualitative narrative case study design, this study explores the lived experiences of Grade 5 students serving as young facilitators (YFs) within a CtC framework in Maldivian preschools. The wider project also examined what students who initially showed low self-esteem, limited confidence, or hesitancy in leadership might gain from occupying a meaningful facilitator role with younger children. Guided by research questions focused on YFs' lived experiences, confidence development, agency, and relational pedagogy, the study moves beyond outcome-focused evaluations to illuminate

the relational, pedagogical, and developmental processes of everyday classroom practice. Ultimately, this paper contributes contextually grounded insight into how CtC functions as a relational pedagogy, advances broader debates on child participation, and offers practical and policy-relevant insights for community-oriented and island contexts.

The article is organised as follows. The literature review first situates Child-to-Child pedagogy within sociocultural, relational, play-based, and rights-based learning. The methodology section then explains the SIPCA project, participant selection, data sources, analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. The findings are presented through four narrative vignettes, followed by a discussion of how the young facilitator role shaped confidence, agency, relational awareness, and responsibility in Maldivian preschool contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review situates the study within scholarship on Child-to-Child (CtC) pedagogy, sociocultural learning, relational pedagogy, play-based and narrative learning, youth facilitation, and rights-based participation. It first reviews the conceptual foundations of CtC and related peer-mediated approaches, then considers how relational and play-based pedagogies inform early childhood practice. It also examines literature on youth agency, leadership, inclusion, and moral responsibility. The review concludes by identifying a specific research gap: while CtC has been discussed internationally, limited qualitative evidence foregrounds the lived experiences of older child facilitators in preschool settings, and there is particularly little context-specific evidence from Maldivian island schools.

1. Conceptual Foundation of CtC approach

The Child-to-Child (CtC) approach is grounded in the principle that children are not passive recipients of knowledge but active social agents capable of contributing meaningfully to the learning and wellbeing of others (Johnsunderraj et al., 2023; van Rensburg & van Rensburg, 2020). Central to CtC is the idea that learning occurs most effectively when children learn with and from one another in socially meaningful and relational contexts. Rather than replacing adult guidance, CtC complements teacher-led instruction by creating structured opportunities for children to assume supportive, cross-age facilitator roles, thereby strengthening ownership, motivation, and the mutual co-construction of classroom knowledge. International organisations such as UNICEF have historically and continually highlighted CtC as an authentic, rights-based approach aligned with children's participation, agency, and voice (Jansen van Rensburg, 2024; UNICEF, 2001), particularly in contexts where relational and community-based learning is culturally valued.

Within early childhood education, the Child-to-Child (CtC) approach offers a compelling alternative to purely adult-directed teaching models. It directly embraces Vygotsky's (1978) premise that learning develops through social interaction with others and the surrounding environment rather than through isolated individual activity. Consequently, preschool classrooms can be understood as inherently relational spaces where cognitive development is deeply intertwined with play, emotion, and communication. As Vuorisalo et al. (2015) demonstrate, this learning environment is continuously co-constructed and negotiated through participants' verbal and non-verbal actions. Within these shared spaces, cognitive development is mediated by a "relational pedagogy" in which children's emotional wellbeing, communicative capacities, and peer play are fundamentally interdependent elements of the educational process (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008). Communication and play therefore serve as psychological tools through which children transform external social interactions into internal emotional and cognitive development.

Peer learning is well established in early childhood education as an important mechanism through which children participate in shared activity, observe others, negotiate meanings, and practise social communication. Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning, peer interaction is often understood as a space where children co-construct knowledge through dialogue, modelling, and guided participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). However, studies of peer learning in early childhood have more commonly focused on benefits for younger learners or on teacher-organised peer interaction, with less attention to the older children who take on facilitative responsibilities in cross-age arrangements.

Cross-age tutoring and peer mentoring studies suggest that older children may develop communication, responsibility, confidence, and a sense of competence when they support younger peers (Topping, 2005). Nevertheless, much of this literature examines structured tutoring, academic support, or mentoring in primary and secondary school contexts. Fewer studies examine cross-age facilitation in preschool classrooms, where facilitation occurs through play, storytelling, movement, care, and informal guidance, and where the facilitator's own identity development is central to understanding the process.

3. Relational Pedagogy and Emotional Safety in Preschool Classrooms

Relational pedagogy emphasises the quality of relationships as foundational to learning, particularly in early childhood settings. Research consistently demonstrates that children learn best in environments characterised by trust, warmth, and emotional security (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; OECD, 2021; Pianta et al., 2008). In such environments, children are more likely to participate actively, take risks in learning, and engage meaningfully with peers.

The CtC approach naturally aligns with relational pedagogy by foregrounding care, empathy, and mutual respect. When children take on supportive roles, such as young

facilitators, they often form strong emotional bonds with younger peers, creating a sense of belonging and continuity that extends beyond formal classroom interactions. These relational dimensions are particularly significant in preschool contexts, where emotional regulation, social learning, and attachment are closely intertwined with cognitive development.

4. Play-Based and Narrative Pedagogy in Child-to-Child Learning

Play-based learning is widely recognised as the cornerstone of effective early childhood education. Through play, children explore concepts, negotiate meanings, and develop social and motor skills in ways that are intrinsically motivating (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Fleeer, 2018; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Within CtC contexts, play-based activities, such as movement games, role play, and collaborative tasks—serve as accessible entry points for peer-led engagement.

Narrative and storytelling further extend the pedagogical reach of CtC in preschool classrooms. Storytelling supports language development, imagination, moral reasoning, and sustained attention, particularly when delivered in interactive and informal settings (Nicolopoulou, 2010). When older children tell stories to younger peers, the activity becomes both instructional and relational, reinforcing listening skills, shared meaning-making, and emotional connection. Research suggests that narrative-based peer learning can enhance children's engagement and comprehension, especially when learning occurs outside rigid classroom structures.

5. Youth Facilitation, Leadership, and Identity Development

Participation as a young facilitator within CtC programmes can be understood through positive youth development and child participation literature. These perspectives suggest that meaningful roles may allow children and adolescents to experiment with identity, responsibility, agency, and belonging in supported environments (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001). This is particularly relevant during middle childhood and early adolescence, when self-concept and social identity are still developing. However, the literature has not sufficiently examined how young facilitators themselves narrate these changes when they are positioned as pedagogical actors in preschool classrooms.

Youth leadership studies also caution that participation must be meaningful rather than symbolic. Opportunities for planning, preparation, collaboration with adults, and reflection may help young people develop a sense of ownership and competence (Larson, 2000; Geldhof et al., 2013; Rhodes, 2005). For CtC research, this means that the facilitator role should be examined not only as a delivery mechanism for younger children's activities, but also as a developmental experience for older children. This study responds to that need by focusing on how YFs describe confidence, responsibility, relational awareness, and emerging leadership through their own narratives.

6. Inclusion, Moral Responsibility, and Rights-Based Learning

A growing body of literature emphasises the role of peer-based approaches in fostering inclusion, empathy, and moral development. When children engage in helping roles, they develop greater awareness of individual differences, patience, and responsibility toward others (Killen & Smetana, 2015; Wentzel, 2015). CtC approaches are particularly well positioned to support inclusive practices by normalising peer support and shared responsibility for learning and wellbeing (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Additionally, CtC aligns with rights-based education by recognising children as contributors to their own and others' learning. Learning about children's rights, participation, and protection within CtC frameworks supports early civic awareness and ethical understanding. This is especially relevant in contexts where community cohesion, mutual care, and collective responsibility are culturally significant.

7. Research Gaps and the Need for Contextualised Evidence

Despite this theoretical foundation, several gaps remain. First, historical CtC literature has been shaped strongly by health, sanitation, nutrition, and community-development interventions, often in primary school contexts. Second, education-focused CtC studies frequently emphasise programme outcomes or younger children's participation, while the perspectives of older child facilitators remain less visible. Third, research on peer learning and youth leadership rarely examines how young facilitators make sense of relational, pedagogical, and identity-related changes over an extended intervention in preschool classrooms. These gaps are important because they limit understanding of CtC as a developmental experience for the facilitators themselves.

The Maldivian context adds a further gap and contribution. The Maldives is characterised by dispersed island communities, close school-family relationships, strong communal ties, and culturally familiar forms of play, storytelling, care, and intergenerational support. These conditions make the CtC approach contextually meaningful, yet there is limited published qualitative research examining how CtC is enacted in Maldivian preschool classrooms. A Maldivian study can therefore contribute to international CtC scholarship by showing how peer-mediated pedagogy operates in a small-island education system where relational proximity, community belonging, and local cultural practices shape classroom interaction.

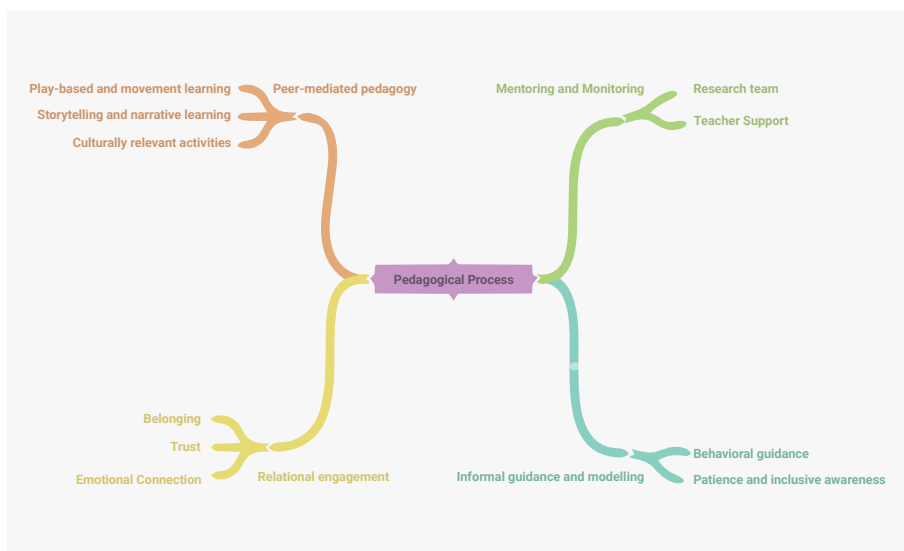
The present study addresses these gaps by foregrounding the voices of four Grade 5 young facilitators selected from the wider SIPCA cohort because their reflective journals, interviews, and conversations offered especially detailed accounts of development over time. Rather than treating CtC only as an intervention for preschool children, the study examines how the facilitator role was experienced by older children themselves. In doing so, it contributes context-sensitive evidence on young facilitators' agency, confidence, responsibility, relational awareness, and pedagogical meaning-making in Maldivian preschools.

In summary, the literature positions CtC as a participatory and relational approach that aligns with sociocultural learning, play-based pedagogy, youth agency, inclusion, and rights-based education. However, it also shows that greater qualitative attention is needed to the lived experiences of young facilitators, especially in preschool and culturally specific contexts. By locating CtC within Maldivian island schools, this study extends the literature beyond general programme evaluation and contributes a locally grounded account of how children’s facilitative roles are narrated, supported, and understood within everyday early childhood practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study was developed as a sensitising and interpretive framework rather than as a model to be tested or validated by the four cases. Figure 1 positions the CtC approach as a relational, peer-mediated pedagogical system operating within preschool classrooms, supported by older children and guided by adult mentors. The framework draws on sociocultural learning theory, ecological models of development, and relational pedagogy to identify key processes that may shape CtC practice: peer-mediated pedagogy, relational engagement, informal guidance and modelling, and mentoring and monitoring. At the centre of the framework is the Pedagogical Process, understood not as a linear sequence of instruction, but as a dynamic interactional system shaped by peer relationships, children’s meaning-making, adult scaffolding, and local school culture. In this study, the framework guided attention to relevant dimensions of practice while allowing themes to emerge inductively from young facilitators’ accounts. Therefore, the findings are used to illustrate, refine, and discuss the relevance of the framework in this context, rather than to claim that the framework has been empirically validated.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Peer-mediated pedagogy: This dimension refers to the ways older children support younger children through play-based activities, storytelling, movement, and culturally familiar learning experiences. It is informed by sociocultural learning theory, which emphasises that learning is mediated through interaction with others and through shared cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2016). In the CtC approach, young facilitators may act as accessible peer supporters who help organise participation and make activities approachable for preschool children. In this paper, this dimension is used to interpret how YFs described planning and leading activities, rather than to make direct claims about measured preschool learning outcomes.

Relational engagement: This dimension refers to the emotional and social qualities that YFs perceived in their interactions with preschool children, including recognition, approachability, trust, and belonging. It draws on relational pedagogy and ecological perspectives that view development as shaped by sustained and meaningful interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Pianta et al., 2008). In this study, relational engagement is treated as an interpretive category for analysing YFs' accounts of interaction, not as independently measured evidence of preschool children's emotional safety, anxiety reduction, or learning outcomes.

Informal guidance and modelling: This dimension captures the ways YFs described modelling behaviour, encouraging participation, showing patience, and responding to children's different needs during CtC activities. It is informed by social learning and moral development literature, which suggests that children can learn social norms and prosocial behaviours through observation, interaction, and guided practice (Bandura, 1986; Killen & Smetana, 2015). Within this study, the dimension helps interpret the YFs' emerging awareness of responsibility, inclusion, and care.

Mentoring and monitoring: This dimension situates CtC within a guided participation model in which adult teachers and researchers provide orientation, coordination, supervision, and feedback. Participation literature emphasises that meaningful child participation requires adult scaffolding rather than adult withdrawal (Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001). In the present study, this dimension helps explain how YFs' opportunities for agency were structured and supported through weekly coordination meetings, teacher mentoring, guidebooks, and classroom supervision.

Collectively, the framework offers a way to organise and interpret the relational, pedagogical, and developmental processes associated with CtC practice. It does not assume that all four dimensions operate in the same way across all contexts, nor does it claim causal relationships between the framework and outcomes for children or facilitators. Instead, it provides a conceptual lens for examining how peer-mediated activity, relational interaction,

informal modelling, and adult mentoring were described by the young facilitators in this particular Maldivian preschool context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and research questions: This study adopted a qualitative narrative case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. The design was appropriate because the study sought to understand how young facilitators interpreted, narrated, and made meaning of their CtC experiences rather than to measure predetermined outcomes. The narrative case study approach enabled the researchers to foreground participants' voices through vignette-based accounts while also examining cross-case themes related to relational pedagogy, agency, confidence, and leadership development.

1. How do Grade 5 young facilitators experience and make sense of their facilitator role within a Child-to-Child approach in Maldivian preschool classrooms?
2. How does participation as a young facilitator shape students' confidence, self-efficacy, agency, communication, and sense of responsibility?
3. How do young facilitators describe the relational and pedagogical processes that support preschool children's engagement in CtC activities?

The project: This paper draws on qualitative findings generated from a multi-site research project titled Scaling Impact of a Play-Based Child-to-Child Approach (SIPCA). The SIPCA project was implemented across 10 schools located in four regions of the Maldives, with schools purposively selected to reflect geographic and contextual diversity. Within each school, approximately six young facilitators (YFs) were engaged, with variation based on classroom size and schools. In several schools, preschool classrooms were organised into multiple small groups, resulting in more than five YFs working concurrently, each supporting a small group of four to five preschool children. Within the SIPCA project, YFs were selected from Grade 5 cohorts, with participants typically approximately 12 years of age. These older children were purposively selected in collaboration with school leadership and teachers. The selection of Grade 5 students was intentional, as this age group represents a developmental stage where children are sufficiently mature to model behaviour, communicate ideas clearly, and assume guided responsibility, while still remaining close enough in age to preschool children for peer relationships to feel accessible and non-hierarchical.

The selection of participants: Out of approximately 88 YFs who participated in the SIPCA project, this paper focuses on four YFs whose narratives were selected through purposive, information-rich case sampling. The broader pool of YFs was initially identified in collaboration with school leadership and teachers, using screening information and teacher observations that highlighted students who displayed low self-esteem, limited leadership

confidence, or hesitancy in taking public responsibility at the beginning of the project. This was intentional because one aim of the wider project was to understand how assuming the young facilitator role might support such students to develop confidence, voice, communication, responsibility, and a more positive sense of self through guided interaction with younger children. The decision to focus on four participants was made after reviewing the available qualitative materials from the wider group. These four YFs had the most complete reflective journals, participated in especially rich reflective conversations, and provided detailed interview accounts that traced their development across the intervention. Their shared journeys also resonated most closely with the central argument of this paper: that the CtC approach may support initially hesitant students to become more confident, relationally aware, and responsible young facilitators. Therefore, the four cases were not selected as statistically representative of all 88 YFs, but as the most information-rich cases for illustrating the processes of change, meaning-making, and relational pedagogy explored in this study. Their rich experiences do not contradict the baseline screening criteria; rather, they show how students who initially appeared hesitant or low in confidence were able to articulate meaningful relational, pedagogical, and personal development after sustained participation in the CtC process. The participants' original names are replaced with pseudonyms in the findings.

The CtC pedagogical process: Grade 5 students were formally positioned as YFs and attached to preschool classrooms for the duration of the intervention. At the beginning of the programme, YFs received orientation on how to interact with young children in ways that supported children's safety and wellbeing. Each week, they participated in coordination meetings with teachers and contributed to the design of learning activities for preschool children. During implementation, each YF worked with a small group of four to five preschool children alongside a trained preschool teacher who guided and supervised the classroom process. This cross-age arrangement operationalised the CtC approach by enabling older children to support learning through play, storytelling, and informal guidance while remaining under continuous adult supervision. The age proximity between facilitators and preschool children was a key design feature of the programme, supporting relational trust, approachability, and authentic peer-mediated learning.

At the outset of the project, all YFs participated in structured training and comprehensive orientation on the principles and practices of the CtC approach. They also received a guidebook to support lesson preparation, record keeping, and implementation. This initial preparation was followed by weekly coordination and preparation meetings, where YFs worked closely with preschool teachers to plan activities, reflect on classroom experiences, and prepare materials. Over a period of 25 weeks, corresponding to the 2025 school academic year, each YF was consistently attached to a specific preschool classroom.

Within these classrooms, YFs typically supported small groups of four to five preschool children, working alongside the classroom teacher to ensure continuity of relationships and pedagogical practice.

Preschool teachers were trained to mentor YFs, facilitate weekly coordination meetings, and provide ongoing classroom guidance. In addition, monitoring and structured classroom observations were conducted by a research team comprising four researchers, who closely supported implementation throughout the 25-week period. To promote consistency across sites, a student–teacher guidebook and a Young Facilitator guidebook were developed and used to operationalise the CtC approach, clarifying roles, pedagogical principles, and activity structures.

Data sources and data collection: Data were generated from three complementary qualitative sources: two rounds of semi-structured interviews, reflective conversations, and young facilitators' reflective journals. The first round of semi-structured interviews was conducted during the early phase of the intervention to explore participants' initial expectations, confidence, understanding of the facilitator role, and early experiences of working with preschool children. The second round was conducted toward the later phase of the 25-week intervention to capture changes in participants' self-perception, confidence, leadership, communication, relationships with preschool children, and reflections on what they had gained through the CtC experience. The two interview rounds enabled the research team to examine development over time rather than relying on a single retrospective account.

Reflective conversations were conducted informally during weekly coordination meetings, classroom visits, and monitoring interactions with teachers and researchers. These conversations allowed YFs to discuss recent activities, challenges, children's responses, moments of success, and areas where they needed guidance. Unlike the formal interviews, the reflective conversations were ongoing and situated close to the actual implementation process, providing insight into how YFs made sense of their role while the programme was unfolding. They also helped clarify meanings emerging from interview responses and supported a more nuanced understanding of the relational and pedagogical processes within the CtC approach.

Reflective journals formed the third data source. Each YF used the Young Facilitator guidebook to record reflections on weekly lesson preparation, activities implemented, preschool children's engagement, personal feelings, difficulties encountered, and lessons learned. These journals provided written accounts of participants' evolving experiences across the intervention and helped document development in confidence, responsibility, patience, and pedagogical awareness. Together, the interview data, reflective conversations,

and journal entries were used to construct narrative vignettes and to identify cross-case themes through thematic analysis. The use of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing participants' spoken reflections, ongoing conversations, and written records to be considered together.

Interview language, transcription, and translation: The interviews and reflective conversations were conducted primarily in Dhivehi, the participants' first language, to allow the young facilitators to express their experiences comfortably and in age-appropriate ways. Field notes and journal materials were also reviewed in the language in which they were produced. Audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim in Dhivehi, including pauses, repeated phrases, and child-like expressions where these were relevant to meaning. For the purposes of analysis and presentation in this English-language paper, selected extracts were translated into English by the research team. Translation was treated as an interpretive process rather than a purely technical task; therefore, translated extracts were checked against the original Dhivehi transcripts to preserve participants' intended meanings, tone, and culturally situated expressions as closely as possible. Where direct translation risked losing meaning, the research team prioritised semantic accuracy and clarity while retaining the participants' voice. The final English quotations used in the findings are therefore translated verbatim as closely as possible, with minor grammatical adjustments only where needed for readability.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted using a primarily inductive approach, as the main research focus was to understand how young facilitators made sense of their experiences rather than to test predetermined theoretical categories. Although the conceptual framework sensitised the researchers to broad areas such as relational pedagogy, peer facilitation, agency, and adult mentoring, the initial codes and themes were generated from the participants' interview transcripts, reflective conversations, and journal entries. This inductive orientation was appropriate because the study sought to preserve the meanings, priorities, and developmental journeys expressed by the YFs themselves.

The analysis followed several stages. First, the research team read and re-read all qualitative materials to become familiar with each participant's account. Second, meaningful segments of data were coded manually, with attention to repeated ideas, emotionally significant moments, role-related reflections, and descriptions of interaction with preschool children and teachers. Third, similar codes were grouped into provisional themes within each participant's narrative. Fourth, these provisional themes were compared across the four cases to identify shared patterns and points of difference. This cross-case comparison informed the construction of the narrative vignettes and the synthesis of themes related to confidence, responsibility, relational connection, play-based facilitation, and adult guidance.

Use of Gemini AI in analytic refinement: Gemini AI was used only as a supplementary analytic support tool after the researchers had completed initial familiarisation, manual coding, and provisional theme development. The version used was the publicly available Gemini model accessible to the research team at the time of analysis; because model interfaces and version names change over time, the exact access date and model label should be recorded in the project audit trail. Gemini was not used to generate original codes independently, determine final themes, interpret participant meanings on behalf of the researchers, or make methodological decisions. Its role was limited to supporting analytic refinement, such as checking whether provisional theme labels were coherent, identifying possible overlap between themes, suggesting clearer wording for theme names, and helping the researchers examine whether selected extracts were appropriately aligned with the emerging thematic structure.

To protect participant privacy, identifiable information was removed before any text was entered into Gemini. Participants' real names, school names, island names, teacher names, and other contextual details that could identify individuals or sites were replaced with pseudonyms or broad descriptors. Only short, de-identified excerpts and researcher-generated summaries of codes or provisional themes were used; full transcripts, complete journals, audio recordings, consent forms, and raw identifiable datasets were not uploaded. Prompts were designed to ask Gemini to comment on analytic clarity rather than to produce findings. Examples of prompt purposes included: "Check whether these provisional themes overlap conceptually," "Suggest clearer wording for these theme labels without changing their meaning," and "Identify whether this de-identified extract appears to fit the stated theme."

All AI-supported outputs were treated as prompts for researcher reflection rather than as evidence. The research team reviewed every Gemini suggestion against the original Dhivehi transcripts, translated extracts, reflective conversations, and journal entries. Suggestions that were not supported by the data were rejected, and wording changes were accepted only when they improved clarity without altering participant meaning. Final decisions about coding, theme development, vignette construction, interpretation, and reporting remained fully researcher led. The use of Gemini was therefore positioned within a reflexive qualitative workflow: it supported consistency checking and clarity, but the credibility of the analysis depended on human interpretation, repeated comparison with the source data, and transparent documentation of how AI assistance was used.

Construction of narrative vignettes: The narrative vignettes were created after the inductive thematic analysis as a way of presenting each participant's experience in a coherent, case-based form. For each YF, the researchers brought together data from the two interview rounds, reflective conversations, and reflective journal entries. These

materials were reviewed chronologically and thematically to identify key moments in each participant's journey, including initial expectations, experiences of working with preschool children, challenges, reflections on confidence and responsibility, and perceived changes over time. The vignettes were therefore not written as fictionalised accounts; rather, they were constructed from participants' own data to preserve the sequence, meaning, and texture of their experiences while making the findings readable and analytically coherent.

Verbatim quotations were selected when they directly illustrated a theme or captured a participant's own wording about an important experience. These quotations are presented in quotation marks and formatted as separate indented extracts in the findings section. Researcher interpretation appears outside the quotation marks and is used only to introduce, connect, or interpret the participant's words in relation to the research questions and emerging themes. This distinction was maintained throughout the findings so that readers can identify which statements come directly from participants and which statements represent researcher-led analytic interpretation. Where brief connective text was added to improve narrative flow, it was based on the surrounding interview, conversation, or journal data and was reviewed against the original source material to avoid adding meanings not supported by the data.

Qualitative trustworthiness: Trustworthiness was strengthened through attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through multiple qualitative data sources, repeated engagement with the data, cross-case comparison, and verbatim quotations. Dependability was addressed through a clear analytic process comprising familiarisation, manual coding, provisional theme development, cross-case comparison, vignette construction, and documented AI-assisted refinement. This analytic sequence created a transparent decision trail that could be reviewed in relation to the original data. Confirmability was supported by checking interpretations against the original Dhivehi transcripts, translated extracts, reflective conversations, and journals, and by treating Gemini outputs only as prompts for researcher reflection rather than as evidence. Transferability was supported through contextual detail about the Maldivian island school setting, the SIPCA project, the CtC pedagogical process, participant selection, and vignette construction. Together, these procedures strengthened methodological transparency while recognising that the findings offer depth and contextual insight rather than statistical generalisation.

Ethical considerations: Ethical considerations were closely maintained in accordance with the requirements of the relevant ethical bodies, including approval from the Ministry of Education, Maldives, and the Islamic University of Maldives. Parental consent and student assent were obtained before participation, and participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary. Pseudonyms were used in the findings, and identifying details

such as school names, island names, teacher names, and other contextual markers were removed or generalised to protect participants and sites.

FINDINGS

The findings for this paper are presented as vignettes representing narrative accounts of four young facilitators (YFs), two males and two females, who were closely involved in the CtC approach implemented in preschool classrooms in the Maldives. These four cases were selected from the wider SIPCA cohort because they generated the most complete reflective journals, engaged in particularly rich reflective conversations, and offered detailed interview accounts of their development over time. Their shared journeys closely aligned with the paper's central focus on how initially hesitant or less confident students can gain agency, relational awareness, and leadership through the young facilitator role. Each vignette was constructed by combining evidence from interviews, reflective conversations, and journal entries, then organising it around the main themes emerging from that participant's account. Verbatim participant quotations are shown in quotation marks and set apart from the surrounding text, while the sentences before and after each quotation represent researcher interpretation used to explain the relevance of the extract to the study's themes. The vignettes are written to preserve each participant's voice while situating their experiences within a coherent analytical narrative.

Vignette 1: YF Raahim (Male)

Raahim's experience illustrates how CtC is grounded in relationships that extend beyond formal classroom boundaries. His account reflects a strong sense of emotional connection and recognition among the young children he taught in the preschool classrooms, suggesting that trust and familiarity were established early in his engagement. He said:

"Whenever the children see me, even outside the school environment, they get excited and call out my name, 'Rai Sir.' That reaction makes me feel that they are genuinely happy to see me and comfortable around me. It shows that they recognise me not just as someone who comes to teach, but as someone they trust and enjoy being with."

Within classroom interactions, Raahim demonstrates emerging pedagogical awareness by interpreting children's behaviours as indicators of learning and engagement.

"I can tell that the children are really listening during the activities because they follow the instructions carefully. After the lesson, they also ask questions about what we did, which shows that they were thinking about the activity and trying to understand it, not just copying others."

His role was embedded within a collaborative structure supported by teachers, where shared planning and decision-making enabled youth agency.

“During the coordination meetings, I found it easy to understand what the teachers expected from me. For one activity in particular, we discussed different ideas together and decided as a group—teachers, students, and myself—what activity to do, how to do it, and how to organise everything for the day.”

Raahim recounts a memorable play-based numeracy activity that exemplifies experiential learning in the CtC approach.

“One activity I remember clearly was an addition lesson. The teachers gave us markers, and we wrote numbers. We used a spinning wheel, and whenever it stopped on a number, the children had to jump onto the matching number on the floor tiles. The children were very excited and enjoyed learning through movement.”

Leading learning activities independently contributed to his sense of confidence and self-efficacy.

“When I was leading the session on my own, I felt a strong sense of self-accomplishment. I realised that I was not just helping the children but also developing myself. Through this experience, I gained confidence and learned important life skills and soft skills that I did not have before.”

His narrative also reflects an internalised sense of responsibility for children’s wellbeing, extending beyond instructional roles.

“If I saw the children being bullied, I would immediately step in to stop it. I would ask what happened and try to solve the problem between them. I feel responsible for their safety and wellbeing, even outside the classroom.”

Raahim identifies patience and inclusivity as critical competencies developed through working with diverse learners.

“Patience is very important because sometimes children do not listen the first time. There are also children with special needs who need more time and individual attention. Without patience, it would be difficult to help every child properly.”

Behind classroom interactions, Raahim describes the importance of preparation and accountability.

“Being hardworking is important because after the coordination meetings, we still have a lot to do. We often need to prepare materials at home and make sure everything is ready for the next lesson. This taught me to be responsible and committed to what I agreed to do.”

His continued engagement is driven by enjoyment, belonging, and supportive relationships.

“I want to continue next year because the programme is enjoyable. I like spending time with the children and working together with my friends. The coordinators and teachers are also very kind and supportive, which makes me want to stay involved.”

Vignette 2: YF Maahil (Male)

Maahil's account emphasises attentiveness, behavioural guidance, and culturally grounded engagement within CtC practice. He characterises children's listening and behaviour as central indicators of effective interaction.

"The children really listen to what I say... they are very well-behaved and well-mannered children."

Learning was not confined to formal classroom settings but extended into culturally familiar forms of play.

"We went outside and played 'Dak-Dak Go'."

Maahil also positions himself as a guide for children's behaviour through everyday interaction.

"Yes," (in response to whether he tells children how to behave properly).

"Many times, I remember correcting their behaviour in class. I tell them not to do that and to keep focusing on learning or on the task. They always listen to me."

Affective closeness and children's presence were central to his motivation.

"It's because those children are very loving. They are always around me whenever I go to the class, and they are very attached to me. Even when their teachers are around, they talk to me more."

Programme closure and recognition provided symbolic affirmation of his role and contribution.

"I took photos with the children. I felt very proud too. Yes, I received the completion certificate."

"I had fun at the closing event. I want to have this next year too."

His willingness to continue reflects positive engagement and intrinsic motivation.

"Yes, I want to."

Vignette 3: YF Insha (Female)

Insha's narrative highlights confidence development, emotional fulfilment, and storytelling as a key pedagogical practice within CtC.

"It was very good actually. I gained more confidence."

She identifies storytelling as a meaningful way of engaging preschool children.

"I really like... telling stories to them... The Bee story."

Her relationship with children continued beyond structured sessions, marked by joy and play.

"I feel so happy to see them again and again. Their parents also know me, and whenever the children see me, they call me and come to me."

"Yeah, they always play with me. We had a good time over the last couple of weeks."

Insha also acknowledges her role in guiding children's behaviour and learning.

"Yes, I always tell them to listen carefully and handle the pencil properly, and they actually listen to me. I like it very much."

She expresses a clear intention to continue participating in the programme.

"Yes," (in response to continuing next year).

Vignette 4: YF Ain (Female)

Ain's vignette provides insight into student-level impact of the CtC approach, highlighting emotional validation, learning transfer, and emerging leadership identity. She describes her participation as a unique and affirming opportunity.

"I felt very special... like I was given a unique opportunity that no one else had."

"I feel grateful and happy—very happy."

Her strongest source of joy came from children's emotional responses.

"What makes me happiest is whenever I go to the class and see the smiles on those little children's faces as I arrive."

A storytelling session outside the classroom remains a vivid memory, illustrating context-sensitive engagement.

"That was the day we read our first story... We were out of the classroom, and I read the story to them."

"They were incredibly well-behaved and listened very carefully."

"Usually, when we teach in the classroom, they don't pay as much attention... but they really enjoyed hearing stories outside the class."

Ain also reports learning related to rights awareness and interpersonal understanding.

"I learned that children have many rights."

"I learned how to interact and play with children, and how to understand them."

Through participation, she began to imagine herself in a teaching role.

"I got a sense of what it feels like to be a teacher."

“I would love to be a teacher.”

She further describes transfer of confidence and leadership into her own classroom context.

“I participate more in class now. It’s also easier to take on leadership roles.”

“They ask me for help... Yes, I help them.”

Looking ahead, Ain expresses strong motivation and advocacy for continued participation.

“I want to continue... keep going and never stop, because it is a truly great opportunity.”

Across the vignettes, several dominant and interrelated themes illustrate how the YFs experienced the CtC approach in preschool classrooms in the Maldives. Most prominent is the strength of emotional connection and relational trust as described by the young facilitators, evidenced in their accounts of children recognising them, approaching them, and responding positively during activities. These accounts suggest that relational closeness was an important part of the facilitation process. However, preschool children’s emotional safety, anxiety, engagement, and learning were not independently measured in this study.

A second dominant theme is the YFs’ use of developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices, particularly play-based learning, storytelling, movement, and culturally familiar games. Participants interpreted preschool children’s listening, questioning, excitement, and willingness to join activities as signs of participation and interest. These observations are reported as YF perceptions rather than direct evidence of measured learning gains or engagement outcomes. The CtC approach also fostered youth leadership, confidence, and self-efficacy, as young facilitators experienced a strong sense of accomplishment, responsibility, and emerging teacher identity.

Importantly, CtC cultivated prosocial values among the YFs, including patience, inclusivity, moral guidance, and child protection awareness, demonstrating its relevance to young facilitators’ holistic development rather than academic outcomes alone. The findings further highlight shared responsibility and collaboration with teachers, showing that CtC was experienced by YFs as most meaningful when youth participation was guided, supported, and structurally integrated. Finally, strong motivation to continue and a sense of belonging across participants indicate sustainability potential from the facilitators’ perspectives. Collectively, these themes suggest that the Child-to-Child approach is well suited to further exploration in Maldivian preschool contexts, particularly as a model for developing young facilitators’ agency, confidence, responsibility, and relational awareness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how young facilitators experienced the CtC approach as a relational and developmental pedagogy. By centring the voices of young facilitators like Raahim and Maahil, the research moves beyond traditional

outcome-based metrics to examine the social, emotional, and pedagogical meanings that YFs attached to peer-mediated facilitation in the Maldives. The discussion therefore focuses primarily on YF development and perceptions, rather than making direct claims about preschool children's measured learning or emotional outcomes.

1. Relational Pedagogy and the Lowered Power Differential

A primary theme across the facilitators' narratives was the depth of emotional connection and trust they perceived within the CtC framework. As seen in Raahim's experience of being greeted as "Rai Sir" outside formal school boundaries, the CtC approach appeared, from his perspective, to extend beyond rigid instructional structures. This interpretation aligns with relational pedagogy, which emphasises that the quality of interpersonal relationships is foundational to early childhood learning (Pianta et al., 2008). In this study, however, children's emotional safety, anxiety, and learning outcomes were not directly assessed. Therefore, references to trust, comfort, or participation are treated as young facilitators' interpretations of their interactions with preschool children, supported by illustrative accounts from the vignettes.

The age proximity between the child-facilitator and the preschool child may have contributed to a lower perceived power differential in classroom interactions. The YFs interpreted children's willingness to approach them, listen to them, and participate in activities as signs of relational accessibility. Rather than claiming that the programme directly reduced anxiety or created emotionally safe learning environments, this study presents such observations as facilitator-reported perceptions that require further investigation through direct data from preschool children, teachers, or independent classroom measures.

2. Pedagogical Agency through Play, Interactive and the Culturally Sustained ZPD

The empirical findings are consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, particularly the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within this framework, the Young Facilitators (YFs) can be understood as accessible "More Knowledgeable Others". However, unlike traditional adult educators, their instructional methods were largely play-based and narrative-driven. Literature widely recognises play as central to early childhood education, noting that it allows children to explore concepts, negotiate meanings, and develop social and motor skills in intrinsically motivating ways (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In this study, the YFs used movement-based activities and traditional games as accessible entry points for peer-led participation.

This localisation of learning is vividly demonstrated in Maahil's deployment of the traditional game "Dak-Dak" and Raahim's movement-based numeracy activities. By embedding abstract curriculum goals, such as basic literacy and addition, into culturally familiar, play-based structures, the facilitators rendered complex concepts tangible and digestible for the preschoolers. Because peer facilitators inhabit the exact same social world,

neighbourhood dynamics, and play-language as their younger peers, they are uniquely positioned to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Furthermore, the facilitators leveraged narrative and storytelling to extend the pedagogical reach of the CtC approach. As highlighted by Nicolopoulou (2010), interactive and informal storytelling supports rapid language development, imagination, and sustained attention in early childhood. When older children share narratives or contextualise games for younger peers, the act becomes simultaneously instructional and deeply relational.

This dual dynamic may have supported listening, shared meaning-making, and relational connection, as interpreted by the YFs in their accounts. However, because the study did not directly measure preschool children's cognitive engagement, comprehension, or learning gains, these claims are framed cautiously as perceived classroom processes rather than demonstrated preschool outcomes. Future research could extend this study by collecting direct observational data, teacher assessments, or preschool children's perspectives.

3. Identity Transformation and Leadership Development

One important finding of this study concerns the way the facilitators described changes in their own self-concepts. This is particularly relevant because the project was not only designed to benefit preschool children, but also to explore whether students who initially appeared less confident or low in self-esteem could develop a stronger sense of competence through the young facilitator role. The transition from "student" to "facilitator" was described by participants as a meaningful shift in self-perception, suggesting that participation in CtC programmes may contribute to positive youth development. This experiential learning is relevant during middle childhood and early adolescence, a developmental window where self-concept and social identity are actively forming (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Rather than engaging in symbolic or nominal involvement, the YFs assumed meaningful responsibility. As Larson (2000) suggests, developmental growth, competence, and ownership are more likely when youth are trusted with authentic roles. The "self-accomplishment" reported by the YFs indicates that meaningful responsibility, scaffolded by structured adult guidance, may support self-efficacy. This dynamic is broadly consistent with Mitra's (2018) work on youth-adult partnerships. Mitra's framework supports the interpretation that the adult teacher's role may shift from a top-down "director" to a supportive "mentor" while retaining necessary structural oversight.

Furthermore, this identity shift was associated with an emerging sense of moral responsibility and civic awareness. The YFs did not merely see themselves as operational "teachers"; rather, they began to describe themselves as protectors against bullying and advocates for inclusive practice. This finding is consistent with literature suggesting that peer-based approaches can support inclusion, empathy, and moral development (Killen & Smetana, 2015). For instance, Raahim's reflection on the need for "patience" when

supporting children with special needs illustrates how placing youth in helping roles may deepen their awareness of individual differences and encourage an ethics of care.

By recognising children as active contributors to their own and others' learning, the CtC approach reflects elements of a rights-based education framework, including civic awareness and peer support in contexts where community cohesion is culturally important. The findings also highlight that while the CtC approach is child-centred, it is not a "hands-off" or unsupervised model. The identity shifts and agency described by the YFs appeared to be supported by structured adult guidance, including regular coordination meetings and student-teacher guidebooks. This collaborative planning suggests a pedagogical shift in which the adult teacher's role moves from a top-down "director" toward a supportive "mentor." This relationship between adult scaffolding and youth agency may help keep activities within preschoolers' developmental boundaries while giving YFs opportunities to practise leadership.

Link with the conceptual framework and empirical findings

The empirical findings can be read in relation to the four areas of the Pedagogical Process conceptual framework (Figure 1), but they should not be understood as validating the framework. Rather, the four narrative cases illustrate how selected dimensions of the framework were visible in the YFs' accounts. Peer-mediated pedagogy is reflected in the facilitators' descriptions of play-based and narrative activities, including culturally familiar games such as "Dak-Dak". Relational engagement is suggested in their accounts of recognition, approachability, emotional connection, and belonging, although these remain facilitator perceptions rather than direct measures of preschool children's experiences. Informal guidance and modelling are evident in the YFs' reflections on patience, behavioural guidance, and inclusive awareness. Mentoring and monitoring are visible in the role of teachers, coordination meetings, guidebooks, and adult supervision. Taken together, the findings help refine the framework by showing how its dimensions may interact in practice within this specific Maldivian context, while also indicating areas that require further investigation through broader samples and direct data from preschool children and teachers.

Implications for the broader school environment

Traditionally, school leadership roles (like prefects) are often administrative or disciplinary. The paper suggests a shift toward pedagogical leadership.

- Students in mid-to-upper primary (Grade 5 and above) can move beyond being passive learners to becoming "knowledge co-creators."

When students are trusted with the learning of others, they may develop a stronger sense of school belonging and self-efficacy, with possible benefits for behaviour and peer relationships.

The paper highlights how relationships formed in the CtC programme extend beyond the classroom (e.g., the "Rai Sir" example).

- Implementing CtC school-wide breaks down the "silo" effect where different age groups never interact. This creates a safer, more familial school environment.

As noted in the vignettes, young facilitators may develop a protective instinct toward younger students. This natural mentorship could complement adult-led safeguarding and contribute to a more caring school environment.

The facilitators' reflections on patience and inclusive awareness suggest that CtC is a practical tool for moral education.

- Instead of learning about empathy in a textbook, students practice it by adapting their communication to peers with different needs.

A whole-school CtC approach normalises the idea that everyone learns differently, fostering a culture where helping and being helped become standard social norms rather than exceptions.

A school-wide adoption requires teachers to shift their professional identity.

- Teachers must learn to scaffold student agency rather than controlling every interaction. This creates a "ladder of participation" where teachers mentor older students, who then support younger ones.
- The weekly coordination meetings mentioned in the paper imply a need for schools to bake "collaboration time" into the master schedule, allowing for student-teacher planning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the paper draws on four purposively selected narrative cases from a wider group of approximately 88 young facilitators. These four participants were selected because they provided the most complete reflective journals, rich reflective conversations, and detailed interview accounts; therefore, the findings are intended to offer depth and insight rather than statistical generalisation. Second, the study relies primarily on young facilitators' self-reported experiences, supported by journals and reflective conversations. Although these sources provide valuable access to participants' meaning making, they may also reflect selective memory, social desirability, or a tendency to emphasise positive experiences within a programme they valued. Third, the study does not directly measure preschool children's learning, anxiety, engagement, or emotional safety. Any references to preschool children's responses are therefore interpreted as YF perceptions or observational accounts rather than independently verified outcomes. Fourth, because the study is situated in Maldivian island school contexts, the findings may not transfer directly to larger, urban,

or culturally different education systems without adaptation. Fifth, Gemini AI was used only for de-identified analytic refinement after manual coding and provisional theme development; however, AI-supported checking cannot replace researcher judgement and may reflect limitations of the model, prompt wording, or the data excerpts provided. For this reason, all Gemini suggestions were reviewed against the original data and final analytic decisions remained researcher led. Finally, the study did not include long-term follow-up, so it cannot determine whether the reported gains in confidence, leadership, responsibility, and agency were sustained beyond the intervention period. Future research could address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample of YFs, collecting direct data from preschool children and teachers, using classroom observations or assessment measures, and following participants over time to examine the durability of developmental gains.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the CtC approach is more than a simple classroom exercise. It is a relational pedagogical strategy that connects formal schooling with the communal values of Maldivian society. By positioning Grade 5 students as young facilitators, the programme shifted the focus from adult-led instruction toward guided peer-mediated participation. The evidence in this study most strongly supports claims about the young facilitators' own development: they described growth in confidence, leadership, responsibility, patience, and relational awareness. While the YFs perceived preschool children as responsive and engaged during activities, the study does not make direct claims about preschool children's learning, anxiety, engagement, or emotional safety because these were not directly measured.

The overall implications of this research suggest that student agency should be considered within school-wide policy and practice. For the young facilitators, the role appeared to support identity development, leadership, empathy, and a sense of moral responsibility that traditional curricula may not always foreground. For schools, the model offers a possible approach for strengthening cross-age relationships and guided participation, although its effects on younger children should be examined through direct evidence in future studies. Future educational policy, particularly in community-oriented contexts like the Maldives, could consider integrating cross-age peer facilitation as a formal curriculum component while ensuring appropriate teacher mentoring, safeguarding, and evaluation mechanisms.

Peer-mediated learning, storytelling, play-based activities, and informal guidance are key features of CtC and are well aligned with developmentally appropriate practice in the early years. Importantly, CtC does not remove the role of teachers; rather, it reconfigures it. Adults become facilitators and mentors who scaffold children's participation, ensuring that peer-led learning remains inclusive, ethical, and developmentally appropriate.

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