

## **A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN TEACHERS' PRACTICE OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Malaysian early education authorities have advocated for play-based learning in Malaysian classrooms in recent years. However, there is minimal recorded evidence of the state of play-based learning implementation in preschools. This study seeks to investigate the practice of play-based learning by three Chinese-ethnic teachers in a preschool. The choice of a case study is to enable a detailed examination of the intertwining relationship between knowledge, attitude and practice of play-based learning among the case study teachers. The findings obtained from three sets of self-report rating and observation point to a stronger influence of knowledge than attitude on the teachers' practice of play-based learning. Improved knowledge about play-based learning is critical for the Malaysian preschool teachers to apply play-based learning in their teaching practice. Without adequate knowledge in play-based learning, there is the risk that teachers will continue to perceive "play" and "learning" as two separate entities, and correspondingly believe that play has an adverse effect on learning.*

**Keywords:** play-based learning, preschool, case study, Malaysia, sociocultural

### **INTRODUCTION**

Play-based learning is an approach of learning where the elements of play are incorporated in the process of achieving academic goals. Play eases learning by reinforcing and extending a child's learned knowledge and skills through naturalistic

interactions with other individuals and environments in his/her surroundings (Ashiabi 2007). In play-based learning, it is important to strike a balance between child-initiated activity and teacher-directed activity in order to improve a child's learning experience (Wang and Lam 2017). Play in the classroom settings brings along many advantages, such as encouraging problem-solving skills, creativity and imagination, reading, and arithmetic skills, apart from developing social-emotional skills (Ashiabi 2007; Jung and Jin 2014; Marcon 2002; Pyle and Danniels 2017). To date, it is noted that most of the research on play-based learning is from the Euro-American countries (Marcon 2002; Ashiabi 2007; Jung and Jin 2014; Pyle and Danniels 2017). The successful implementation of play-based learning in Asian countries such as Malaysia are yet to be well-investigated. Reports indicate that there are huge differences between Euro-American countries and Asian countries in terms of grasping the concept as well as the implementation of play-based learning (Huang 2013; Wu 2014).

## **PLAY-BASED LEARNING**

The significance of play in the classroom has been emphasised nearly a century ago (Dewey 1916). Today, the prevailing acceptance of play-based learning is common in Euro-American countries (Cutter-Mackenzie et al. 2014). Play-based learning reflects an educational ideology which encourages an active system of learning, independent thinking, problem-solving, socialisation and individual difference (Wallerstedt and Pramling 2012). Play is believed to be a rich resource for learning. Play and learning are inseparable in a child's early years (Wallerstedt and Pramling 2012). A person is being inhibited from developing into a happy, healthy and creative individual if play is absent during his/her childhood (Isenberg and Jalongo 2001). Through play, young children learn cooperative skills, build knowledge through imitation, and learn new perspectives from trial and error (Ismail, Asrul and Wafa 2014).

There are different types of play. From the social perspective, Parten (1933) differentiated play as "solo play", "parallel play", "associative play" and "cooperative play". Before four years of age, young children typically play by themselves (solo play) or side by side with others (parallel play). From four years onwards, young children's interest to play and communicate with other children increases. In preschool settings, young children start to engage in associative play (play together with others but in their own way) and cooperative play (play with a common purpose) (Günel and Tufan 2019). In preschools, teachers might use various "purposely framed play" to facilitate learning, which include free play, modelled play and teacher-child interaction during play (Cutter-Mackenzie and

Edwards 2013). More recently, an ideology of play called AnjiPlay approach emerged in China (Anji Education 2019). This play approach was developed by an educator called Cheng Xueqin and it focuses on reflective learning and the discovery of the true capacity of children, based on the principles of love, risk, joy, engagement and reflection (ibid.). This play approach stresses the importance of open-ended, minimally structured materials and environments, with children being given the freedom to determine placement and use of equipment (Coffino and Bailey 2019).

The importance of play-based learning can be explained from the sociocultural theory, which was introduced by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the 20th century. Vygotsky stated that “in play...he (the child himself) was a head taller than himself” (1978, 102). In this theory, Vygotsky (2016) emphasised that play is a crucial activity that determines a child’s development (Ramani and Brownell 2014) where play supports a young child to make sense, think and solve problems through constructing new knowledge and understanding (Collum 2012; Isenberg and Jalongo 2001); while he/she experiences the social interactions through play (Nugent 2017). During play, young children undergo the process of imitation, guided learning and collaborative learning (Cherry 2018) from a more knowledgeable person, such as a more capable peer or an adult (Isenberg and Jalongo 2001). When a child engages in a new task, the more knowledgeable person, such as the teacher first observes and listens to the child. The teacher takes an active but non-dominant role in communicating and providing support to the child (Morrison 2014). If the child can grasp the concept, the teacher gradually withdraws him/herself to encourage independence. This process is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where a child is able to perform with guidance and encouragement from a more knowledgeable person (Collum 2012; Morrison 2014). When the child successfully masters the concept, the teacher may introduce a new task and repeat the scaffolding process in ZPD (Morrison 2014).

Children can actively participate in the construction of their own learning with a satisfactory level of help from the teacher in a play-based learning environment. Play is important for the development of moral emotions (such as guilt and empathy), sharing and self-regulation behaviours, as well as reasoning (such as distributive justice) in children (Morrow and Rand 1991; Bergen and Davis 2011; Morrison 2014). Apart from that, play provides the context for teachers to support language learning by building on words that young children have already understood (Morrison 2014). Therefore, the “ethos of play” is prevalent in most Euro-American contexts (Rentzou et al. 2019) where there is a strong belief that children in the play-based environment who are being scaffolded by teachers, according to their ZPD, not only gain academically but also develop character (Nugent 2017).

However, play is given less emphasis in the Asian preschools. For example, Wu (2014) compared Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and German kindergarten teachers on their views on play-based learning, and she identified a few notable differences. One key difference was that the Hong Kong teachers view play as a different entity from learning. Hong Kong teachers stressed the importance of mastering academic skills and knowledge in preschools; they even made a point that young children could only achieve that through teacher-led instruction. Consequently, in most of the school time, young children are occupied with non-play activities such as doing homework, reading and tidying up. Play is only allowed as a reward after the hard work of learning, which might only take less than 30 minutes of time in a half-day session in a typical Hong Kong preschool (Wu 2014).

In Malaysia, the National Preschool Curriculum has been implemented in all preschools since 2003. In a study conducted in 2009, Teo found that Malaysian preschool teachers used a certain extent of play-based activities in their teaching practice, such as colouring activities, manipulation of coloured papers and physical activities. Later, the curriculum was revised in 2010 and 2017 to give more emphasis to holistic education and development. In particular, National Preschool Standard Curriculum 2017 was revised to be in line with the goals in the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013–2025, focusing on the mastery of 21st century skills such as critical thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving skills and leadership (Malaysian Ministry of Education 2017). One of the key focuses highlighted in the National Preschool Standard Curriculum 2017 is play-based learning - defined as a planned and structured pedagogical approach which provides the opportunities for young children to learn safely, joyfully and meaningfully, through their natural behaviours and intuitions. Preschools in Malaysia are urged to provide collaborative and individual learning spaces for the children, and three blocks of free play time per week (20 minutes for each block) for the children (Malaysian Ministry of Education 2017). These new mandates which gave increased emphasis to play-based learning were well-received by the preschool teachers in Malaysia (Mohd Nazri and Wan Nurul Baizura 2018). However, at the same time, the teachers also reported challenges associated with the lack of teaching aids and dilemma in balancing play and the direct teaching of academic skills (Mohd Nazri and Wan Nurul Baizura 2018; Aquino, Nordin and Mazlina 2017).

Besides that, the challenge to implement play-based learning in early childhood education in Asia is also partly influenced by parents' perspectives of play and learning (Mardziah et al. 2017; Grieshaber 2016). In Malaysia, parents expect their children to master 4M (*membaca, menulis, mengira, menaakul*), namely reading,

writing, counting and thinking skills, in preschool as a preparation for formal education in the primary schools, and such expectations and related concerns are constantly communicated to the teachers by parents (Mardziah et al. 2017). Like many other Asian parents (Chua and O'Brien 2011), some Malaysian parents still hold the perspective that play does not go in line with learning (Aquino, Nordin and Mazlina 2017). In regard to this, Leung (2011) reported that Hong Kong parents prefer that play and learning be separated because they believe that play in a classroom setting will only cause harm to children's study and socio-emotional growth. Parents worry that a playful environment will distract children from serious study and will cause disadvantages to academic results. This shows a heavy influence from Confucian ideology. For example, in one of the Confucian quotes, “玩物丧志” (wang2wu4sang4zhi4), play is seen as having a negative influence on learning determination. As a result, it had been found in previous studies that Asian parents tend to limit the child's playtime and play materials (Parmar, Harkness and Super 2004). In general, Asian parents were also found to have limited interest in play while tending to emphasise more on academic development in their children (Wong and Fleer 2013).

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PRACTICE OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN ASIAN PRESCHOOLS**

Despite the common argument that Asian preschools practice less play-based learning, there are limited studies conducted so far to reveal the actual teaching-learning context in Asian preschools. Among the studies conducted so far, a perspective emerged that despite many Asian teachers having a positive attitude towards play-based learning, they are lacking in knowledge to implement play-based learning (e.g., Aliza, Sharifah Nor and Omarzila 2013; Wang and Lam 2017). For example, research with 51 teachers in Malaysia found out that most of the teachers (86.3%) have a positive attitude towards play-based learning (Aliza, Sharifah Nor and Omarzila 2013). However, the research also found out that the teachers' knowledge of play-based learning is only at the surface level as many of them assume play-based learning only refers to free play.

In China, Wang and Lam (2017) interviewed and observed two teachers during classroom teaching. A notable finding was that, even though the teachers provided positive remarks about play-based learning, their actual teaching practices in the classroom did not reflect their remarks. For example, one teacher mentioned that she put high importance on respecting students' needs and treating them equally as the teacher. However, the teacher was found to be quite authoritarian in the classroom where she decided on learning activity and demanded the students

to follow her instructions (Wang and Lam 2017). As explained by Cheng and Stimpson (2004), for so long, Asian teachers were trained to apply the traditional authoritarian-style of the teaching method. Therefore, they were most familiar with this method and they were shaped to focus on the technical power of teaching, rather than the practice of play-based learning. As a result, other than merely instilling the knowledge of play-based learning to Asian pre-service teachers and teachers, Cheng and Stimpson also advocated for teacher education to focus on the development of inner power which enables the teachers to engage in self-inquiry and be more committed to the search for support to meet the challenges of change (ibid., 349).

Other than the teacher factors (which include the teachers' disclosures that cultural, school and parental factors also influence the practice of play-based learning in the Asian preschool contexts (Fung and Cheng 2012). Most of these factors are inter-related. As previously mentioned, Asian parents prefer that play and learning be separated because of the belief that play will distract their children from studying (Leung 2011). Besides that, Asian parents were found to have the tendency to make comparisons and to seek tangible proofs of their children's learning. To meet these parental expectations, school administrations and teachers are inclined to stick to the direct teaching method, which is easier to produce the tangible proofs (e.g., worksheets, graded assignments) (Fung and Cheng 2012). Such a condition is especially prevalent in the Asian context in which private preschool education is common (Kim 2004). In such a context, parents are the main financial sponsors of the preschools. Therefore, the preschool administrators face the pressure to present immediate, tangible results to the parents (ibid.).

To date, studies on play-based learning in Asia have been conducted predominantly by researchers in mainland China and Hong Kong (e.g., Cheng and Stimpson 2004; Fung and Cheng 2012; Wang and Lam 2017). In comparison, there are fewer studies on the implementation of play-based learning in Malaysia (e.g., Mardziah et al. 2017; Aquino, Nordin and Mazlina 2017). Applying a qualitative case study investigation method, it is aimed in this study to examine the practice of play-based learning in a private preschool context in Malaysia. Malaysia is a South Eastern Asian country, bordering Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. About 20% of the people in Malaysia are of ethnic Chinese backgrounds. Specifically, the study hopes to examine the practice of play-based learning by three Chinese-ethnic teachers in a Malaysian private preschool and to explore factors that affect their practice. Focusing on play-based learning, the investigation of play-based learning in this context contributes to understanding the significance of Asian-Chinese heritage values and the culturally influenced teaching practices which are prevalent in the early childhood education in the wider region of Asia. Ultimately,

it is aimed to deduce factors that hinder the implementation of play-based learning in the Asian context. Three research questions were asked in this study: (1) how did the teachers implement the practice of play-based learning, (2) how does knowledge influence the practice of play-based learning, and (3) how does attitude influence the practice of play-based learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher selected the case-study preschool through a purposive sampling method. A purposive sampling technique is a well-planned and non-random participant selection method with reference to given traits or characteristics based on research questions or objectives (Palinkas et al. 2015). This sampling method provides the opportunity for the researchers to identify and select individuals who are knowledgeable or experienced in the area of interest. The school is located in an urban area in the northeast of Penang island, Malaysia. After getting approval from the principal, the researchers obtained written consent of participation from the teachers. Three teachers who participated in this study were selected based on the following criteria – they are in-service teachers who are teaching children aged three to six in a preschool setting.

The data reported in this article were obtained from the teachers' self-report ratings and the observations of their teaching practices in the classrooms. First, the teachers were asked to perform a self-rating of their knowledge, attitude and practice of play-based learning (refer to Figure 1). Then, an observation was conducted during a teaching and learning session in the class. Observation is crucial in understanding the participant's natural behaviour in a normal setting (Yin 2003). In order to minimise bias and prevent extraneous factors that will influence the data collection, the researchers used naturalistic observation. Naturalistic observation is a non-participation observation, which is also known as "complete observer", in which the observer excludes themselves from the group that is observed (Mukherji and Albon 2010).

In this study, the first author who conducted the observation stayed at the back of the classroom during the teaching and learning sessions. This is to ensure minimal distraction so that the teachers and students could behave naturally during classroom activities. The classroom situations were manually recorded using an observation checklist (refer to Figure 2). At the same time, the classroom situations were also video-recorded to reduce information bias – a condition where information is being recalled selectively or is influenced by false memory (Hammer, du Prel and Blettner 2009). Each observation session was about 30 minutes. The observation checklist



contains five major behaviour domains to be observed, including the aspects of classroom management, availability of play-based materials, encouragement in child initiation, teacher's participation and use of additional materials.

<b><u>Interview Questions Form</u></b>									
Teacher No: P1 / 1 / 2 / 3					Start Time: _____			End Time: _____	
Gender: _____					Age: _____				
Highest Educational Level: _____					Years of Teaching: _____ (Since) _____				
Marital Status: _____					No. of Children: _____				
Self-report by the participant:									
1. In the scale of 1 – 10, how do you rate yourself on your knowledge on play based learning?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No idea					I'm an expert				
2. In the scale of 1 – 10, how do you rate your attitude toward play based learning?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Negative					Positive				
2. In the scale of 1 – 10, how do you rate your practice on play based learning?									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I do not implement					I implement during every lesson				

Figure 1: Self-reported form.



<b>Observation Checklist: Teachers' Practice and Classroom Environment</b>			
Date of visit: _____		Time: _____	
Subject: _____		TeacherNo: P1 / 1 / 2 / 3	
Class Observed (age group): _____		No. of Students: _____	
Teacher	Which teaching strategy does the teacher use? (Child-initiated free play, open-ended play, modeled play, purposefully framed play, teacher-directed work)		
	Did the teacher use scolding or disciplinary actions to manage the class?		
	Often	Sometimes	No
	Did teacher make the items/ materials available to the child?		
	Often	Sometimes	No
	Did the teacher encourage the child to make choices?		
	Often	Sometimes	No
	Did the teacher join the activity?		
	Often	Sometimes	No
Did the teacher add materials to facilitate the child's interest or interaction?			
Often	Sometimes	No	

Figure 2: Observation checklist.

## RESULTS

Before the research commenced, background information was gathered from the teachers in this study. The basic information of each teacher is presented in Table 1.

As summarised in Table 1, all the teachers were female, aged between 27 to 35 years old. Two respondents, i.e., Teacher Serena and Teacher Ling graduated at the undergraduate degree level and Teacher Mian graduated at the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM) level. Teacher Mian has the most experience in teaching (16 years), while Teacher Serena and Teacher Ling have less than 10 years of teaching experience each. The information below portrays the education and teaching backgrounds of each teacher. All teachers have attained certification in early childhood education.

Table 1: Basic information of respondents

	Research respondents		
	Teacher Mian	Teacher Serena	Teacher Ling
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Age	35	29	27
Highest educational level	SPM	Degree	Degree
Certification in early childhood education	Yes (certificate level)	Yes (degree level)	Yes (degree level)
Years of teaching	16	6	3
Prior teaching experience	Local preschool (public and private)	Oversea preschools in Singapore, Thailand and Dubai	Local preschool (private)

Note: Teacher Mian, Teacher Serena, Teacher Ling are pseudonyms of the teachers in this study.

### Self-Reports on Knowledge, Attitude and Practice

The respondents were asked to rate their knowledge, attitude and practice of play-based learning using a scale of 1 to 10, where the higher marks denote better and more positive meanings. For example, the ratings of 7 to 10 were accepted as higher or more positive than the ratings of 4 to 6, while the rating of 3 and below were regarded as the lowest or the least positive. The results are presented in Figure 3.

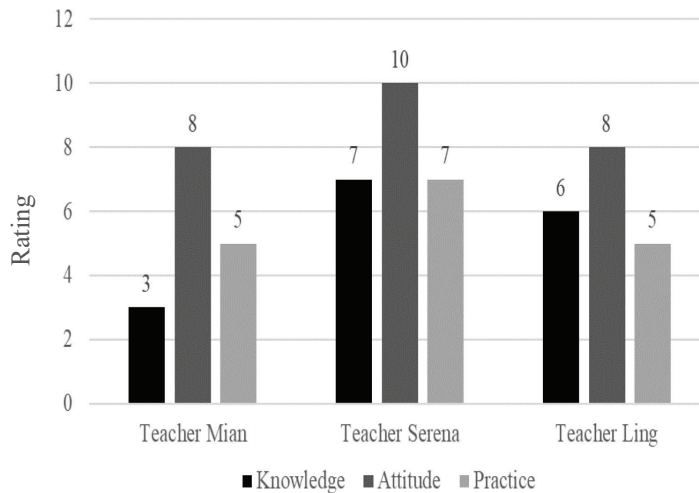


Figure 3: Self-report results.

Overall, Teacher Serena recorded the highest self-rating for all the measures: knowledge (self-rating of 7), attitude (self-rating of 10) and practice (self-rating of 7). This was followed by Teacher Ling, who recorded “6” for knowledge, “8” for attitude and “5” for the practice of play-based learning. Teacher Mian’s rating of attitude and practice was similar to Teacher Ling, i.e., “8” for attitude and “5” for practice. However, among the three of them, Teacher Mian recorded the lowest rating for knowledge. She only rated herself 3 out of 10 (self-rating of 3) for knowledge.

### Observation data

The observation data collected from the teaching and learning sessions (about 30 minutes each) were analysed. The data were analysed according to the research questions: (1) How did the teachers implement the practice of play-based learning, (2) How did knowledge influence the practice of play-based learning, and (3) How did attitude influence the practice of play-based learning. To ease the presentation, the observation data is summarised in Table 2 for reference.

Table 2: Observation data

Observation	Respondent		
	Teacher Mian	Teacher Serena	Teacher Ling
Age group observed	5 and 6 years old	5 and 6 years old	5 and 6 years old
Subject during observation	Bahasa Melayu	Phonics	English
Teaching strategy	Teacher-directed work, book-based	Modelled play: making Clown art	Purposefully framed play
Play-based learning activity during observation	No play-based learning	Yes. Clown arts and craft	Yes. Guess the word game
Duration of activity	No play-based learning	Around 15 minutes	Around 20 minutes
Materials	No activity Teachers only used book available in school	Teacher bought pom-pom and paper plate by herself without school financial support	Teacher used existing word card in school The teacher asked some questions Children raised their hands to answer The correct answer was rewarded a mark for the group

(continued on next page)

Table 2: (continued)

Observation	Respondent		
	Teacher Mian	Teacher Serena	Teacher Ling
Learning goals	Reinforce vocabulary Reinforce writing skills	Reinforce the vocabulary Reinforce the sound of “cl” in phonics	Reinforce English vocabulary Spelling
Other observation: Children’s response	Seated work Some are unable to follow the lesson Some are able to give appropriate responses	Children are allowed to move around in the class Enjoy the lesson Eager to show their artwork with friends, interacting with their peers	Children are required to stay at their place Children actively participated Some seem lost and not paying attention

### Practice on Play-based Learning

Teacher Serena (self-rated practice = 7) and Teacher Ling (self-rated practice = 5) were observed having play-based activity in their respective teaching. However, play-based learning was not observed in Teacher Mian’s (self-rated practice = 5) lesson. Teacher Mian used the book available in the class and taught in a conventional way. She was highly dependent on the workbook and took control of the class. She taught the Malay word according to the book by asking children to read aloud and write the word in their book. Children were required to sit in their own seats. Some children were able to answer and respond accordingly but some seem to have difficulties in catching up with the teacher’s pace in completing the workbook. No play-based learning was observed in Teacher Mian’s teaching session. Therefore, her actual practice can be considered as even lower than her self-rated practice of 5.

Teacher Ling carried out a “guess the word” game to reinforce children on the English words they learned in the previous lessons. The activity is approximately 20 minutes in a 30-minutes lesson. She used the word cards available in the class, so there is no prior preparation needed. In the game, she drew out a one-word card and kept it to herself. She then described the word for the children to guess the word. After that, children are required to spell out the word verbally. Children were asked to raise their hands to answer. Every correct answer was given one point as a group score. Children were excited to participate but some children were lost and not paying attention. Teacher Ling practiced play-based learning moderately. In the observation session, she implemented a purposely framed play in which there was a mixture of structured learning and play. Her practice was consistent with her self-rated practice of 5.

On the other hand, Teacher Serena planned a craft activity of designing a clown to reinforce children's recognition of the sound "cl" in phonics. The activity took around 20 minutes (in a 30-minute lesson). First, teacher Serena did a quick revision on the sound and related words. Then, she explained the steps of making the craft and let the children design and make their own clown. The children had freedom to move around and interact with their friends. They were allowed to expand their creativity to design their own clown. They were excited to show their artworks to the teacher and to their peers. Teacher Serena's practice of play-based learning in the classroom was more vivid than the other two teachers, which was also consistent with her relatively higher self-rating of practice (self-rated practice = 7). Overall, the observation data reveal that Teacher Serena and Teacher Ling practice play-based learning at varying degrees while Teacher Mian did not practice play-based learning.

### **Influence of Knowledge on the Practice of Play-based Learning**

Self-rated findings indicated that Teacher Serena has the highest level of knowledge (self-rated knowledge = 7), followed by Teacher Ling (self-rated knowledge = 6) while Teacher Mian (self-rated knowledge = 3) has the least level of knowledge. The findings are supported by the data from the classroom observation. Teacher Mian who recorded the least knowledge of play-based learning did not implement play-based learning in the time of observation. On the other hand, Teacher Serena and Teacher Ling implemented play-based learning in their classroom but in a slightly different way. During the observation, Teacher Serena used "modelled play" (crown art and craft) while Teacher Ling applied "purposefully framed play" (guess the word game) as their respective teaching strategy during their session. The findings indicate that teachers with a satisfactory level of knowledge in play-based learning have higher chances to practice play-based learning.

### **Influence of Attitude on the Practice of Play-based Learning**

Findings from the self-reports show that all teachers have a positive attitude towards play-based learning (Teacher Serena = 10, Teacher Ling = 8 and Teacher Mian = 8). However, observation data shows that their attitudinal behaviour towards play-based learning is different. This is shown in their initiatives, in their preparation, and also the kind of child's response they allow in the classroom. During the observation session, Teacher Serena and Teacher Ling were found to execute play-based learning in their teaching sessions, reflecting their genuinely positive attitude towards play-based learning. They designed child-oriented activities and they also allowed active participation of the children in the class. Children in Teacher Serena's class were allowed to move within the class and interact with

peers; while the children in Teacher Ling's class were allowed to participate in discussion and communication with peers but in a seated position.

On the other hand, the observation data did not support Teacher Mian's claim on her positive attitude towards play-based learning. Teacher Mian did not implement any play-based learning in her teaching during the observation. Teacher Mian neither allowed any conversation between children nor let them move around in the classroom. She restricted children's activity during her lesson. Therefore, the observation findings did not reflect the high positive attitude as recorded by Teacher Mian.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study aims to investigate factors that influence the practice of play-based learning in a private preschool in Malaysia through three research questions: (1) how did the teachers implement the practice of play-based learning, (2) how does knowledge influence the practice of play-based learning, and (3) how does attitude influence the practice of play-based learning? The research data were obtained from two sources, namely, self-rating and observation, and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

For the first research question, it was found that the three teachers who participated in this study practised varying degrees of play-based learning, ranging from open-ended play to teacher-directed activity. These qualitative case-study findings disclose the changing trend which is currently taking place in the Asian preschool context, where some teachers have started to embrace play-based learning; while others have not (Wu 2014). Predominantly, it was found that the teachers' teaching practices were more towards teacher-oriented rather than being student-oriented. No free play was observed during the three teaching sessions. The teachers only allowed structured play with varying degrees of freedom or no play activity at all in their teaching practices. The findings added to support the notion that play-based learning is not being implemented adequately in Malaysia (Mardziah et al. 2017). More teachers in Malaysia are inclined to implement teacher-centred teaching rather than student-centred teaching (Mardziah et al. 2017; Nazila and Adelina 2018).

For the second research question, it was found that knowledge is a dominant factor that influences the practice of play-based learning by the teachers. The findings provide evidence that teachers who recorded the highest level of play-based learning knowledge (i.e., Teacher Serena) practiced more play-based learning and

also allowed more degrees of freedom in the play-based learning activities. In contrast, Teacher Mian who recorded the least knowledge level did not practice any play-based learning in the observed teaching session. The findings illustrate the direct relationship between teachers' knowledge and practice in the case of implementing play-based learning. Such finding is important as it supports the initiatives to introduce play-based learning pedagogy in teacher training and to continue imparting the knowledge of play-based learning in teachers' continual professional development (Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot 2010). Such initiatives are crucial considering that past research in Malaysia also pointed out that preschool teachers have less understanding about teaching approaches and the integration of all teaching aspects as documented in National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Mardziah et al. 2017).

However, the relationship between attitude and practice of play-based learning was less direct (research question 3). Despite that all three teachers recorded having had a positive attitude towards play-based learning, their initiatives to practise play-based learning were markedly different. The most notable finding was that despite Teacher Mian rating her attitude towards play-based learning as "8/10", a considerably high positive level; the observation data did not support her claim. The above finding reflected the strong cultural influence on the Asian teachers' practice of play-based learning. Many Asian parents and teachers regard play and learning as separate entities (Leung 2011), with many of them only endorsing learning rather than play as an activity that supports a child's development (Wong and Fleer 2013; Wu 2014). Correspondingly, these parents and teachers would not purposely plan and carry out play-based activities with young children (Wu 2014). In contrast, more attention is given to reinforce academic activities, such as reading and writing.

Even so, it is worth pointing out that such a cultural effect is not seen in teachers with increased knowledge of play-based learning. The findings are suggestive of the importance of imparting knowledge on play-based learning to pre-service and in-service teachers – in the effort of promoting more play-based learning in Asian contexts such as Malaysia. As realised from the findings, a merely positive attitude is not enough to cause a change in practice. Teachers require more knowledge about various pedagogical approaches of play-based learning (Mardziah et al. 2017) such as Montessori or AnjiPlay methods for improved integration and implementation of play-based learning in their teaching practices. Last but not the least, it is acknowledged that the current investigation only involved three teachers in a Malaysian preschool. The generalisation of the findings is limited. However, as asserted by Yin (2017) and Creswell (2009), the value of a case study design is for portraying social phenomenon which is under-reported. Therefore, the



findings from this study are not intended to be generalised, but rather the findings contribute to illustrate the contextual relationship of teacher's knowledge, attitude, and practice for the phenomenon of play-based learning in a Malaysian preschool setting.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study add knowledge to understand the practice of play-based learning in a private preschool context in Malaysia. Three sets of self-report rating and observation data obtained from this study point to a stronger influence of knowledge than attitude on the teachers' practice of play-based learning. In conclusion, it requires the acquisition of knowledge about play-based learning for the teachers to embrace play-based learning in a local Asian context, where the traditional educational philosophy and culture put more emphasis on scholastic training via the direct teaching approach rather than the constructivist's approach of play-based learning.

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