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Abstract

This paper focuses on children's experience and learning opportunities in ethnically diverse pre-school settings. The study involved 60 children and three teachers from three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings. A qualitative methodology was applied to explore children's experience and learning opportunities. Direct observation of children's free play and in-depth interviews were conducted with the children and teachers within 16 weeks. Observation based on instruments from the ECCE Research Project which included two main standards, an element of children's learning and meaningful learning. An indicator of standards started with working towards, meeting the standard and exceeding the standard. The primary findings of this case study emergent from the exceeding standard that children's learning experience and opportunities are divided into three: Children need the challenge to be competent, Active learning and learning comes from social interactions. Given an opportunity, the children are skillful in the initiated learning experience.

Keywords: Learning Opportunities, Pre-school, *Teaching Method*, Children

Introduction

This paper draws on a study that is part of a longitudinal research project that analyses Quality of Early Childhood Care and Education in formal early years settings with 4 – 6-year-old children in Malaysia. The overall project aims to provide Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a national framework for Malaysia. The provision of quality ECCE programs is an important investment in the overall social, economic and human capital development of a country. In Malaysia, there is an increasing attention, funding, capacity building programs and support in the form of national constitutions, policies, laws, and legislation to provide an enabling environment for ECCE to develop. Besides the government, the development of ECCE programs in Malaysia is also through efforts and contributions of local communities, religious bodies, private entities, and charitable organizations. Against this background, it is necessary to evaluate the different programs in terms of antecedents, transactions, and outcomes in terms of relative comparison. In addition, it is also necessary to

evaluate the programs in terms of absolute comparison in relation to standards of excellence both global and local. This evaluation would make a significant contribution towards the quality development and learning for young children's. In ensuring the standards and provision of a firm preparatory foundation for primary schooling, the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) was introduced and implemented in 2016.

Literature Review

Theory and Framework

Vygotsky's theory describes the cognitive development of children. In his view, early years cognitive development involves processes based on challenge and potential development. Vygotsky introduced the idea that children can perform more challenging tasks when assisted by more advanced and competent individuals. Vygotsky identified two levels of development: actual development, which is the upper limit of tasks a child can perform individually, and level of potential development, which is the upper limit of tasks a child can perform with the assistance of a more competent individual. He divided into two level: level of competence: teacher models task (child watches); teacher does task (child helps); child does task (teacher helps) and child does task(independently) and Level of challenge. What the learner can achieve with assistance: zone of proximal development (child works with assistance and child works independently. According to Vygotsky, in order to get a true assessment of a child's actual and potential development, we should assess capabilities both when the child is performing the activity alone and with a more competent individual.

Learning activities should be based on the needs, desires, abilities of the baby and children's background and development. Teachers should provide an activity space, organize physical needs in the classroom to carry out learning activities. Pre-schools need to provide activity and teaching planning appropriate to children (KPM, 2016; Morrison, 2004; Beaty, 2014; 2016; Loy et al., 2017; Nordin et al., 2017).

In this study, learning activities include (i) learning of children divided into the effectiveness of learning activities as well as support, encouragement and guidance; (ii) focus, active and reflective in the implementation of activities divided into the use of child information in the implementation of activities and activities and involvement of children.

Previous studies show that the quality of pre-school is determined by the best practices in pre-school in terms of curriculum, the profile of children, quality of the teacher, facilities, and teaching and learning practices. The quality of teachers gives the greatest impact on kindergartens quality as teachers greatly influence the literacy and social development of children, especially children at the age of 5 (Nordin, et Al., 2017). Multi-ethnic pre-school refers to "pre-school that includes children of different ethnic groups, which is the policy of the pre-school itself to ensure the composition of the pre-school entrants consist of a mix of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others. The aim of the multi-ethnic pre-school is to unite three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysian in order to ensure national integration" (Majzub, 2006, p. 87). Many scholars have addressed the benefits of pre-school settings for children's attention during learning activities. Pre-school setting promotes children's attention and learning at an early stage. Children's participation in classroom activities is highly influenced by

pre-school setting and teacher's approach (Mura et.al, 2015). According to Nordin & Ainon (2013) direct cross-ethnic and teaching is more effective in changing children's intergroup attitudes.

Bentley (2012) explains the meaning of diversify ethnically pre-school in the early childhood classroom practices in the everyday lives of four- and five-year-olds. Through classroom research and discussion, the children develop their own concepts around these issues, finding meaningful ways to share their knowledge with the larger school community. These fundamental values can be integrated into the lives of young children, especially in the early childhood classroom. According to Chi-Hung & Ming-Tak (2017), the practice of multicultural teaching in early childhood education is an important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programs. The study investigates the perceptions of teaching competency in the multi-ethnic classroom held by 347 teachers at 22 kindergartens in Hong Kong. The result indicates that pre-school teachers fit with the model of multi-ethnic teaching competency scale (MTCS) for children from ethnic-minority. The most important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programs is preschool teachers.

Meanwhile, Buchori & Dobinson (2015) deduct a different view; early childhood teachers view the children's previous cultural background as a burden. They are concern for the children who are not performing up to the curriculum standard and fear of not meeting their own expectations, those of the system and those of the children's parents. In the Australian Early childhood education, in order to address the needs of the children from a diverse cultural background in their care, they implemented a setting of a culturally diverse classroom and pedagogic practice. This shows the teachers' understandings of the multicultural education goals. It is important to teach children about different cultures and the most effective way to do this is to emphasise points of comparison between cultures.

According to Suraji, et al., (2018), results from their study at pre-school settings show a different significant on the effectiveness of Fun Learning module in enhancing patriotism among pre-school children. This quasi-experiment involved 1000 sample from 4 pre-schools under government. Treatment group involved 50 pupils from 2 classes in 2 pre-schools as well as a controlled group. The study demonstrated that fun learning approaches are suitable for cognitive level and pre-school children's interest in improving learning at the early childhood stage.

Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) emphasize that a qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand the elements of behaviours by getting to know those involved, their values, beliefs, and emotions. This study is a qualitative study involving three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings that conduct early education programs for children aged 4 to 6 years either pre-school or kindergarten. This methodology was applied to explores children's experience and learning opportunities. The study involved 60 children and three teachers from three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings. Direct observation of children's free play and in-depth interviews were conducted with the children and teachers within 16 weeks. Observation based on instruments from the ECCE Research Project which included two main standards, an element of children's learning and meaningful learning. An indicator of standards started with working towards, meeting the standard and exceeding the standard.

The qualitative part of the research employed a combination of observation and interviews to serve as data collection instruments as well as means of data triangulation; to estimate the validity and reliability of data and research procedures. A series of workshops were carried out to construct the interview protocols and observation checklist. Observations analysis were done by at least two researchers for two consecutive days at each selected child centres. The interviews were divided into individual interviews. Whenever necessary, researchers would also conduct interviews at the centres to have a deeper understanding of data. Respondents' consents were procured prior to the interviews and observations while observing their anonymity and confidentiality of data. To ensure data saturation, interviews were also held during several seminars and workshops on parenting and early childhood education; to maximise the number of respondents. Transcripts were divided into three categories: teachers/carers, and educationist. A series of workshops were held to thrash out the nodes, axial nodes and the systematic nodes. Relationships between the axial nodes were scrutinised to narrow them down into major themes. Each transcript underwent pair-comparison, then each group presented their own mapping in the group comparisons sessions and finally, the mapping for each group was drabbed based on factors that contribute to quality teaching and learning.

Finding

The primary findings of this case study emergent from the exceeding standard that children's learning experience and opportunities are divided into three: Children need the challenge to be competent, Active learning and learning comes from social interactions. Given an opportunity, the children are skillful in the initiated learning experience.

Learning Comes From Social Interactions

Through daily interactions with responsive, affectionate adults, young children experience positive social relationships. Self-confidence develops and children learn to communicate their needs and master challenges in their world. Young children thrive when they encounter challenges they can meet; they flourish when they are free to explore and feel that caring adult encourage and take pleasure in their emerging interests and skills. According to Goleman, 2006 "a simple sign that a child feels he has safe a safe haven is going out to play. Playful fun has serious benefits; through years of hard play, children acquire a range of social expertise. For one, they learn social savvy, like how to negotiate power struggles, how to cooperate and form alliances, and how to concede with grace.

It seems important in this study to investigate social interaction activity through children's play activity that the children were involved in. Most of the observation showed that children relate to each other based on the play either during free time or learning time. They develop communication skills and learns new knowledge when interacting with each other happen during the play activities.

The play here is initiated by the children, not the organised play activities initiated by the teacher.

For example, here we have a type of play activity that a group of children created:

May Ling saw Harun and Vejay jumping on the green carpet with a square shape design on the floor. They played with the carpet shape. She went to Harun and Vejay to play with them. She imitated what they did which was jumping inside the shapes.

(Observation Session 1: Child 17)

In this case, a group of children created a type of play, jumping on the floor based on a carpet shape. The children carried out their assigned roles among their group and imagined that the square shape design on the floor was part of their rules. We observed that the children created and engaged in cooperative play. Cooperative play occurs when two or more children are engaged in a play activity. This play activity initiated an interaction, communication, and understanding with other children who were involved. They were copying the activity that the others were doing and showing their willingness to become friends. The children communicated through the activity they were involved in together and had the same feelings towards each other.

The case below could be described as similar to the one above:

Si Mi followed Wee Jo, she put a pencil between her nose and her mouth and showed it to Asmira. They looked happy with this play activity.

(Observation P096: Child 22)

Like the case before, a friend is a play partner, so learning comes from the children relate to each as a partner to interact or to share the fun with. Another thing, social interaction such as shared play activity developed children's social and cognitive development.

Children are Active learner

The active engagement of children in the learning process and their engagement with others in interactive activities, or engagement with materials, forms the dynamics of knowledge and understanding. Through active learning, children are constantly changing, adjusting and rearranging meaning and their understanding of things. Children are interested in experiments, trial and error, and representing what they are learning through construction and play. Active learning takes place with experiences, for example, children will learn more about the weather rather than hearing a story.

In this case study, the children interacted with each other when they shared the same interest or had something to share or talk about. For example, the children would relate to each other when they wanted to share a story from a TV program. The children related to each other because they had something to share. By sharing, they built up a relationship based on something to play or to discuss. The observation showed that:

Harun had a new handkerchief, he showed it to May Ling. May Ling took out her handkerchief and showed it to Harun too. Then May Ling told him that they could do shapes using the handkerchief, Harun asked her to teach him to make shapes. May Ling showed him the steps to do it, and Harun followed. He liked to show the hanky to the few children nearest to him like Suriani and Wee Jo, like putting his hanky on Wee Jo's head and Wee Jo looked like he enjoyed it.

(Observation Session 1: Child 9)

In this case, the boy liked to play with the object with the girl as his playmate. The boy enjoyed that play with materials forms and followed what the girl showed him. The interaction here was driven by the handkerchiefs, and then the child initiated another interaction with other children. In this case, the learning process happened in their engagement with others in interactive activities.

The active engagement of children develops meaning and their understanding by using an object or fantasy play when they talk and to sit together. They were talking to each other about what they did during the everyday activity. Through this discussion topic, automatically new ideas will come up.

R: Let's look together at the photos from today - can you tell me about what your friends are doing? Ardini: We eat fruits...apple and watermelon.

R: Do you like it?

Ardini: Yes it tastes great!

R: Do you have any relationship with them?

Ardini: Yes, we are friends.

R: What makes you all become friends?

Ardini: Chatting together...work together. We play together...sit together. They always help me.

R: Have you ever become angry with anyone?

Ardini: No... but we always tease each other.

(Interview on Observation P004: Child 5)

The child understood the meaning of something here as having a conversation, chatting and working together about fruits. In this case, the fruit helped to create an interaction.

Children Need The Challenge to be Competent

Every child is unique and competent in their own way, and the way they think, feel and interact with others reflects their uniqueness and competence. Some children are outgoing and some are shy, some show a preference for physical activities and some children love stories and music. To view the child as unique and competent is to see his or her potential. Children need an environment in which they can flourish and grow develop positive self-esteem.

In this case, a challenging place that enabled them to do different movements like crawling and jumping or climbing became an interesting place for boys and girls. In another example, they were shown as preferring to play in a place which looked adventurous such as on top of a block.

Most of the group of boys playing in this place and at top of the block and most of the girls played inside the block circle. After a while they feel low challenge and has high capabilities, they are bored, and a girl starts climb block and walk on tunnels.

(Observation P122: Children Group)

In this case, a group of children was playing in the block area. A first most of the boys preferred to play on the top rather than inside the block circle or tunnels. Several boys competed with each other to be at the top of the block circle. They climbed to the top of the block first and then shouted: "I won". In this case, the action showed that the boys tend to choose places and friends which are challenging. Later on, girls started to follow the same games to try the adventurous activity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary from the interviews and observation of this research refer to the teacher and children. The following construct included teacher's interaction, teaching strategies and learning management.

The evidence shows that there is an interaction between teacher with children is one of the factors that contribute to the quality of early childhood settings in line with Nordin et al., (2017) study which explains the interaction exists in pre-school and learning activities. Teaching strategies and learning management include two themes: (i) effective activities (ii) methods, practices and levels of learning progress that are one of the factors that contribute to the quality early childhood centre and education in line with Loy et al. (2017) and Nordin et al., (2017) which states that teachers should also provide activity and teaching planning as well as implementing activities and teaching and learning appropriate to the children. The indoor and outdoor environment play an important role in children's learning activities (i) an environment that meets the needs of children who contribute to quality early childhood centre in line with Loy et al. (2017) and Nordin et al. (2017) which explains that pre-school should provide an activity space, organizing physical needs in the classroom to carry out learning activities.

Another issue concerning the setting of the pre-school is the use of materials which represent the contextual culture which follows the ethnic groups. Therefore, the pre-school ethos works in line with the behaviour accepted by the parents and community, and this is consistent with findings from Corsaro and Molinari (2000) on the types of priming events in the pre-school in which children participate and attend prospectively to on-going or anticipated in activities have changed their lives. They identify different types of priming events in pre-school and show how collective activities in these events affect the children's representations (p.16). We found that different types of priming events involving children's collective and practical activities with others in the pre-school setting such as seating formation, school routines and rituals, are crucial in priming children's behaviour.

The surrounding of the pre-school setting is made up of materials which represent the ethnic groups and this provides a climate of Malaysian culture for the children and gives them a psychological message that affects awareness of multicultural society. The features of the pre-school materials totally stimulate and inculcate national unity values. This study is consistent with studies by Majzub (2006) and Prochner, Clegmen & Green (2008) who examined the way the pre-school space is constructed and used with reference to pedagogical materials. Materials are described as an element of the spatiality of pre-school, their meaning constructed from the interaction between physical and social forces, and which cultivated the children's aesthetic sense and self-confidence (Prochner, et al., 2008, p. 190). Materials in the pre-school space encourage the children's interactions. It depends on what way the pre-school materials and environment reflect children's backgrounds. This includes the design of the building, its location in the community, the people, materials, and furnishings within it.

Overall, preliminary findings show that there are both the best qualities in teaching and learning. Through observation, there are few best practices found. First, there are many learning activities integrated and learning activities can improve the understanding of the children. An environment that provided promotes child inquiry. This indirectly stimulates children's learning interests. As a result, there are also opportunities for children to participate in learning activities. In other words, this means there is a continuation of learning from every kind of activity done in kindergarten in relation to the daily life of the child.

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