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Exploring Preschool Parents' Understanding of Play-based Learning and its Importance in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Play, a context identified by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a human right, contributes significantly to a child's optimal growth and development. Although play-based learning (PBL) is known as the very core of the "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" (DAP) that is currently observed at the Malaysian preschool context, many preschools do not address play as a critical component for early childhood development. One of the major reasons cited by school administrators is that preschools are pressured by parents and stakeholders for producing high academic achievers and primary-level ready students. The purpose of this study hence was to explore preschool parents themselves, to identify further their understanding of play-based learning and their view on the importance of PBL in the early childhood education context. Through the "maximum variation" sampling technique, eighteen parents were selected from seven different states in Malaysia to obtain their views on PBL. Findings from this qualitative study steered six major themes for discussion which include contextualizing the term 'play' and 'play-based learning', their awareness about PBL as a teaching method, preschool's initiatives on injecting awareness about play-based learning, their recognition that play-based learning can holistically develop children, their acceptance on PBL as a pedagogy for a child's development and their concerns of PBL on children's primary level school readiness.

Keywords: Preschool Parents, Early Childhood Education (ECE), Play-Based Learning (PBL)

Introduction

Play, a child-centred approach in the context of early childhood development, contributes significantly to a child's optimal growth including physical, cognitive, social as well as emotional acquisition. Play, a context identified by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a human right (United Nations, 1989) is usually observed when children attain meaning of their social worlds through dynamic engagement with the environment specifically dealing with people and developmentally appropriate tools and activities (Munsaka & Matafwali, 2013). NAEYC or known as National Association for the

Education of Young Children has also significantly identified play as the very core of the “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” (DAP). In its definition, NAEYC delineates DAP as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning” (NAEYC, 2020, p.5). In the Malaysian context, DAP is recognised as the basic knowledge preschool teachers should master to provide appropriate teaching and learning strategies for children. However, a study by Kassim and Hanim in 2015, and a recent study by Tee and Mariani in 2018 hold parallel understanding that the main challenge of the Malaysian preschool education has been and still is on recognising play as key development criteria of children particularly at the cognitive and physical level because children are still given formal academic instruction, rather than learning through play-based learning (PBL), a term coined with the mandatory Developmentally Appropriate Practices introduced to all preschools in Malaysia. In addition, parents are still holding strongly to the belief that only traditional methods of teaching and learning can develop their child successfully hence making it further difficult for preschools, specifically the private early childhood centres to be able to integrate play successfully into the preschool systems. Just because parents believe that play is frivolous and that play opportunities take time away from ‘true learning’ the curriculum and early learning standards of many preschools including Malaysia do not address play as a critical component for early childhood development (UNICEF, 2018).

Literature Review

After almost a decade, matters of play, specifically the term play-based learning is still at the rudimentary understanding level of not just parents but also teachers as they have failed to see that play and learning are not a separate entity that can’t be compatible with each other (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). According to numerous evidence picked by Hirsh-Pasek et al (2009, p.14), playful learning can attract the mind of children, provide a strong social factor that motivates the children to work beyond their current level of development. Most importantly, the kind of motivation that play provides is intrinsic motivation, which promotes passion in lifelong learning (Targowska, 2008). As compared to elder students, this kind of motivation is even more important to preschoolers as they tend to have shorter attention span to sustain their mental effort in conventional way of learning that designed for adults (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009, p.11).

Play as an essential element in children’s development

Play which is vital for all children, from birth till the age of eight (NAEYC, 2020) promotes learning in a joyful manner that encourages children to enhance language, cognitive and social competencies apart from practice self-regulation and obtain multidisciplinary content knowledge. Play, both indoors and outdoors are usually designed in various forms to create sustained opportunities to develop young children’s peer relationships, language, symbolic and imaginative thinking, physical development, and problem-solving skills (Yogman, et al., 2018). Various studies have consistently linked play to school success as it symbolizes the traits of successful learning and holistic development (Mardell, et al., 2016; NAEYC, 2020). Children will participate in many different types of play as they grow. As put forward by Mildred Parten in 1932, six stages of play outlined by sociologist include unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. According to Parten’s research, children progress through these six stages before they’re five years old and once they master them, they’ll try out other types of play such as competitive play, dramatic

play, physical play, and constructive play (Harris, 2022). To develop language, motor, social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, various forms of play are therefore required to support and facilitate meaningful learning opportunities. (Mardell, et al., 2016).

Letting children purely play in the non-existence of a strategic learning environment or predominantly offering direct instruction does not denote to effective, developmentally appropriate practice (Hassinger-Das et al., 2019). Teachers must take time to construct learning conditions such as materials and the environment that reflect children's interests which ensures children get continuous opportunities to engage in self-directed play be it individually or cooperatively in small groups. In all these endeavours, teachers play multiple roles. They strategically ask questions to stimulate thinking and provide continuous feedback to help engage children towards a learning goal (Hassinger-Das et al., 2019). Play-based learning provides teachers opportunities to use children's learning-styles and learning preferences to enhance their thinking skills, introduce new concepts, model certain behaviour, and provide children with manifold occasions to use the knowledge (schemata) and then to develop newer knowledge. These meaningful and engaging experiences help children create higher order thinking which is more effective than rote learning or memorization of knowledge (Riley-Ayers & Figueras-Daniel, 2019).

As put forward by NAEYC (2020), regardless of the evidence that points out the merit of play, not all children are provided the opportunity to play. In the United States, play is not an afforded opportunity for Black, Latino and under-resourced communities (Kushner, 2012). In Malaysia on the other hand, Tee & Mariani (2018) has objectively stated that play is often viewed as being at odds with the demands of proper schooling, especially for children intending to enter primary schools at age seven. Although the fact is known that the highly didactic, highly controlling curriculum found in many kindergarten and primary grades, with its narrow focus on test-focused skill development, is unlikely to be engaging or meaningful for children, almost all schools still carry on with this traditional methodology to accommodate both the parent's demands and to meet the entry requirement for formal schooling (Boaler & Zoido, 2016; Parker & Thomsen, 2019).

Although certain studies have directly pointed out the benefits of play-based learning (UNICEF, 2018), preschools are still using the traditional methods of teaching and instead of using their skills and knowledge in solving problems, children are just banking on knowledge through the teacher-centred approach (NAEYC, 2020). Study by Parker and Thomsen (2019) on playful integrated pedagogies even pointed directly that students who are taught math largely through rote learning and memorization end up being a year behind than those who have been taught by connecting math concepts to their prevailing knowledge and reflecting on their own understanding through play. Giving young children agency and autonomy in how they analyse and approach problems, make hypotheses, and explore possible solutions with their peers and superiors promotes deeper learning and progresses their executive functioning—all of which add up to holistically developing for long-term success (NAEYC, 2020).

Research on play-based learning (PBL) in the context of early childhood education (ECE) in Malaysia

Research on play-based learning (PBL) in Malaysia has been an on-going effort over the last decade. Within Malaysia itself, multiple research studies have clearly shown that although the recognition of PBL is made known to preschool administrators and teachers through the various forms of professional development initiatives organised by Teacher Education

Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, the failure of implementing play-based learning still exist.

Although renowned Constructivist theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky have long recognised and contributed significantly on how play brings about successful children's learning and development (Puteh et al., 2013; Tee & Mariani, 2018), research has found that preschools in Malaysia are not readily adopting play-based approach in their teaching and learning (Aliza et al., 2011; Fauziah, 2009; Puteh et al., 2013; Saayah, 2004; Sharifah et al., 2009). Many young Malaysian pre-schoolers especially in private settings still learn in traditional, structured classrooms where a lot of teacher-centred pedagogy is utilised despite play being widely acknowledged as an important learning medium of early childhood education (Tee & Mariani, 2018).

As put forward by Aliza et al (2011); Sharifah et al (2009), at the preschool level, even though Malaysia's very own National Preschool Standard-Based Curriculum (NPSC) or better known as Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) highlighted that learning through play approach is established as an effective teaching and learning approach for meaningful early learning experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017), various gaps exist.

Parallel findings of research have pointed that the failure of PBL emerge largely due to limited knowledge and effort early childhood educators have on integrating play into their pedagogical planning. Teachers either hardly practiced the use of play approach in their teaching instruction (Saayah, 2004; Fauziah, 2009; Sharifah et al., 2009) or they simply did not possess the required skills in designing instructions and developing materials and resources for play-based learning (Tee & Mariani, 2018). Moreover, constant pressure for preschool ranking through students excellent academic achievement and pressure from school administrators to produce school-ready children resulted in play-based learning approach being discarded altogether by teachers (Abu Bakar, et al., 2015; Ali & Mahamod, 2015; Aliza, Zahara & Rohaty, 2011; Sharifah et al., 2009; Mariani, 2003).

Although research on PBL has been an on-going effort, very few substantial research on the perspective of parents' understanding on play-based learning as part of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice in early years education in Malaysia has been undertaken. However, within the few studies undertaken, based on findings of Hewitt and Meloney (2010) through a market survey, Malaysian parents do not support play-based learning activities in actual classroom, specifically for children in K2 that are soon to transit to national primary schools. In addition, there are also several findings indicating that there seem to be a large distrust about PBL among public preschool parents as most feel that play-based curriculum lacks in equipping their children with the required academic skill for a successful transition to Primary Year 1 (Ali & Bahari, 2020; Ann, 2019; Jantan et al., 2015). In most occurrences, parents saw play as a form of activity that does not relate to education. Rather it is seen and categorized as an activity considered unimportant, insignificant and serves no goal-oriented purpose. The perception parents have developed is that children engage in play as a part of the childhood and is mostly related to physical activities for relaxation and socialising with friends.

Since research and practice grow in analogous and there remain massive research gaps in the field of Malaysian early childhood education (Tee & Mariani, 2018), the rigour of research on PBL based on the literature reviews conducted by the researchers indicate that this area is still very much at the foundation level, specifically in the context of parental connexion. Researchers believe that although there seem to be great mind-shift required from all Malaysian parents to move from academic-focused curriculum to developmentally-focused practices that centres on play, it is also possible that over the years, parents may have become

more supportive of the application of play-based learning, since Malaysia's government has publicly displayed initiatives in endorsing policies on abolishing standardized test and introducing project-based assessments in schools.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study was to explore parents' understanding and awareness of the term 'play-based learning' and its importance to their children's holistic development.

In pursuing the aim derived from the research problem presented above, this study, hence, was designed based on a three-fold objective:

1. First, the study assessed parents' understanding of the term 'play' and 'play-based learning' in the context of early childhood education.
2. Next, the study probed on the parents' awareness on the use of play as a pedagogy for their child's educational attainment.
3. Finally, the study explored if parents recognized the potential importance of play-based learning in holistically developing their children.

Methodology

Research Design

This study which was qualitative in nature used the case study research design. A qualitative research design deemed appropriate since the major objective of this study was to explore parents' understanding and awareness of the term 'play-based learning' and its importance to their children's holistic development. Case study approach is an appropriate research design to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject (Creswell, 2014; Heale & Twycross, 2018) as it allows the researchers to analyse the key features, significances, and implications of the case individually or in groups (Single, 2017; Yin, 2011).

Data Collection Instrument and Instrument Reliability

Parents' Interview Guide consisted of ten structured-questions that were designed by the researchers based on the three research questions that revolved around parents understanding of the term 'play' and 'play-based learning', their awareness on the use of play-based learning as a pedagogy and their recognition on the impact of play-based learning on their child's growth and development.

The interview guide was composed into two parts. The first section mainly investigated parents' demographic information like age, gender, state of residence and the type of preschool the child is currently attending. Section 2 begins by asking parents their understanding of the term 'play' and 'play-based learning' and continues in finding out their awareness on the use of play-based learning as a pedagogy in preschool as well their understanding on its impact to their children's development.

Instrument Reliability

Since the assessment was composed by the researchers, an inter-rater reliability test was important to be conducted to check its reliability. The well-established inter-rater reliability test method, Cohen's Kappa was used. Cohen Kappa's rule of the thumb is that values of Kappa ranging from 0.40 to 0.59 are considered moderate, 0.60 to 0.79 substantial, and 0.80 outstanding (Viera & Garrett, 2005). The Kappa score achieved from the inter-rater reliability

test for the instrument in this study was .72, meaning that there is substantial agreement on the discussion guide, making it a reliable instrument.

Population and Sample

To explore parents' understanding of the term 'play-based learning' and its importance to their children's holistic development, this study was conducted in two phases. Phase one revolved around selecting a target population. The target population for this study were parents of children who were studying at the preschools in Malaysia. Since it was not practical to recruit the entire population of preschool children's parents throughout Malaysia it became essentially important to specify on the accessible population. Accessible population, which is the subset of the target population, is the population in research to which the researchers can apply their conclusions (Davis, 2019).

Since accessible population is a division of the target population that considers certain characteristics (Lunsford & Lunsford, 1995), a list of characteristics was drawn. Firstly, only parents of 6-year-old (K2) children were selected. Next, parents should be able to confidently participate in interviews using the online application. Finally, only parents who were able to speak English were selected as to gain in-depth information for the conclusion of this study. In addition, since this study applies the qualitative research design approach, the topographical and time constraints with which both the researchers and potential subjects will have to contend with was studied carefully. As put forward by Creswell (2014), it is from the accessible population that researchers draw their samples, hence, convenience sampling was used to draw a sample since data collection needed to be facilitated in the most convenient way as it involved parents, who have various professional and personal commitments and it is the simplest form of sampling to ease the research (Saunders et al, 2012).

Data Collection Procedure

As the researchers have been active in the early childhood education industry and is part of various parenting-related social groups, the researchers sent out invitations through a simple google form, seeking parents' consent to be part of the study. From the open invitations twenty-three parents agreed to participate. However due the characteristics required, only eighteen parents were eligible for the interviews. The main reasons for the disqualification of the parents that consented were either that they did not have any current preschool going children or were mostly Mandarin speaking, which is beyond the researcher's language acquisition. The eighteen parents that consented their agreement to participate and were accepted were from Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Penang, Malacca, Johor and Pahang. Each parent was given a pseudonym P meaning parent, to ensure strict confidentiality and discussions of findings were coded as P1, P2 to P18. Table 1 below provides demographic data of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic data of participants

Participant (P=Parent)	State	Type of preschool	Philosophy of affiliated preschool
P1	Kedah	Public National	Academic
P2	Kedah	Public	Academic
P3	Kedah	Private National	Academic
P4	Perak	Private National	Academic
P5	Perak	Private International	Montessori
P6	Perak	Public	Academic
P7	Perak	Private National	Thematic
P8	Penang	Private International	Thematic
P9	Penang	Private International	Montessori
P10	Penang	Private International	Academic
P11	Selangor	Private National	Academic
P12	Selangor	Private National	Academic
P13	Selangor	Semi-government	Thematic
P14	Selangor	Private International	Montessori
P15	Malacca	Public	Academic
P16	Malacca	Private National	Thematic
P17	Pahang	Public	Academic
P18	Johor	Private International	Thematic

Chart 1

Participants' details based on state and type of preschool attended

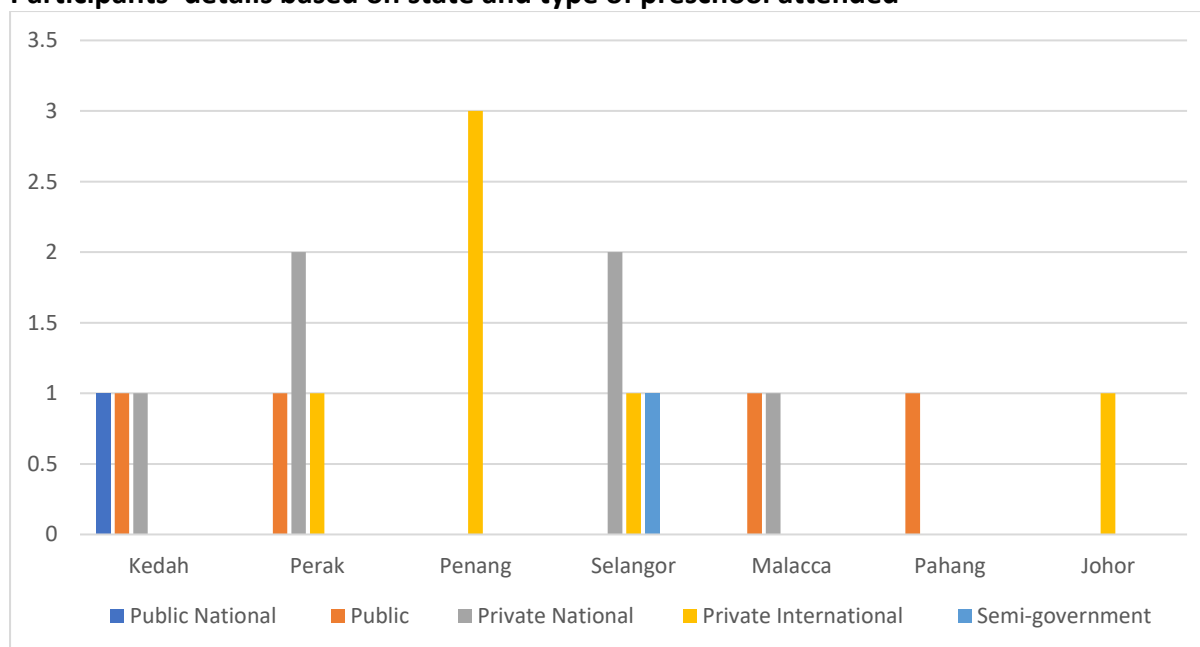
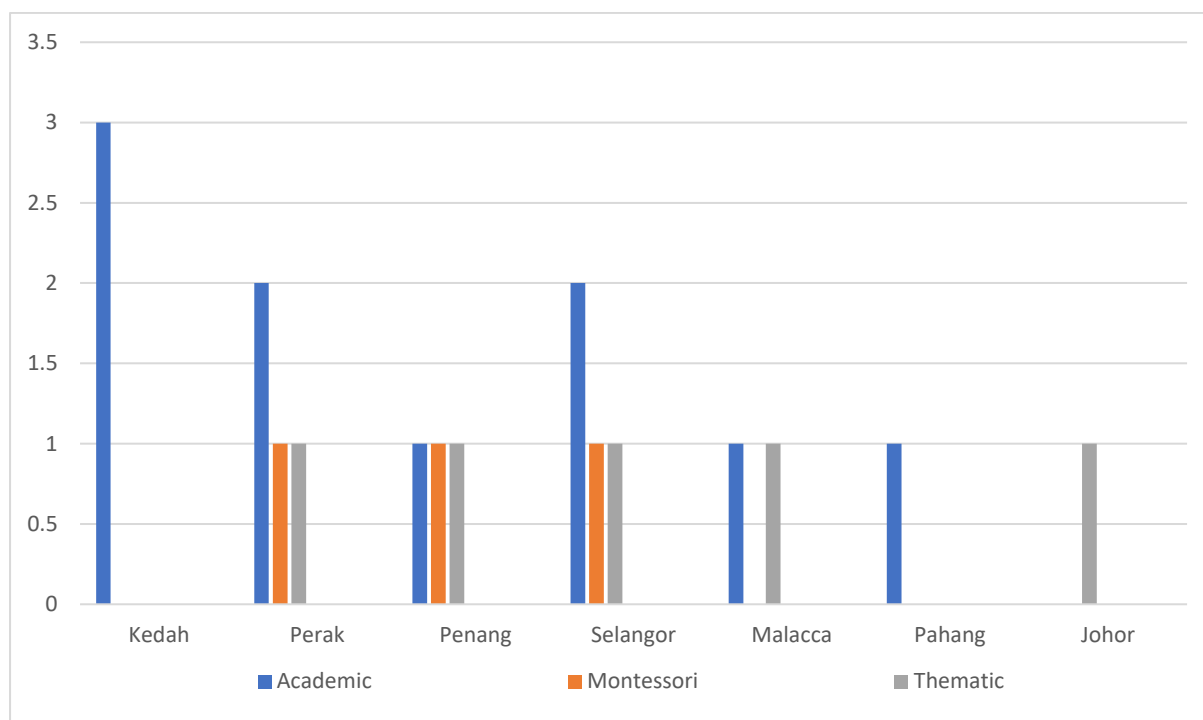


Chart 1 further illustrates in graphical manner the participants' state and the type of preschool their children attend. It can be observed that most of the participants' children attend private international preschool (6 parents) and private national preschool (6 parents).

Chart 2 on the other hand illustrates further on the philosophy of education children attend based on state.

Chart 2
Participants' details based on state and philosophy of education



The “maximum variation” sampling technique (Merriam, 2009, p. 229) was used in selecting the participants for this study, which enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings. Participants represented seven different states in the country with varying school education philosophies. This heterogeneity of participants allowed findings to be applied by a greater range of the population.

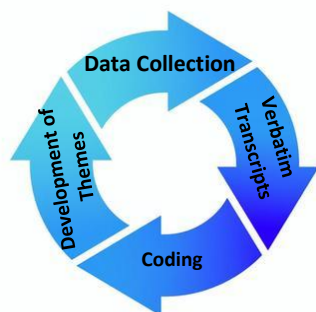
In the second phase, the researchers virtually met each parent prior the actual interviews and discussed regarding this case study’s need for data collection, arrangement of mutual date and time as well as to ensure confidentiality concerns with the parents. Post mutual agreement from each parent, the researchers devised a schedule for interviews to be conducted. Each interview was conducted between 35 to 45 minutes and was done fully online using the Zoom Meeting platform.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Several approaches exist to analyse qualitative data. For this study to be effective, the researchers applied content analysis. Content analysis according to Krippendorff (1980) “is a research technique for making replicable and valid inference from data to their context” (p. 21) and is an important building block in the conceptual analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). The content analysis for this study was done strategically as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Content analysis



Data from each interview was collected based on the agreed schedules. Post data collection, the researchers interpreted the data where coding was applied. The codes were then analysed against the transcripts to further validate findings. Once coding was complete, the collected data was examined to find patterns and draw conclusions or in other words, draw out themes for further discussion.

Findings

The findings from the qualitative data are presented and discussed under six themes which are coordinated under each research objective.

Research Objective 1

To assess parents' understanding of the term 'play' and 'play-based learning' in the context of early childhood education

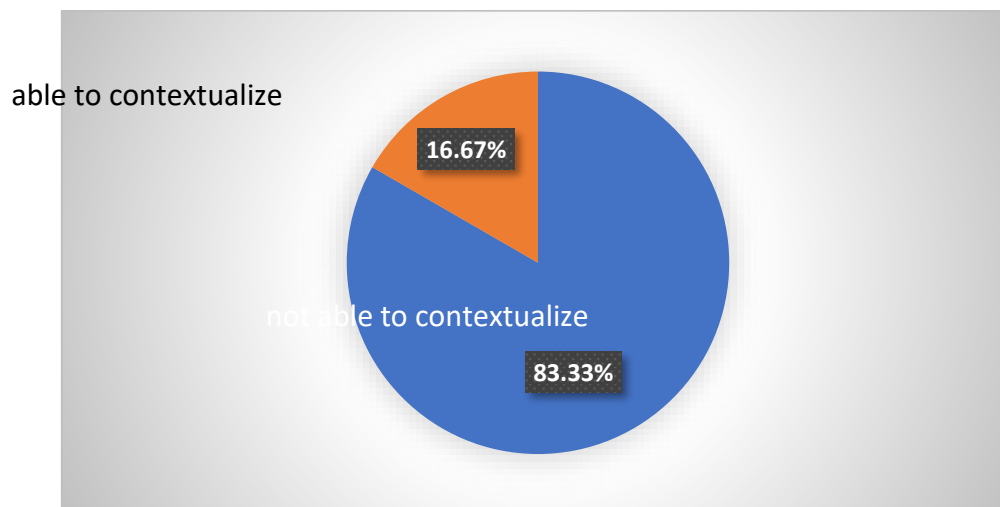
Theme 1

Contextualizing the term 'play' and 'play-based learning'

Each parent was asked their understanding on the term 'play' and 'play-based learning'. Data from interviews as illustrated in Chart 3 below found that 83.33% (15 parents) were very confused between 'play' and 'play-based learning'. Of the 18 parents, only 3 were able to provide proper difference between the two terms.

Chart 3

Parents ability to contextualize the term 'play' and 'play-based learning'



"Play and play-based learning in my opinion is same. The only difference I think is where the teacher is doing. Whether in the class or field. If field, it is play. No learning."

[P5, 03/02/2023]

"Play and play-based learning is also known as physical education or PJ, Pendidikan Jasmani. Children learn how to be physically strong."

[P9, 06/02/2023]

Two parents, who were primary school teachers, based on the demographic details collected, were able to elaborate the differences between play and play-based learning, and conceptually agreed that it is a current need in preschool education.

"Play I think is something children do every day and is to have fun. But play-based learning is something that has a purpose, an academic objective."

[P14, 07/02/2023]

"...is different. Play-based learning is a current pedagogy, teaching style in schools, not only preschool, but also for me as primary school teacher."

[P16, 08/02/2023]

Research Objective 2

To probe parents' awareness on the use of play-based learning as a pedagogy for their child's educational attainment

Theme 2

Awareness about play-based learning as a teaching method

Post explanation by researchers on the difference between play and play-based learning, of the 18 parents, 61% (11 parents) admitted not having any awareness about play-based learning as their preschool children's educational attainment, as illustrated in Chart 4.

"...no I am not aware of this method..."

[P11, 11/02/2023]

"I only understand that teacher play with children during play time...like play ball or hopping."

[P4, 09/02/2023]

However, 7 parents (chart 4) admitted that they are familiar and some even stated that they have frequently been acquainted with the term play-based learning by their children's teachers.

Chart 4

Parents awareness about play-based learning as a teaching method



"Since I am a teacher myself, although at the college, I am familiar, but I am not very sure, if his teachers are frequently using this play-based method as I don't see many remarks from the teachers or school on this."

[P14, 07/02/2023]

"I usually get weekly feedbacks from the teacher and there were many times I questioned if teachers still use the traditional methods of teaching...Play-based was brought to my attention quite frequently..."

[P12, 12/02/2023]

The above findings prompted the researchers to probe further if schools have provided any awareness to parents regarding the play-based learning method, which led to the development of Theme 3.

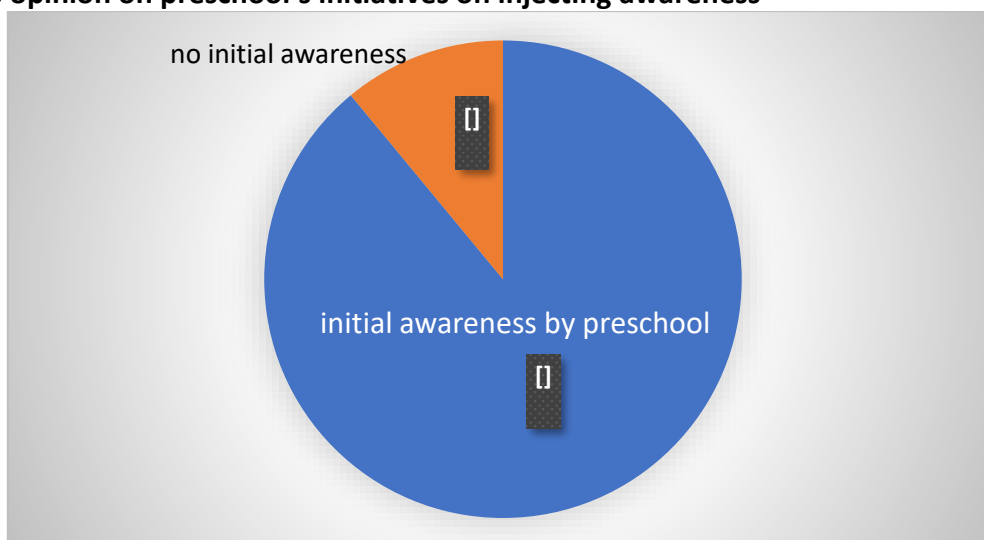
Theme 3

Preschool's initiatives on injecting awareness about play-based learning

On the contrary, 89% (16 parents) as shown in chart 5, did agree that the school has mentioned about play or play-based learning at their initial point of registering the child. But almost all findings indicated that no progressive reports or further explanations were given.

Chart 5

Parents opinion on preschool's initiatives on injecting awareness



“Yes. I think I have been informed about play-based learning. But that was only one time when she was four years old. Do they still do when they are six?”

[P3,09/02/2023]

“Yes. But I didn’t ask much also. Because I want to see my son strong in his English and Maths.”

[P7, 10/02/2023]

“I can’t remember if they mention play or play-based learning. But they don’t show us anything during Report Card Day. In fact, I doubt if teachers themselves know the difference.”

[P1, 06/02/2023]

Regarding teachers’ knowledge on play-based learning some parents further reported that they felt most teachers have no proper understanding and stated that because most are not highly educated at the preschool level, they might also confuse between play and play-based learning.

“What I was informed by teachers was that play is a fun exercise, and it is a free activity and said that they allocated only a specific time each day for play so that children won’t feel bored with just studying.”

[P2, 11/02/2023]

“Play-based learning wasn’t clearly explained by the school. Maybe because teachers in my son’s school mostly just certificate or diploma level. Maybe they don’t know too. What was told to us was that it is play time, usually outdoors as the school has its own playground.”

[P3, 04/02/2023]

Research Objective 3

To explore if parents recognize the potential importance of play-based learning in holistically developing their children.

Theme 4

Recognizing that play-based learning can holistically develop children.

Based on the interview and clarifications exchanged between the researchers and each individual participant, parents developed a very basic recognition that play-based learning does have the potential to develop a child holistically.

“Well, earlier in this interview, I did not really agree play can benefit my child. But now I can see that play can be used for learning. Maybe I should learn more about this method first.”

[P8, 18/02/2023]

“I think this is good way to teach children and fun, Maybe I will also use it at home. Can I find it on YouTube?”

[P17, 18/02/2023]

“As we are progressing in this interview, for me personally I don’t object to play-based learning. I recognise it is important for holistic development. In fact, I have told my son’s teachers that my son must not be pressured academically. I rather him learn in an engaging and enjoyable way that the traditional old-style teaching.”

[P16, 08/02/2023]

Some parents also related some of their own play-based teaching examples to the researchers, just confirming if that was what meant with play-based learning. Upon gaining researchers’ feedback, parents conveyed that it is beneficial especially because it brings out children’s creative and critical thinking.

“...so yes. I use imaginary play, like creating imaginary scenes using substitute objects ...so now I can see that it helps young children in classifying abstract ideas from concrete reality...critical and creative thinking!”

[P13, 17/02/2023]

Theme 5

Acceptance of play-based learning as a pedagogy for child’s development

When asked, if parents have now accepted the fact that play-based learning should be encouraged in early childhood education, all (100%) parents agreed and accepted that play-based learning should be implemented as one of the pedagogies for preschool education.

“I would love if the school applied this method to teach my girl. Maybe I should ask the teacher when I see her next.”

[P13, 17/02/2023]

"I will accept it. I think the school also need to inform parents on how teachers use it and what they teach."

[P10, 17/02/2023]

Most parents also related strongly that play-based learning is accepted as long as it serves a purpose and is only one of the methods rather than the only method.

"I would agree it to be one of the method. Not the only method."

[P10, 17/02/2023]

"I agree but to a certain extend. As long as the teacher knows that there is a goal behind that play and my son is learning something, then it is okay."

[P18, 17/02/2023]

However, even with the recognition and acceptance, parents voiced out major concerns of using play-based learning on academic achievement and primary level school readiness which is detailed in Theme 6.

Theme 6

Concerns of play-based learning on children's primary level school readiness

Majority, 94% (17 parents) conveyed that their major concern on play-based learning is related to their child's readiness to gain entry into primary year 1 and excel academically in their primary education.

"As you know, if a child can't do the 3M...membaca, menulis mengira, how will they be registered into a good school? So rote teaching, traditional teaching is still important for me."

[P3, 04/02/2023]

"Play-based learning can be done for one subject daily. I can't just let my child develop on their own. I need teachers to make sure she is good enough when she completes preschool. She must be able to read, write and calculate properly."

[P1, 06/02/2023]

"Play-based learning is best for children aged 3 and 4. But for 5 and 6 years old, better use the traditional method because when they go Standard 1in primary school and they can't read or write, they will not gain entry into a good class."

[P7, 10/02/2023]

"The school my kid is going to is very book-based. I can't disagree. It is good. All children there get into first class when they go Primary school. They are smart. So, I won't encourage play-based learning for my child even if I know it is good and fun. Once a month maybe, but not daily."

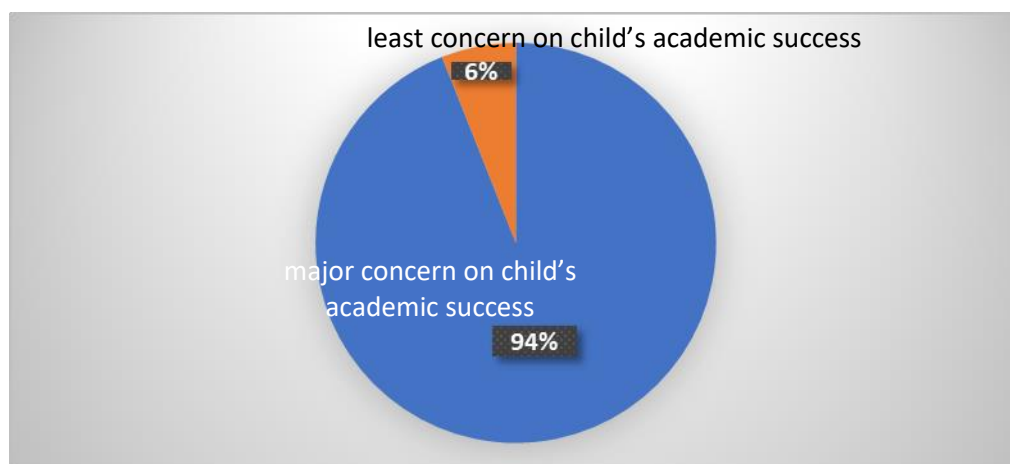
[P4, 09/02/2023]

"I am okay with play-based learning. I know I said that earlier. But to think again, maybe it is best for four or five years old. Not the six years old because if they fail entre-level test given before they enter primary school, they can't go to a good primary school."

[P17, 18/02/2023]

Chart 6

Parents’ concerns of play-based learning on children’s primary level school readiness



Overall, as illustrated in Chart 6. data clearly directed that majority of parents (94%) posited concerns of play-based learning on children’s primary level school readiness and academic success beyond their early years, which yielded many parents to rather agree that play-based learning if introduced should be for nursery level, ages four and below.

Discussion

The major findings from the data analysis above are summarised in the following table:

Research Objective	Mapping of key ideas	Theme(s) developed
<p>Research Objective 1 To assess parents’ understanding of the term ‘play’ and ‘play-based learning’ in the context of early childhood education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 83.33% (15 parents) were very confused between ‘play’ and ‘play-based learning’ ➤ Only 3 parents were able to distinguish the differences 	<p>Theme 1 Contextualizing the term ‘play’ and ‘play-based learning’</p>
<p>Research Objective 2 To probe parents’ awareness on the use of play-based learning as a pedagogy for their child’s educational attainment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 61% (11 parents) admitted not having any awareness about play-based learning as their preschool children’s educational attainment ➤ 7 parents admitted that they are familiar and some even stated that they have frequently been acquainted with the term play-based learning by their children’s teachers ➤ 89% (16 parents) did agree that the school has mentioned about play or play-based 	<p>Theme 2 Awareness about play-based learning as a teaching method</p>

	<p>learning at their initial point of registering the child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ almost all findings indicated that no progressive reports or further explanations were given regarding play-based learning post the first day of registration to the preschool➤ parents reported that teachers' knowledge on play-based learning is not adequate➤ most teachers have not given proper understanding to parents➤ teachers were found to be not highly educated at the preschool level hence teachers might also be confused between play and play-based learning	<p>Theme 3 Preschool's initiatives on injecting awareness about play-based learning</p>
<p>Research Objective 3 To explore if parents recognize the potential importance of play-based learning in holistically developing their children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ parents developed a very basic recognition that play-based learning does have the potential to develop a child holistically➤ parents believe it is beneficial especially because it brings out children's creative and critical thinking ➤ 100% parents agreed and accepted that play-based learning should be implemented as one of the pedagogies for preschool education➤ play-based learning is accepted as long as it serves a purpose and is only one of the methods rather than the only method	<p>Theme 4 Recognizing that play-based learning can holistically develop children.</p> <p>Theme 5 Acceptance of play-based learning as a pedagogy for child's development</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ parents voiced out major concerns of using play-based learning on academic achievement and primary level school readiness ➤ 94% (17 parents) conveyed that their major concern on play-based learning is related to their child's readiness to gain entry into primary year 1 and excel academically in their primary education ➤ parents (94%) posited concerns of play-based learning on children's primary level school readiness and academic success beyond their early years ➤ many parents agree that play-based learning if introduced should be for nursery level, ages four and below 	<p>Theme 6 Concerns of play-based learning on children's primary level school readiness</p>
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The major findings outlined above provided a glimpse into early childhood parents' understanding and awareness of the term 'play-based learning' and its importance to their children's holistic development. The results have certain similarities and some differences on findings with previous studies on various aspects. Firstly, in terms of contextualizing the terms 'play' and 'play-based learning', parents were not able to distinguish between the two easily. Majority parents have the understanding that play is denoted to physical education. Parents felt that 'learning' is only to teacher giving the instructions through textbooks, worksheets, or whiteboards on the wall, rather than objects that children can manipulate, explore and apply into their learning. This is parallel to UNICEF (2018) where in its report on the obstacles to integrating play into pre-primary system has pointed out that parents from many countries still hold a serious misconception about playful-learning or as we know as play-based learning, and this is caused by a lack of understanding of the benefits of play in children's education. In its report, it also stated that many parents have not observed learning through play and as a result lack confidence if their children are taught through play-based learning.

Contradicting to the incapability in defining the term play and play-based learning, the study found that majority parents were informed on the term 'play' or 'play-based pedagogy' but received very little information on it. To add on, schools too did not fully provide adequate knowledge on how the play-based learning activities and teaching methods will be conducted with their children. Parents also reported saying that play as informed by teachers, was usually a mode of rewarding their children or seen as a form of physical activity for students to relax. This was similarly discussed by Pyle et al (2017) in a study on perspectives and practices of teachers and children in South Africa that teachers conducted lessons on a more structured, teacher-centred method and hardly employed the play-based learning pedagogy.

In correspondence, findings from Quyen and Khairani (2017); Phajane (2017) both indicated that a vast majority of teachers viewed play and learning as detached entities. Most teachers were found to provide children with play as a reward, once they have completed their assigned work (Wood & Bennett, 1998).

As the base of this research was grounded on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and the role of play in developing the whole child, parents were able to gauge the importance of play integrated learning during the interview sessions. Although they gained very basic knowledge, most parents were able to understand that play-based learning does have the potential to develop a child holistically. On the other hand, most parents who agreed also stated that it was more appropriate for much younger children, below the age of five. Parents also reported to have doubts if schools and teachers knew the basics of play-based learning to be able to apply it as a pedagogy. Previous research has also shown similar findings on the positive perspectives of play-based learning and had similarly stated parents having sceptical views of how teachers use play to enhance children's intellectual abilities and promote the children's learning (Ali, et al., 2019; Lungu & Watafwali, 2020; Woolnough, 2017). Various studies have also pointed that even though play is vital to children's learning and development, preschool teachers in Malaysia are still new-borns at applying play-based approach as they lack knowledge and skills required to adopt play-based learning successfully (Aliza et al., 2011; Tee & Mariani, 2018).

Parallel to findings on parental's preferences of the traditional teaching and learning methods in early childhood education (Tee & Mariani, 2018), parents in this study also preferred teachers to teach in traditional, structured classrooms where academic and rote learning was highly appreciated as their child's daily preschool routine, hence supporting rigid and test-based learning experiences at preschool. In addition, corresponding to Vogt et al. (2018) findings on parents preferring the traditional methods of teaching, this study also reported that very little was made known to them about play as a method of teaching in comparison to the amount of information given either in weekly comments or during Report Card sessions about the schools' efforts to enhance their children's success through the traditional ways of teaching and learning that included reading, writing and arithmetic.

However, interestingly, some of the findings reported by this study on parents' preferences of the traditional teaching methods shows contradicting viewpoints from the findings of a systematic review conducted by (Yee et al., 2022). The review which discusses how parents viewed PBL, points out that the roles and functions of parents and teachers were found to be significant in supporting the implementation of play-based learning in preschool settings. It also delineated based on various research findings from the systematic review that most parents knew the importance of play and have agreed with the implementation of PBL in their child's preschool settings as they observed that children who spend time playing educational screen-based games or teacher-structured PBL not only enjoyed their learning but also performed academically better (Tang et al., 2021; Carolan et al., 2021; Hyun et al., 2021; Keung & Cheung, 2019; Egan & Beatty, 2021; Timmons et al., 2021; Matsumoto et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, although parents do finally understand that play-based learning is important for the child's development, a major concern in the context of Malaysia among parents has and will always be about play-based learning and its impact on children's academic success. Despite the systematic review by Yee et al (2022) and various other international statements including that from NAEYC, UNESCO and UNICEF that posits the benefits of play based learning (PBL) on a child's growth and development, this study found a deep gap in the

implementation of PBL in the ECE context in Malaysia. The result of this study is parallel to that of Tee and Mariani (2018) indicating PBL implementation in the Malaysian preschool education scenario to be far behind as majority child-centred learning where children participate actively in their own process of learning is not being practised in most Malaysian preschool settings. One major cause for the lack of PBL implementation drawn out from this study was children's primary education level readiness. Parents and school administrators are more concerned on the child's readiness for primary education by the age of seven and maintaining their school's ranking. This is similar to the many research conclusions from previous studies that indicated pressure for preschool ranking through students excellent academic achievement and pressure from school administrators to produce school-ready children resulted in play-based learning approach being discarded at most times by teachers (Abu Bakar, et al., 2015; Ali & Mahamod, 2015; Aliza, Zahara & Rohaty, 2011; Sharifah et al., 2009; Mariani, 2003).

Conclusion

In Malaysia, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is recognised as the basic knowledge preschool teachers should master to provide appropriate teaching and learning strategies for children. DAP promotes each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning. However, in the context of Malaysia, play-based learning (PBL) is still not fully integrated as part of teachers' daily pedagogy citing reasons of parents and stakeholders' pressure for academic achievement and primary-level readiness. This study which was conducted to explore the view of parents instead of teachers, found that although parents do finally understand that play-based learning is important for the child's development, the major concern in the context of Malaysia still is on their children's academic success and primary level school readiness. Parents do however agree that PBL is a good development strategy, and it should be integrated into the ECE context but for children aged four and below. As for children aged five and six, majority parents remain their stand that PBL is not the pedagogy of choice as they can't associate it to their children's academic success and primary school-readiness. The findings of this study have significantly contributed to the existing literature on play-based learning in the context of early childhood education in Malaysia. The study has further added new perspectives on parents' perceptions of play-based learning instead of teachers and school administrators. This study hopes that future research can look into analysing parent-preschool partnerships in promoting strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful and engaged learning for all children at the early childhood education context.

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