

# PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF PLAY- BASED APPROACH IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR PRESCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – In the new mandatory National Preschool Curriculum Standards introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, the play-based approach has been emphasized in the teaching and learning process. This study aimed to find out teachers' perception towards the use of the play-based approach in the language and literacy development of preschoolers.

**Method** – A structured questionnaire survey was the main instrument used for data collection. The respondents consisted of 60 teachers from four agencies which provide preschool education, namely the Ministry of Education, KEMAS, Jabatan Perpaduan Negara (JPN), and private preschool centers in the district of Hulu Langat Selangor. All respondents were randomly selected. Of the 60, 51 respondents completed the survey. To gain additional insights into teachers' perceptions 12 respondents were purposely selected from this group to be interviewed. One-way ANOVA was used to analyze data from the survey.

**Findings** – The results showed that teachers have a positive response towards a play-based approach in preschoolers' language and literacy development. They believed children like to play and are actively involved in play. However, they were unsure about the use of play-

based approach. Issues and constraints such as time allocation for play activities, limited and unsuitable space for play, and lack of knowledge and skills required to implement developmentally appropriate teaching including play, made them resort to a didactic teacher-directed approach in their classrooms.

**Significance** – The study points to the importance of providing teachers with knowledge and skills on the use of play in their teaching approach. Intervention programs and collaborations among the agencies providing preschool education must be established to enhance the quality of teaching practices and to ensure the new curriculum is effectively implemented.

**Keywords:** Preschool education, play-based approach, language and literacy development, curriculum implementation, national preschool curriculum standards

## INTRODUCTION

All children love to play because children have natural instinct to engage in enjoyable activities. Proponents of early childhood education believe children learn naturally through play. The International Play Association (IPA), an association for the child's right to play, believes that play is vital for children's development and well-being (IPA, 2009). Playing helps children fulfill their needs, and children have fun learning about the world around them. It is through play that children build their identity and self-confidence (Moyles, 2005; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Christie & Roskos, 2009).

Play as a way of learning for children has been a priority in childhood education (Gestwicki & Bertrand, 2011). Playing and learning in children are dimensions that stimulate each other and can be seen as an indivisible entirety. It is a part of children's experiences which helps them create an understanding of the world they live in. As play is a natural instinct for a child, using the learning through play approach is an effective way to shape and develop children's thinking (Moyles, 2005; Sharifah Nor, Manisah, Norshidah & Aliza, 2009).

Every child deserves a chance to grow and learn in a play-based experiential preschool (Miller & Almon, 2009). According to Bodrova and Leong (2010), the need to integrate play into the early childhood curriculum has been supported by decades of child development research and is reflected in the most recent documents of professional organizations, such as National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and International Play Association (IPA). NAEYC promotes play-based approaches in the early childhood curriculum and states that teaching practices should be appropriate for children's needs, age group and development. NAEYC believes that Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) contributes to children's healthy development in learning (NAEYC, 2009).

As NAEYC defines it, DAP is the best practice in early childhood education and that the early childhood curriculum should be presented in ways that are accessible and achievable for young children. A developmentally appropriate approach enables children to build cognitive skills through concrete experiences. Miller and Almon (2009) and Arce (2000) reiterated that children in play-based kindergartens have a double advantage over those who are denied play, ending up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills.

International evidence has shown that children enrolled in the play-based program developed a strong foundation for learning compared to their peers who were subjected to a didactic teacher-directed program. A series of studies by Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) cited in (Walsh & Gardner, 2006) that examined early childhood programs in Michigan, USA, showed that the children in the programs encouraging self-initiated activity, including play, were faring significantly better than the children receiving more direct academic instruction. The study reported that early childhood programs in which teachers encourage children to initiate and activate their own learning activities are more beneficial than didactic teacher-directed programs. The measures included intellectual and scholastic performance over time, self-reports, various aspects of social behavior and attitudes, mental health, employment and financial affairs.

Other studies have also reached similar conclusions. The children in the more formal settings were found to possess a lower degree

of social acceptance and more anxiety about school, while those in play-based programs displayed greater academic progress in reading and writing (Walsh & Gardner, 2006). For this reason, it is important to incorporate a play-based approach as part of the preschool curriculum to help children develop physically, academically, mentally, and socially.

However, the lack of a common definition of play makes it hard to provide specific recommendations for curriculum designers and educators to advocate a play-based approach in early childhood classrooms in the face of increasing demands on academic skill. In addition, different teachers perceive play differently in practice. Teachers' perception of the use of a play-based approach involves awareness, understanding, and interpreting how a play-based approach provides learning benefits to children. According to Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson & Rogers (2010), teachers' perceptions of play impacted children's learning experiences. Thus, it is essential for preschool teachers to understand the appropriate teaching approach, such as learning through play and its role in early childhood development. Teachers who fail to use appropriate teaching approaches, according to the development stage, may struggle to help children reach their potential.

Beginning 2010, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) introduced the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS) for implementation nationwide. The NPCS is mandatory for all agencies which provide preschool education in the country. The new preschool curriculum focuses on standard content and standard learning. The use of DAP that focuses on child-centered learning approaches has been strongly advocated to all preschool teachers and early childhood educators. The advocacy of the use of play-based approach in the NPCS is to ensure that the new curriculum is successful in meeting the goals and objectives of curricular reforms (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2009). This study sets out to explore teachers' perception of the use of a play-based approach specifically in language and literacy development of preschoolers. The extent to which the teachers identify with the elements of play-based approach, child-centered, and teacher-facilitated practices in the classrooms is arguably a measure of their perceptions of the pedagogic change.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions towards the use of play-based approach in language and literacy development of preschool children. Specifically the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine teachers' perceptions of the use of play-based approach to develop language and literacy skills for preschoolers in all types of preschools.
2. To examine constraints and challenges arising in the implementation of a play-based approach to develop language and literacy skills for preschoolers in all types of preschools.

Language development is the acquisition of linguistic forms and procedures, social rules and customs for expression and interpreting thoughts, feelings and ideas. Whilst literacy is the ability to use language in a variety of forms to listen, speak, read, write, represent and think about ideas. In early childhood, language and literacy development is acquired through social interactions. By interacting with peers and adults, a child learns to develop language skills. There are many connections between play and language and literacy development in young children. Research has provided evidence that play processes are related to early literacy skills (Christie & Roskos, 2009). Play activities give children opportunities to learn language from their peers and practice what they have learned in different situations. Literacy, like oral language, emerges in natural ways that do not require formal teaching. Hence, literacy is best promoted through play in a language rich environment that contains many materials fostering the development of language skills. Play in the preschool years has the potential to provide young children with a highly engaging and meaningful context for learning essential early literacy concepts and skills. Indeed, preschoolers learn to develop language skills quickly and easily through repetitive activities during play (Christie & Roskos, 2009; Essa, 2011).

Vygotsky's theory of language development suggests that play is a vehicle for social interactions. During play activities, learning takes place with the assistance and support of an adult. In the context of preschool, the adult is the teacher or the teacher assistant. With appropriate help and support, a child learns how to complete the task

successfully and to apply this knowledge to new situations. Vygotsky refers this as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A child's ZPD depends upon the interactions and the social experiences the child has with the adults. In sum, Vygotsky's theory on the social nature of language learning is focused on the environment within which the child is raised (Vygotsky, 1978).

In contrast Piaget's theory of language acquisition states that children's cognitive development occurs in stages, and children must be cognitively ready to learn new concepts. Piaget recognized that play is not only for fun, but can be the essential learning tools for developing language. During play, children could combine existing knowledge and skills and apply them to the new situation. In the Piagetian view, a child constructs knowledge through a complex process, and the development of thinking determines how that child speaks and what he or she will say. A child learns to use language and represent objects by images and words. Teachers therefore need to be aware of the child's abilities and level of development in order to set appropriate tasks.

Despite the evidence on the merits of play-based curriculum, many kindergartens resort to using highly prescriptive curricula geared to new standards and linked to standardized tests (Almon, 2004; McNamee, 2010). Because of constant pressure put on kindergarten pupils and teachers to exceed and tackle milestones, play is being pushed out of kindergarten. In many kindergartens, there is no play time at all and there is no time for teacher to incorporate play in the instruction. Young children are being rushed toward the acquisition of skills or knowledge without consideration for how the process of learning itself can lead to more important outcomes, in addition to the targeted skills or knowledge. Furthermore, many school administrators do not value play and believe that play is a waste of time in school (Miller & Almon, 2009; Brodova & Leong, 2010; Chervenak, 2011).

In the Malaysian context, the play-based approach has been emphasized in the national preschool curriculum and teachers are encouraged to adopt play-based activities in their teaching and learning process. Mastura (2008) reiterated that play focuses on children's natural characteristics and that learning through play is the most appropriate approach in early childhood curriculum. Nonetheless, managing play-based activities is one of the most

challenging tasks that teachers in Malaysia have to face. Studies have shown that many teachers never prioritize the use of play approach in their teaching instruction (Saayah, 2004; Fauziah, 2009; Sharifah et al., 2009). They do not possess skills in planning and organizing activities and in using materials and resources effectively during play activities. In addition, constant pressure for academic achievement, lack of support from school administrators and resulted in a play-based approach being abandoned by many teachers (Aliza, Zahara & Rohaty, 2011; Sharifah et al., 2009; Mariani, 2003).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed the survey method, using questionnaires to obtain data. The respondents consisted of 60 teachers from four agencies which provide preschool education: the Ministry of Education, KEMAS, Jabatan Perpaduan Negara, and private preschool centers in the district of Hulu Langat Selangor. Of the 60, 51 respondents returned the survey. The respondents were randomly selected and the choice of location was of logistic convenience. The questionnaire was based on the literature review on play. It consisted of 40 items, 20 items on teachers' knowledge and understanding of the play-based approach, and 20 items on teachers' perceptions towards using play to develop language and literacy skills for preschoolers. The participants rated the questionnaire items using 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To ensure reliability and validity of the instrument, a pilot study was performed. Results of pilot test showed that Cronbach Alpha value was sufficiently high (0.705). The value of alpha indicates that the instrument has the reliability and validity for the main research. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were employed for data analysis. The One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was used to compare level of teachers' perception from the four agencies. Type of preschool, teachers' academic qualifications, and teachers' experience were related to perceptions of the play-based approach. In this article, only findings on teacher's perceptions of play-based education will be highlighted.

In order to gain a deeper insight into teachers' perceptions of play-based learning and to assess their attitudes towards play, a total 12 respondents was selected from the survey sample to

be interviewed. The respondents were selected based on their willingness and consent. Each respondent was interviewed after he or she had completed the survey questionnaire. The purpose of the interviews was to probe teachers' understanding towards teaching and learning language through play. The probing questions focused on respondents' knowledge and understanding about the play-based approach in learning language for preschoolers, their practices in play-based approach to develop in language and literacy skills, and the problems and challenges they faced when using play in teaching and learning language with their children.

## FINDINGS

### *Teachers' Perception According to Types of Preschool*

Table 1 summarizes the mean scores of teachers' perceptions of the use of the play-based approach in language and literacy development of preschoolers according to types of preschool.

*Table 1*

#### *Mean Scores for Types of Preschool and One-Way ANOVA*

Type of Preschools	N	Mean	Standard Deviation (sd)	Degree of Freedom (df)	F-ratio	Sig. (p)
MoE	13	85.15	7.459			
KEMAS	12	85.67	8.825			
Perpaduan	14	80.50	7.003			
Private	12	82.64	8.176			
Total	51					
Between Groups				3	1.223	0.312
Within Groups				46		

Significant level  $p < 0.05$

The analysis showed that teachers of KEMAS scored the highest (mean=85.67, standard deviation=7.459), followed by those of MoE preschools (mean=85.15, standard deviation=8.825), and private preschools (mean=82.64, standard deviation=8.176). In contrast, teachers of Perpaduan scored the lowest mean among the groups (mean=80.50, standard deviation=8.176). One-Way



ANOVA analysis revealed that level of teachers' perception among the four groups is at  $df$  3, 46,  $F$ -ratio 1.0223,  $p=0.312$  indicating no significant difference in the level of perceptions among them. The results showed that the type of preschool was not the main factor in determining teachers' perceptions of the use of the play-based approach in language and literacy development.

### *Teachers' Perception According to Academic Qualification*

Table 2 summarizes the mean scores of teachers' perception of the use of play-based learning in language and literacy development of preschoolers according to teachers academic qualifications.

Table 2

#### *Mean Scores Based Academic Qualification and One-Way ANOVA*

Teachers' Academic Qualification	N	Mean	Standard Deviation (sd)	Degree of Freedom (df)	F-ratio	Sig. (p)
Malaysian Certificate of Education	22	82.00	7.509			
Malaysian Higher School Certificate	7	89.00	10.033			
Diploma	16	82.68	7.238			
Bachelor Degree	6	83.60	7.335			
Total	51					
Between Groups				3	1.469	0.235
Within Groups				46		

Significant level  $p < 0.05$

Analysis based on academic qualification showed that those with Higher School Certificate scored the highest mean (mean=89.00, standard deviation=7.509), followed by those with bachelor degree (mean=83.60, standard deviation=7.335), and diploma holders (mean=82.68, standard deviation=7.238). In contrast, Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) holders scored the lowest mean among the groups (mean=82.00, standard deviation=7.509). Result of One-Way ANOVA test revealed teachers' perceptions among the four groups, based on their academic qualifications, is at  $df$  3,46  $F$ -ratio 1.469,  $p=0.235$  indicating no significant difference in the level of perceptions among them. Analysis showed that a teacher's academic background was not the main factor that determined his or her perception of the use of play-based approach in language and literacy development.

### *Teachers' Perception According to Duration of Teaching Experiences*

Table 3 summarizes the mean scores of teachers' perception of the use of play based curriculum in language and literacy development of preschoolers according to length of teaching experience.

*Table 3*

#### *Mean Scores Based on Duration of Teaching Experiences and One-Way ANOVA*

<b>Duration of Teaching Experiences</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation (sd)</b>	<b>Degree of Freedom (df)</b>	<b>F-ratio</b>	<b>Sig. (p)</b>
0 – 5 years	16	80.73	6.943			
6 – 10 years	8	85.00	9.150			
11 – 15 years	12	84.92	5.807			
16 – 20 years	15	84.07	9.498			
Total	51					
Between Groups				3	0.855	0.471
Within Groups				46		

Significant level  $p < 0.05$

Analysis based on years of teaching experience among groups of teachers showed those with 6-10 years experience scored the highest (mean=85.00, standard deviation=9.150), followed by those with 11 to 15 years (mean=84.92, standard deviation=5.807), and those with 16-20 years (mean=84.07, standard deviation=9.498). In contrast, teachers with teaching experience less than 5 years scored the lowest among the groups (mean=80.73, standard deviation=6.943). Result of One-Way ANOVA revealed that teachers' perception, based on duration of teaching experience among the four groups, is at  $F(3, 46) = 0.855, p = 0.471$ , indicating no significant differences in perceptions among them. The analysis of the result showed that duration of teachers' teaching experiences was not the major factor determining teachers' perceptions of the use of play in language and literacy development of preschoolers.

## THE MAJOR FACTORS

### *Constraints and Challenges in Implementing Play-Based Approach*

Table 4 shows the list of factors that created constraints and the list of factors teachers felt most challenging in implementing the play-based approach.

*Table 4*

#### *Constraints and Challenges*

Factors	MoE (n)	KEMAS (n)	Perpaduan (n)	Private (n)	Total (n)
Constraints in implementing play-based approach:					
• Time allocation	6	4	3	2	15
• Handling materials	3	2	4	1	10
• Student control	4	5	1	3	13
• Space not suitable	2	2	-	-	4
• Teachers' skills	1	-	1	-	2
• Support from school administrator and parents	2	2	1	1	6
The most challenging factors in implementing play-based in teaching and learning:					
• Time allocation	5	3	3	3	16
• Handling materials	6	2	4	4	16
• Student control	6	5	9	5	25
• Space not suitable	3	3	3	3	12
• Teachers' skills	4	4	4	6	18
• Support from school administrator and parents	4	2	2	2	10
Play-based approach is suitable and meet the learning standards:					
• Agree	13	11	10	10	44
• Disagree	-	1	1	2	4

**Time Allocation** – Many teachers felt time allocation was the main constraint hindering the use of a play-based approach in their teaching. More than their colleagues at other schools, Teachers of MoE preschools felt that lack of time caused them not to use play-

based activities. The results indicated that the allocated four hours a week play time in newly introduced curriculum is still not enough for teachers to adopt play in their teaching instruction.

**Handling Materials** – The majority of MoE teachers felt that educational materials were the most challenging factor. Although they were provided with teaching materials by the MoE, teachers were uncertain of how to use them (Sharifah Nor et al., 2009). It is clear, then, that, teachers should be given more training on using the materials.

**Student Control** – There were quite a number of respondents in this study who felt that student control was a big challenge for them. The majority of teachers of Perpaduan felt that student behavior in the classroom caused them not to use play-based activities in teaching language. JPN should look into this matter and perhaps reduce the number of students in classroom, or set up more preschools, mainly in urban area where the number of preschoolers is greatest.

**Space Not Suitable** – The lack of suitable space for play activities was a challenge for all teachers. Many teachers reported that there was not enough space for children to learn and play in classroom. They did not know how to make effective use of classroom space and transform the classroom into a quality play space.

**Teachers' Skills** – As for teachers' skills, the private preschool teachers felt that this was their biggest challenge, compared to their peers in MoE, KEMAS and Perpaduan. Lately, the shortage of qualified preschool teachers at private preschools has had the largest impact on the creation of effective classrooms. It is important for all private preschool teachers to be highly qualified which means they have had teachers' training conducted by MoE.

**Support from School Administrator and Parents** – Results have shown that lack of administrator and parental support has become a big challenge to teachers. Teachers reported that they choose direct instructional methods to teach children language because of pressure from the school administrator and parents to meet academic achievement standards. Efforts should be made to raise administrator's and parent's awareness about the benefits of integrating play in teaching preschooler language.

## FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Interviews with selected teachers were conducted in an effort to probe further into the teachers' perceptions of using the play-based approach to develop language and literacy skills for preschool children. In general, all teachers were positive in their perceptions of the play-based approach. There was an agreement among teachers that all children like to play, that children never get bored while playing, and that they look forward to play. However, the type of play children chose was some kind of game or physical activity. Teachers encouraged children to play freely without any specific activities and learning outcomes set by teachers.

As for development of language and literacy skills, many of the teachers interviewed were unsure of what activities they would do with the children to help them learn through play. They received teaching materials but apparently had no ideas how to use these materials effectively with the children. They lacked the skills in handling the materials and children easily became bored. The interviews confirmed that many did not incorporate play in their teaching and preferred the direct instructional methods to teach language skills. With increased pressure from school principals and parents on academic achievement, teachers chose to use the direct instructional methods to teach reading and writing skills to their pupils. The following are some of the responses of the teachers.

~ *"I have heard about the play-based approach but I am not sure to incorporate play in my teaching practice."*

~ *"I rarely use play-based approach because I am not sure how. I used flash cards, books and the white board. It is much easier and less hassle."*

~*"I really feel that this approach is only good in the document, only on paper. I know that in NPCPS the approach is strongly recommended. In reality many teachers do not practice and that include me. The principal always reminds me to make sure that all pupils can read and write before they go to primary school. So, I use books to teach children reading."*

~*"I don't have the time to do all this. I agree play-based approach is good for preschool children because all children love to play. But the problem is if I use the approach, I will*

*not be able to ensure that all pupils can read before they go to primary school. Play-based is okay if all children start schooling at age of four years. If they go to kindergarten at age five or six, they won't have enough time to learn reading and writing."*

*~"I am not sure how to use this approach in my teaching. Anyway, I am still new."*

*~"Children love to play. Children can develop their communication skills through this approach. However it is difficult to practice it because we do not have enough time to help students meet the standards of the curriculum".*

## DISCUSSION

From the findings of the study, it would appear that the sample of preschool teachers surveyed endorse the importance of play-based approach in language and literacy development in preschool education. However, many teachers did not integrate play into their activities to support teaching and learning language, even though they agree that children love to play. Time allocation, materials management, control over students, inappropriate space, teachers' skill, and poor support from administrators and parents are the main reasons why play has been sidelined.

It could be argued that the positive response towards play-based education suggest that teachers accept play as being of benefit to the development of children and that the play-based approach will ensure effective learning. Many teachers surveyed apparently do not adopt play-based activities into their language teaching instructions because they are unsure how to integrate play activities into classroom instruction. The lack of knowledge and skills caused many teachers continue to use formal teacher-direct instruction to teach language and literacy skills. It could also be argued that these teachers perceive play and learning as two separate entities. Play is important to children, but teachers are reluctant or perhaps uncertain of how effective enhancement of literacy skills can be developed without the use of direct instructions. Similiar findings were also reported by Aliza et al. (2011), Sharifah Nor et.al (2009), Mariani (2003) and Mastura (2008).

The polarization of play and learning has been causing problems for decades in early childhood education and it appears still to be unresolved. Empirical studies conducted in early years settings in England found that teachers' attention focused predominantly on more formal task such as literacy and numeracy (BERA, 2003 cited in Walsh & Gardner, 2006 ). Play has been viewed mainly as a social function with little evidence of cognitive challenge. This narrow conceptualization of play, shared by many early years' practitioners, continues to undermine play-based activities in delivering early childhood programs (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002). Such reluctance to see play as the medium for all learning in the early childhood curriculum may stem from the fact that teachers are under constant pressure to meet academic targets by administrators and parental expectations and they do not see play as contributing to academic goals. Indeed, similar situation has been observed in Malaysia. Reports by the Curriculum Development Division of MoE showed play activities have been sidelined by teachers and that many still use the conventional teacher-direct instructions in the classroom (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2008). With the mandatory NPCCS, teachers will be under greater pressure to meet the standard content and standard learning outcomes prescribed in the curriculum document. More studies on the implementation of the new curriculum standard should be conducted to support government initiative in the transformation of preschool curriculum.

Effecting a more play-based curriculum also requires teachers to possess pedagogical skills to take on a more facilitative role in classrooms. The teachers surveyed in this study seemed to have a wide range of academic qualifications. Academic achievement alone is not enough to qualify teachers to teach early childhood education especially in child-centered settings. Teachers need strong background in child development or early education pedagogy.

Following Shulman's (2004) definition of good teaching practice, the teachers' perception of their knowledge is considered as a critical success factor. Pedagogical knowledge involves the teaching and learning processes and methods, as well as educational goals, values and targets. A teacher with thorough pedagogic knowledge understands how students construct their knowledge, acquire skills and develop learning habits, and thus knows which methods to

use so that students understand. Pedagogical content knowledge embraces the core of teaching, learning, curriculum, evaluation and reporting and demands flexible lesson planning and implementation. Teachers must understand the interaction of content and pedagogy (skills of teaching) in order to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum (Cunningham, 2009). One way is to ensure teachers' professional development. The findings from this study point to the importance of teachers' professionalism. Collaborative efforts between the four agencies in planning for intervention programs is needed to enhance the quality of teaching practices and to ensure NPCS is effectively implemented.

A challenge in educating teachers for playful kindergartens is that many younger teachers did not grow up with experience of a child-initiated play classroom (Miller & Almon, 2009). Findings from this study showed teachers with less than five years in the field tended to be less likely to accept a play-based curriculum in language and literacy development. The main problem associated with novice teachers is lack of confidence and knowledge due limited exposure and experiences in early childhood pedagogic principles. Bennet and Rogers (1997) highlighted similar pedagogical challenges that early years teachers encounter when they implement play in a classroom environment.

One way is to ensure that teachers do make meaning of change would be to encourage them to reflect more closely on their practices and effectively to become learners themselves. However, professional development, promoted by personal learning and understanding, requires time. The teachers concerned must try the new ideas for themselves. Once they begin to make meaning of the pedagogical implications, grounded change in practices can be successfully initiated by teachers themselves.

The newly introduced NPSC emphasizes a child-centered approach to meet academic and learning standards requirements. In a child-centered approach, children will only be assessed according to how well they have done in school, rather than based in standard met. Steiner (1996) reiterates that we should not introduced standardization into the upbringing of children, especially not in play-based curriculum. Some questions that might remain unanswered are how prescribed standards could effectively support child-centered instruction and



improve learning outcomes. According to Miller and Almon (2009), observational and curriculum-embedded performance assessments should be used instead of standard based learning. In this context of NPSC, it is not only important to systematically monitor how the early learning standards are being implemented, but, more significantly, what the relevant authorities are doing to help teachers use the standards appropriately and effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Though there is a strong endorsement by early childhood proponents of the use of the play-based curriculum in language and literacy development at the preschool, the findings of the study do not perhaps auger well for the future of play-based approach envisaged by the MoE through the introduction of NPCS. Many teachers confirmed that they do not integrate play in teaching and learning language and literacy skills. Apparently, factors such as time allocation for play activities, limited and unsuitable space for play, and lack of knowledge and skills required to implement developmentally appropriate teaching including play, are the main reasons the teachers cited for minimizing play. If the views of the sample of teachers in this study are representative of a wider community of preschool teachers in the country, then the findings suggest that preschool teachers are not ready to adopt the play-based approach, not only for language and literacy development, but for all other areas of learning in the NPSC.

Enforced change challenges long-held beliefs and practices. People are willing change if they “know the stakes are worth it” which Fullan (2007) refers to as teachers making meaning of change. The main implication of the results are that curriculum and practice innovators face the ‘heart and minds’ task of providing information, support and training to enable teachers to introduce change in their personal pedagogies and to integrate play activities as they begin to see the benefits for themselves. It is the responsibility of the MoE to take actions of providing information, continuous supervision, support and training to enable teachers to change their perceptions and beliefs. Winning over teachers could help increase the prospects of success using play-based approach and implementation of NPCS.

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