



TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE IN IMPLEMENTING THE THEMATIC APPROACH IN PRE-SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This is an initial study which preceded the implementation of a 4-phase collaborative action research using the Mac Naughton & Hughes model. The purpose of this study is to explore the existing knowledge and practice of teachers in implementing a thematic approach in the planning and implementation aspect of the learning and facilitation process (PdPc). This early observation involved five teachers

from different pre-schools. The data collected in a field study was through observation and interview. Critical observation was based on comparison between two pre-schools as the benchmark. Observation and interview of research participants found that teachers of the two pre-schools had no in-depth understanding of the thematic approach even though they admitted to using the National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan or KSPK). Two teachers made annual theme-based planning and only one made daily theme-based planning. Three other teachers did not make annual theme-based planning but used topics in workbooks as themes. All teachers arranged their schedule for child learning based on separate subjects. All teachers frequently used a one-way teaching method, lacked variety in teaching methods and stressed on academic development, while use of textbooks and worksheets prevailed. This situation showed that the principle of thematic teaching was unfulfilled, that is, teachers did not combine various subjects and knowledge, child skills, variety of learning styles as well as child development domains appropriate to age and ability. Research findings gives input to researchers to make changes and improvements to teaching practice in implementing the thematic approach through collaborative action research. A Guideline for Implementation of Thematic Approach is required to assist and guide other teachers on how to begin the process of implementing the thematic approach.

Keywords: Thematic Approach; early childhood education; pre-school; teachers' understanding; teachers' practice

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, early education is crucial for an individual as rapid child development in the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social domains are taking place. Thus, meaningful stimulation is required to improve child development to an optimum level appropriate to individual age and ability. An effective, meaningful and happy pre-school learning experience can provide a child with the skills, self-confidence and positive attitude as preparation for entry into formal schooling and life-long learning (Rohaty 2003). Therefore, selecting a suitable teaching approach is essential for holistic child development. The goal of pre-school education is to develop the potential of children, aged four to six years, in a holistic and integrated manner in the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social domains in a safe and nurturing environment, with fun, creative and meaningful activities (KPM 2009; KPM 2016). In the National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KSPK), this goal translates according to the recommendation of implementing diverse teaching approaches, one of which is the thematic approach.

1.1. Teachers' Knowledge in Implementation of Teaching in Pre-school

The teacher has a role in planning and implementing teaching as well as assessing child development, while ensuring the fulfillment the requirements of conducive pre-school environment and child welfare. Implementation of the thematic approach will not succeed if

the teachers have no knowledge of its contents and pedagogy. The teachers need to know the lesson contents and be skilled in implementing teaching (Kon et al. 2012; Zaizul et al. 2018a). A limited understanding of a concept causes implementation of the teaching process not to go well as planned (Nutbrown 2006). Teachers without adequate knowledge of lesson contents and pedagogy will create a significant gap between documented plans and implemented practice. Eventually, the true goals of teaching and planning will go unachieved.

1.2. Thematic Approach in Pre-school

Thematic approach in early childhood education is an approach that compiles curriculum around an idea or topic (Arce 2000; Wortham 2006; Driscoll & Nagel 2008). This recommended approach suits the goal of early childhood education that does not over-emphasize academic achievement but stimulates holistic child development according to practice appropriate for child development (Developmental Appropriate Practice). The main rationale for implementing the thematic approach is that the renowned educational reformer, John Dewey, disapproved of and criticized the teaching practice of the Progressive Era, which used a teacher-centred approach and subject-based curriculum (Brewer 2004). Teaching practice implemented at that time emphasized on exercise drills and facts memorization inappropriate for a child's age and nature. The overall goal of a thematic approach is to form a positive attitude towards a child's active learning and real experience through projects it pioneers as well as to nurture its curiosity and urge to explore (Warner & Sower 2005; Zaizul et al. 2018b).

In addition, the reason for introducing a thematic approach is that childhood daily experience outside of school does not conform to separated subjects as in implementing the existing subject-based curriculum. This situation causes the traditional subject-based curriculum to be viewed as unable to provide real experience to a child when faced with a true life context. It becomes difficult for a child to apply knowledge acquired in pre-school in its everyday life. A thematic approach has the characteristic of an integrated approach. Its implementation provides experience closest to a child's real situation (Brewer 2004; Zaizul et al. 2018b) so that pre-school learning is not differentiated from the reality in a child's life, thus assisting the child to understand the world (Eliason & Jenkins 2012; Zaizul et al. 2018c). The thematic approach is ideal, especially for children, as it is characteristically an integrated curriculum (Driscoll & Nagel 2008). Studies relating to the excellence of contemporary issues in shariah studies and social sciences are also assayed by local scholars, covering various issues such as discussion of *halal* pharmaceuticals (Halim et al. 2015), the relationship of *maqasid al-shari'ah* with *qisas* and *diyah* (Husni et al. 2012), the effectiveness of the forum method for the self-development course in UKM and its link with student interest (Hassan et al. 2015), the development and evaluation of ning social network for teaching training online surveillance (Nawi, Jamsari & Sulaiman 2013), as well as the issues on blood plasma in food from Islam and science perspectives (Mohd Izhar Ariff et al. 2017)

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY

The issue of action research is that it is more towards a practice that is unsatisfactory, or yet to be completed, or needs to be changed, or not running as well as hoped for (McNiff 2014; Othman 2015; Kashim et al. 2015) or needs to be improved (Shuki et al. 2013). Thus, reflection and improvement in curriculum is necessary to ensure that early childhood curriculum is constantly at an excellent level. Not to mention Norliah's (2014) opinion that implementation of KSPK still has room for improvement. Mariani (2006) found that factors such as learning material, stimulating environment for child learning, suitable activities and teachers are

significantly influencing factors in the process of child development. Therefore, proper control of the said factors optimizes holistic child development.

Teachers play the role of planning and implementing teaching as well as assessing child development while ensuring a conducive pre-school environment and preserving child welfare. Ab. Rahim (2000) stated that a creative teacher is one who stimulates various ideas, new thoughts and discoveries that help a child to develop its intellectual and other potential through inquiry, intuition, exploration, cognitive, affective and psychomotor processes. Teaching a subject becomes expectedly easier and more effective when appropriate strategy, method and teaching practice are used (Mohd Majid & Mokhtar 2009). In view of the purpose of pre-school education program, which is to stimulate a child in all fields of development, a teacher should not focus only on the cognitive aspect (Azizah & Zainun 2001) but should plan a teaching strategy and activity that help to stimulate holistic child development, involving cognitive, physical, spiritual, social and emotional development.

A teaching method more oriented toward academic skills development still dominates many pre-school classes in Malaysia since the beginning. Many past research found that the emphasis of most pre-schools (Saayah 2004; Lee 2005; Kamariah 2009) and parents (Rohaty 2003; Sharifah Nor et al. 2009; Lu 2015) is more inclined towards merely academic achievement leading to neglect of the child's need to play through activity involving balanced child development. This situation caused by the perception of most parents and teachers, regards learning as an activity that requires children to sit quietly and listen to the teacher as well as do exercises in workbooks (Wortham 2002) [47]. In pre-school teaching and learning process, teachers should use various approaches according to principles and practice suitable for child development (Developmental Appropriate Practice). The National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KPSK) recommends use of various teaching approaches in efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education, one of which is the thematic approach.

The thematic approach is a method of compiling a curriculum as a medium of implementing a teaching approach and method in pre-school besides combining various other teaching goals and skills. Implementation of a thematic approach will not succeed if teachers do not have knowledge of contents and pedagogy. Teachers require knowledge of lesson content and skills to implement teaching (Kon et al. 2012; Kashim et al. 2018). Teachers' limited understanding of a concept causes implementation of the teaching process to fail the plans (Nutbrown 2006). Teachers who do not have adequate knowledge of lesson contents and pedagogy will create a significant gap between the documented plans and implementation in practice. Then, ultimately, the true goal of teaching and learning will be unachieved.

Based on the gap in knowledge and understanding of the mechanism of implementing a thematic approach and challenges to its implementation that still exist, the researcher found a need for research to explore implementation of the thematic approach in pre-school. Moreover, research on implementation of the thematic approach is still lacking in Malaysia (Kon et al. 2012) even though its implementation has been recommended in the National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KPSK) since the year 2010. As an issue of action research, a preliminary review to explore the knowledge and implementation practice of the thematic approach in pre-school needs to be conducted as an early phase before beginning the main or actual research involving implementation of action for change and improvement.

Thus, this research is preliminary to the main or actual research involving improvement, modification as well as resolution of a dissatisfying problem, to be conducted through action research. Reflection from this preliminary research helps in the process to determine the focus

of research, by ascertaining the research problem at the research location or more accurately, determining the problem for which improvement and modification in practice are desired.

Generally, this research conducted is to explore teachers' knowledge of the thematic approach recommended in the National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KPSK) and the existing implementation practice of the approach. Observation and interview focused on the knowledge, planning and implementation of the teaching and learning process by teachers of children aged five years. This research involved qualitative data collected through observation and interview. Five teachers teaching 5 year olds from different pre-schools were involved. Data at research location were thematically analysed and supported by comparison to pre-school benchmark.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Teachers' Knowledge of Thematic Approach

Through interview, all five teachers, PRA1, PRA2, PRA3, PRA4 and PRA5 admitted to making reference to the National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KPSK) in planning and implementing teaching. Teacher PRA1 moderately understood the thematic approach. He/she understood the definition of thematic approach but was still weak when translating it into practice in the aspects of planning and implementing teaching.

'guna tema...dari perbualan pagi lagi kita dah bagitau tema apa kat budak-budak...lepas tu minggu tu kita cerita pasal tema tu la"... (LATM1PRA1)

Meaning: "We use themes...since morning conversation, we already told the children which theme... afterwards, for that week we talk about the theme"... (LATM1PRA1)

The example of what was said by teacher PRA1 shows that he/she understands the thematic approach as a basic medium for compiling the curriculum implemented throughout the PdPc session and may be implemented over a long time. Teachers PRA2, PRA3, PRA4 and PRA5 did not accurately understand the thematic approach even though they admitted referring to KSPK. They misunderstood themes for topics in children's workbooks used during the PdPc session. As example, Teacher PRA5 said the following:

'..ada...kalau macam buku tu bertema la..' (LATM1PRA5)

Meaning: ".there are... if it's like the themes in the book.."(LATM1PRA5)

Teachers' knowledge is one of the factors for successfully implementing a change. Overall, knowledge regarding thematic approach of teachers involved was still weak. The majority of them referred to topics in children's workbooks as themes. They also lacked knowledge about the integrated approach that is a principle for implementing thematic approach. Observation in many past studies found that Children's Activity Centre (or PAKK) teachers still failed in implementing changes recommended by KSPK, including the thematic approach, due to inadequate knowledge. Sharifah Nor & Aliza (2012) found that even though teachers had a good perception of the pre-school curriculum, they were unclear on the method of its implementation, including the thematic approach recommended in KSPK. They did not have sufficient knowledge (Kamarul Azman 2013) to practise the approach in making planned changes in teaching and learning. Observation by Romarzila (2016) found that kindergarten teachers were not ready to implement the recommended transformation of education.

3.2. Teachers' Practice in Planning Theme-based Teaching

Observation at research location found that all pre-schools visited planned the schedule for teaching and learning according to subject. Teacher PRA1 made annual theme-based plans

(LAPM1PRA1). He/She stated the theme, sub-theme, learning objectives and domain of child development involved in the daily teaching plan. However, he/she divided implementation of the teaching and learning session into basic modules and theme-based modules separately implemented. Basic modules were emphasised from the beginning of the school session. Theme-based modules were emphasised only after implementation of the basic modules. In this situation, teachers were unable to combine the subjects and essential child skills through the activity conducted.

Teacher PRA5 prepared the annual theme-based plan such as observed in the teacher's teaching file (LAPM1PRA5) but selected themes based on topics in children's workbooks. In writing the teaching plan book, themes, sub-themes, learning objectives and child development domains involved were not stated. Teachers PRA2, PRA3 dan PRA4 did not make any theme-based plans and took learning contents entirely from topics in children's workbooks. Teacher PRA4 brought up workbooks when asked to show annual, weekly and daily theme-based plans.

As a whole, observation of teachers' teaching plan books at the research location found that there were teachers who did not make teaching plans, who were unskilled in writing teaching plans, planning implementation of theme-based curriculum, planning various teaching methods, planning children's activities, planning use of various teaching aids materials and planning combination of subjects and skills. According to Dewey, learning becomes more meaningful if the learning contents are combined with curriculum and teaching (Wortham 2006) [48]. Similarly, Norsita (2014) [36] found that teachers in research were less skilled in planning teaching.

3.3. Teachers' Practice in Implementing Theme-based Curriculum

Implementation of the thematic approach covers the principle of integrated approach, that is various approaches and strategies as well as children activities are used across the curriculum. Incorporating the concept of learning through playing in the thematic approach into children's activities, indirectly involves the use of learning aids and learning centre. The type of child assessment practised in pre-school influences the teachers' selection of teaching approach and strategy. Thus, implementation of the thematic approach is observable in the aspects of teacher's teaching strategy, children's activities, learning aids, use of learning centre and child assessment.

(a) Teachers' Teaching Strategy

At the research location, it was observed that five pre-school teachers, PRA1, PRA2, PRA3, PRA4 and PRA5 used direct and one-way teacher-centred teaching strategy (LAPM1PRA1, LAPM1PRA2, LAPM1PRA3, LAPM1PRA4 and LAPM1PRA5). Children had less opportunity to give ideas on the direction of their learning. Through interview (LATM1PRA1, LATM1PRA2, LATM1PRA3, LATM1PRA4 & LATM1PRA5) and review of teaching plan books (LAAD1PRA1, LAAD1PRA2, LAAD1PRA3, LAAD1PRA4 & LAAD1PRA5), it was discovered that the mentioned strategy was more frequently used by teachers before this research was conducted. Besides that, teachers lacked using a variety of teaching strategies and did not combine subjects, that is, subjects were taught separately.

(b) Children's Activities

During observation at locations (LAPM1PRA1, LAPM1PRA2, LAPM1PRA3, LAPM1PRA4 & LAPM1PRA5), interviews (LATM1PRA1, LATM1PRA2, LATM1PRA3, LATM1PRA4 & LATM1PRA5) and review of teaching plan books (LAAD1PRA1, LAAD1PRA2, LAAD1PRA3, LAAD1PRA4 & LAAD1PRA5), use of workbooks and worksheets constituted

the main children's activities for children at all research locations. Teachers did not believe in giving children the opportunity to write and draw freely because they were not confident in their abilities and placed high expectations of their work results. Teacher PRA2 made worksheets as a task that must be completed by children (LATM1PRA2). Teachers were more comfortable in this activity to assess children's understanding after the activity was completed and to fulfill the request of parents who wish to see the results of formal learning. The words of Teacher PRA1 disclosed reasons for implementing activity inclined towards the learning objective of developing academic skills for children:

“Memang la dalam KSPK suruh kita buat main sambil belajar la, tapi bila pemantauan, dia tetap tanya berapa peratus yang dah boleh baca, berapa peratus yang tak boleh baca lagi.. ” (LATM1PRA1).

Meaning: “It's true in KSPK, we are told to let play while learning, but when monitoring, we are still asked how many percent can already read, how many percent still cannot read.. ” (LATM1PRA1).

Activities based on hands-on experience were usually conducted during science subject, but some teacher's usually only do a demonstration without letting children actively participating in it.

(c) Learning Aids

During observation at this initial visit showed that teachers used less various and effective learning aids. Teacher PRA4 was using picture cards (LAPM1PRA4) and other teachers were using workbooks and worksheets (LAPM1PRA1, LAPM1PRA2, LAPM1PRA3 & LAPM1PRA5). Learning aids are actually necessary to help children better understand a concept and avoid forcing them to imagine something in their mind leading to erroneous understanding of some matter.

(d) Use of Learning Centre

The pre-school environment is comprised of the outer and inner environments. All pre-schools involved in this research provide play tools outside the building. During the initial visit, it was observed that all pre-schools did not provide a learning centre in the inner environment, while all pre-schools have a similar environment, comprising of book racks, whiteboards, tables and chairs. The physical environment of preschools in this research was not well-planned, limiting teachers' ability to meaningfully implement PdPc according to theme-based curriculum. In a similar finding in a study by Norsita and Zainal (2014), teachers were not skilled in creating a learning space and providing suitable leaning aid materials. Many pre-school teachers did not know how to manage by maximising usage of play materials. Instead, the materials were carefully kept so as not to lose or spoil them (Sharifah Nor et al. 2009). The physical environment needs improvement to ensure optimal child development (Krogh & Morehouse 2014; Zaizul et al. 2018c).

(e) Assessment of children

In the assessment aspect, Teacher PRA1 used continuous assessment to evaluate the level of child development. Even though Teacher PRA1 used continuous assessment, he/she was more inclined to emphasize on development in the aspects of reading, writing and counting through activity using workbooks, writing books and worksheets. Pre-school teachers PRA2, PRA3, PRA4 and PRA5 still carried out summative testing using paper and pencil. Preschool teachers PRA2, PRA3, PRA4 and PRA5 also stressed on development of child academic skills, that is,

unbalanced development compared to holistic development. This situation was as stated by Teacher PRA5, that children need to compete with each other in order to become the best:

“ada ramai je walaupun dah bekerja rasa takpe la, cukup la apa yang ada...saya kalau boleh tak nak la, biar la diorg compete each other, biar ada semangat juang la, biar dia dapat cuba yang terbaik’ (LAPM1PRA5).

Meaning: “There are many already working who feel it is alright, what we have is enough... if possible, I don’t want that, let them compete with each other, let them have a fighting spirit and try their best” (LPAM1PRA5)

Excessive emphasis on purely academic achievement encourage teachers to plan a rigid teaching schedule that limits exploration activity by children who need a more relaxed schedule, not to mention if done in a group. Further, in attempting to make children show excellent academic performance, teachers tend to select direct teaching strategy and depend on workbooks and worksheets as the main activity for children. However, Brewer (2004) criticized practices such as summative testing, approach focused on academic development using workbooks and worksheets, rigid activity schedule and high discipline in class which prevent children’s movement and are unsupportive of Developmental Appropriate Practice. Teachers should not merely focus on the cognitive aspect (Azizah & Zainun 2001; Husni, Nasohah & Kashim 2015) but need to plan various activities that can stimulate holistic child development involving cognitive, physical, spiritual, social and emotional development fulfilling the principle of Developmental Appropriate Practice for children.

Due to lack of knowledge and guidance, pre-school teachers are not skilled enough to implement the thematic approach even though it has been recommended in KPSK since the year 2010 (KPM 2009). Romarzila (2016) stated that there were still many constraints for pre-school teachers to implement teaching. This problem is due to the significant gap between the written curriculum and its practical implementation in the PdPc session causing teachers to be unable to plan teaching according to the planned curriculum document An action plan needs to be framed to close the gap between plans in the written document and practical implementation.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, the outcome of children at the research location is still being assessed from the extent of their academic ability to write and memorize in spite of their very young age. This perception and belief heavily influences the process of planning and implementation of teaching in pre-school. The impact is that research on pre-school found some factors that contribute to the failure of implementing the recommended curriculum through KSPK, particularly the thematic approach. The factors contributing to the failure are: i) teachers’ inadequate knowledge and skills to apply the teaching approach, particularly the thematic approach, due to lack of continuous training and absence of detailed guidelines for teachers on implementing the thematic approach; ii) limited resources that cause pre-school entrepreneurs and teachers to neglect creating a proper physical environment and to provide various teaching and learning aids; iii) limited time due to subject-based schedule arrangement which leads teachers to select the direct teaching approach in order to complete the learning syllabus within the time set; and iv) the current situation which focuses on academic skills development at primary school level and the parent’s wishes to see academic development at pre-school level, that causes unbalanced development, that is, by emphasizing solely on the cognitive domain.

Much improvement is required still for implementation of the thematic approach and PdPc method in pre-school if we wish to establish quality Child Activity Centres (PAKK). The objective of the Malaysian National Pre-school Standard Curriculum (KPSK) explains to us

that even though the teaching and learning process is very important, children's rights and nature may not be denied but must be provided for through a fun learning experience. Teachers need to take the initiative to master knowledge related to early childhood education in order to provide quality early education. In such efforts, teachers need to plan various teaching and learning activities, implement the teaching and learning process by using various teaching approaches and methods, and teaching aids or materials that can attract the children's interest, as well as provide ample activity-conducive space and child-friendly activities.

KSPK documents are insufficient to give an in-depth understanding of knowledge and implementation of a teaching strategy. Thus, findings of this research give ideas or suggest the need for written and practical guidance for teachers. The guidance covers: (1) collaborative monitoring, guidelines and improvements through action research with experts and academicians; (2) documented guidance through provision of guidelines on implementation of the thematic approach; and (3) practical guidance through continuous training for teachers.

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