

Conceptualizing Play based Learning Method for Students with Special Learning Needs

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Abstract

Effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on selection of the methods, strategies and activities carried out by teachers with students. Teaching and learning methods that can attract students will have a positive impact on students' achievement, especially students with special learning needs. This concept paper focuses on the context of the play-based learning method by discussing the definition and theory of this method for students with special learning needs. Through this discussion, it will provide an overview of the importance of using this method for students with special learning needs. The discussion on the importance of this method can be seen from the aspects of cognitive, language and communication proficiency as well as social skills of students with special learning needs. This concept paper can provide educators with the strategies used in play-based learning method for students with special learning needs. Indirectly, it also helps educators in diversifying teaching and learning methods in the classroom according to the suitability and level of their students.

Keywords: Learning Disability, Play-Based Learning, Special Education, Students With Special Learning Needs

Introduction

Students with special learning needs are students who are categorized as people with disabilities under the category of learning disability (Department of Welfare, 2020). In Malaysia, people with disabilities are locally known as OKU; an acronym for 'Orang Kurang Upaya' in Malay. The term is defined as individuals who have constraints from physical, mental, intellectual or sensory aspects in long term that make it difficult for them to interact and thus prevent them to participate effectively in the community (Persons with Disabilities Act, 2008). Among those included in the learning disability category are individuals with global developmental delay (GDD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, intellectual and specific learning disability such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia (Department of Welfare, 2020).

Students with disabilities often face difficulties in managing daily life, lack of focus, memory, gross and fine motor coordination, communication problems, antisocial, difficulties in understanding concepts and imagination (Ahmad & Latiff, 2015). As such, they need support and guidance from adults to manage their daily life. Their disabilities may affect their cognitive abilities that also affect language development, memory processing and interpreting skills.

As a result of the developmental problems, these children are more likely to show undesirable behaviours such as short attention span (Hai et.al., 2022). Limited attention span of students with special learning needs may cause difficulty in understanding the content of the lessons taught (Ali & Sahal, 2016). Thus, teachers need to be creative to increase students' participation in learning.

Conventional method is a teacher-centered, where the teacher gives explanation and students listen to the explanation (Sutomo, 2018). This conventional method could make students bored and unable to focus for long periods of time. Lecture-based method is less effective because there is limited engagement from students, especially students with special learning needs who often shy to interrupt lessons. The use of IQ Stick Game assessment model is found to improve the achievement of students with special learning needs compared to students who use conventional methods (Amiruddin et al., 2017). This indicates that quality teaching requires teachers' skills in adapting teaching methods to achieve learning objectives.

Thus, this concept paper is prepared to focus on the context of the play-based learning method by discussing the definition and concept of play-based learning for students with special learning needs. This concept paper also will discuss about the importance of this method for students with special learning needs. This concept paper will answer the following questions:

1. What is the definition of the play-based learning method?
2. What is the importance of the play-based learning method for students with special needs?

Definition of Play, Play-based Learning and Learning While Playing

The definition of play has been interpreted by many researchers through a variety of perspectives. Most of the definitions put forward focus on child development. According to Damanhuri (2017), play is a routine activity of children that allows them to master a skill comprehensively. The activity includes the way children manipulate knowledge about concrete objects in constructing new concepts and knowledge (Bakar et.al, 2019). Children learn through adventures and experiences that involve physical, cognitive and social components unconsciously, with and without being taught by adults. It is a symbolic activity performed by children voluntarily as well as benefiting by making them active children and producing a feeling of fun even though the game is quite difficult to carry out (Fromberg & Bergen, 2015). The desire to play comes from internal motivation and has its own rules that need to be followed either implicitly or explicitly. Play is also defined as a repetitive activity performed by children so as to produce a sense of happiness, fun and satisfaction (Fadlillah, 2017). Play is a routine activity of children that allows them to master skills holistically without them realizing it (Bodrova, 2008). It is a way for children to develop through their experiences while interacting with each other.

Play-based learning method means that students play while they are learning (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). This method is a learning activity carried out by children where they do play activities planned by the teacher but at the same time, they are learning a skill, processing

information, showing talent and presenting themselves without realizing they are learning some skill or knowledge (Bakar et.al., 2019). In addition, this method is also said to be a method that manipulates play activities while teachers are teaching to achieve curriculum objectives (Ali et al., 2018). While students are playing, they are not aware that they are learning a skill or concept such as the basics of mathematics while they are dancing or playing geometric blocks (UNICEF, 2018). As students play with geometric blocks, they are understanding the concept where two rectangular blocks will form a rectangle. The same goes for dancing activities where they perform activities of stepping forward, backward, clapping and repeating with a count. This repetition makes them learn and understand the basics in mathematics without realizing it. Learning while playing is a situation that exists when the method of playing while learning is carried out where students can learn something when they play (UNICEF, 2018). Examples of learning while playing are when students play, they learn to make plans and move according to the plans made, learn from trial and error, use imagination and learn to solve problems and many more.

Theory of Play

There are several theories about the method of play. Based on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, play is able to activate the brain, move and balance the use of the right and left brain, form neural structures, and develop nerve cells (Erfayliana, 2016). When children play, they do not learn something new yet they learn to practice and incorporate the skills they know (Fadlillah, 2017). Children learn through experience, interaction and information obtained.

Lev Vygotsky's theory is known as social cognitive theory. According to Vygotsky, children's development is influenced by play activities and relationships between children and adults or more mature peers. The activities play an important role in a child's development because communication occurs when a child engages in this activity. The process during play supports the children acquire new knowledge (Hanly et al., 2019).

Freud's theory is closely related to individual emotions. Through play activities, children can release their stress to the maximum level. The triune brain theory was introduced by Dr. Paul Mclean. This theory deals with the relationship of brain function according to the parts of the brain. Through play activities, children will express the joy and satisfaction of playing. In turn, it moves the inside of the brain and makes children learn and think (Fadlillah, 2017).

The Concept of Play-Based Learning in Educational Context

Play is the most popular activity for students, including children with special learning needs. It can be said that this activity is one of the daily activities of children performed with joy and satisfaction without any coercion and at the same time, without them being aware of the activity this becomes a medium for them to learn new knowledge that helps them in the process of development and growth (Nachiappan et al., 2017). Referring to Jean Piaget's theory of play, play activities will activate the child's brain and in turn balance the use of the right and left brain so as to make the brain function properly. According to Jean Piaget again, through play activities, a child's neural structure can be formed and nerve cells can grow well (Erfayliana, 2016).

Play provides a picture of activities that students frequently perform without any coercion, are born of internal motivation and produce enjoyment (Daniels & Pyle, 2018). Therefore, teachers are advised to take advantage to conduct teaching and learning by educating students using the play-based learning method where students can grow their

brain and expand thinking through activities planned by teachers based on the school curriculum (Isa, 2021). Teaching and learning that uses the play-while-learning method does not give students the freedom to play independently alone but the activity must be guided by the involvement of the teacher during the activity (Hai et al., 2022).

Jean Piaget was a leading figure who introduced the theory of play. According to Jean Piaget through his theory of cognitive development states that while children play, they will apply and make exercises by combining existing skills (Fadlillah, 2017). This is because through play activities, children's brains will be activated. Through this activity as well, the child's brain can function well and is able to use the right and left brain in a balanced way. According to Jean Piaget again, through play activity nerve structures can be formed and nerve cells can grow well (Erfayliana, 2016). Children also learn something through interactions that take place with individuals around them, experience and new information.

The Importance of Play-Based Learning for Students with Special Learning Needs

Cognitive Level Improvement

Play is an activity that is synonymous with the children's world. So, if learning activities can be applied in games, learning will be more interesting and this leads to improved academic performance of children. Students with special learning needs can pronounce letters more when they learn to use word dice games compared to conventional techniques (Mohamed, 2005). Similarly, the findings of a study conducted by Carson and Sorin (2016) who found that students with special needs who used the clay play method were not only able to master spelling skills but also had high self-confidence to answer the questions given.

Through play activities, children will use creativity and at the same time, they build imagination, agility, physical, cognitive and emotional strength. This statement is in line with the study of Ali and Sahal (2016) who found that the use of origami as a game is not only able to increase the involvement of students physically and mentally but also able to improve imagination, logic and spatial skills.

Language and Communication Proficiency

The play-based learning method can improve student's language (Rashid & Mohamed, 2021) because when they play with their friends, they will interact with each other, discuss an issue, exchange opinions and stories, hold various characters like the leader and learn new words from their friends. The example of play activities that can encourage students to communicate are telematch, role play, games outside the classroom (Zainiah et al., 2021) and many more. During play activities, teachers act as facilitators in establishing communication between them and make reprimands if there are inappropriate words or language or pronunciation errors (Nachiappan et al., 2017).

Improving Social Skills

The use of play while learning is able to increase student concentration. This is because the interest in play is a child's natural instinct. Their inner motivation is already formed in them. Teachers just need to be creative in processing learning in the form of play. Children will feel excited, entertained, enthusiastic and in turn will increase their rate of focus on the activities carried out. Games that are run usually involve more than one student. While playing, children will go through a process of interaction with other friends. This will improve social skills among these students. This statement is in line with the study of Ali and Sahal (2016)

who found that through play-based learning method, it can increase student focus and improve social skills.

The fun of playing produces satisfaction in children. Through play activities, children can interact to the maximum not only with old friends but also new friends. Usually, students with special learning needs do not have a high interest in learning. However, if teachers successfully apply the play-based learning method, then learning will be more fun because students are not aware that they are learning. This can prevent children from feeling stressed and bored. This statement is in line with Freud Theory which states that in order to avoid depressed children, learning should be conducted in an interesting and enjoyable method.

Through play activities, children can interact and engage with the world around them. In turn, it will increase children's self-confidence in interacting with the surrounding community. Parents, teachers and nursery operators need to give the right to play to children because through play activities, children will learn and imagine (Nachiappan et al., 2017). This in turn will develop their potential in terms of physical, emotional, language and social.

Discussion

This concept paper has explored in general about the play-based learning method through its definition, theory and importance to students with special learning needs. This method is seen to provide many benefits to students with special learning needs and also suitable to be applied in producing fun and effective learning. The importance of this method can be seen from the aspect of improving cognitive level, language and communication proficiency as well as improving children's social skills. As a result of the discussion, it has provided answers to the two research questions stated in this concept paper. The explanation given will give an understanding to teachers in applying this method to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This is further emphasized in the Curriculum and Assessment Standards Document which states that this method is one of the appropriate strategies to increase interest and enjoyment of learning through activities of exploration, discovery and building understanding based on experience and fun. This in turn stimulates the cognitive level and creates curiosity, mastery of thinking and psychomotor skills as well as emotional handling skills. There are several features of the play-based learning method that are emphasized in DSKP that the activities carried out must be fun, involve exploration and interaction with the environment, free and planned play, time flexibility, experimentation of own ideas, opportunity to focus and attention.

Overall, it is found that studies on the play-based learning method for special learning needs in Malaysia are still in a minimal level especially in developing innovations that using the play-based learning method. Therefore, it is suggested that further research related to the new innovation that use the play-based method for students with special needs is conducted to test the level of effectiveness to be used as a guide by special education teachers.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the play-based learning method is found to be very practical method to be used for children with special learning needs. The play-based learning method means that children learn while performing play activities (Fromberg & Berge, 2015). This method is a teaching method where children carry out play activities and at the same time, they process new information and skills as well as hone their abilities and skills (Isa, 2021). The selection of appropriate teaching and learning methods by using techniques that can attract students will

have a positive impact and increase their level of achievement, especially for students with special learning needs. Through this method, various play activities can be carried out and in turn give a good effect to students with special needs not only from a cognitive point of view, but also affective and psychomotor children also increase (Rashid & Mohamed, 2021). Coinciding with the natural characteristic of children who love to play, this activity is rationally applied in teaching and learning in providing fun, satisfaction and at the same time they acquire new knowledge (UNICEF, 2018).

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