

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PLAY BASED AND MULTI-SENSORY LEARNING APPROACHES IN TASKA: MEETING THE NEEDS OF INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the teaching and learning approaches used for infants and toddlers in Taman Asuhan Kanak-kanak (TASKA) and how these practices align with parents' aspirations for early education. A qualitative approach was used, involving a semi-structured interview with one TASKA teacher responsible for children aged two months to four years. The findings show that play-based, multi-sensory, and routine-integrated activities are the main strategies that promote children's holistic development, especially in language, social, and motor skills. Parents generally prioritise safety, health, and early growth, while some focus more on academic readiness. This difference creates challenges for teachers in balancing developmental needs with academic expectations. The study concludes that maintaining developmentally appropriate practices, improving communication with parents, and providing regular teacher training, adequate resources, and clear management support are essential to enhance the quality of teaching and align TASKA practices with parents' expectations.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, infants and toddler, play-based learning, parental aspirations*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood, especially during the infant and toddler stages, is a critical period for physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth. In Malaysia, Taman Asuhan Kanak-kanak (TASKA) plays an important role by providing both care and early learning opportunities. Parents today expect childcare centres to not only ensure safety and health but also to provide stimulating experiences that prepare children for future learning.

Research supports the importance of play-based and developmentally appropriate approaches in early childhood. For example, Lee, Radzi, and Mamat (2022) highlight that play-based learning improves children's socio-emotional and cognitive development, while Alotaibi (2024) found that game-based methods enhance motivation and engagement. Similarly, Tang et al.

(2022) reported that Malaysian parents increasingly value both holistic growth and early academic exposure, creating new expectations for TASKA. However, studies also show that challenges remain in practice, particularly due to resource limitations and parental pressure for rapid academic progress (Manja et al., 2024).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims:

1. To explore the teaching and learning approaches used with infants and toddlers in TASKA
2. To understand parents' aspirations for early education,
3. To examine the challenges faced by teachers in balancing developmental

needs with parental expectations. It also seeks to suggest improvements that can strengthen early childhood practices in TASKA

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study design, as it aimed to explore in depth the teaching and learning approaches used in one TASKA setting. A case study approach was chosen to allow a detailed understanding of the teacher's experiences, strategies, and challenges in a real-life context.

Participants

The participant in this study was one teacher from a TASKA, selected through purposive sampling because she had direct experience teaching and caring for young children. The teacher, known as Teacher Awatif, is 30 years old and has 11 years of experience in early childhood education. She takes care of about five to ten children aged between two months and four years. Her experience and daily involvement gave useful information about how teaching and learning are carried out in TASKA.

Data Collection Strategy

The study used a semi-structured interview as the main data collection strategy. The interview lasted around 20 minutes and included 13 open-ended questions about the teacher's role, teaching approaches, parents' expectations, and the challenges faced in daily practice. The interview was conducted with her permission, and her responses were recorded in note form to ensure accuracy and reliability of the information collected.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive thematic analysis, which is suitable for identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring

ideas in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher first read the interview notes several times to become familiar with the content and to understand the overall context of the responses. Then, important words, phrases, and sentences related to the research objectives were highlighted and coded.

The codes were grouped into broader categories such as teaching and learning approaches, parents' aspirations, and challenges faced by teachers. These categories were further refined into key themes that represented the main findings of the study. The themes were compared with previous studies to confirm consistency and strengthen the accuracy of the interpretation. The analysis was carried out manually without the use of software, but a simple coding framework was used to ensure consistency and reduce researcher bias. This process provided a clear understanding of how teaching and learning are implemented in TASKA and how these practices align with parents' expectations in the Malaysian context.

FINDINGS

The interview with Teacher Awatif provided meaningful insights into the daily teaching and learning practices at TASKA and the challenges faced in meeting both children's developmental needs and parents' expectations. She explained that her role extends beyond basic caregiving, such as feeding and ensuring safety, to include supporting children's early growth through planned and purposeful activities. She cared for about five to ten children aged between two months and four years, which required her to manage children with different developmental stages. This situation demanded patience, flexibility, and a good understanding of each child's abilities and behaviour.

In describing her approach, Teacher Awatif emphasised that *learning through play* is the most effective and enjoyable method for infants and toddlers. She integrates songs, storytelling, and group activities into daily routines such as feeding, napping, and hygiene. These playful elements not only make learning fun but also help children develop language, communication, and social

skills. For instance, singing helps with word recognition and rhythm, while storytelling encourages imagination and emotional understanding. Group play, on the other hand, teaches sharing, turn-taking, and cooperation.

To further support sensory and physical development, multi-sensory activities are a key part of her teaching practice. She uses sand play to develop tactile awareness, colour cards to enhance visual recognition, animal sounds to stimulate auditory learning, and dancing or exercise for motor coordination. These activities allow children to learn through exploration and experience, which supports holistic development across multiple domains.

Teacher Awatif also discussed how parents' aspirations influence teaching practices. Most parents prioritise their children's safety, health, and overall well-being, but many also hope for early academic exposure, such as recognising letters and numbers. She explained that TASKA tries to balance these expectations by combining simple academic tasks with play-based and values-based activities. This approach ensures that children not only learn basic academic skills but also develop social values, creativity, and independence through play.

However, several challenges were identified in implementing these approaches. One main challenge is that young children often have short attention spans, which makes it difficult to maintain focus during activities. Another challenge is managing mixed age groups, where infants and toddlers have very different developmental needs. The teacher also faces the difficulty of providing close supervision, as younger children require more attention. In addition, some parents expect fast academic progress, which may not be realistic for children in this age group.

To address these issues, Teacher Awatif suggested several improvements. She emphasised the need for regular teacher training to strengthen teaching skills and knowledge about child development. She also recommended providing more teaching materials to support varied activities and ensuring stronger communication with parents to help them

understand the importance of play-based learning. Finally, she believed that clearer policies and support from management would help teachers implement effective and balanced teaching practices in TASKA.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the interview with Teacher Awatif show that the teaching and learning approaches used in TASKA are mostly aligned with what researchers recommend for early childhood education. Her focus on learning through play reflects the importance of play-based learning as an effective method to support children's holistic development. This is consistent with the study by Lee, Radzi, and Mamat (2022), who found that play-based learning helps young children develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Similarly, Radzi et al. (2023) explained that using songs, storytelling, and creative play helps teachers maintain children's attention and promote meaningful learning. These strategies are also practiced by Teacher Awatif in her daily routine.

The findings also revealed the influence of parents' aspirations on teaching practices. Many parents expect TASKA to provide both safe care and early academic exposure, which aligns with Tang et al. (2022), who found that Malaysian parents increasingly value a mix of holistic and academic development. However, Teacher Awatif pointed out that parents' pressure for early academics can be challenging because infants and toddlers learn best through play and daily experiences rather than formal instruction. This situation reflects a common issue in Malaysian early childhood education where teachers must balance parental expectations with what is developmentally appropriate for young children.

In addition, the challenges faced by Teacher Awatif, including children's short attention spans, mixed age groups, and limited resources, are consistent with previous studies. Wai Leng et al. (2021) noted that teachers often struggle to maintain quality teaching because of high workloads and lack of materials. These findings suggest that while

teachers are committed to using best practices, they require stronger institutional and parental support to implement them effectively.

In summary, the discussion highlights that Teacher Awatif's teaching strategies are consistent with research-based practices in early childhood education. Her play-based and multi-sensory approaches support holistic development, while her awareness of parents' aspirations reflects a balanced understanding of current expectations in Malaysian childcare settings. However, the challenges she described show the need for more professional training, sufficient teaching resources, and continuous collaboration between teachers, parents, and management to create a supportive learning environment for infants and toddlers in TASKA.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the teaching and learning approaches used with infants and toddlers in TASKA through an interview with Teacher Awatif. The findings show that play-based and multi-sensory activities are effective in supporting children's early development, helping them build communication, social, and cognitive skills in a natural and engaging way. The study also revealed that parents have mixed expectations, where some value early academic learning while others focus on holistic development. However, challenges such as short attention spans, mixed age groups, and limited resources remain common in daily practice.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are suggested. TASKA should provide regular teacher training to strengthen knowledge and teaching skills, especially in planning age-appropriate and play-based activities. Management should also ensure adequate learning materials and reduce the child-teacher ratio to improve the quality of interactions. In addition, stronger communication with parents is important to help them understand that learning through play is suitable for young children's growth. Finally, clear guidelines and support from management can help teachers balance developmental needs with parental expectations. By implementing these steps, TASKA

can create a more effective and supportive learning environment for young children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was conducted under the Department of Psychology and Counseling, University of Malaya as part of an academic requirement. The researcher would like to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Mohd Nazri Abdul Rahman for his continuous guidance, encouragement, and valuable feedback throughout the completion of this study. Special thanks are also extended to Teacher Awatif for her time, cooperation, and willingness to share her experiences during the interview process. Her input provided meaningful insights that greatly contributed to the success of this research.

DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Ainul Sofeeya does not work for, consult, own shares in, or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this manuscript, and has disclosed no affiliations other than those noted above.

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