


# Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Electronic Media Effects on Cognitive Development: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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**Abstract**
This study explores how preschool teachers in Sri Lanka perceive the influence of electronic media on young children's cognitive development. Drawing on survey data from 327 preschool teachers in the Kalutara District, the research examines teachers' beliefs about media-related effects on attention, creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving, and learning motivation. The analysis reveals a divided professional perspective: while 47.7% of teachers believed electronic media enhances children's ability to initiate new tasks and 42.5% of credited 7tmedia with fostering creativity, only 27.3% associated media use with thinking skill development and merely 23.9% linked it to problem-solving growth. Notably, 30% of respondents adopted a neutral stance, signaling epistemic uncertainty rather than firm conviction. Kruskal-Wallis analyses demonstrated that teachers' age, educational qualifications, and preschool location significantly shaped their perceptions, whereas professional qualifications and years of experience exercised limited influence. The study argues that teachers' ambivalent perceptions reflect both the genuine complexity of media effects and gaps in professional knowledge. It concludes that structured media literacy training and national guidance are required to help preschool educators form evidence-based judgments and act as effective mediators of children's media experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

The cognitive landscape of early childhood has shifted profoundly with the saturation of digital technologies into everyday family life. Contemporary preschoolers in Sri Lanka encounter screens not as novelties but as ordinary fixtures of domestic space. National statistics indicate that over half the population accesses the internet and mobile connectivity exceeds 149% of the population, while roughly 3.8 million of 5.2 million households own a television (DataReportal, 2022; Dataxis, 2013) [7, 8]. Such figures suggest that few Sri Lankan children reach preschool without prior, and often substantial, exposure to screen-based media.

Cognitive development during the preschool years is a period of rapid transformation. Children between two and seven years occupy Piaget's pre-operational stage, during which symbolic thought, language, imagination, and the foundations of reasoning expand dramatically (Berk, 1989) [2]. Executive functions attention, working memory, and inhibitory control also emerge conspicuously between ages three and five (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020) [23]. Because these capacities underpin later academic learning, the question of whether electronic media enriches or erodes early cognition carries considerable consequence.

The empirical record, however, remains unsettled. Some studies report that well-designed educational content and interactive applications can strengthen vocabulary, problem-solving, and motivation to learn (Herodotou, 2017; Huber *et al*., 2018; Notten & Kraaykamp, 2009) [12, 13, 25]. Others associate greater screen exposure with attentional difficulties, diminished executive control, and lower cognitive test performance (Christakis *et al*., 2004; Keefe-Cooperman, 2016; Vedechkina & Borgonovi, 2021) [5, 16, 35]. These divergent findings point to the importance of content quality, adult mediation, and the displacement of alternative activities rather than screen time per se.

Within this contested terrain, preschool teachers occupy a strategic position. They observe children's learning behaviours daily and are frequently expected to advise parents on media matters. Their perceptions therefore shape both classroom practice and the guidance families receive. Yet in Sri Lanka, teachers' views on media and cognition have rarely been examined systematically. The few available local studies concentrate on parents (Manukulasooriya, 2019) [20] or on exposure patterns rather than professional beliefs (Rathnasiri *et al*., 2022) [30].

This study addresses that gap. Its guiding questions are:

1. How do Sri Lankan preschool teachers perceive the influence of electronic media on children's cognitive development?
2. To what extent do these perceptions differ across teachers' demographic and professional characteristics?
3. What do teachers' responses reveal about their readiness to mediate children's media use?

By answering these questions, the study contributes evidence to an under-researched setting and offers practical direction for teacher education and policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Anchorage

Two theoretical traditions frame this inquiry. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (1979) situates the child within overlapping environmental layers. Electronic media functions within the microsystem when children interact directly with devices, and within the mesosystem when teachers and parents negotiate rules and expectations around that use. Teachers, positioned at the intersection of home and preschool, act as mesosystemic agents whose beliefs determine whether media experiences are reinforced, moderated, or counterbalanced. The exosystem comprising media producers, advertisers, and platform designers supplies the content that enters the child's world, while the macrosystem encodes cultural assumptions about technology and childhood.

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) contributes to a complementary mechanism. Children acquire behaviours, emotional responses, and problem-solving strategies through observation and imitation. Media characters therefore function as potential models, and repeated exposure to particular cognitive styles whether patient inquiry or rapid, fragmented attention may shape children's own approaches to learning. Teachers' awareness of these modelling processes is a precondition for purposeful mediation.

### 2.2. Evidence on Media and Cognitive Development

The literature converges on the conclusion that content and context matter more than the mere quantity of screen time. Zimmerman and Christakis (2005) [36] found that educational programming was associated with better cognitive outcomes than entertainment content, a distinction subsequently reinforced by Vedeckhina and Borgonovi (2021) [35], who reported that quality programming without commercial interruption correlated with stronger attention and executive control.

Interactive media appear especially promising when design is purposeful. Huber *et al*. (2018) [13] demonstrated that preschoolers who played an educational app showed greater delay of gratification and improved working memory relative to those who watched a cartoon. Herodotou's (2017) [12] systematic review of nineteen studies documented gains in reading, mathematics, and problem-solving associated with well-designed applications. Dore *et al*. (2019) [9] similarly found that a narrative vocabulary game produced measurable word-learning gains.

Countervailing evidence is equally substantial. Christakis *et al*. (2004) [5] linked early television viewing to later attentional problems, and Hancox *et al*. (2005) [11] associated childhood viewing with poorer educational attainment in adulthood. Keefe-Cooperman (2016) [16] reported that preschoolers with heavier digital media use scored lower on visual-spatial and full-scale intelligence measures. Background television has been shown to disrupt toy play and parent-child interaction, thereby indirectly undermining cognitive stimulation (Schmidt *et al*., 2008; Kirkorian *et al*., 2009) [17, 31].

A reasonable synthesis is that media effects are conditional. Educational intent, adult co-viewing, and balanced use can yield cognitive benefits, whereas passive entertainment, solitary consumption, and displacement of play and conversation tend to produce costs. This conditional framing is central to interpreting teachers' perceptions, since their views may reflect genuine observation of both patterns.

### 2.3. Teachers as Perceivers and Mediators

Research on teacher cognition regarding media is thinner than the parental literature but consistent in its broad contours. Kara and Cagiltay (2017) [15], Ogegbo and Aina (2020) [26], and Utami and Palacios-Hidalgo (2020) [34] all report that preschool teachers generally regard technology as beneficial for learning and use computers, projectors, and televisions in instruction. Neumann *et al*. (2020) [24] found that teachers viewed tablets positively when used appropriately but worried about overuse at home.

Concerns also feature prominently. Monteiro *et al*. (2022) [22] reported that teachers believed screen exposure altered children's play habits, behaviour, and language. Sharkins *et al*. (2016) [32] found strong teacher agreement that violent media is harmful, alongside general acceptance of technology's educational value. These studies portray a profession holding two ideas simultaneously: media can teach, and media can harm. How teachers resolve that tension depends heavily on training, experience, and institutional context variables that merit closer examination.

### 2.4. The Sri Lankan Setting

Sri Lankan evidence remains sparse. Manukulasooriya (2019) [20] found that parents credited electronic media with educational value and observed children imitating positive behaviours from television. Rathnasiri *et al*. (2022) [30], studying 340 children in a suburban area, reported that 96% used electronic devices, 60% exceeded one hour of daily

screen time, and half had begun using devices by age two. Prathapan *et al*. (2016) [27] documented that 78% of televised food advertisements targeted children, raising concerns about commercial influence on young audiences.

Together these findings establish that Sri Lankan preschoolers are heavy media users in an environment with minimal regulatory oversight, yet the professionals who work with these children have scarcely been consulted. The present study responds to that omission.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Design and Setting

A cross-sectional survey design was employed, incorporating both closed-ended rating items and open-ended questions. The study was conducted in Kalutara District, selected for its demographic balance: it contains urban, semi-urban, and rural communities and reflects the broader distribution of preschool provision in Sri Lanka. According to the Statistical Handbook (2021) [33], the district hosts 1,045 preschools serving 27,041 children aged three to five, with a teaching workforce of 2,228.

### 3.2. Sample

Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) [18] table, 327 preschool teachers were randomly selected. The response rate was 87%. Respondents were predominantly rural (78.3%), reflecting national patterns of preschool distribution. Just under half (45.9%) worked in private institutions, 19.0% in government preschools, and the remainder in religious, NGO, or other settings. Over half (54.4%) were under thirty years of age. Nearly half (49.8%) held G.C.E. Advanced Level as their highest academic qualification, while 13.1% held degrees and 8.3% postgraduate qualifications. Professionally, 36.4% possessed a two-year early childhood diploma, and 34.9% had fewer than ten years of teaching experience.

### 3.3. Instrumentation

The questionnaire was developed through a four-stage process of construct specification, item generation, pilot testing, and purification (Churchill, 1979; Lewis *et al*., 2005) [6, 19]. Content validity was established by expert review; construct validity was assessed through inter-item correlation, with weakly correlated items removed. The cognitive development subscale comprised of six items addressing Media enhances ability to initiate new tasks (TC01), Media develops analytical skills (TC02), Media develops creativity (TC03),

Media develops thinking skills (TC04), Media develops problem-solving skills (TC05), and Media develops problem-solving skills (TC06). Internal consistency was strong (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.859$), exceeding the conventional 0.70 threshold (Field, 2013) [10]. The instrument was translated into Sinhala by a language specialist and administered via Google Forms.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS version 20 (IBM, 2019) [14]. Descriptive statistics summarised response distributions. Because the rating data were ordinal, Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine differences across demographic groups. Qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2012) [3], with NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018) [29] supporting coding and word-frequency visualisation.

### 3.5. Ethics

Participation was voluntary and informed. Anonymity and confidentiality were preserved, and data were used solely for research purposes (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009) [21].

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Descriptive Overview

**Table 1:** Teachers' Ratings on Cognitive Development Statements (n = 327)

| Indicator | No response | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TC01 | 7 (2.1) | 30 (9.2) | 37 (11.3) | 97 (29.7) | 117 (35.8) | 39 (11.9) | 327 (100) |
| TC02 | 7 (2.1) | 35 (10.7) | 55 (16.8) | 101 (30.9) | 103 (31.5) | 26 (8) | 327 (100) |
| TC03 | 7 (2.1) | 28 (8.6) | 63 (19.3) | 90 (27.5) | 107 (32.7) | 32 (9.8) | 327 (100) |
| TC04 | 8 (2.4) | 39 (11.9) | 93 (28.4) | 98 (30) | 62 (19) | 27 (8.3) | 327 (100) |
| TC05 | 10 (3.1) | 39 (11.9) | 98 (30) | 102 (31.2) | 51 (15.6) | 27 (8.3) | 327 (100) |
| TC06 | 7 (2.1) | 31 (9.5) | 81 (24.8) | 100 (30.6) | 68 (20.8) | 40 (12.2) | 327 (100) |

****Note:*** Values in parentheses are percentages.

Three patterns merit attention. First, the most positively regarded statements concerned task initiation and creativity, endorsed by 47.7% and 42.5% respectively. Second, statements concerning higher-order cognition attracted markedly less support: only 27.3% endorsed thinking skills and 23.9% problem-solving. Third, neutral responses clustered consistently around 30%, indicating that a substantial minority of teachers were unwilling to commit to either position. This pattern suggests uncertainty rather than indifference.

### 4.2. Demographic Variation

Kruskal-Wallis results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Kruskal-Wallis Results by Demographic Variable

| Statement | Educational qualification | Professional qualification | Age | Experience | Preschool sector | Management type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TC01 | $\chi^2$=6.00, p=.199 | $\chi^2$=4.58, p=.333 | $\chi^2$=4.68, p=.197 | $\chi^2$=8.31, p=.040* | $\chi^2$=3.75, p=.053 | $\chi^2$=1.44, p=.838 |
| TC02 | $\chi^2$=4.56, p=.335 | $\chi^2$=4.92, p=.296 | $\chi^2$=1.86, p=.602 | $\chi^2$=0.01, p=1.000 | $\chi^2$=0.49, p=.483 | $\chi^2$=3.35, p=.502 |
| TC03 | $\chi^2$=1.96, p=.743 | $\chi^2$=4.90, p=.298 | $\chi^2$=1.40, p=.705 | $\chi^2$=6.90, p=.075 | $\chi^2$=0.01, p=.932 | $\chi^2$=1.32, p=.858 |
| TC04 | $\chi^2$=3.64, p=.457 | $\chi^2$=2.56, p=.634 | $\chi^2$=1.71, p=.635 | $\chi^2$=2.95, p=.399 | $\chi^2$=0.85, p=.356 | $\chi^2$=7.79, p=.099 |
| TC05 | $\chi^2$=1.53, p=.822 | $\chi^2$=0.95, p=.918 | $\chi^2$=3.60, p=.308 | $\chi^2$=2.68, p=.444 | $\chi^2$=3.01, p=.083 | $\chi^2$=5.16, p=.271 |
| TC06 | $\chi^2$=11.38, p=.023* | $\chi^2$=3.14, p=.535 | $\chi^2$=11.23, p=.011* | $\chi^2$=6.57, p=.087 | $\chi^2$=4.61, p=.032* | $\chi^2$=1.44, p=.838 |

*Significant at p < .05

Three variables displayed statistically significant associations. Educational qualification was linked to perceptions of learning motivation (p = .023), with more qualified teachers more likely to credit media with motivational benefits. Age was associated with both motivation (p = .011) and, at the sector level, preschool location was associated with motivation (p = .032). Teaching experience reached significance only for task initiation (p = .040).

The most striking feature of Table 2 is the absence of significant associations for the higher-order cognition items (thinking and problem-solving) across nearly all demographic categories. Teachers' scepticism about media's capacity to develop thinking and problem-solving appears widely shared rather than concentrated within particular demographic segments. Conversely, the motivation item the most affectively framed of the six proved the most demographically sensitive, suggesting that judgments about media's motivational appeal are more closely tied to teachers' backgrounds than judgments about its cognitive depth.

### 4.3. Qualitative Insights

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses yielded four themes.

**Theme 1: Media as a source of information and vocabulary.** Several teachers credited media with expanding children's knowledge. One remarked, "Children learn new words and see places they have never visited. They ask questions about what they see." Another noted that educational programmes introduced concepts of animals, shapes, numbers that children later raised in class.

**Theme 2: Media as a competitor to sustained thought.** A contrasting view emphasized fragmentation. "Children who watch a lot of cartoons cannot sit and finish a puzzle," one teacher observed. "They want everything fast." Another commented that children expected immediate answers, reflecting a habituated expectation of rapid resolution.

**Theme 3: Uncertainty and the need for guidance.** Many responses conveyed hesitancy. "I am not sure whether it helps thinking or not," one teacher admitted. "Some children learn, some just watch." A recurring request was for authoritative guidance: "We need to know what is good and what is bad. Then we can tell parents."

**Theme 4: The centrality of parental mediation.** Teachers consistently located responsibility with families. "If parents watch with the child and talk about it, it can be good," one respondent explained. "If the child watches alone, it is only entertainment." This attribution suggests that teachers see themselves as secondary mediators, dependent on parental cooperation.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. A Profession of Two Minds

The findings portray a teaching workforce that is neither uniformly optimistic nor uniformly alarmed. Teachers readily credited media with stimulating task initiation, creativity, and motivation capacities that are visible, affective, and easily observed in the classroom. A child who volunteers for an activity or produces a drawing inspired by a programme presents unmistakable evidence, and teachers respond accordingly.

Yet when asked about thinking and problem-solving, endorsement fell sharply. This pattern suggests that teachers distinguish between the surface manifestations of engagement and the deeper cognitive processes that underlie reasoning. Children may appear motivated and creative while still struggling to sequence ideas, sustain attention, or generate independent solutions. Teachers, observing this distinction daily, registered their doubt in the high proportion of neutral responses.

This interpretation aligns with the conditional account of media effects advanced in literature. If benefits depend on content quality and adult mediation, then teachers who witness both mediated and unmediated use would reasonably develop mixed views. Their neutrality is not indecision but an honest reflection of inconsistent evidence.

### 5.2. The Explanatory Role of Demographics

The demographic findings invite careful reading. Age and educational qualification predicted perceptions of media's motivational value, suggesting that younger and more highly qualified teachers may be more attuned to media's affective appeal. This could reflect generational familiarity with digital tools or greater exposure to contemporary pedagogical discourse that recognizes motivation as a legitimate learning outcome.

That professional qualification and experience showed little relationship to cognitive perceptions is more surprising. One might expect specialist training to sharpen judgment. The absence of such an effect raises the possibility that early childhood programmes in Sri Lanka devote insufficient attention to media effects an inference consistent with the calls for guidance that emerged in the qualitative data.

The influence of preschool location on motivational perceptions hints at contextual variation. Urban teachers may observe different media practices and parental attitudes than their rural counterparts, shaping what they believe media can accomplish.

### 5.3. Implications for Mediation

The mixed picture has practical consequences. Teachers who doubt media's cognitive value may discourage its use

altogether, potentially forfeiting the benefits that well-designed educational content can deliver. Conversely, teachers who overestimate media's cognitive benefits may endorse excessive use. Neither posture serves children well.

What the findings suggest is a need for calibration. Teachers require a framework that distinguishes between content types, recognizes the role of co-viewing, and acknowledges the displacement risks of passive consumption. Such a framework would allow them to advise parents with precision rather than blanket prohibition or endorsement.

The qualitative data reinforces this conclusion. Teachers did not present themselves as experts; they presented themselves as observers seeking guidance. The repeated request for clear standards indicates a receptive audience for professional development.

### 5.4. Limitations

Several constraints qualify for these findings. The sample, though adequate for the analytical procedures employed, was drawn from a single district and therefore cannot support national generalization. Tamil- and English-medium preschools were not represented. Perceptions were self-reported and may be shaped by social desirability. Finally, the cross-sectional design cannot track how perceptions evolve with experience or training.

### 5.5. Directions for Further Inquiry

Future research should extend sampling across provinces and linguistic communities, incorporate observational measures of classroom media practice, and evaluate the impact of targeted media literacy training on teacher perceptions. Longitudinal designs would clarify whether perceptions shift as media environments evolve, particularly with the emergence of AI-driven content recommendation and personalized learning applications.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Sri Lankan preschool teachers perceive electronic media's influence on young children's cognitive development. The evidence indicates a profession holding nuanced and partially uncertain views. Teachers recognise media's capacity to motivate and inspire creativity but doubt its contribution to thinking and problem-solving. Their perceptions vary with age, qualification, and setting, yet scepticism about higher-order cognitive benefits is broadly shared.

These findings matter because teachers' beliefs shape the guidance families receive. A teaching workforce that is thoughtful but uncertain, and that explicitly requests standards, represents an opportunity rather than a deficit. Targeted media literacy training, coupled with national guidelines that distinguish content types and specify mediation strategies, would equip teachers to convert their observational insight into effective practice. In doing so, Sri Lanka would take a meaningful step toward ensuring that young children's encounter with electronic media supports rather than undermines their cognitive growth.

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