

Incorporating Play-Based Learning into the Curriculum for Preschools in Malaysia: Challenges and Practical Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

The importance of play in early childhood education has gained global recognition in recent years. Research highlights that play-based learning significantly enhances young children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. However, its adoption in Malaysian preschools remains inconsistent. Traditional, academically driven teaching methods continue to dominate, potentially limiting the holistic development of preschoolers. This study examines the learning approaches currently used in Malaysian preschool curricula and explores the challenges of implementing play-based learning. Additionally, it aims to provide policy and practical recommendations to enhance its integration in 21st-century classrooms. By investigating these issues, the study seeks to bridge the gap between the proven benefits of play-based learning and its practical implementation in Malaysian preschools. Encouraging a shift towards a more balanced and developmentally appropriate approach will support children's overall growth and align Malaysia's early childhood education with global best practices.

Keywords: Play-based learning, early childhood education, Malaysian preschools, practical recommendations, educational challenges

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is recognized as a critical period in a child's development, laying the foundation for future learning, behavior, and overall well-being. Traditionally, Malaysian preschools have used structured, teacher-led instruction to meet academic goals. While this approach has its strengths, it may not fully support young children's holistic growth, nor fully reflect the Malaysian Ministry of Education's (MOE) philosophy, which aims to nurture well-rounded individuals—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically—based on strong moral values (Ministry of Education, 1993; 2001; 2017).

The Ministry regularly updates the preschool curriculum in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, with the goal of developing capable, knowledgeable, and ethical citizens who contribute to family, community, and the nation (Ministry of Education, 2017). Recently, there has been a growing push for play-based learning in Malaysia, which supports cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, aligning well with this holistic educational vision (Mohd Radzi et al., 2023).

However, while the MOE has worked to revise the curriculum and add diverse teaching methods, many preschools in Malaysia still emphasize structured, academically focused activities, relying on memorization (San & Hui, 2022). Although play-based, thematic, and project-based learning are encouraged, their actual use remains limited, partly due to teachers' limited understanding of these methods and their importance for young children. Many teachers lack the knowledge and training needed to incorporate play effectively, often defaulting to teacher-led activities instead. Education experts express concern that this focus on academics

may overwhelm young children, offering little room for meaningful, developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Play-based learning, advocated by educational theorists like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes active engagement and exploration as essential parts of effective learning (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Research underscores that play supports critical thinking, problem-solving, and social skills, all of which are crucial in today's world (Vygotsky, 2016). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) emphasizes that play promotes brain development, stimulating creativity, physical ability, and emotional resilience (Yogman et al., 2018). Studies even show that play changes the brain on multiple levels, promoting learning, adaptability, and social skills. For example, animal studies reveal that play helps with problem-solving and social interaction, indicating that a lack of play can stunt social and cognitive development.

Despite evidence of the benefits, play-based learning remains inconsistently integrated into Malaysian preschools (Mohd Radzi et al., 2023). Many Malaysian preschool teachers struggle with this approach due to limited training (Aliza et al., 2011; Bakar et al., 2015). Additionally, cultural beliefs that prioritize academic success over play pose a barrier to widespread adoption. Malaysian society places high value on academic achievement, leading many parents to emphasize early academic skills, creating pressure for teachers to focus on preparing young children for formal schooling. This can result in an emphasis on rote learning rather than natural, exploratory learning (San & Hui, 2022).

This paper aims to explore the barriers to implementing play-based learning in Malaysian preschools and to identify actionable strategies for addressing these challenges. By understanding these issues and fostering collaboration among educators, parents, policymakers, and the community, Malaysia can work towards creating a more balanced and developmentally appropriate early childhood education system that nurtures the holistic growth of every child.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the impact of play-based learning on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.
2. To explore key educational theories and types of play that support holistic child development.
3. To investigate the practical implementation of play-based learning in early childhood education and identify strategies for its enhancement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does play-based learning influence children's overall development in cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains?
2. What are the key educational theories and types of play that contribute to children's learning and development?
3. How is play-based learning currently implemented in early childhood education, and what strategies can improve its effectiveness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is recognized as an essential and developmentally appropriate strategy in early childhood education. It is particularly effective in nurturing young children's growth across various domains. According to the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines, incorporating play enables children to develop critical skills such as self-regulation, language proficiency, cognitive abilities, and social interaction (NAEYC, 2009). Research further underscores that play significantly enhances children's development by providing

opportunities for exploration, creativity, and active engagement with their environment (Zosh et al., 2017; Guirguis, 2018; Yogman et al., 2018).

Learning through play allows children to interact with both people and objects, promoting holistic skill development. It fosters creativity, a vital competency in today's interconnected world, and equips children with the tools they need to navigate a globalized society (Vygotsky, 2016).

Theories Supporting Play-Based Learning

Renowned theorists such as Dewey, Montessori, Piaget, Erikson, and Vygotsky have long advocated for the value of play in early learning. They emphasized education centered around the child, focusing on activity, social engagement, and experiential learning (Mooney, 2013). Montessori highlighted the importance of sensory experiences, while Piaget viewed play as essential for mental, emotional, and physical growth. Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizing the role of guided play in helping children gradually develop independence and extend their learning potential.

Practical Application of Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning involves activities that are engaging, meaningful, and socially interactive, creating a foundation for enjoyable and active learning (Zosh et al., 2017). Children thrive when engaged in play that connects with their real-life experiences, encourages experimentation, and promotes collaboration. Educators can foster this by designing exploratory environments and facilitating activities that range from child-led to teacher-guided or fully structured experiences (CMEC, 2012; Blyth, 2023). For example, research in Malaysia has shown that role-play activities help children enhance their vocabulary and grasp new concepts more effectively (Madhawa Nair et al., 2014), demonstrating how play boosts engagement and reinforces learning.

Varieties of Play in Early Education

Play manifests in various forms, each contributing uniquely to a child's growth:

- **Unoccupied Play:** Infants explore movements without specific objectives.
- **Solitary Play:** Children focus on independent activities, fostering autonomy.
- **Onlooker Play:** Observing others, which facilitates learning through observation.
- **Parallel Play:** Playing alongside peers without direct interaction, developing social awareness.
- **Associative and Social Play:** Collaborative play with others, teaching cooperation and sharing.

Educational frameworks, such as those developed in Manitoba, further classify play into the following types:

- **Exploratory Play:** Interaction with new materials to develop social, cognitive, and emotional skills.
- **Constructive Play:** Using materials for building and creating, which enhances problem-solving and language skills.
- **Symbolic and Socio-Dramatic Play:** Engaging in role-playing and using objects symbolically to nurture language and social competencies.
- **Games with Rules:** Following structured rules to develop cooperation, self-regulation, and independence.

Each form of play is instrumental in cultivating cognitive, emotional, social, and physical skills, laying a strong foundation for children's long-term success.

The Holistic Development Benefits of Play

Play-based learning is pivotal in fostering overall development. Studies have shown that play strengthens neural connections, enhances problem-solving abilities, and supports language acquisition and early numeracy

skills (Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, play builds executive functioning, social abilities, physical well-being, and self-confidence. Together, these attributes enable young learners to excel both academically and socially.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a mixed-methods design to investigate the obstacles and potential solutions for implementing play-based learning in Malaysian preschools. Information was gathered from 24 educators through various methods, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of relevant documents. Quantitative data offered numerical insights, while qualitative data provided a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences.

Survey results were examined using descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was utilized to interpret interview transcripts and observation notes. Ethical approval for the study was obtained, and measures were taken to ensure participant confidentiality and informed consent. Although the study offers meaningful findings, the limited sample size and cultural factors may influence the generalizability of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to Implementing Play-Based Learning

The data reflects the proportion of teachers reporting the issues (barriers) or supporting enhancements (solutions).

Table 1: Barriers to Implementing Play-Based Learning

Category	Section 4.1: Barriers
	(Teachers Reporting Issue, %)
Time Management	67% (16 out of 24 teachers)
Guidelines and Training	58% (14 out of 24 teachers)
Parental Expectations	54% (13 out of 24 teachers)
Resource Limitations	50% (12 out of 24 teachers)
Cultural Norms	50% (12 out of 24 teachers)
Teacher Confidence	58% (14 out of 24 teachers)
Administrative Support	46% (11 out of 24 teachers)

Based on Table 1: Barriers to Implementing Play-Based Learning, the rigid curriculum structure in Malaysian preschools leaves limited time for play-based activities, as it prioritizes academic-focused basic and thematic modules. Teachers find it challenging to balance these modules with play, leading to the exclusion of meaningful play experiences despite acknowledging their benefits for children's development.

Teachers also face difficulties due to a lack of clear guidelines on how to integrate play-based learning into daily lessons. Although many educators have professional training, they often lack practical knowledge and examples of implementing play in classrooms, especially in large group settings.

Parental and societal expectations further hinder the adoption of play-based methods. Many parents favor traditional academic approaches and view play as secondary, leading teachers to focus on measurable academic outcomes to meet these expectations. This cultural bias adds pressure on educators, discouraging innovation in teaching methods.

Resource limitations, including insufficient space, materials, and a high teacher-student ratio, also pose significant challenges. Overcrowded classrooms make it difficult for teachers to facilitate and assess play effectively. As a result, they often revert to teacher-centered instruction, which requires fewer resources.

Enhancing Play-Based Learning

Table 2: Enhancing Play-Based Learning

Category	Section 4.3: Enhancements
	Teachers Supporting, %)
Time Management	70% (17 out of 24 teachers)
Guidelines and Training	75% (18 out of 24 teachers)
Parental Expectations	63% (15 out of 24 teachers)
Resource Limitations	66% (16 out of 24 teachers)
Cultural Norms	60% (14 out of 24 teachers)
Teacher Confidence	70% (17 out of 24 teachers)
Administrative Support	62% (15 out of 24 teachers)

Based on Table 2: Enhancing Play-Based Learning, to address these barriers, professional development opportunities are essential. Teachers require continuous training and mentorship to understand and effectively implement play-based teaching methods, combining them with existing curriculum requirements. Smaller class sizes are also crucial, as they allow teachers to manage and support children more effectively during play.

Flexibility in curriculum design is another key recommendation. Allowing teachers to adjust schedules and allocate more time for play-based activities would provide children with deeper learning experiences. Practical examples and clear guidelines for implementing play should be integrated into the curriculum to support teachers in their daily practices.

Parental engagement is vital for shifting cultural perceptions about play. Educating parents about the benefits of play-based learning can build their confidence in the approach, fostering a more supportive home and school environment.

Lastly, government support is critical. Increased funding for resources, improved infrastructure, and reduced teacher-student ratios would enable preschools to implement play-based learning more effectively. Collaborative networks among educators, policymakers, and communities can also help sustain and refine play-based teaching practices over time.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of play-based learning in Malaysian preschools encounters multiple obstacles, despite its widely recognized advantages for fostering holistic child development. Educators often find themselves constrained by rigid curriculum frameworks that provide minimal flexibility for incorporating meaningful play-oriented activities. Additionally, the absence of clear implementation guidelines and practical examples poses challenges for aligning these methods with existing curriculum goals.

Cultural and societal priorities that emphasize academic success further complicate the adoption of play-based approaches. A significant portion of parents view play as a less valuable activity, prompting teachers to focus on achieving measurable academic results to align with these expectations. Other barriers include limited resources, such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and inadequate space for play. These constraints often force educators to rely on teacher-centred instructional strategies.

Despite these challenges, educators acknowledge the value of play-based learning in supporting children's growth. Recommended solutions include providing more professional development opportunities, creating flexible curriculum structures, reducing class sizes, and fostering stronger collaboration among key

stakeholders. Raising parental awareness about the benefits of play-based learning and increasing government investment are also essential steps in establishing an environment where such approaches can thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Professional Development and Teacher Training

Educators need access to hands-on examples, guidance, and sufficient resources to create impactful play-based activities and integrate them effectively into their teaching practices.

2. Curriculum Flexibility

The curriculum structure should be adjusted to allow more flexibility. Redesigning schedules and simplifying modules can help teachers allocate additional time for play-based learning, enhancing children's educational experiences while reducing educator workload.

3. Parental Engagement

Programs should inform families about the benefits of play-based learning, boosting their confidence in this approach. Collaborative initiatives can empower parents to support these practices at home, fostering a cohesive learning environment.

4. Resource Allocation

Increased government funding is necessary to ensure preschools have adequate play materials, outdoor spaces, and improved classroom facilities. Hiring more educators to reduce teacher-student ratios is also crucial for personalized attention during play.

5. Administrative and Policy Support

Administrators and policymakers must provide clear, practical guidelines to encourage the adoption of play-based learning. Collaboration between administrators and teachers is essential to overcome systemic obstacles and create a child-centered learning environment.

6. Community Networks and Research

Building community networks and collaborative platforms can sustain interest in play-based education. Ongoing research on its long-term impacts and applications in Malaysian preschools will provide valuable data for continuous improvements.

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