

Play-Based Learning in Malaysian Early Childhood Education: A Study of Diploma Students' Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

Play is natural and essential to childhood (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). This is important to children as play helps them to develop important skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and communication skills (Faiz Fauzi, 2022). Play-based learning is a teaching method that emphasizes play and promotes children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development through activities that spark imagination and curiosity. Play is significant in early childhood education in Malaysia nowadays as it is essential to prepare young children's minds for lifetimes of learning. The implementation of play-based learning is gaining momentum in early childhood education in Malaysia, with its integration into the curriculum. This research employs a qualitative case study approach to delve into and observe the perspectives and challenges encountered by diploma students. Through purposive sampling, participants were selected from various early childhood education diploma programs from UOW Malaysia KDU College and UNITAR International University, ensuring a comprehensive representation of perspectives and experiences. By shedding light on the viewpoints of these future educators, this study will contribute to the ongoing discussion on early childhood education in Malaysia, paving the way for a more informed and effective approach to early learning. The findings revealed significant insights into three primary areas of concern. First, implementation challenges emerged, predominantly centered around resource constraints, time management difficulties, and varying levels of parental support. Second, the study identified gaps in educator preparedness, highlighting the need for enhanced training in play-based teaching methodologies and challenges in assessment practices. Third, institutional support varied considerably, with limited professional development opportunities and a need for clearer implementation guidelines. These findings collectively underscore the complex interplay of factors affecting successful play-based learning implementation in Malaysian early childhood settings. Building upon these findings, several directions for future research emerge as crucial for advancing understanding in this field.

Keywords: Play-Based Learning, Malaysia Early Childhood Education, Benefit, Challenges, Play, Perception

Introduction

Play is natural and essential to childhood (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). This is important to children as play helps children to develop important skills such as problem-solving skills, creativity skills, and social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and communication skills (Faiz Fauzi, 2022). Therefore, play-based learning is introduced not just because it's fun, but because it's a powerful tool that promotes holistic child development, prepares children for future success, and makes learning joyful and engaging.

Play-based learning is a teaching method that emphasizes play and promotes children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development through activities that spark imagination and curiosity. These activities can be structured or unstructured, indoor or outdoor, and can include pretend play, tag games, board games, hopscotch, singing nursery rhymes, and backyard play equipment. They help children develop new skills, take risks, solve problems, and practice self-regulation, preparing them for school and life (Fauzi, 2022).

Play eases learning by reinforcing and extending a child's learned knowledge and skills through naturalistic interactions with other individuals and environments in his/her surroundings (Ashiabi, 2007; Kheioh & Low, 2021). In play-based learning, it is important to balance child-initiated and teacher-directed activities to improve a child's learning experience (Kheioh & Low, 2020).

Play-based learning has become a foundational element in early childhood education, acknowledged for its effectiveness in nurturing comprehensive child development. Its focus on exploration, creativity, and social engagement is in harmony with the core tenets of child-centered pedagogy. In Malaysia, the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework (NECECF) underscores the significance of play as an essential element in young children's educational journeys. Play become more important in early childhood education in Malaysia nowadays. This is because play plays an essential role in preparing young children's minds for lifetimes of learning. Approaches used in early childhood education are important to help children develop in different domains which include cognitive, social, emotional, and creative domains. Moreover, play-based learning has been included in the curriculum of Malaysia in early childhood education. The curriculum that includes play-based learning is the National Preschool Curriculum and the curriculum implemented in childcare centers is named *PERMATA* curriculum.

Play-based learning has been integrated into early childhood education curricula in Malaysia, including the *PERMATA* curriculum for childcare centers and the National Preschool Curriculum for preschool. The National Preschool Curriculum was revised in 2017 with an emphasis on developing 21st-century abilities including creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving as well as holistic education. A key component of the curriculum is play-based learning, which is described as an approach that provides children with a beneficial, secure, and meaningful learning experience. Similarly, the *PERMATA* curriculum emphasizes the importance that play-based learning as an essential component of activities, which allows children to discover, try new things, and cultivate their curiosity.

Play-based learning has been included in both the national preschool curriculum and the *PERMATA* curriculum, but limited study has been done to understand how early childhood

education diploma students view play-based learning along with the advantages and difficulties they identify in it. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of play-based learning significantly relies on the knowledge and competencies of early childhood educators. Diploma programs, serving as the primary avenue for numerous aspiring educators, play a pivotal role in shaping their comprehension and application of this approach. Despite the expanding body of research on play-based learning, there remains a scarcity of studies examining the perspectives and obstacles encountered by diploma students within this domain.

This study is driven by the objective of determining the perception of diploma students of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education and determines the challenges that diploma students identify in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education. This study is focused on the perceptions of diploma students who major in early childhood education. This study aims to contribute to the discussion on the effectiveness of play-based learning and identify the possibility of the future early childhood educator in implementing play-based learning in early childhood education.

Problem Statement

Play-based learning is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of exemplary early childhood education, nurturing comprehensive child development through exploration, creativity, and social interaction. In addition, it is fundamental to children's development, and play-based learning is an idea that has its roots in early childhood education (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). The Malaysian National Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework (NECECF) underscores the importance of play in children's educational journey (Shah et.al, 2022). Nonetheless, a critical gap exists in comprehending the challenges encountered by diploma students when translating this theoretical framework into effective practice in preschool settings.

There is a study conducted by San Li Kheioh and Hui Min Low in 2020 on Malaysian teachers' perspectives on play-based learning in preschools has analyzed different perspectives on play-based learning in Asian preschools and Malaysian preschools. However, with the rapidly growing research on play-based learning, studies that focus on the experiences and views of pre-service early childhood educators in Malaysia are limited. This lack of knowledge prevents the formulation of adapted support systems and improvements to the curriculum to equip diploma students with the essential skills to implement game-based learning successfully.

The insufficient readiness of diploma students to orchestrate high-quality play-based encounters carries implications for the overall standard of early childhood education in Malaysia. In the absence of ample support and guidance, these forthcoming educators may face difficulties in cultivating enriching play-based environments, potentially influencing children's developmental outcomes. Hence, there is a pressing necessity to explore the specific hurdles faced by diploma students in enacting play-based learning and to pinpoint effective strategies to tackle these challenges.

Study that compared kindergarten teachers in Germany and Hong Kong and found some significant differences. Play and learning are different from one another in Hong Kong.

Preschool teachers in Hong Kong frequently use teacher-led instruction and place a high priority on the development of academic knowledge and abilities. With play being viewed as a reward after academic work and lasting less than 30 minutes in a normal half-day session, this strategy may lead to limited playtime (Kheioh & Low, 2021).

On the other hand, since 2003, Malaysian preschools have been using the National Preschool Curriculum, which emphasises comprehensive education and development (Kheioh & Low, 2021; Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003). Additional focus has been placed on 21st-century abilities, such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and leadership, in the curriculum revisions that occurred in 2010 and 2017 (Kheioh & Low, 2021; Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2016).

The revised versions of the national preschool curriculum in 2017 are focused on holistic education and development and are in line with the goals of the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013 – 2025. The revised version of the national preschool curriculum is focused on mastering 21st-century skills such as critical thinking skills creativity problem-solving skills and leadership (Kheioh & Low, 2021). Meanwhile, the national preschool curriculum has listed a few strategies that can be used in delivering lessons at preschools and one of them is play-based learning. Play-based learning in the national preschool curriculum revised versions in 2017 are defined as a plan and structure to provide pupils with opportunities to learn in a free and safe environment that is enjoyable and meaningful. According to the National Preschool Curriculum 2017, play is a natural behavior of pupils, and play will allow pupils to explore, make discoveries, and naturally build experiences. Therefore, the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language developments and the child's potential are enhanced and maximized (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017).

Preschool teachers in Malaysia have responded well to these revisions, but they have also mentioned difficulties with teaching aids and striking a balance between play and direct academic instruction (Abdul Rahman & Wan Mohamad Noor, 2018; Aquino, Mamat & Mustafa, 2017; Kheioh & Low, 2021).Moreover, there is also a focus on play-based learning in the PERMATA curriculum. PERMATA curriculum is a curriculum established for the childcare center to use and this is mandatory to be implemented in every childcare center. This curriculum has also listed a few teaching and learning strategies to use in the lessons or activities in the childcare centers. However, play-based learning is the basis of all the activities and the best strategies to use according to the PERMATA curriculum. Play-based learning allows children to explore, ask, try, experiment, and develop their curiosity (Bahagian PERMATA, 2013).

Parents' viewpoints and the educational system both have an impact on the challenge of integrating play-based learning in early childhood education in Asia (Abdullah et al., 2017; Grieshaber, 2016; Kheioh & Low, 2021). In Malaysia, parents frequently have high expectations for their preschool-aged children to master the 4Ms (*Mengira, Menaakul, Membaca, Menulis*)— counting, thinking, reading, and writing to get them ready for formal education in primary schools (Abdullah et al., 2017; Kheioh & Low, 2021). According to Wong and Fler (2013), some Malaysian parents may be unwilling to link play with learning, reflecting the views of some Asian parents who prioritize academic growth above play (Kheioh & Low, 2021). Parental perspectives that separate play from learning arise from cultural and

educational views, such as the influence of Confucian ideology, which links play to a negative effect on learning outcomes (Kheioh & Low, 2021; Leung, 2011).

Despite the burgeoning research on play-based learning, studies concentrating on the experiences and viewpoints of pre-service early childhood educators in Malaysia are limited. This knowledge scarcity impedes the formulation of tailored support systems and enhancements to the curriculum to equip diploma students with the essential skills to implement play-based learning successfully. The insufficient readiness of diploma students to orchestrate high-quality play-based encounters carries implications for the overall standard of early childhood education in Malaysia. In the absence of ample support and guidance, these forthcoming educators may face difficulties in cultivating enriching play-based environments, potentially influencing children's developmental outcomes. Hence, there is a pressing necessity to explore the specific hurdles faced by diploma students in enacting play-based learning and to pinpoint effective strategies to tackle these challenges.

Significance of the Study

For various reasons, understanding the perspectives and challenges diploma students face in implementing play-based learning holds significant importance. Firstly, by pinpointing the factors impacting their teaching practices, this study can guide the creation of tailored support programs and professional development initiatives. These initiatives can enhance their ability to establish engaging and effective play-based learning environments.

Secondly, the insights derived from this research can enhance diploma programs in early childhood education by highlighting the knowledge and skills essential for future educators to adeptly implement play-based learning. This could lead to improvements in the curriculum and more efficient pedagogical training. In essence, by equipping diploma students to become proficient and self-assured practitioners of play-based learning, this research contributes to elevating the overall standard of early childhood education in Malaysia. By fostering a deeper comprehension of the factors influencing the successful integration of play-based learning, this study can influence policy decisions and support the establishment of a solid educational foundation for children's lifelong learning.

While research consistently highlights the advantages of play-based learning for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Waite-Jones, 2020), there is a significant lack of studies specifically delving into the perspectives and challenges faced by diploma students in implementing this approach in Malaysian preschools. Existing research has predominantly focused on the outcomes of play-based learning for children (Low, H. M., 2022) or the use of play-based learning in Malaysian Preschool (Radzi et al., 2023). As a result, the experiences and expertise of pre-service educators, who play a pivotal role in early childhood education, have remained largely unexplored.

Through an exploration of diploma students' comprehension, attitudes, and hurdles linked to play-based learning, this study endeavours to bridge this crucial gap in the literature. By delving into these aspects, this research will contribute to a more thorough understanding of the factors influencing the effective integration of play-based learning in Malaysian early childhood environments.

This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating diploma students' understanding, attitudes, and challenges related to play-based learning. By examining their perspectives, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the successful integration of play-based learning in Malaysian early childhood settings.

Research Objective and Research Questions

Research Objective

This study aims

1. To determine the perception of diploma students of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education.
2. To investigate the challenges that diploma students identify in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education.

Research Question

The research question of this study is:

1. What are the diploma students' perceptions of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education?
2. What challenges do diploma students identify in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education?

Literature Review

The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education

Play is widely recognized as a crucial component of early childhood education, as extensive research has demonstrated its multifaceted benefits for young children's development. On the physical level, play allows children to develop and refine their gross and fine motor skills through engaging activities like running, jumping, climbing, and manipulating objects. Physical exertion and exploration during play contribute to the development of children's muscle strength, coordination, and overall physical well-being.

From a cognitive perspective, play-based learning provides children with opportunities to experiment, problem-solve, and make sense of the world around them. Through play, children build crucial cognitive skills such as memory, attention, language, and critical thinking, as they actively engage with their environment and construct knowledge (Vogt et al., 2020). Play also allows children to develop symbolic thinking, representational skills, and the ability to think abstractly - capacities that are essential for later academic success.

In the social and emotional domain, play facilitates children's interactions with their peers, teaching them to cooperate, share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts. During play, children develop important social-emotional skills, such as empathy, self-regulation, and emotional expression (Parker, et al., 2022). The sense of joy, accomplishment, and agency experienced through play also contributes to children's overall well-being and positive self-concept.

Given the extensive evidence on the multifaceted benefits of play, play-based learning has been widely adopted in early childhood education curricula around the world. Play-based pedagogies are recognized as effective approaches to promote the holistic development of

young children, addressing their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs. By positioning play at the centre of the learning process, early childhood education programs can support children's natural curiosity, creativity, and engagement, laying a strong foundation for their future academic and personal success.

Play Based Learning

Play-based learning is a teaching method that emphasizes play and promotes children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development through activities that spark imagination and curiosity. These activities can be structured or unstructured, indoor or outdoor, and can include pretend play, tag games, board games, hopscotch, singing nursery rhymes, and backyard play equipment. They help children develop new skills, take risks, solve problems, and practice self-regulation, preparing them for school and life (Faiz Fauzi, 2022).

Play has been emphasized in the classroom for nearly a century, and play-based learning is now widely accepted in Euro-American countries. This approach encourages active learning, independent thinking, problem-solving, socialization, and individual differences. Play is considered a rich resource for learning and is inseparable from a child's early years. The absence of play can hinder a person's development into a happy, healthy, and creative individual. Play helps young children learn cooperative skills, build knowledge through imitation, and learn new perspectives from trial and error (Kheioh & Low, 2021).

However, attention to play given in Hong Kong preschools is less. Hong Kong preschool teachers emphasize the importance of mastering academic skills and knowledge through teacher-led instruction. As a result, children are often occupied with non-play activities like homework, reading, and tidying up. Play is only allowed as a reward after the hard work of learning, which typically takes less than 30 minutes in a typical half-day session (Kheioh & Low, 2021; Wu, 2014).

Moreover, play-based learning is being implemented in early childhood centres like the Makkasan Child Development Centre in Bangkok to enhance children's social and cognitive development. The centre uses interactive activities, games, songs, and creative play under skilled teachers to teach basic English vocabulary. The Makkasan Centre emphasizes the importance of peer interaction, social skill development, and early education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach provides quality early education to low-income families and those facing difficulties, addressing educational inequalities and contributing to the holistic development of young children. Play-based learning can address educational inequalities and contribute to the holistic development of young children, aligning with the objectives of early childhood education (UNESCO, 2022).

Play-Based Learning in the Malaysian Context

The Malaysian national preschool curriculum has recognized the importance of play-based learning and child-centered approaches as crucial components of early childhood education. This policy-level emphasis on play-based pedagogies reflects the growing understanding among Malaysian education stakeholders of the holistic benefits of play for young children's development. However, research suggests that the actual implementation of play-based learning in Malaysian early childhood settings is often hindered by various challenges. Studies have highlighted how factors such as limited resources, lack of parental

and administrative support, and pressure to prioritize academic content can pose significant barriers to the effective adoption of play-based teaching practices in Malaysian preschools and childcare centers (Radzi et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, scholars have underscored the need for greater investment in play-based learning resources, as well as increased opportunities for professional development and capacity-building among early childhood educators in Malaysia. Providing teachers with the necessary support, training, and materials is crucial for empowering them to successfully implement play-based pedagogies and unlock the full potential of this approach in the Malaysian early childhood education context (Low, et al., 2022). Overcoming these implementation barriers is key to ensuring that the policy-level emphasis on play-based learning is translated into meaningful and impactful educational practices that benefit all young children in Malaysia.

Challenges of Play-Based Learning

Play is crucial for children's learning and development, fostering skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity, as well as social skills like cooperation and communication. It also provides a joyful learning experience, fostering a love for learning. However, the implementation of play-based learning in early childhood education in Asia is influenced by parents' perspectives on play and learning. In Malaysia, parents expect their children to master four skills, including reading, writing, counting, and thinking, in preschool as preparation for primary school. However, some Malaysian parents still believe that play does not align with learning. Hong Kong parents prefer to separate play and learning, believing that a playful environment will harm children's study and socio-emotional growth. This is heavily influenced by Confucian ideology, which views play as having a negative influence on learning determination. As a result, Asian parents tend to limit their children's playtime and materials and have limited interest in play. In general, Asian parents tend to focus more on academic development in their children, highlighting the importance of balance between play and learning in early childhood education (Kheioh & Low, 2021).

Despite positive comments about play-based learning in China, a disconnect emerged between teachers' espoused beliefs and their actual classroom practices. While two teachers acknowledged the benefits of play, their teaching styles demonstrated a more authoritarian approach. One teacher, who emphasized treating students equally, was observed to be highly directive in her teaching, dictating learning activities and demanding strict adherence to her instructions. This observation highlights the influence of traditional authoritarian-style teaching methods prevalent in Asian education systems. These methods often prioritize technical power and teacher-centered instruction over student-centered and play-based approaches. Addressing this dissonance requires a shift in teacher education. Emphasis should be placed on developing teachers' inner power, encouraging self-reflection, and promoting a collaborative approach to seeking support in navigating change. This would foster a deeper understanding of play-based learning and empower teachers to effectively implement it in the classroom (Kheioh & Low, 2021).

Play has been marginalized in primary schools in Malaysia due to a focus on academic achievement. There is limited playtime, and many schools undervalue play. Teachers often lack skills in planning, organizing, and utilizing materials for play activities. Perceptions of play-

based approaches vary based on school type, teacher qualifications, and experience. Additionally, there is a shortage of qualified preschool teachers in the country (Mostafa, M., 2023).

The data analysis revealed three main categories of obstacles to how teachers integrate play in the classroom: structured constraints, classroom management, and attitudinal constraints. Structured constraints included time, resources, budget, space, and staff training. Classroom management concerns were focused on children's behaviours and classroom composition. Attitudinal constraints related to parental expectations, collegial support, management support, and principal's/supervisor's expectations (Heang et al., 2021).

Perspectives of Early Childhood Education Students

There is research has been conducted on the practice of play-based learning in Malaysian Early Childhood Education from a preschool teacher's perspective. The study found significant variation in teacher practices regarding play-based learning in Malaysian preschools, with some embracing play-based learning and others remaining committed to teacher-directed instruction. Knowledge was a dominant factor influencing teachers' practice, with those with a stronger understanding implementing it more comprehensively, while others with limited knowledge did not. This highlights the need for teachers to have the necessary knowledge and training to effectively employ play-based learning. Attitude and cultural influences also played a role, with some teachers not aligning their practices with these attitudes due to a cultural perspective that often separates play and learning. The study emphasized the importance of knowledge in promoting effective practice, suggesting that teachers need a deeper understanding of various pedagogical approaches related to play-based learning, such as Montessori or Anji play methods (Kheioh & Low, 2021).

This research explores the perceptions of diploma students in Malaysia's early childhood education, focusing on play-based learning. Cultural perspectives often prioritize academic skills over play-based learning, affecting the approach to early childhood education. The research aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring diploma students' perceptions of play-based learning and the challenges they face in its implementation. This will provide valuable insights into the multifaceted landscape of early childhood education in Malaysia and provide a foundation for potential improvements in pedagogical strategies.

The beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers play a crucial role in shaping their teaching practices and approaches. Existing literature has explored the perspectives of early childhood education students on various aspects of their training and professional development, such as their perceptions of the curriculum, their interactions with mentors and peers, and their readiness for the classroom (Canaran, 2023). However, a notable gap in the research is the lack of specific examination of diploma students' views and challenges regarding the implementation of play-based learning in the Malaysian early childhood education context. Given that these diploma students are often on the frontlines of delivering educational services to young children, their perspectives and experiences can provide invaluable insights into the realities of applying play-based pedagogies in Malaysian preschools and childcare centers. Understanding diploma students' beliefs, concerns, and obstacles in adopting play-based learning approaches can help inform the design of teacher education programs, as well as the development of targeted support systems and resources

to empower these emerging professionals in effectively translating the policy-level emphasis on play-based learning into everyday classroom practices. Filling this research gap is crucial for bridging the disconnect between the national curriculum's emphasis on play-based learning and the actual implementation challenges faced by early childhood educators in Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The term self-determination refers to a person's ability to manage themselves, make confident choices, and think on their own (Deci, 1971; Lopez-Garrido, 2023). Self-determination theory (SDT) is a broad framework for understanding factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness, all issues of direct relevance to educational settings (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Self-determination is a theory that focuses on human motivation and personality, addressing both inherent growth tendencies and psychological needs. It plays a crucial role in an individual's overall well-being and psychological health by putting them in control and making them responsible for their actions. Self-determination also significantly impacts motivation, as individuals who believe they can manage themselves effectively are more likely to find motivation in their tasks. Therefore, self-determination is a vital aspect of personal growth and development (Lopez-Garrido, 2023).

SDT research focuses on intrinsic motivation, an expression of human nature's active integrative tendencies. It refers to activities done for their own sake or their inherent interest and enjoyment, such as play, exploration, and curiosity-spawned activities. These activities provide satisfaction and joy without external incentives or pressure, making intrinsic motivation likely responsible for most of human learning across the lifespan (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Applying SDT to early childhood education is essential to understanding how diploma students interact with play-based learning which is a crucial pedagogical strategy in Malaysian early childhood education.

In formal education, intrinsic motivation is significant in school achievement, with studies in Canada and Sweden showing consistent associations with higher performance. Additionally, intrinsic motivation predicts student engagement, which in turn predicts higher achievement. However, research from multiple countries suggests that intrinsic motivation tends to decline over the school years, particularly for school-related activities. This suggests that schools are not creating need-supportive contexts that foster this inner resource, which is supported by Gnambs & Hanfstingl's 2016 analysis showing that declines in intrinsic motivation are associated with decreasing psychological need satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The decrease in intrinsic motivation in school-related activities, particularly during the academic year, raises concerns that educational environments cannot always offer the support required to sustain this intrinsic motivation. Thus, while examining how diploma students perceive and interact with play-based learning, the decrease in intrinsic motivation in school-related activities becomes a crucial factor to consider.

By integrating this theory, the framework offers a comprehensive perspective to explore the intricate interplay of individual understanding, practical execution, and cultural context in shaping diploma students' viewpoints on and obstacles with play-based learning in

Malaysian early childhood education. This multifaceted theoretical approach enables a nuanced examination of how future educators navigate the intersection of modern educational concepts and cultural influences in their teaching practices.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework for investigating play-based learning in Malaysian early childhood education from the perspective of diploma students revolves around the dynamic interaction of understanding, implementation, and cultural context. Central to this framework is the acknowledgment that students' viewpoints and challenges are moulded by their theoretical comprehension and practical competencies related to play-based learning. This facet of understanding interacts with the implementation dimension, where students' assessments of the advantages and obstacles linked to play-based methods take centre stage. Importantly, these components are situated within the broader cultural landscape of Malaysia, where traditional values and contemporary educational methodologies may present contrasting influences on the perception and application of play-based learning.

The framework asserts that these three dimensions - understanding, implementation, and cultural context - are intricately linked and reciprocally influential. For example, a student's theoretical grasp of play-based learning could be influenced by cultural norms, while their stance on implementation challenges might be impacted by their level of practical proficiency. Through the examination of these interconnections, the framework seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how diploma students navigate the intricacies of play-based learning within the Malaysian milieu. Ultimately, the amalgamation of these factors is anticipated to shape the students' readiness for future engagement in early childhood education, serving as the primary outcome of interest in this conceptual model.

This inclusive approach enables researchers to delve into the multifaceted nature of students' encounters with play-based learning, considering both individual and societal aspects. It furnishes a framework for exploring how educational, practical, and cultural components converge to influence future educators' perspectives on and aptitude for implementing play-based learning strategies in Malaysian early childhood education environments.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the perception of diploma students of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education. Besides, this research also explores the challenges students face during the implementation of play-based learning. This chapter will discuss the research design, setting descriptions, data collection procedures, and data analysis processes.

This research has chosen qualitative case study research as the researcher wants to gain concrete and in-depth knowledge about the perception of play-based learning among students of Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Qualitative research provides a deep picture of the perception and challenges of implementation among diploma students. The approach used in this research is a case study. A case study is a general term used to describe an examination of an individual, a group, or a phenomenon. This is an in-depth and comprehensive description of the specific situation and its analysis (Nasri, U. 2023). The research method emphasizes case studies that focus on in-depth analysis of people, groups,

or activities that are directly related to the participants of this study. Therefore, this research employs qualitative research techniques to gather information following research questions.

Participants

This research aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of pre-service early childhood educators regarding play-based learning in Malaysia. Four Diploma in Early Childhood Education students from UOW Malaysia KDU College (Students A - P1, Students B - P2, Students C - P3, and Students D - P4) were chosen for this research. They are all Year 2 students currently enrolled in the subject 'Playing as Early Childhood Education Pedagogy.' Six Diploma in Early Childhood Education students who are from creative learning through play courses at UNITAR International University were also selected (P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10). This course specifically focuses on the importance of play as a teaching and learning strategy for young children, highlighting its vital role in fostering their development. All participants have undergone observation of play-based learning in early childhood settings during their studies, providing them with valuable first-hand experience and insights.

Data Collection Procedure

Interview

Qualitative research uses a variety of interview methods. This is to determine the challenges and to compile the teachers' in-depth perceptions. The interview used for this research was semi-structured. The semi-structured interview is a commonly used interview method in qualitative research, which enables researchers to obtain student perspectives during the interview process. Essentially, the interview will consist of open-ended questions that will allow the students to share their opinions in response to the selected topic. Rather than following the researchers' instructions, the questions are meant to spark conversation and exchange ideas about the research topic. The participants were subjected to interviews.

Data Analysis Procedure

Finding, analysing, and interpreting the themes and patterns in the data is the process of data analysis. The researchers identified themes and patterns in the data and how these contribute to addressing the research topic. The process of processing data for qualitative research involves several steps. Data organisation and preparation is the initial step. Transcripts of the interview have been created by the researchers.

The data was then examined and studied by the researchers. The information gathered from interviews was reviewed by the researchers. Using the gathered data, the researchers investigated the trends. Creating the data coding system and giving the data codes would be the following stage. To classify the data, researchers create a coding scheme (Bhandari P, 2020). Using Microsoft Word, researchers have examined interview conversations to create tables corresponding to each relevant research question.

Following that, researchers used codes to assess all of the interviewee responses and data. To find the recurring themes, researchers connected the codes to form an ordered structure and determined the main topics (Bhandari P, 2020). By using a coding system, the researcher was able to determine the main themes. Before moving on to the next phase, it has been examined by the next person. Then, the researchers examined and assessed the

data. The research's patterns and themes have been identified and interpreted using the use of thematic analysis (Bhandari P, 2020).

Findings

Research Question 1: What are the diploma students' perceptions of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education?

i) Holistic Development and Engagement

Holistic development refers to the growth of social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual, which focuses on all aspects of children's overall well-being and growth. In holistic development, it involves three processes which include biological, cognitive, and social-emotional. Biology refers to the changes in the body such as physical growth and brain development (What is Holistic Development?, 2022). Cognitive refers to thinking, intelligence, and language skills development. Meanwhile, social-emotional refers to the personality, emotions, and interpersonal connections of young children.

According to P1 and P3, play-based learning supports holistic development by providing opportunities for various aspects of development including problem-solving, social interaction, physical activity, and creativity. However, P4 also mentioned her perspective on play-based learning contributes to holistic development by making learning experiences more engaging and memorable.

"I think play-based helps foster children's development holistically. For example, it helps children with their problem-solving skills as play-based based provides an opportunity for exploring and experimenting. For example, during lessons, teachers can use games for children to understand a concept better. During games, it also increases social interactions between children."-P1

"From my perspective, cultural awareness is to help children to explore and understand their own culture and other culture and appreciate it by promoting respect and tolerance. Creativity is when children get to express themselves creatively and imaginatively fostering innovation and self-expression. Other than that, physical development is promoting gross motor skills by doing activities such as running, climbing and more, while fine motor skill is promoted by doing activities such as drawing, painting and manipulating small objects."-P3

"Play-based learning plays an important role in fostering the development of young children because it can help make a learning experience more memorable and enjoyable while still being educational ...With play-based learning, such as having a role-playing session with the children to teach them about the different occupations that exist and what each occupation does, children will better retain such information using the play-based method as they will have a more hands-on experience in learning about what each occupation does..."-P4

Meanwhile, P2 also shares and emphasizes her perception that play-based learning fosters holistic growth. This includes the excitement for learning, fostering problem-solving skills, and improved communication, especially when involving cooperative play.

“From my perspective, in Malaysian early childhood education, play-based learning is essential to supporting children's development since it encourages all-around growth, cultural awareness, and language learning. Benefits include increased excitement for learning, better problem-solving skills, and improved communication abilities through cooperative play.”

Holistic development emphasizes overall well-being and growth. Domains include social, emotional, physical, mental, and cognitive play an important role in holistic development. Overall, participants support the idea that play-based learning supports holistic development for young children by developing various domains and skills. Among the domains and skills shared by participants include problem-solving, social interactions, creativity, communication, etc. In general, participants view play-based learning as a comprehensive and engaging approach that supports various aspects of a child's development effectively.

Table 1

Perceptions on the Effectiveness and Benefits of Play-Based Learning for Young Children's Development?

PARTICIPANTS	The effectiveness and benefits of play-based learning for young children's development?
<i>Participants 5</i>	<i>In Malaysian early childhood education programs, play-based learning is seen as a powerful tool for young children's development. It's all about creating a fun and engaging environment where kids can learn through play. By allowing children to explore, imagine, and interact with their surroundings, play-based learning helps them develop important skills like problem-solving, creativity, and social interaction.</i>
<i>Participants 6</i>	<i>Personally, I think play-based learning is a very effective way at keeping young children engaged in learning and is better at getting them to explore and receive different experiences while learning. Unfortunately, I don't know or recognize any preschools or nurseries that effectively adopt the system in Malaysia.</i>
<i>Participants 7</i>	<i>Every play opportunity that children enjoy has the potential to provide important and worthwhile learning experiences that will help them in their understanding of their surroundings. Play-based learning helps children form a good mental connection between learning and having fun, in addition to increasing their exposure to new ideas and concepts.</i>
<i>Participant 8</i>	<i>Play-based learning is widely acknowledged as a developmentally appropriate method. Cognitive Skills, for example, play promotes creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving.</i>

Participant 9

Play-based learning encourages children to actively engage in hands-on activities, which support their active learning and the development of fine and gross motor skills.

Participant 10

Play encourages social interaction, empathy, and emotional regulation. Children learn to cooperate, negotiate, and develop important interpersonal skills.

Based on the perceptions of the students interviewed, P5-P10 agreed that play-based learning is an effective approach to the development of young children, offering various benefits across the cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and linguistic domains. For example, block play helps children develop spatial reasoning and problem-solving skills, while pretend play encourages symbolic thinking and creativity. Playing together allows children to practice communication, negotiation, and turn-taking, which are essential social skills. Through imaginative play, children can express their emotions, develop self-regulation skills, and learn to cope with different situations. By providing a holistic framework for development, play-based learning helps children become well-rounded individuals who are prepared to succeed in all areas of life. As future educators, these students recognize the importance of play-based learning in preparing children for success in their academic and personal lives

Research Question 2: What challenges do diploma students identify in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education?

i) Resource and Funding Limitations

Play and learning materials are crucial for children's successful development, especially in the early years. Witt suggests that suitable play opportunities foster learning, independence, self-confidence, social competence, and physical skills development through various learning methods (Abed & Shackelford, 2022). Based on the responses of the participants, insufficient funding and shortage of resources are some of the main difficulties impeding the effective implementation of play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education. The limitations of materials and finances are significantly impacting the ability to adopt and utilize play-based methods.

P1 and P4 highlighted that the lack of materials and insufficient funding are the significant challenges that are identified in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education. Meanwhile, P3 also agreed on the lack of resources and funding.

"Lack of ..., resources such as materials, and lack of awareness about the importance of play among teachers." – P1

"I think teachers ... maybe not enough materials ... I also think there may be lack of space to perform play-based learning inside classrooms..." -P1

"One of the challenges I see being faced is limited resources and materials which may pose a challenge to implementing play-based learning effectively." -P4

“Play-based learning may face obstacles in Malaysian early childhood classrooms due to a lack of funding...” -P3

In a nutshell, most of the participants agreed that resource and funding limitations are a major challenge in implementing play-based learning. Most of the responses highlighted insufficient materials and financial constraints.

ii) Teacher Training and Professional Development

According to Hunter (2019), play-based learning is a child-centered pedagogy that promotes the development of children by following their natural inquisitive and explorative disposition. Play-based learning involves child-directed exploration through the method of play (Aiono, 2015, 2017; Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich & Tenenbaum, 2011; Hunter, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Therefore, teachers play an important role in supporting children to reach their full potential through self-guided discovery (Hunter, 2019). Participants shared that there is a lack of proper training and professional development for teachers. This impedes the effectiveness of the implementation of play-based learning. Besides, participants also expressed that the teachers may have insufficient skills to utilize play-based learning.

From P1's perspective, P1 identified there is a lack of ideas and inadequate teacher training as the difficulties. Teachers may not have enough knowledge or confidence in implementing play-based learning.

“Lack of ideas ... lack of awareness about the importance of play among teachers ...”-P1

“I think teachers may not have enough ideas on how to implement play-based learning and there may be not enough materials...”-P1

Meanwhile, P4 indicates that there is insufficient formal training and a lack of confidence among educators are the challenges.

“The second challenge I see being faced is a lack of teacher training and professional development. Some early childhood educators within Malaysia may not have received proper or formal training to handle a play-based approach or may even lack confidence in implementing it.”-P4

Teacher training and professional development are important components of a successful play-based learning implementation. This happens because teachers with adequate knowledge and understanding are necessary to create an effective and engaging learning experience for young children. Inadequate teacher training and professional development may lead to the teachers struggling to design engaging and developmentally appropriate play-based activities resulting provide a lack of meaningful learning experience. Participants identified there is inadequate training and a lack of confidence among teachers as the challenges.

iii) *Cultural Norms and Parental Understanding*

Play is crucial in children's development; however, cultural norms and parental understanding frequently restrict its adoption. There is a view of playing as hurting learning in many Asian cultures. Therefore, Hong Kong and Malaysia's parents frequently prioritize academic skills compared to play and they believe that it's essential for children to succeed (Kheioh & Low, 2021). Some parents in Hong Kong prefer to separate play and learning and are afraid that a playful environment may affect academic progress and socio-emotional development. Due to these cultures, Asian parents tend to limit children's playtime and materials (Kheioh & Low, 2021). Thus, this could be a challenge for educators who tend to implement play-based learning.

Participants view that cultural norms and a lack of parental understanding pose challenges to adopting play-based learning. Besides, traditional educational practices and different expectations of parents can impede the acceptance and implementation of play-based methods. P2 and P3 expressed that traditional educational norms and cultural resistance can restrict its adoption.

"Play-based learning may not be easily implemented in Malaysian early childhood schools due to a lack of resources, conventional educational standards, and the requirement for parental comprehension..."-P2

"Play-based learning may face obstacles in Malaysian early childhood classrooms due to a lack of funding, cultural norms that prioritize traditional teaching techniques, and deficiencies in teacher preparation..."-P3

Other than traditional educational norms and cultural resistance, P4 shares her views that the parental expectation for structured teaching could be a challenge as well.

"One of the challenges I feel may be faced when trying to implement a play-based approach into an early childhood classroom in Malaysia is parental expectations. Some parents may not be as updated or well-informed about the various teaching approaches available and may expect a more structured and academic-focused way of teaching rather than a play-based one..."-P4

In a nutshell, cultural norms and parental understanding demonstrate challenges in implementing play-based learning. However, traditional teaching methods and parental expectations restrict its adoption.

Table 2

Challenges in Implementing Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms and How to Address these Challenges

PARTICIPANTS	Challenges in implementing play-based learning in early childhood classrooms and how to address these challenges
<i>Participants 5</i>	<p><i>Play-based learning may be perceived as less structured and challenging to assess in terms of academic progress and achievement. This challenge can arise due to the emphasis on standardized testing and a lack of understanding of alternative assessment methods.</i></p> <p><i>use observation techniques, portfolios, and qualitative assessments to track children's progress and development. Educating stakeholders, including parents and policymakers, about the effectiveness and validity of alternative assessment methods can help address concerns about accountability.</i></p>
<i>Participants 6</i>	<p><i>it is crucial to develop alternate assessment strategies that capture the learning objectives of play-based approaches to address the challenge.</i></p> <p><i>Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort involving educators, parents, policymakers, and the community.</i></p>
<i>Participant 7</i>	<p><i>Not all parents will understand, and they will criticize and believe academic learning is a more effective way to teach children.</i></p> <p><i>The way to handle it is by implementing parent-teacher conferences, and proving the connection between play and important developmental milestones to convince and educate parents about the benefits of play-based learning could ease these worries.</i></p>
<i>Participant 8</i>	<p><i>Not all parents will understand, and they will criticize and believe academic learning is a more effective way to teach children.</i></p> <p><i>The way to handle it is by implementing parent-teacher conferences, and proving the connection between play and important developmental milestones to convince and educate parents about the benefits of play-based learning could ease these worries.</i></p>
<i>Participant 9</i>	<p><i>The equipment, having play-based learning requires lots of resources, toys, and tools that are expensive. And with how much teachers are getting paid these days, I doubt any of</i></p>

them would willingly give up any more money to personally purchase the equipment.

Participant 10

Another challenge is ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement play-based learning.

Professional development programs and training can help teachers understand the principles of play-based learning and provide them with strategies to integrate them into their classrooms.

In conclusion, although implementing play-based learning in early childhood classrooms presents various challenges as mentioned by the participants, proactive strategies can effectively address these obstacles. Overcoming curriculum alignment issues by demonstrating the value of play education, educating parents about its benefits, creatively managing limited resources, and using alternative assessment methods are important steps. Additionally, offering teacher training, supporting flexible schedules, establishing clear guidelines for classroom management, and encouraging cultural sensitivity contribute to the successful implementation of game-based learning. By addressing these challenges head-on and embracing play as a fundamental tool for children's holistic development, educators can create an enriching environment that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional growth in young learners.

This research significantly advances our understanding of early childhood education by bridging the gap between the theoretical benefits of play-based learning and its practical implementation. It offers tangible solutions to real-world challenges faced by educators, moving beyond previous research that focused primarily on theoretical advantages. The study stands out by incorporating diverse perspectives from teachers, parents, administrators, and students, crafting a comprehensive framework for successful implementation. Its relevance is amplified in the current context of educational reform, where institutions are transitioning to more experiential approaches. By addressing common barriers to implementation, such as curriculum alignment, resource constraints, and assessment methods, the research supports this shift while upholding academic rigor. Beyond its immediate impact on play-based learning, the research contributes to key areas of educational development. It underscores the need for robust teacher training and ongoing support systems, recognizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and parent engagement, addresses practical resource concerns, proposes creative solutions, and suggests alternative assessment methods that align with play-based learning while meeting accountability standards. This comprehensive approach makes research particularly valuable in today's educational landscape, where institutions seek to balance innovative teaching methods with traditional educational objectives.

Discussion

Some of the participants view that play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education helped children holistically. It can provide holistic learning and engagement to young children. Holistic development is a holistic approach to children's growth, including social, emotional, physical, mental, and cognitive aspects. Play-based learning supports holistic development by providing opportunities for problem-solving, social interaction, physical activity, and creativity. It also makes learning experiences more engaging and memorable. In Malaysian early childhood education, play-based learning is essential for supporting children's development, encouraging all-around growth, cultural awareness, and language learning. Benefits include increased excitement for learning, better problem-solving skills, and improved communication abilities through cooperative play. Overall, participants view play-based learning as a comprehensive and engaging approach that effectively supports various aspects of a child's development.

Participants identified few challenges in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia Early Childhood Education. Among the challenges identified includes resource and funding limitations; teacher training and professional development; and cultural norms and parental understanding. Play and learning materials are critical for children's development, especially in early years. However, insufficient funding and resources are one of the major challenges in implementing play-based learning in Malaysia's early childhood education that identified by participants. Participants identified lack of materials, awareness among teachers about the importance of play, and limited space for classrooms. The lack of resources and financial constraints significantly impact the implementation and application of play-based methods. Overall, the lack of resources and financial constraints hold back the effective implementation of play-based learning in Malaysian early childhood classrooms.

Play-based learning is a child-centered approach that encourages children's development through exploration through play (Hunter,2019). Teachers play a fundamental role in supporting children through self-guided discovery (Hunter,2019). However, participants expressed that there is a lack of proper training and professional development for teachers. This has limited the effectiveness of play-based learning implementation. Teachers may lack ideas, awareness of the importance of play, and confidence in implementing play-based learning. Insufficient formal training and lack of confidence among educators are also significant challenges. Inadequate teacher training and professional development are crucial to creating engaging and developmentally appropriate play-based activities. Inadequate teacher training results in a lack of meaningful learning experiences.

Play is crucial for children's development, but cultural norms and parental understanding often hinder its adoption. In Asian cultures, parents prioritize academic skills overplay, fearing it may affect their children's progress and socio-emotional development (Kheioh&Low, 2021). This can lead to limiting play time and materials (Kheioh&Low, 2021). Traditional educational practices and cultural resistance also pose challenges to play-based learning. Participants share that traditional educational standards, lack of resources, and parental expectations for structured teaching are other challenges of implementation play-based learning. Cultural norms, parental understanding, and traditional teaching methods can inhibit the adoption of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms.

The results of this research show that the participants as future early childhood educators acknowledge that play-based learning can help children develop and learn holistically. Besides, they also addressed the challenges in implementing play-based learning in the early childhood education sector. Thus, this research can provide insight to the curriculum developer in designing a curriculum that integrates play-based learning effectively by considering the challenges facing it. Besides that, this research is also beneficial for educators in understanding play-based learning. Eventually, children are the important beneficiaries, effective implementation of play-based learning can enhance children's holistic development and learning experiences. Moreover, this research is also beneficial to the teacher training centres where this research alerts the importance of developing and preparing future educators to implement play-based learning and equip them with important skills and knowledge.

Further study in the future could explore the potential actions that could be taken based on the challenges addressed. Furthermore, the sample size could be increased and narrower to gain more information on future early childhood practitioners to help them in implementing play-based learning.

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