

A Case Study on the Use of Play-based Learning in a Malaysian Preschool

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Abstract

Although learning through play was practiced nearly a century ago by many educators, the use of play-based learning in Malaysia is only emphasized when the National Preschool Curriculum Standard was made compulsory in 2010. Play is essential for children's learning as it provides a valuable opportunity for the development of meaningful learning, expansive knowledge, universal skills, imagination, creativity, and enjoyment. There is a need for more research on play-based learning activities in Malaysian preschools to provide more recorded evidence of its use and effectiveness. This qualitative study using observation and interview methods to three preschool teachers teaching children at the age of three and four years old intended to answer three objectives: the type of play frequently employed by teachers in their classrooms, teachers' views on using play in their classrooms and teachers' resources on designing lessons for children. It was found that dramatic play is rated highest in the type of play favoured by teachers, all teachers observed have positive views on the use of play in the classroom and lastly, teachers' resources came from observing the children's play interest closely, through readings and the internet. Teachers' positive perception and implementation of play-based learning are shaped by their professional background, including their experience, knowledge, education level, and the support they receive from the school's principal.

Keywords: Case Study, Play-Based Learning, Preschool, Sociocultural, Types Of Play

Introduction

Research has shown that play is a vital and essential activity during early childhood development (Johnson et al., 2019; Kessel, 2018). This highlights the significance of incorporating play-based learning approaches in education, as it fosters a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Pediatricians have acknowledged play as a salient component in healthy brain development and it comes naturally to almost all children (Gudritz, 2016). Imagination begins to develop through play and before play there is no imagination Vygotsky (1967) as cited is (Spodek et. al., 1989). Imagination contributes to creativity, abstract thinking and curiosity which are important aspects in learning. The process of movement while playing helps develop fine and gross motor skills which are important for the action of holding crayon or pencil and jumping or running (Isenberg and Quisenberry,

2002; Isenberg and Jolongo, 1997). Language and socialization skills can also be enhanced through play. Children would learn to communicate emotions, to think, be creative and solve problems throughout the process (Orr, 2022; Puteh and Ali, 2013). Other benefits of play include promoting healthy interpersonal relationships and high self-esteem (Pyle & Daniels, 2017).

In a culture (i.e. Malaysia) where academic excellence is viewed as important, more and more parents are stressing their children to maximize their academic potential since the first years of life (Yakimir, 2019). Concerned parents would train their children to read and write at younger ages. Worst, teachers are pressured to prepare the children for school while the child is in preschool or kindergarten (Kassim, et. al, 2015). Although it is correct that children who have mastered academic skills at a young age tend to perform better especially in language acquisition during their initial years of formal schooling (McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, and Levitt, 2006), there are numerous evidence that demonstrate how children who are less proficient can eventually catch up and perform just as well as the "excellent" children in later years of schooling. When children are coerced into learning certain skills at an early age, it goes against their natural state of learning, and they are compelled to memorize information through tedious drilling and conditioning methods that can negatively affect their overall learning experience (Reikerås, and Dahle, 2022).

Play-based learning allows children to explore, inquire, and discover independently, making knowledge more meaningful. It enables them to develop broad knowledge, universal skills, imagination, and creativity while enjoying the activity. (Bubikova-Moan, Næss-Hjetland and Wollscheid, 2019; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

In Malaysia, the implementation of play-based learning is gaining recognition and attention in the field of early childhood education. However, research on the topic (i.e. San and Hui, 2020; Abu Bakar et al., 2019; Chin, 2017) in Malaysia is still limited (San and Hui, 2020). All of this research highlighted the benefits of play-based approaches in promoting children's holistic development and enhancing their learning outcomes.

San and Hui (2020) investigated the practice of play-based learning among three Chinese-ethnic teachers in a private preschool. The researchers used a case study design to examine the relationship between knowledge, attitude, and practice of play-based learning among the teachers. The findings, based on self-report ratings and observations, showed that teachers' knowledge had a greater influence on their implementation of play-based learning compared to their attitude. It is essential to improve teachers' understanding of play-based learning to effectively integrate it into their teaching. Insufficient knowledge of play-based learning may lead teachers to perceive play and learning as separate and believe that play hinders learning. A study conducted by Abu Bakar et al. (2019) investigated the implementation of play-based learning in Malaysian preschool classrooms. The study found that play-based approaches facilitated children's engagement, creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions. It also emphasized the importance of supportive environments, well-trained teachers, and appropriate play materials in optimizing the effectiveness of play-based learning.

Another research study by Chin (2017) explored the perspectives of Malaysian preschool teachers on play-based learning. The findings revealed that teachers recognized the value of play in children's learning and development. They highlighted the role of play in fostering cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills among preschoolers. However, the study also identified challenges, such as limited resources and pressure to conform to academic demands, that hindered the full implementation of play-based approaches.

In order to add more evidence on the implementation of play-based learning in Malaysian preschools, this study employing a qualitative methodology aims to answer the following questions

1. What is the type of play frequently used by preschool teachers in their classrooms?
2. What are their perceptions on the use of play in the process of teaching and learning?
3. What are the resources that teachers used in designing play-based activities?

Literature Review

Types of play preferred by teachers

Preschool classrooms teachers often utilize various types of play to facilitate children's learning and development. There are several types of play commonly observed in preschool settings. Pretend or dramatic play, for example, involves children engaging in imaginative scenarios and taking on different roles, such as pretending to be doctors or superheroes. This type of play allows children to exercise their creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions (Lee & Stieglitz-Ham, 2021). Creative play, another prevalent type, involves activities that encourage artistic expression, such as drawing, painting, and sculpting. It fosters children's fine motor skills, self-expression, and imagination (Vu, 2020). Additionally, physical play, including running, jumping, and climbing, is crucial for children's gross motor development, coordination, and overall physical health (Ginsburg, 2007). Manipulative play, which involves manipulating objects and materials like puzzles, blocks, and construction sets, supports children's cognitive development, problem-solving abilities, and fine motor skills (Dundar, 2018).

Teachers' perceptions on play-based learning

Teachers' perceptions of using play in learning within preschool classrooms have garnered significant attention in recent literature. Research suggests that teachers generally hold positive views regarding the incorporation of play in early childhood education. They perceive play as a valuable and effective approach for promoting children's holistic development, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains (Wong, 2020). Teachers recognize that play allows children to actively engage in the learning process, explore their interests, and develop critical skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and communication (Shaw, 2018). Furthermore, teachers perceive play as a means to foster positive relationships among children and between children and teachers, enhancing the overall classroom atmosphere and creating a supportive learning environment (Suh, 2019).

Resources in designing play-based activities

Designing play-based activities in early childhood education requires the thoughtful selection and utilization of appropriate resources to support children's learning and engagement during play. One study emphasizes the importance of providing open-ended materials, such as loose parts and natural materials, which allow children to manipulate and explore in creative and imaginative ways (Linder, 2019). These resources promote problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and encourage children to take ownership of their play experiences. One study emphasizes the importance of teachers' understanding of child development and learning theories in designing play-based experiences that align with children's developmental needs (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2019). Teachers who possess knowledge about different types of play, such as pretend play, constructive play, and socio-dramatic play, can effectively choose resources that support and extend these play experiences, fostering children's creativity, problem-solving, and social skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2019; Marjanovič-Umek et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers' own experiences and reflections on play-based activities contribute to

their resource selection process. These experiences provide insights into the effectiveness of specific resources, materials, and play setups, enabling teachers to refine their practices and make informed decisions regarding resource selection (Marjanovič-Umek et al., 2019).

Theories on the Effect of Play on Young Children's Learning

Play is a vital component of young children's learning experiences, and its impact on their development has been extensively studied. Piaget's cognitive theory provides a foundation for understanding the cognitive benefits of play in young children. According to Piaget (1962), play allows children to actively construct knowledge, develop problem-solving skills, and understand abstract concepts through hands-on exploration and experimentation. Through play, children engage in symbolic representation, imaginative thinking, and creative problem-solving, promoting cognitive development (Piaget, 1962).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further illuminates the social and cultural dimensions of play and its influence on young children's learning. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interactions and guided play in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where children can engage in activities just beyond their current level of understanding with the support of more knowledgeable others. Play provides opportunities for children to engage in collaborative learning, develop language skills, and internalize cultural norms and values through shared play experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Research based on these theoretical frameworks has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of play on various domains of young children's learning. For instance, Hughes (2009) found that play supports the development of social skills, including communication, cooperation, and perspective-taking. Play also enhances problem-solving abilities, as children engage in imaginative scenarios that require them to think flexibly and devise creative solutions (Hughes, 2009). Additionally, play has been shown to foster the development of executive functions, such as self-regulation, working memory, and attention control (Diamond, 2012).

Contemporary theories on play, such as the ecological systems theory, recognize the multi-faceted influences on young children's learning through play. This theory emphasizes the interactions between the child, the environment, and the social context in which play occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It acknowledges that play occurs in various settings, including homes, schools, and communities, each with unique affordances and constraints. The ecological systems perspective highlights the importance of providing diverse play opportunities and supportive environments that engage children's interests, foster social interactions, and align with cultural and societal values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Methodology

Research setting

The research setting, which is a private preschool in Damansara South, Selangor was identified through a purposive sampling technique. This preschool was chosen as the research setting because the center uses play in the process of teaching and learning in their classroom. The owner cum the principal received her Master in Education Degree in Early Childhood Education from a university in the United States (US). Her training there has reflected in the preschool she set up. There are five classrooms in the center for children aged 3 to 6. All the classrooms are equipped with designated area for play and play paraphernalia. Teachers are given the freedom to design their own lessons using the National Preschool Curriculum Standard and the modules the principal have designed as guideline. Parents of the children

attending this preschool are mostly in the socio-economic status of upper middle class and upper class.

Participants

All the teachers chosen in this study were female, aged between 25 to 35 years old. One respondent, i.e., Teacher Sara (25 years old) graduated with a Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Second respondent, Teacher Anita (27 years old) possessed a Degree in Business Administration and finally Teacher Maria (35 years old) graduated at SPM level. Teacher Maria has been teaching for 11 years while Teacher Sara and Teacher Anita both have less than 5 years of teaching experience. All of them are qualified to teach in Early Childhood setting after passing the Kursus Asas PERMATA (minimum certificate requirement for teachers teaching children under 4 in Malaysia).

Research Design

This research informed by qualitative study utilized observation and interview as the medium of data collection. Upon getting consent from the school's principal, three preschool teachers teaching three- and four-year-old children were interviewed and observed in four weeks duration, during which a total of fifteen observations were conducted across the three preschool classes. Each class was observed for three hours a day, resulting in a three-week observation period. The first week was dedicated to familiarizing the researcher with the setting and the respondents.

To mitigate disturbance to the natural setting and behaviors of the participants, the researcher used naturalistic observation method. According to Creswell (2013), naturalistic observation is "a method where the researcher observes individuals in their natural setting and records what they do, say, or how they interact with others" (p. 228). The purpose of naturalistic observation is to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon or behavior in its natural context, allowing researchers to observe and describe events as they naturally unfold. To conduct a naturalistic observation in this study, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom with minimal interaction with the children and teacher observed. Observations were documented through field notes and a set of checklists.

After each observation, an informal interview was conducted with the teachers involved. Informal interviews were used to create a comfortable and non-threatening environment where participants feel free to express themselves openly, leading to rich and detailed data (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), informal interviews are "casual conversations with participants, usually involving open-ended questions, in which the researcher allows the conversation to wander in order to probe for information or gather opinions and perspectives" (p. 84). Each preschool teacher was interviewed for ten to fifteen minutes to gather their views on the use of play in the preschool classroom and the resources they utilized. The interviews were audio recorded (with participants' consent) for further reference.

Findings and Discussion

Types of play frequently used in preschool classroom

Utilizing observation and checklists as the research instruments, it was discovered that most teachers in the classroom exhibit a preference for incorporating dramatic play, followed by creative play, physical play, and lastly followed by manipulative play.

It was observed in Teacher Sara's class that she would let the students to just run free and play whatever they want to play. Children mostly do pretend play for all the paraphernalia in the classroom are suitable for that. Teacher Sara has set up several stations that were labeled as post office, clinic, house and restaurant. The teacher has set up a "mini-town" in the classroom for children to play. Children can choose to go to any station and would role-play with their classmates e.g., as doctors, restaurant owner, waiter, etc. Around 10 am, there will be a circle time in which in five observations, the teacher has chosen physical play as the activity in which the children were taken outside to play in the playground around. Therefore, the most frequent play used in this classroom is dramatic play because it is always in classroom one for the children to experience.

In Teacher Anita's class, she was found to also been using dramatic play as everyday activity. Here, the children were seen wearing pirate hats, eye patches because the theme of the week was pirates. There was also a wooden boat for the children to play. Later, during circle time, the teachers used creative play for three consecutive days that I observed for they are decorating the classroom to look more like pirate themed. Children were asked to make the ocean by using watercolours, cut shapes of pirate hats and eye patches.

As for Teacher Maria, her class is a balance between all types of play. In this classroom, there is one station that is dedicated for dramatic play (with kitchen sets, and dolls, and dresses), another section is for manipulative play where I can see there are Lego sets and blocks. And there is a writing center where children can do colouring, write letters, etc. The children are allowed to experience physical play three times a week.

These findings resonate with research by Lee and Stieglitz Ham (2021) in which they found that almost all teachers of young children they observed prefer using dramatic play in facilitating learning. Perhaps the knowledge and training these teachers received through experience and education has contributed to their preference in using dramatic play. Many teachers in Malaysia with proper training understand the need to introduce this type of play to the children they are teaching (San and Hui, 2020).

Teachers Perception on using play in learning

Responses from the three teachers indicated that they perceived play as a process of learning and developing. Teacher Maria in one of the interview sessions mentioned that "Through play children discover and construct an appreciation about the world around them." Sara mentioned that "Through play, children create new experiences, learn to cooperate, interact and learn from each other." Therefore, it can be summarized that through play children learn to tolerate each other and learn how to be a member of a group, work together as one unit. Teacher Anita saw play as a good medium to develop social skills: "In my opinion, play helps increase self-esteem and self-concept for the children are always 'somebody' in the play." Similarly, Sara explained, "Play gives children the chance to learn to interact with others and to develop children's emotions and nurtures their curiosity, that will eventually turn into scientific enquiry."

Respondents' perceptions on play as a process of learning corresponded well with the widely held view that play is the best mode for children to learn and to develop a positive classroom environment (Wong, 2020; Suh, 2019; Morrison, 2009; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2004). Kieff and Casbergue (2000) state that "play is certainly not the only way children learn, but it has been demonstrated repeatedly that it is an effective way of learning" (p. 18).

Findings on this research objective also supports Vygotsky (1978) theory in which children's play is an early form of creativity; play is creative when it remakes or reinvents past experiences into new realities rather than simply reproducing reality. Vygotsky (1978) stated that imagination is the internalization of children's play, that creativity exists when one's imagination combines, changes, and creates something new, and that imagination is the basis for any creative activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

Resources in designing play-based activities

In finding resources to create play-generated lessons, Sara mentioned, "I would observe what the children are playing with their friends. From there you can see what they are interested in". Anita responded similarly too, "The children in my classroom are active in coming up with new ideas on what to play. Once they were really interested in superhero, so we had a superhero party to appreciate this". While according to Mary, "Teachers must be observant in the classroom. It is important to be aware of what the children are interested in. Therefore, you can design activities based on this. It is important to cherish their interest because that will spark their interest in learning."

Apart from observing the children, teachers also mentioned that they would refer to various websites and books to find new ideas in how to enhance the children's play experience. For example, in Anita's class, since the children are very interested in pirates after finishing the book 'Peter pan', Anita decided to enhance this experience by adding class decoration, teach students to make pirate hats, encourage their drawing skills by asking them to color and draw the ocean, etc. She manages to generate the idea by referring to a website especially for early childhood teaching and learning.

All the respondents agree that the education, training and experience they received have help them tremendously in thinking about how to design play and incorporate play in their classrooms. The principal's reviews and insights on the lessons they designed helped them to understand better on how to implement play-based learning.

This shows that play by itself may be less meaningful without the teachers' effort and guidance to enhance the experience. Play should not just be perceived as children just playing around without any learning going on. Teachers' knowledge in child development and experience as explained by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2019) are salient in designing a meaningful play-based learning experience for the children. Without proper training and understanding on the different types of play and making reflection while observing children at play (Marjanovič-Umek et al., 2019) play-based learning will be hard to implement. Since all teachers observed received proper training on play through workshops organized by the principal, have more than five years' experience working at the preschool, and one teacher (Sara) has a Diploma in Early Childhood Education, it can be assumed that all these factors have made it is possible for them to be bring in a meaningful play-based learning experience for the children they are teaching.

Implication of the Study

This research hopefully will contribute to adding to the literature of how preschool teachers perceive play in enhancing children's learning. This research revealed the type of play frequently used in a preschool classroom and teachers' resources in designing play-based activities were also examined. Perhaps by understanding all these, suggestions on effective ways to implement play in the classroom could be made.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that teachers showed a strong preference for dramatic play as the most favoured type of play. Furthermore, all observed teachers held positive perspectives on the incorporation of play in the classroom. Lastly, teachers sourced their resources from closely observing the children's play interests, as well as from readings and online materials. Teachers' experience, knowledge, education level and support from the school's principal influenced teachers' positive perception and implementation of play-based learning.

In future, it would be interesting to know what are the challenges that teachers faced in designing the lesson, what are parents' perception regarding play-based activities? Do they view play as learning or just as "play"? What are the strategies used by teachers to ensure everyone in the classroom cooperate while implementing play-based activities in the classroom (classroom management). What type of dramatic play toys is in the classroom and how can it develop social construction?

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