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Stakeholders' Perspectives on Reconceptualizing the Play-pedagogy Relationship

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Abstract

The relationship between learning, play and child development in the early years of formal instruction is a productive area for educational research. The Malaysian Government's National Curriculum Guidelines acknowledge the relationship between all aspects of development in young children and their learning through play. This study was prompted by the researcher's desire to better understand how the government's learning through play approach is being implemented in preschools. It investigated the implementation of this approach in four different settings and contexts and draws on the researcher's own structured observations, as well as the perceptions and understandings of teachers, school administrators and parents. The research sought to identify any factors that constrain or influence teachers' practice. The findings show that teachers think they are providing children enough time to engage in play, but they also reveal inconsistencies between teachers' and administrators' perceptions and their actions. Over half of teachers' actual practice consists of teacher control and heavy emphasis on whole-class teaching. Constraints on implementation included pressure to complete and adhere to the National Curriculum, teachers' own pedagogical limitations, and lack of resources and budget. These findings imply the needs: for further research into teacher preparation with a view to improving courses to include current, best world practice in preschool pedagogy; to further inform government policy and provision for preschool education; and to strengthen home and school communications.

Keywords: Play-Pedagogy, Early Childhood, Malaysian Contexts

Introduction

Theorists and researchers paint a convincing picture of the importance of play to children's learning and development (Balter & Tamis-LeMonda, 2006; Roskos & Christie, 2010). As discussed by Little and Wyver (2008, p. 33), "within the early childhood field, play has long been acknowledged as an important context for children's learning and development. Play is a significant aspect of children's lives, reflecting their social and cultural contexts".

However, enrolling children into preschools that advocate learning through play is not a straightforward task.

Kamogawa, (2010) makes the strong point, that for Malaysia to become an advanced nation by 2020, it is valuable to have this focus on attaining Universal Primary Education (UPE) in early childhood, as has been the case from the late-1990s to the early 2000s. The Child Care Center Act 1984 [308 Act] (2006) passed against a background of rising workforce participation by women, and an establishment of basic child care infrastructure. Nevertheless, compared with primary education, which was also becoming universal, in 2006 preschool education was still not fully available (Tejima, 2006).

A further challenge for the early childhood sector itself is to enhance the educational background and quality of preschool teachers as stated in 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015). To improve the quality of preschool teachers, the qualifications for their appointment will be raised to a diploma or a bachelor degree. This rise in qualification will have a profound impact on the Early Childhood sector, for example it means that the Government will now implement measures to establish teaching as a profession of choice (*Economic Planning Unit, 2010*).

Currently in Malaysia we have greater access to and higher numbers of students in early education, as well as dropping teacher student ratio, and we have the MOE committed to raising teacher education levels. However an area of concern that also concerns education experts relates to academic approaches that put too much pressure on young children to succeed without providing opportunities for them to actively construct knowledge (Kagan & Kauerz, 2009). There is no argument that early childhood programs need to continue their focus on cognitive development but research demonstrates that there must also be a focus on socioemotional development, if best practices are to be achieved.

From professional experience within early childhood education centres in Malaysia the researcher found that learning through play has many challenges. For example, many children in Malaysian preschools are being educated in a formal way. This “formal pedagogic world” does not allow for the needs of child development as advocated in the learning through play approach but it stresses an academic approach and more formal academic monitoring through testing. Furthermore, there also seems to be entrenched competition among the preschool providers, to attract “customers” and to show that their school is the best in educating children. These personal experiences link with research from two decades ago by Ling (1993) who concluded from her study that the most of the preschools in Malaysia used a variety of academic and formal curricula.

The implementation of the learning through play approach also faces the challenge of the lack of teachers’ understanding of the tenets of child development, as evidenced through scholarly research and demonstrated good practice internationally, and which has pedagogic significance in what the MOE advocates for young children. The teachers are reported to have limited knowledge of how play should be implemented in classroom practice and some teachers fail to engage with the children whenever playtime is involved. Others implement play-based learning in formal teacher-centered activities. Indeed, many teachers are not aware of how their philosophical positioning impacts on the way they teach, an issue addressed within a bachelor level training degree. And yet another factor is the lack of resource provision for early childhood

development and education. This situation leads to a lack of materials, suitable environments and sources created for play.

All of these problems combined have led to the development of the following research questions. These questions are designed to explore where play-based learning is employed and how valued play-based learning is by different stakeholders.

2.1 Culture and learning through play

The way that children learn through play is culturally specific as result of differences in childrearing beliefs, values, and practices. Play both influences and reflects the way children from different cultures learn. Most theorists and researchers in western cultures would agree with the previously described definition of play where play is enjoyable, have no extrinsic goals, no prescribed learning that must necessarily occur, is spontaneous and voluntary, involves active engagement on the part of the player, involves an element of make-believe.

Yet the challenge of how to interpret child's play and development differs from culture to culture. Even defining child's play and a child's other activities differ depending on one's culture. For example, many families with Asian ethnic cultural influences tend to see play and academic activity substantively, mutually exclusive of one another (Lang, 1997). In contrast, from an Italian perspective, as in the Reggio Emilia approach, there is little distinction between play and child's other activities, and rather a strong emphasis on social-interaction in child's play (Hewett, 2001). Many U.S. educators and researchers together with Euro-American perspectives strongly believe that child-initiated play and similar related experiences have an important bearing on the the child's development through his/her later academic experiences.

There is a cultural tendency of many families with Asian backgrounds to perceive child's play as a subject in itself rather than as a means for supporting academic experiences when the child becomes a kindergartner. Children tend to spend a great deal of their time in activities known as academically oriented experiences in their daily schedules (Takeuchi, 1994). These phenomena are highly valued and encouraged by the ethnic culture. Lang (1997) completed research on phenomenological interviews as well as field observations with Korean parents in Seoul, Korea and with Korean-American families in the New England, US area. The research found that these parents tended to strongly believe that academic activities are more highly valued than play, but within an academic activity the parents believe that children can enjoy it as a kind of play; *"Academic activities are more important than play. Even if they are doing an academic work, they are still in a kind of play because they make it as a playful or fun study (interview with a Korean-American mother, Durham, NH, March 1997), (Lang, 1997).*

2.2 The role of teachers

In the Bennett et al. (2009) study it was found that teachers who understood the importance of providing supportive frameworks for developing and assessing children's skills as players and learners, and encouraged children to follow their own interests and agendas, realised value in coming to understand the meaning of play in children's terms rather than in relation to their own predetermined learning objectives.

Bennett et al. (2009) question the view that exploring and discovering leads to learning. They argue that children need adults' help to make sense of their discoveries and to make links

and connections between new discoveries and their existing knowledge. Repetitive play can also be a dilemma, in that adults are uncertain about when, or indeed whether, they should intervene to move the child on. This uncertainty is linked with a particular view of the child as a learner, and also of the role of adults in children's play. The belief that children cannot fail during play was also challenged by this study, as instances were observed of children being unable to pursue their goals during play because they lacked specific skills or knowledge.

Those participating in the study re-evaluated the adult's role during play. As regards role-play, the teachers held the view that this is the 'child's world' and, therefore, felt uncomfortable about intervening unless invited to do so by the children. Most teachers intervened in other sorts of play, particularly to support children's language or skills development.

It was also evident in the Bennett et al. study that, on occasions, the teachers' intentions for the play activity were not well matched or appropriate for the children. This could be either because the children had already achieved the learning intention, or because, while the play activity elicited a set of behaviors from the children, it did not seem to extend or develop their learning. Children's intentions during a play activity were sometimes at odds with those of the teacher, and this was problematic for the teachers. In one instance, children played dogs and babies, despite the fact that the teacher had set up the imaginative role-play area to encourage and facilitate play around the theme of birthday parties. In another setting, children played burglars and guard dogs in the class 'shop' (Bennett et al. 2009, p. 73). This research does not suggest that play is not valuable, nor that early years settings should introduce formal teaching. It does, however, encourage teachers to look more closely at the actual play experiences of children, and it acts as a catalyst for developing our thinking about how we should be planning for play, and about the role of adults in children's play.

Wood (2010) who was part of the Bennett et al. (2009) group found within her own study, that teachers understood the importance of seeing children's patterns of learning. Wood's own research highlighted how interactions could inform a teacher's pedagogy and curriculum planning (Wood, 2010).

In addition Broadhead's (2004) study of children's social and co-operative skills revealed possibilities for new reading and understanding of knowledge-power relations between children, and between children and adults and gives some insights to professional development for preschool teachers particularly. In looking at play through the sociocultural lens teachers are given opportunity to see that play is not simply enactments of the child's world, but are reflective of their understanding of the complexity of the worlds they inhabit.

In elaborating the role of teacher as 'playmate', the work of Wood (2010) also provides some insight into integrated approaches. According to her, adults are involved with children in planning for play and child-initiated activities, based on their observations and interactions. Planning and pedagogical decision-making are informed by children's choices, interests, capabilities and knowledge, which feed forward into further curriculum planning. The teachers in the study by Bennett et al. (2009) translated their theories into practice through planning, organization, modifying the environment and through their intentions for learning. According to Hewett (2001), the teacher's role "centers on provoking occasions of discovery through a kind of alert, inspired facilitation and stimulation of children's dialogue, co-action, and co-construction of knowledge" (p. 97). Beatty (1998) describes the instrument used in her study of teaching and

learning in classrooms; “where it is depending on user’s goals it may be used to investigate relationships between teaching and learning and to encourage teachers to reflect on teaching practices” (Beaty, 1998, p. 1). This instrument has potential for modification and use in my current study, as teachers’ reflection on their own practice is an important aspect of my research.

The teachers involved in these studies generally demonstrated a shift in understanding about their role in children’s play, about when to intervene and when not to intervene, about their intentions for planning for play, and about the importance of sustained play. They came to understand how their observations of play could inform curriculum planning. Thus strategies can be adopted to support children’s play and learning, and to maintain communication with the home, as demonstrated in the Reggio Emilia approach.

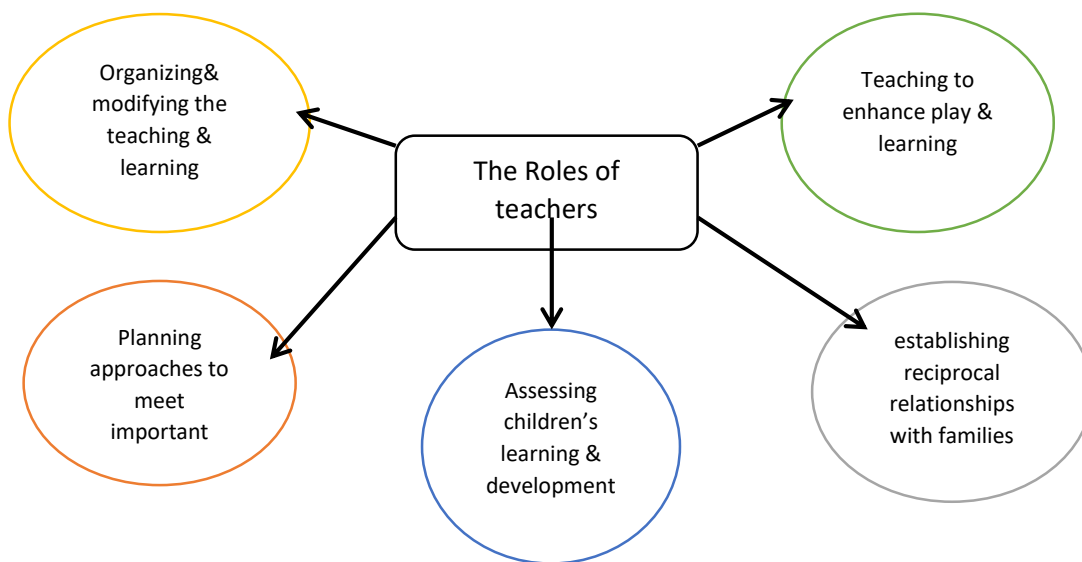
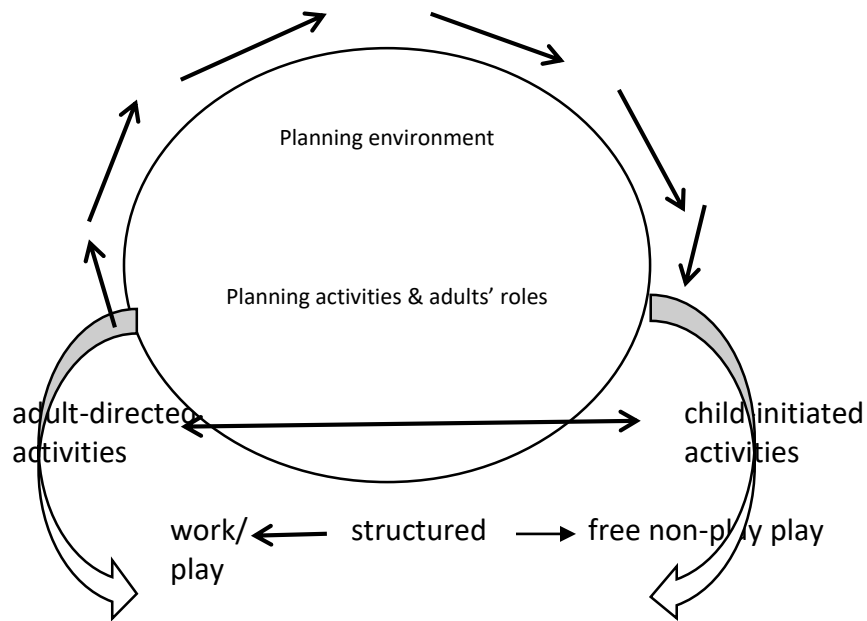


Figure 1.1 The Roles of Teachers

The term organizing and modifying the teaching and learning environment incorporates two key ideas that characterize early childhood education, (1) children’s learn through positive relationship with adult teachers and other children; and (2) the learning context matters, referring to the indoor and outdoor environments, how the environments are organized, the materials and the equipment they contain.

Teachers or practitioners are expected to use different pedagogical approaches, which include adult-led and child-initiated activities, as well as “free” and structured play. Adult led activities include structured approaches with defined learning intentions that are applicable to the whole class or to groups (Wood, 2010). However, there are varying degrees of flexibility for children in how tasks are presented, and what responses are expected. The teachers can harness the qualities of play by developing integrated pedagogical approaches, which combine the benefits of adult-directed and child-initiated activities (Wood, 2010). The following model in Figure 3.3 represents this integration, and allows for elements of playfulness in child-initiated and teacher-directed activities. The model adopts the perspective that play in early childhood settings is always structured to varying degrees by the indoor and outdoor environment, the

curriculum, the adult: child ratio, the resources available, the rules, and the values, beliefs and practices of the adults (Wood, 2010)



**Figure 1.2 A model of integrated pedagogical approaches
(adapted from Wood, 2010, p. 21)**

The pedagogical orientation uses the cycle of planning the play/learning environment, interacting with children in a range of activities, observing, reflecting, evaluating and returning to further planning. The aim is to ensure a flow of information about children's play and learning from two pedagogical zones – adult- and child-initiated activities, both of which have contrasting but complementary forms of adult and child involvement, co-constructive engagement, and pedagogical strategies. In the child-initiated zone, freely chosen play activities are closest to 'pure play' (Wood, 2010). Children are free to choose an adult teacher as co-player or peer-peer negotiation, refer to an adult help, and set their own goals. The children will exercise choice, control and imagination.

While in the structured play zone, Wood (2010) suggested adult-directed activities may engage children in playful ways with curriculum content: there may be some elements of imagination, but limited choice and control for children. For example, a teacher may ask children to solve mathematical problems in the context of imaginary situations. Teachers can respond to their observations of child-initiated play by providing enrichment activities, making props for play, or extending the challenge.

Results

Play, meaning and concept

Teachers' views

At Preschool 1, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the play concept, teachers were asked to explain their views of its roles and values. In summary, the teachers' responses revealed that they did recognize play as having a great value in learning and as playing a significant role in advancing children's construction of understanding and in promoting child development. They were clear in their opinions about its defining quality and what it does for children. As one teacher stated:

Children actually learn through playing because playing is their nature. It is the way they acknowledge the world and environment. They will be able to expand their knowledge on language and numbers. For example, the game, "Pukul berapa Datuk Harimau?" (What time is it, Mr. Wolf?) teaches them the language and the number concept. As Imam Al Ghazali said, playing can expand children's self-nature besides give health and strength to their body and muscles. When they play, for example running, they develop their psychomotor skills.

Both teachers responded positively when they were asked about the contribution of play to children's development as well as its roles and significance in their worlds. The teachers appeared to readily accept that young children need to play, that play is intrinsically motivated and supremely satisfying for them.

To me...children when they play they can explore things and it is a comprehensive basis suitable for children at this stage. For example, six year-old children can experience excitement by playing, compared to learning that must be stressful. Playing is in children's nature, so, it is their daily activity; they just want to play all the time. Therefore, when conducting teaching and learning, we let them play and we can create one activity to allow them to learn and they get something out of it.

Play is considered to be fun and enjoyable, whereas work is labeled as serious, rigid and even stressful activity for young children.

Uhhmm ... for the activity just now, I focused on learning, and there were no play activities. Before this, they learnt while playing, but not for this one. My target was for them to read. So, I used the drilling technique.

She added:

Actually, the way the children learn is different from one another. Some children could use their imagination while playing with an airplane toy, for instance, but some other children just simply play with it. But at the same time they learn. On the other hand, learning is a process to gain knowledge and skills through learning, training and thinking. Children are focused when they learn; meanwhile, when they play they seem enjoy.

It is interesting to uncover the knowledge or information teachers have concerning the contribution of play to child development. Finding out what teachers know about this may add richer information and become important points in examining teachers' understanding of the concept of play itself

Parents' views

The parents of children in Preschool 1 discussed and described early childhood education as something formal, which revolved around certain academic skills that were supposed to be learnt or acquired by the children prior to statutory schooling. For example this could include writing and reading the alphabet in their first language and with an ability to construct a simple sentence:

Okay, ..., early childhood education in my understanding is an early process of child's learning. For example, a child, instead of staying at home playing alone, will meet new friends at the preschool, and that is an early process for him to get to know the school life.

He added:

Firstly, I expect that children when they finish preschool and have gained education from here, they will be able to adapt to real school life in primary school. They can also participate in various programs, especially from the curriculum aspect whereby they will be able to recognize words and read at the first level, which is year one where supposedly they should already know how to read. The main purpose is to get awareness, of school life.

Teaching Style and Approaches

In analyzing the observation field notes (see Appendix H) used in this study, the raw data in a form of anecdotal recordings / field notes denoting how children were grouped for activities were transferred into bar graphs. Using the bar graphs made it possible for the data to be converted into what is called the "write up". There are many closely linked aspects influencing teachers' approaches to educating young children. Of course there are many reasons why children are grouped together for schoolwork, mixed ability groups are for example common, as are friendship groups. Indeed the use of group work is one aspect of teaching that demonstrates a teacher's beliefs and philosophy that underpin their teaching style.

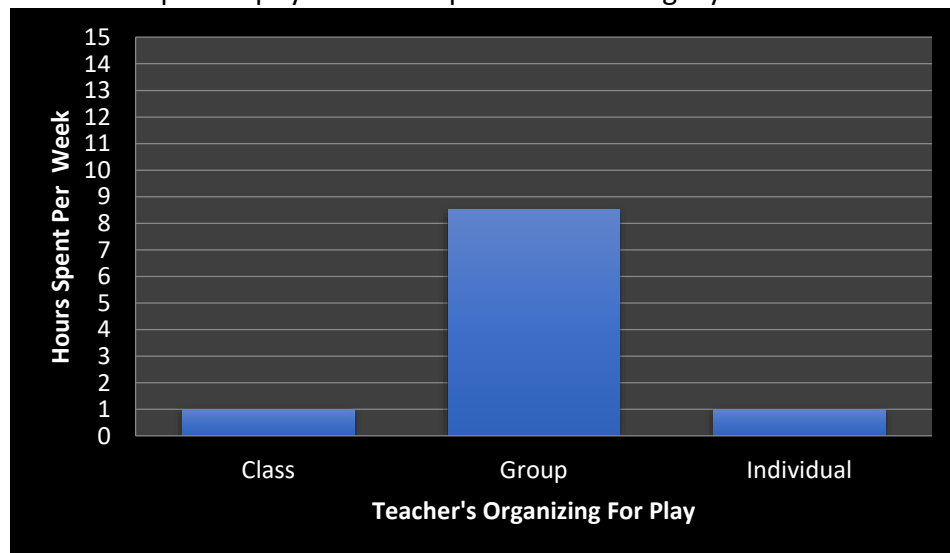


Figure 1.3 Teacher's organization of class for play over the observation period

Figure 1.3 shows the amount of time allocated to different class settings as organized by the preschool teacher in Preschool 1. She arranged for one hour of play where the children operated as a class, eight and a half hours in group play and one hour for individual play. In all of the six types of play observed by me, the teacher favoured putting children in groups. This demonstrated the suitability between her advocated teaching style and what she practiced. Because in organizing learning activities she connected play with formal learning “play in passing” and grouped the children in ways that made it easier for the teachers to instruct them and show examples of how to complete each activity. Most of the rhymes sessions especially during circle time, involved the teacher organizing the children into a whole class activity. The teacher led the song and movement activities.

As mentioned above, there are reasons why the preschool teacher organized the children as they did especially for play activities. The teachers’ comments reflect their philosophy of teaching and the types of play, for example

Because for me it depends on the types of play. As during free play, the children might be involved in solitary and parallel play.

Furthermore, Teacher 1 elaborated on her current teaching style

When I asked them to count beetles toys, this was mostly an individual activity even though they were sitting in a group.

Regarding the approaches used, the two teachers from Preschool 1 consistently claimed that the children learn through fun and play activities and they applied a thematic approach sometimes using project-based experiments when delivering the syllabus content. Timetable arrangements are based on particular areas of child development such as cognitive development, language development, aesthetic development, and social development. All of this work demonstrates a strong connection with how Vygotsky viewed quality learning and his theoretical stance places great emphasis on the importance of the adult’s role in enhancing a child’s thinking and doing and as an outcome of social support (Brennan, 2008).

Teachers’ Views

To me, children when they play they can explore things and it is a comprehensive basis suitable for children at this stage. For example, six year-old children can experience excitement by playing, as compared to learning that is often tense. Playing is in children’s nature, so, it is their daily activity; they just want to play all the time. Therefore, when conduct teaching and learning, we let them play monitored by us as teachers and we can create one activity to allow them to learn and get something out of it.

One teacher clearly described the benefits of having a focus on the overall development of children:

Through playing, children can attempt their own ideas, explore things themselves, and enhance their cognitive ability. When they see a thing, they want to touch and hold it themselves, and it is exciting for them. Actually, playing helps to strengthen the concept of learning. Basically, when they play, they can socialize with friends, develop their emotions, for example, they share things with each other. Then, they can express their feelings and strengthen their physical development.

This same teacher also highlighted how they used the National Preschool Curriculum:

For example, the 'inquiry-finding' approach can be done by doing experiments. Let's say, making soap bubbles. We give them soap and water, which seems like they are just playing, but they will actually learn something. When they mix the soap and water then they shake it, they form bubbles.

She added:

Reading, for example, could be done along with playing. They have to combine words, sentences or arrange letters. I have created a fishing-letter game, which is considered playing. But the children learn how to form sentences through the process.

One limitation to incorporating play into the classes was referred to by the teachers as the 'overloaded' syllabus, which strongly connected to time limitations. They argued that there was just no time:

Sometimes, we created an activity that needed to run for a longer time than before. But, if we rushed that could cause us to lose the target and focus.

Sometimes, preschool teachers are uncertain about parents' demands:

Some parents disagreed with the approach of learning through play that we used in preschool classroom. Actually, this type of parent does not really understand this concept. They think the children simply playing, whereas we are actually teaching the children at the same time. I did hold a meeting with parents to explain the concept of playing. Usually, parents watch their children from afar and they don't know for sure, yet they don't bother to ask, they just know how to blame teachers. This issue is ongoing even happening to the Year One teachers.

Other factors that impacted related to limited play materials, equipment, and or resources:

Materials are not enough. For example, some of the Lego equipment is broken and there is not enough. If we compare at private preschool, the materials are complete in a set.

Furthermore this problem is very much linked to budget and finance:

The budget is definitely the problem. The lack of equipment is due to budget constraints, if not, we would have bought the materials.

Administrator's Views

A number of constraints mentioned by the administrator compromised the planning of the play-learning environment. These included the demands by the State Education Department, in particular, bringing pressure to bear on using more formal methods of teaching and producing reliable evidence of learning. Many teachers had a primary focus on the academic achievement of the children:

If we see teachers nowadays, although they manage to teach, their focus is divided. The same thing happens in preschool classrooms. If we want to implement the learning through play concept, we need to make the curriculum compatible with what we want to reach for. We aim for many targets but the concept requires a lot more skills. It should be compatible with the activities. The problem now is, once children enter Year One, their reading ability is already being questioned. How many of them can read and how many still cannot? The

program organized by Education State Department expects all Year One students to know how to read and write. This is a kind of tension given to the implementation.

Curriculum Aspects and Teacher Professionalism

Teachers' Views

One teacher commented on her understanding of the preschool curriculum and that on the whole, it is vital to examine what actually needs to be done in the classroom. According to this teacher:

Right now, we are using the National Preschool Standard Curriculum. There are two kinds of modules, the first is the basic core and the second is the thematic module. The basic module offers languages, Malay language, English, Tamil and Chinese. And the thematic module concerns the roots. To me, the National Preschool Standard Curriculum is excellent because it does not only focus on thematic learning but it also emphasizes the "4M" – reading, writing, counting and reasoning. The reasoning method is the most interesting because we can expand learners' potential through their observations and reasoning in science activities.

The second teacher also considered the relevance of the National Preschool Curriculum: *I think it is suitable for children at this stage of development since it is legislated according to the standard and the standard has been made consistent. The curriculum at this preschool has a continuation meaning when the children enter Year One, what they have learnt in preschool is also revised in Year One.*

She also emphasized that administrators should give preschool teachers the opportunity to attend workshops and courses, so that teachers are exposed to methods of implementing the approach in the classroom:

Apart from that, I usually discuss with friends asking them for examples of play activities that we can share. Now we can do so through Face book where there is a page called Preschool Shop.

Administrator's Views

The administrator felt that greater cooperation between teachers and parents could be advantageous. Yet, sometimes there were conflicts between the administrators' or teachers' perspectives regarding a child's needs and those of the parents and what they were seeking. In some situations, they have to support the child while in another situation they have to support the parents as well:

The curriculum is written because it came from the Ministry. For example, after we came back from courses, all parents were called for the briefing regarding the changes and revisions of the curriculum. Everything has been informed. Sometimes the target is hard to reach. This is because we depend on the parents, some of them are less concerned about their children's education, but there are parents who cooperate.

Pressure from the parents and State Education Department authorities for greater inclusion of academic activities was widely felt both by the administrators and their teaching staff:

We are too exam-oriented. These can influence parents in a way that they might force their children to achieve high scores, especially at the primary school level. For the preschool level, parents expect preschool teachers to teach in a formal way so as to make sure their children can read and write by the time they enter Year One.

The semi-structured face-to- face interviews

Play: Meaning and Concept

The interview results with the four preschool administrators underscore the fact that respectively they have different perceptions and interpretations about how play may be translated in classroom practice. The perceptions of the administrators in Preschools 1 and 2 were similar in that they recognized play as having great value and playing a major role in constructing learning and child development within an educational context. In contrast the administrator of Preschool 4 argued that play must be based on more academic concepts and be well planned and structured educational play; neither should play be allocated for a long period of time. Meanwhile, in Preschool 3 what the administrator understands about play completely differed from that of her teachers.

Parents interviewed in this study accepted the needs of their children to play but they considered play to be their preferred method of learning when their children were in an informal learning environment. Most parents expected their children go to school to learn in a formal way and referred to early childhood education as a specifically educational program prior to the children’s entrance into the first year of primary schooling.

Table 6.29 Teachers’ and parents’ definitions of play

Definition	Teachers/school administrators (n)	Parents (n)
Play, roles & values (enjoyment, fun, amusement)	7	8
Contribution to child development	7	2
Play then work (specific educational program)	5	6

Play Allocation

The teachers in all the case studies reported valuing play as a medium and foundation for learning. During my observations a similar situation in Preschools 1 and 2 emerged where play was identified and deployed as an alternate or interval activity if it was linked to a topic of a particular subject. In Preschool 3 and 4 teachers reported preferring to teach in a formal way

and only in certain situations (when they deserved reward) and activities did they deploy play during teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the teachers in Preschools 1 and 2 were well planned and structured in their teaching lesson plans, in contrast to the teachers in Preschools 3 and 4 where they only briefly explained what they were going to teach or plan for the day.

All preschool administrators and teachers in this research study followed a subject timetable. However, only the teachers in Preschools 1 and 2 used play as an alternate or interval activity to overcome children’s boredom. In Preschools 3 and 4, however teachers preferred to teach in a formal way and followed the subject timetable. They might allocate play during creative and scientific time, free time, physical time and circle time. Only in certain situations and activities did they deploy play during teaching and learning, and this happened only on a limited number of occasions.

The parents emphasized the work-play dichotomy, meaning that the children could play if they finished their academic work and responded that there are particular types of play relevant to improving academic achievement. Some parents spent some time playing with their children or watching their children playing either at home or in the playground. They saw this as a way to strengthen relationships between parents and children or to let their children enjoy themselves. However, some parents did not recognize the importance of play as they felt play was just for enjoyment. Other parents were aware that their children learnt something when they engaged in play activities with their children at home. Other parents emphasized that children do not need much play time, and that they much preferred their children concentrate on academic pursuits or watching TV at home.

Table 6.30 Number of teachers and parents who promote children’s play in given ways

Definition	Teachers/ school administrators (n)	Parents (n)
Purpose of allocating play in teaching and learning	6	N/A
Provide play activity and equipment	12	4
Provide Space and corners for play	6	2
Participate in and encourage play	5	3
Provide time and opportunities	12	3
Not necessary to do anything	N/A	5

Teaching Style and Approaches

Teachers in Preschools 1 and 2 claimed the children learnt through fun and they applied a thematic, scaffolded, and play-based approach. Sometimes they used project-based experiments when delivering syllabus content. They also claimed they used all the approaches recommended by the preschool curriculum (see Table 6.29).

In Preschool 4, one teacher was not interested in deploying play, preferring to teach in a formal way. Teachers here emphasized other areas of specialization and therefore, the time allocated to play was very limited. Play was limited to chants and rhymes and physical activity periods. Here the administrator admitted that her teachers saw play as something to fill in time between academic learning lessons.

Table 6.31 Teaching style & approaches (Theory into practice) as reported by teachers

Definition	Academic way (Teachers - n)	Fun in learning (Teachers - n)
Teachers' organization of play	5	5
Teaching & learning activity approaches used	3	5

Problems and Constraints

When teachers were asked what kinds of things interfered with children's play, the most frequently mentioned factors related to an overloaded syllabus, budget and financial limitation and the demands from the Education State Department. Another major issue was parental attitudes suggesting that play is a waste of time and parents' demand for academic activities. Other factors mentioned frequently were limited play equipment, rigid schedules, inadequate space, and behaviour and discipline problems relate to the children, including social and emotional attitudes (as shown in Table 6.30).

Similar problems occurred in Preschools 1 and 2 where constraints were identified by the teachers and by the administrator. They referred to the "overloaded syllabus" problem and advanced curriculum content that was beyond children's capability. There was not enough time to implement play activities and finish teaching the curriculum. For Preschool 1, budget and financial considerations limited the availability of resources and play equipment; for Preschool 2 funds were also limited in that the budget was spent on food supplies and learning materials (not specific to play equipment) for the children. The administrator in Preschool 1 noted the demands of the Education State Department, which brought pressure to bear to use more formal teaching methods and to produce evidence of learning, thus limiting the freedom of teachers to deliver a play-based program.

In contrast, in Preschool 3, the teachers did not face any problems in terms of play facilities as it was fully equipped, but they complained they had to generate ideas and be creative to avoid boring the children with the same activities. Moreover with regard to classroom management, the teachers felt that they could not implement play because play caused increased discipline problems. While the administrator was aware that a few of the teachers under her supervision were not interested in deploying play and preferred to teach in a formal way but she did not seem to intervene. Sharing the same perceptions and views as the teachers in Preschool 3 the teachers in Preschool 4 preferred to focus on academic achievement. They adopted this focus because they thought that play was frowned upon by the parents who wanted a more academic-based learning. The management of children and time are some of the factors contributing to the challenge and an inability to implement play activities.

Table 6.32 Problems and constraints as reported by teachers and administrators in deploying play

Definition	Teachers (n)	Administrators (n)
Overloaded syllabus problem	4	2
Budget & limited finances	4	2
Demand of Education State Department	2	1
Limited equipment, rigid schedules & inadequate space	3	2
Demands from parents for academic achievements	4	3
Play caused discipline problem	2	1

Table 6.33 Relationship between teachers' and parents' definitions of play and integration of play into the curriculum

Definition	Teachers (n)	Parents (n)
Play integrated into the curriculum	5	3
Play as separate times or activities	3	5

With a disparity between the professed beliefs held by the teachers in relation to the value of play and their subsequent attitudes to the behaviour related to play, in terms of theory, there existed intent to include or exclude play. As related to the diversity in actual practice, I examined what factors accounted for the differences. The barriers for teachers in Preschool 3 and 4 were such that, though they each professed a belief in the importance of play (as reflected in Preschool 3 teachers' statement that "*children need to play*" and Preschool 4 teachers' statement "*play is a good way to explore and encourage learning*"), they had inconsistent in their attitudes regarding the behaviors related to play. Additionally, they perceived parental demand on an academic approach.

A preschool 3 teacher's statement that
Usually children will only play with toys when they have free time. As well, they will not be too focused. When it comes to learning, the children know that they have to concentrate and follow the teacher's instructions

This reflected an attitude that disallows play in the learning environment. They further commented that, “we want children to achieve our objective”. This represented a motivation to comply with the guidelines, but who do not really understand the value of play. The administrator in Preschool 3 supports this view, reflecting that proficiency is accomplished through teacher-directed work and formal learning.

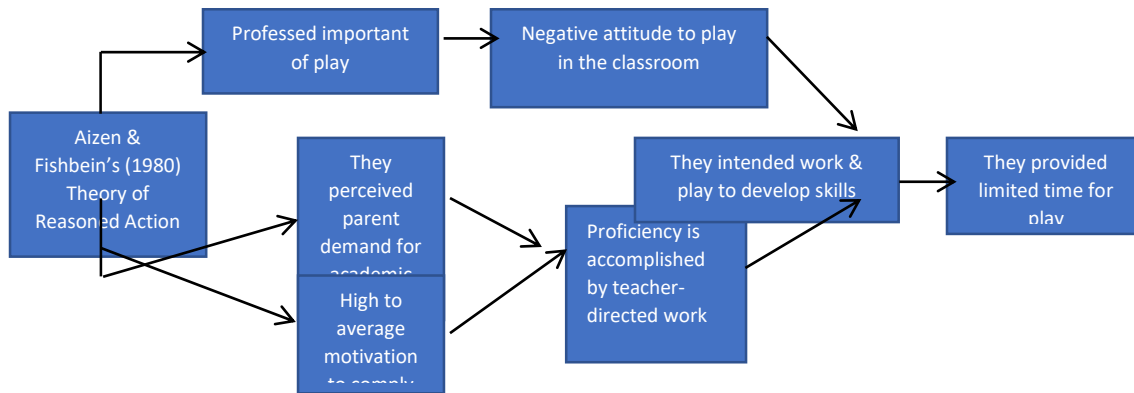


Figure 6.37 Theory of teachers' actions related to play in Preschool 3

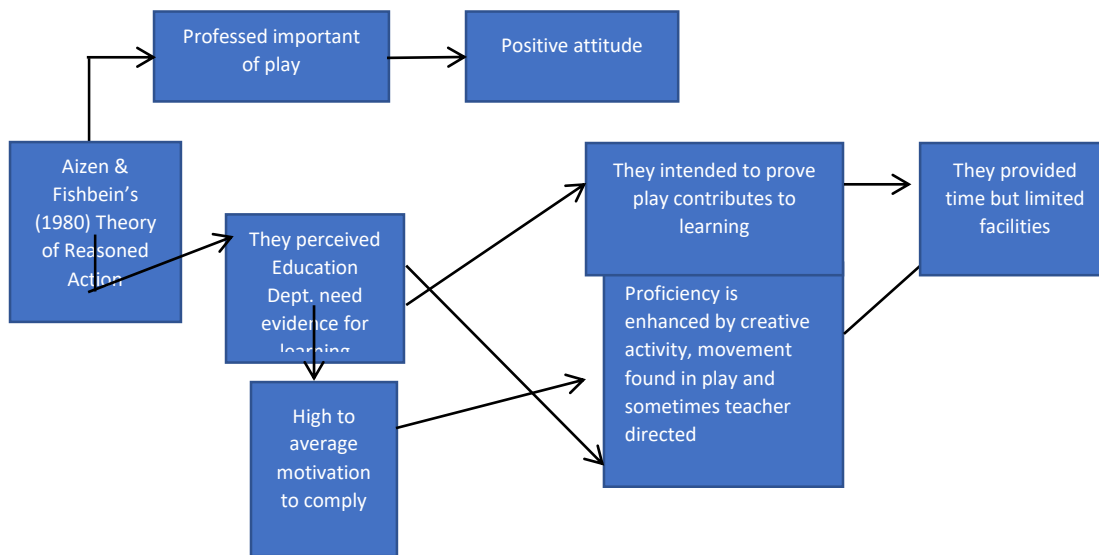


Figure 6.38 Theory of teachers' in Preschool 1 and 2 teaching actions related to play

Teachers in Preschools 1 and 2 in contrast, substantiated declarations as to the value of play with a positive attitude toward creativity and movement related play. However, the demands of the Education State Department brought pressure to bear on the use of more formal methods of obtaining evidence of learning. One of the Preschool teachers commented “it depends on the teachers' approach to the students and I usually discuss with friends asking them

for examples of play activities that we can share”, this represents an individual who was motivated to comply with the perceived established curriculum and guidelines. What she spoke about in terms of values paralleled what she professed to incorporate within her teaching behaviors and the way she implemented play, as an interval activity within formal learning.

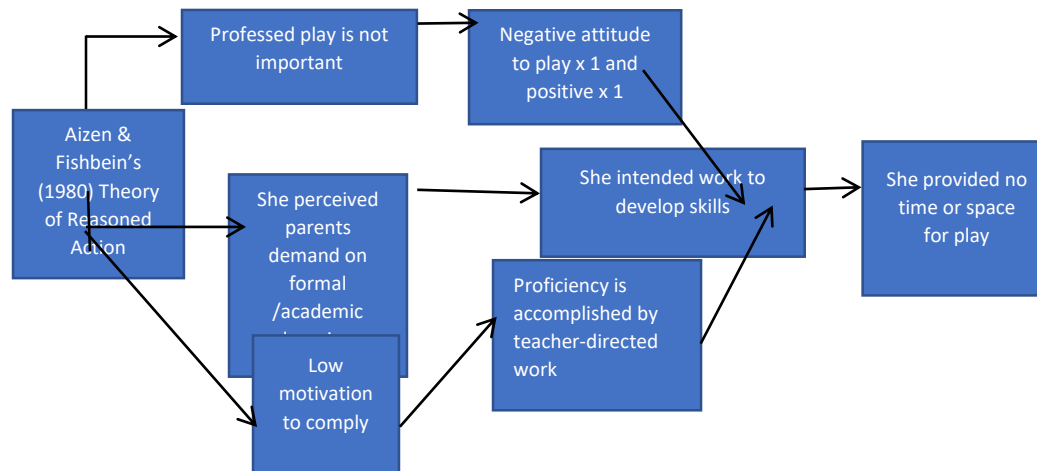


Figure 6.39 Theory of teacher in Preschool 4 teaching actions

However, one teacher in Preschool 4 totally rejected play. As related to the diversity in actual practice, I examined what factors accounted for the differences. She perceived parental demand on formal and academic teaching and learning which contributed to her believe that play is a waste of time. Her statement as *“I know my teaching style places more emphasis on academic achievement. I want the children to concentrate”*, shows her attitude in rejecting play. She believed proficiency is accomplished through teacher-directed work.

Summary

A number of issues have emerged from the observation and interview data analysis, which enables readers to compare play implementation and non-play across the four settings and to compare the implementation of different types of play and play use. The interview analysis provided data over five conceptual themes: play, meaning and concept; play allocation; teaching style and approaches; problems and constraints; and curriculum aspects and teaching professionalism. This analysis highlights a number of constraining factors that discourage teachers from implementing learning through play. The next chapter presents the discussions of the findings.

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