

The Practitioners' Awareness on the Effectiveness of Play in Developing Prosocial Behavior among Preschool Children in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study is set in the context of an increasing awareness of the need for and importance of play learning experience for preschool children to its crucial role and contributions to various aspects of child development. The Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan or Blueprint sets the policies and strategies in developing human capital development. Thus, the aim of this study is to evaluate and investigate teachers' perspectives on play and the implementation of play towards children's learning in preschool practice in meeting with PIPP. Teachers' perceptions of play were described and analyzed with respect to their definition, roles and values of play in relation to children's learning. Two methods of data collection were deployed. First, semi-structured in depth face to face interviews were carried out on 20 preschool teachers, 2 administrators and 2 policy makers. Secondly, observations based on a category system were undertaken in 15 preschools in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Take a moment to look back on our early childhood when we took part in different types of play with our friends. Pretend play, legos, blocks, police and robber and play with toys are examples of play that we had participated before. Play is natural tendency of young children all around the world. Some might believe that play is just for fun. Whereas some might believe play contributes towards our developing process.

Either we realize it or not, play gives significant impact on our physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social development [10]. Many experts in education have agreed upon play as a vital medium to promote children's development. Play in general should be spontaneous and actively engaging. Play is the best thing that teachers and parents can plan for young children. They learn their environment and how it works during play. Play helps them to understand different roles people have in their lives. For instance, through pretend play they can learn the task of a mother. Therefore play can be considered as one of the strategic approaches that can be utilized to stimulate and foster young children's learning process. Moreover there is a need of a balance

between play and learning in constructing intellectually engaging environment and curriculum for preschool children. Shows concern for others in distress, shares something with others, takes turn without fuss, complies with a request without protest, helps others and gives something to others are examples of prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors are helpful actions that benefit others but have no obvious benefits for the person who carries out the action [6].

With regard to relation between play and prosocial behavior a study conducted by Dunst and Raab to evaluate the effectiveness of using toys to promote prosocial interactions among preschool children has shown that the practice increased positive child behavior. When they play together with their peers, they need to use cooperation and teamwork to accomplish a task in which both are prosocial behavior.

The early years of children are the vital time for preschool children to develop their prosocial behaviors by interacting with their peers. A meta analysis study conducted by Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998, found that as children grow older they are generally more likely to engage in prosocial behavior. Thus early childhood teachers must provide positive play opportunities; modeling, coaching, conducive learning environments and carefully designed curriculums which tailored made to foster prosocial behavior among preschool children. Apart from that for preschool children who do not develop competence in inter personal social skills the results can be disastrous in later years [11].

2. Human Capital Development

Malaysia has gone through the first 15 year phase of development towards realising its aspiration to become a developed nation by 2020. In this regard, education has been instrumental in building national unity and producing the human resource towards the realisation of Vision 2020. Much has been achieved in the four main thrusts of education, namely in increasing access to education, increasing equity in education, increasing the quality of education and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of educational management. In spite of the achievement gained,

much more needs to be done in the next phase for the education system to leap forward to excellence of global standards.

Taking into account the drawbacks of the present system, the need to cope with the demands and challenges of globalisation and the New Economy and guided by the National Mission, the Ministry of Education has developed the Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan (PIPP) or Blueprint that sets the policies, priorities, strategies and action plans for improving the education system from preschool up to tertiary education in the five years of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

The challenges to education in the Ninth Malaysia Plan differ from the previous plans. For example, the Eighth Malaysia Plan focused on producing adequate and quality human resource while the Ninth Malaysia Plan, guided by the National Mission, emphasises a more people centred development and brings about bigger agenda of developing human capital as a thrust to building a developed nation. The quality of the nation's human capital will be of utmost importance in the achievement of the National Mission. Human capital will be developed according to our own mould, which is holistic in nature, encompassing the acquisition of knowledge and skills including science and technology as well as entrepreneurial capabilities, uphold the cultural values of our society and the internalisation of positive and progressive attitudes, values and ethics.

It is undeniable that the rapid growth and development in the country as well as the mission and vision toward education have increased the challenge of shaping future generation. One of the frameworks for human capital development is National Education Philosophy which formulated to develop an integrated curriculum with the aim of meeting this challenge and producing a balanced man. This philosophy is a guide to the form of early childhood program and in translating the goal into reality Malaysia generally based the development of the program on incorporation of Islamic intellectual thought and western contemporary theories of child development. One of the strategic programs for human capital development is expanding preschool education.

In Malaysia the terms Kindergarten or preschool have been used to refer to half day programs for children 5 and 6 years old, and in some settings there were provision for 4 years old children. The regulation of preschool education and its provision was stated formally in the Education Act 1996, chapter 2, p. 24-25 which was compiled by MDC Legal Advisers. Malaysian government policy towards preschool was stated clearly in the Ninth Malaysia Plan as "a comprehensive policy on preschool education to increase access to

preschool, enforce National Preschool Curriculum, Train preschool teachers and deploy assistant preschool teachers in developing human capital development. Accordingly the plan also stated the MOE would play a more important role in providing appropriate services for preschool education.

3. Statement of Problems

Taking into account the drawbacks of the present system, the need to cope with the demands and challenges of globalisation and the New Economy and guided by the National Mission, the Ministry of Education has developed Pelan Induk Pembangunan pendidikan (PIPP) or Blueprint that sets the policies, priorities, strategies and action plans for improving the education system, from preschool up to tertiary education in the five years of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

In 2001, Ministry of Education institutionalised preschool education to increase access to and improve the quality of preschool education. Concurrently, Ministry of Education developed and enforced the implementation of the National Preschool Curriculum for children aged 5-6 at all preschools and provided training for preschool teachers to ensure the quality of preschool education provided by either the public or private sector.

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Play is considered as one of the approaches and mediums to develop prosocial behavior among preschool children. But still there are arising matters pertaining to teachers' awareness on the significance of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children. Moreover, what is appropriate play is that can be used to develop prosocial behavior among preschool.

Smith indicates that although most preschool educators acknowledge the importance of play in early years classroom and admit the role in children's learning process they do not use play to teach information and skills.

With regard to Malaysian context Malaysian children are accustomed to be educated in formal way in which academic and formal curriculum is highly emphasized (Ling Chu Poh, [9]). Lack of provision from government leads to problems such as the lack of materials, environment and sources created for play.

Malaysian preschools are lacking of professional and well trained teachers. The existing regulation for registration as a preschool teacher possesses minimum academic qualification that is Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). No professional certificate and no experience working with young children are required to being a preschool teacher. Sufean [17] considers that the absence of highly qualified teachers in preschools pose another problem to development of preschool education in Malaysia.

4. Significance of the Study

In general all early childhood teachers have a great responsibility to cater the developmental needs of the whole children. Moreover they are responsible to help and facilitate the children to develop the prosocial skills that are necessary for them to succeed in society.

Although teachers know the importance of play in preschool children development but some of them might not realize the implications of play in promoting and developing prosocial behavior among young children. To develop prosocial behavior among preschool children teachers must take an active role in preparing a conducive learning classroom (Norhashimah and Yahya, [10]).

The study is significant that it would be able to inform the parents, educational agencies, policy makers and psychologists in general and early childhood teachers in particular regarding the effectiveness of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children particularly in Malaysia.

5. Purpose of the Study

The researcher attempted to conduct a survey research to examine the awareness of early childhood teachers regarding the effectiveness of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children by using interview.

6. Research Questions

- To what extent Malaysian preschool teachers understand the effectiveness of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children?
- How do Malaysian preschool teachers know their roles in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children?
- What types of play used in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children?

- What are the problems faced by Malaysian preschool teachers in carrying out these approaches in pre-school?

7. Literature Review

7.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will be reviewed include:

1. play development,
2. approaches in developing prosocial behavior,
3. play and prosocial,
4. teachers' role in promoting prosocial behavior.

The Researcher also reviewed on the previous researches on play and its relation in developing prosocial behavior.

7.2. Play Development

In general all over the world, children play. Play is recognized as an inseparable part of childhood. The universality of children's play has attracted the attention of many researchers and theorists play has over the years. Many attempts have been made by psychologists, educators, philosophers and others to define play. Although they differed in some of their basic assumptions and ideas regarding play, but all agreed that play plays significant role in the development of children (Norhashimah and Yahya, [10]).

Piaget identified three different categories of play based on observations of his own children in which later adapted by Smilansky, namely functional, symbolic and games with rules. These categories coincide with certain cognitive developmental stages. Functional or practice play includes the manipulative play of infants and toddlers. Symbolic play is commonly played by preschoolers. Later, children shift from dramatic play to spending more time playing formal games which involved certain rules. Piaget believed that young children's play evolves through these stages as their mental structures change.

7.3. Approaches in Developing Prosocial Behavior

Research has shown children benefit greatly from effective positive play situations. Klein et al. listed several approaches for facilitating quality play situations. These approaches include:

1. focusing on the process by asking exploratory questions,
2. building on children's interests and elaborate on their play;
3. labeling emotions and feelings that children are expressing through their play;

4. providing materials that encourage and extend exploration;

5. providing open-ended materials such as blocks or pretend props (cited in Preusse, p.9)

Preusse [14] suggests few strategies to develop prosocial skill among young children. For example, placing marble mazes or other exploratory activities in the science area that can be played by children. Another example is placing giant for puzzles in the manipulative area so that children can work together towards a common goal. Next is promoting helping skills and acts of kindness by setting up opportunities in the dramatic play area, such as a pet hospital.

7.4. Play and Prosocial

Play is a natural tendency of young children. It can be considered as a learning medium for young children. Therefore play plays significant role in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children.

According to Santrock [16] during the preschool years children are developing a sense of independence and capacity for cooperation. As they become more verbal, self aware and able to think about another person's point of view they become more able to interact with peers. Children at this age move from parallel play to more advanced levels such as associative and cooperative play. It is through cooperative play that children experience play in groups in which they must set aside their needs for the good of the group. Thus they are developing positive social skills.

A study of Peer Relationship Development by Norsuhaily [11] indicated that play is one of the factor in contributing to prosocial development. Vygotsky viewed socialization as two fold. First cognition is related to social engagement and second language is a critical tool for communication within a social context (Norhashimah and Yahya, [10]). Vygotsky emphasized the importance of sociodramatic play. Play is a mean by which children interact but it is also through this social interaction that cognitive development occurs.

7.5. Teachers' Role in Promoting Prosocial Behavior

Studies by Rubin and Sloman stated, in the case of young children teacher play an important role as "social arrangers". Teachers in preschool facilitate the children's social development by having activities in class, enrolling children in organized activities, scheduling pre school's visits or organized social event. Similarly the study by O'Reilley [12] stated that, "there is evidence of an important role for teachers in preschool social

behaviors in play activities. When teachers are engaged in play with the children, they structure play by providing groups, guide by helping children by maintain roles and the action, establish and arrange the play context, engage in play as a partner and monitor play and give feedback". (p.56)

Teacher also can intervene and help children play together but the form of the intervention is important. A study by Norsuhaily [11] found that teachers who were most successful in increasing the play of pairs (whether in formal setting of classroom or in informal setting) of unfamiliar six year old children, for example, were those who were responsive to the children and encouraged them into playing together.

The teacher's role should include preparing an appropriate and conducive classroom environment for optimal prosocial learning opportunities and providing a comprehensive curriculum that enhances the development of prosocial skills [10]. Study conducted by Dunst and Raab evaluating the effectiveness of an evidence based practice guide for using toys to increase preschoolers' prosocial interactive behavior with peers. Findings showed that greater used of the practice was associated with increased positive child behavior.

From these studies it can be concluded that play is a vital medium to facilitate child development particularly prosocial behavior development. Play alone is not sufficient as teachers' intervention is vital in order to ensure the effectiveness of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children can be achieved.

8. Research Methodology

8.1. Introduction

This chapter explains the research design used and describes the sample, and instrument used. It also shows the data collection and data analysis procedures. This research employs the qualitative approach which involves observations and face-to-face interviews. According to Bell, researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world and seek insight rather than statistical analysis. Therefore, the qualitative method was chosen as a strategy which tends to focus on exploring in as much detail as possible.

8.2. Research Method

This study is a qualitative descriptive research. Qualitative research is to enable the researcher to get descriptive data. The character of the descriptive research was explained by Manion and Cohen, "descriptive research being fundamentally different from experimental research is that the

former, researchers account for what has already occurred; in the latter they arrange for events to happen. This overall balance in the text reflects the fact that the majority of educational studies that are reported in the literature are descriptive rather than experimental. They look at individuals, groups, institutions, method and materials in order to describe, compare, contrast, classify, analyze and interpret the entities and the events that constitute their various fields of enquiry”.

This study uses the qualitative methodology to present and analyze the collected data which will be obtained from observations, and interviews. According to Patton (cited in Best and Kahn) the qualitative research uses different forms of data from those used in traditional research methods.

“Qualitative methods consist of 3 kinds of data collection; (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observations; and (3) written documents. The data from interviews consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinion, feeling and knowledge. The data from observations consist of detailed descriptions of people’s activities, actions and the full range of interpersonal interaction and organizational processes that are part of observable human experience. Document analysis in qualitative enquiry yields excerpts, quotations or entire passages from organizational clinical or program records; memoranda and correspondence; official publications and reports; personal diaries; and open-ended written responses to questionnaires and surveys”.

8.3. Methodological Triangulation

This In the fieldwork study, the data in this study were gathered by using multiple methods or methodological triangulation ‘where different strategies are used to investigate the results’’. This study applied the first, third and fourth types of triangulation advocated by Denzin, whereby the distinguished four types of triangulation: data, investigators, theories, and methodology. The data triangulation represented in this study refers to the use of different kind of data at different time, different spaces and from different persons involving interviews and observations. As the third type of triangulation, this study approach data with multiple perspectives and various theoretical points of view of western and Islamic Thoughts. Finally, as a fourth type, between method triangulation will used through combination between semi-structured interviews and structured observations.

9. Data Collection Procedures

9.1. Face-to-face Interviews

The main method use in the data collection is in-depth face-to-face semi structured interviews with teachers, administrators and policy makers. Hutchinson proposed that interviews permit researchers to verify, clarify or alter what they thought happened, to achieve a full understanding of an incident and take into account the “lived” experience of participants. In addition, semi structured interviews provide an elaborated in depth response.

Seidman stated that a basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they carry out that experience. The semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews in this study were held with teachers and administrators in order to assess their views on the approaches used pre-schools’ classrooms and its contribution in children’s learning process. The interviews with the policy maker, specifically from the Ministry of Education, were conducted in order to consider if there is coordination between policy and practice.

9.2. Small-scale Structured Observation

The second method used in collecting the data is the small scale structured observation. The use of small scale observation with intends to observe how play was implemented in classroom practice, teaching style and overall teaching learning climates in pre-schools. The observation schedules, based on a category system were used to observe teachers in terms of teaching style, learning activities and overall teaching learning approaches in the pre-school classrooms.

Observations in this study were used to validate or corroborate the messages obtained in the interviews. According to Robson, a major advantage of observation as a technique is its directness. In this study the directness of observation can usefully complement information obtained by interview. The method may provide evidence for certain queries. The findings were recorded using observation record sheets and a video camera for data collection.

9.3. Analysis Procedures

The data is presented by transcribing in verbatim. Themes were used in transcribing the data and discussing the results. Denzin suggests that Themes are abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection. There is more than one way to induce

themes – looking for evidence of social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal methods of social control, things that people do in managing impersonal relationships, methods by which people acquire and maintain achieved and ascribed status and information about how people solve problem.

The study was done in two states – Selangor and Terengganu. The Researcher applied permission from the State Education Department of both countries stating the school intended as the first step. The next step after obtaining the letter of approval is approaching the pre-schools seeking permission from the principles or administrators either by writing or through telephone conversation.

The data were collected in three stages. First, by visiting schools or telephone, explaining the aims of the study and by establishing a good rapport and relationship; and then by agreeing date and time for interview.

Second, the Researcher were conducted the interviews with 20 teachers, and two administrators in each type of pre-schools. All the interview sessions were tape recorded for the process of transcribing the data.

The third stage is related to the observational method of data collection. These small-scale observations were made throughout the pre-school session.

9.4. Data Analysis

The tape-recorded interviews from each of two groups of participants (teachers and administrators) were transcribed and analysed using traditional method of qualitative analysis.

The following steps were undertaken in analyzing the interviewing data:

- The Researcher transcribed the recorded interview word by word into written form. Some interviewees' answers consider as "out of topic" will ignored.
- The interviews were conducted in Malay language. The Researcher translated the answers into English language without altering the style of the participants' language.
- All the data which transcribed in the special form were read carefully, and then the important words or phrases for each of the interviewing answers or prompts were highlighted and summarized.
- The data were analysed according to the chronological number of each participants. For example, for Q1 was answered by teacher 1, teacher 2 and so on (step by step).
- Similarities and differences among participants were identified with reference to their answers to each number of interview questions.

- Classification for each phrase mentioned by interviewees was made by giving specific theme/title.
- Overlapping answers were identified throughout the interview.
- The Researcher divided the data into several themes in discussing the results.
- Some examples of the full script of several data transcriptions were translated in English will be prepared.

The data gained from observation schedules were also analysed using traditional method of qualitative analysis. In analyzing the observation schedule used in this study, the raw data in a form of words and anecdotal recording will transferred into summary sheet tables.

9.5. Research Design

This study can be generally classified as an in-depth face to face semi structured interview. Since this study attempted to analyze the teachers' understanding on the effectiveness of play in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children, interview was used to gain in depth understanding of the central phenomenon. Indeed the interviews permitted the participants to describe detailed personal information.

10. Population and Sample

The population in this study refers to all pre-schools in Malaysia. The pre-schools in Malaysia are organised and set up throughout the country by various agencies and providers.

10.1. Participants

Pre-schools' teachers and administrators are the subjects of this study for interviewing purposes. In terms of observational method of data collection, the randomly selection teachers and their teaching and learning approaches in pre-school classroom are the target to obtain the data.

10.1.1. The pre-school Teachers. A total of 20 teachers (two from each of 20 pre-schools) were involved in this study. These teachers varied in terms of their teaching experiences and qualifications.

10.1.2. The Pre-schools Administrators. Two pre-school administrators of the 20 settings were involved in this study.

10.1.3. The Policy Makers. Two policy makers from Ministry of Education Malaysia were involved in this study.

10.2. Validity and Reliability

To ascertain face and construct instrument validity, the Researcher asked two lecturers in University Darul Iman Malaysia who are PhD holders and she also went to a panel of experts in Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia to identify whether the questions in questionnaire are valid. To obtain instruments' reliability and validity the Researcher conducted a pilot study in order to ascertain the respondent could understand the questions. The Researcher interviewed a teacher in one of the primary school in Terengganu. The respondent indicated that the questions were clear and understandable. After the pilot study there was no amendment to the interview questions.

10.3. Analysis of the Teachers' Responses

There were 20 teachers, two administrators and two policy makers were interviewed in this study. Using the demographic data of study subject the Researcher attempted to get the data of the teachers. The Researcher analyzed the responses given then categorized them into three major themes as follows:

- Teachers' understanding on play and its significance
- Teachers' awareness on their role in implementing play as a tool in developing prosocial behaviour
- Types of play used in classroom
- Approaches used in developing prosocial behavior among preschool children

11. Results

Based on the findings of the research, we can outline the following implications:

- Although preschools' teachers in Malaysia recognized play as a vital medium in teaching and learning processes more efforts should be taken to support using play in actual practice.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia could provide sufficient and proper training for the teachers in teaching preschool children. Ministry of Education must review its preschool educational system. For example give more training to its teachers, upgrade the teaching styles of the teachers and others. It could improve and enhance the quality of Preschool in providing early childhood education for the betterment of Malaysian society.
- Preschool teachers in Ministry of Education Malaysia could review their approach in teaching

- Play must be considered as a vital medium in teaching and learning process. They should use it in their actual practice as play could contribute towards children's physical, cognitive, spiritual and socio emotional developments.

12. Recommendations

- Teachers could use different types of play in developing prosocial behavior. They should not confine to one particular way of teaching or emphasize on formal way of teaching.
- Further researches could be done to prove play gives significant impact in developing social development.
- There is a need for more comprehensive research of this area of concern, i.e. to have more observations on children in various settings and involving more teachers in interview sessions. In addition in depth observations and interview at different level i.e. nursery and playschool should be conducted.
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- There is a need for research involving more kindergartens and pre-schools, so that comparative studies in social development and education become available.

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