

ALIGNING TEACHING PRACTICES WITH MODERN PARENTAL DEMANDS IN MALAYSIAN CHILDCARE CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of teaching and learning approaches for infants and toddlers in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA) and their alignment with parents' expectations. The research was conducted using a qualitative design through a semi-structured interview with a TASKA teacher to explore daily practices, parental aspirations, and challenges faced by educators. Findings revealed that teachers frequently apply play-based and sensory learning methods, such as storytelling and interactive activities, to support children's cognitive and emotional development. However, issues such as limited resources, large child-to-teacher ratios, and differing parental expectations present ongoing challenges. The study concludes that while current teaching strategies in TASKA reflect parental demands and promote holistic growth, continuous adaptation, teacher training, and stronger parent-teacher collaboration are essential to sustain high-quality early childhood education in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Teaching and learning approaches, Play-based learning, Parental expectations, Childcare centres (TASKA), Early childhood education*

INTRODUCTION

Childcare centres, or TASKA, have become an essential part of modern family life in Malaysia, especially as more parents participate in the workforce. Traditionally viewed as spaces for supervision, these centres are now expected to promote early education that nurtures children's holistic development. Recent studies, such as those by Mustaffa, Abdullah, and Ismail (2019), emphasize that early childhood education in Malaysia must evolve to meet the changing expectations of parents who increasingly demand structured and meaningful learning experiences from an early age. Current practices in many TASKA incorporate play-based and sensory learning activities such as storytelling, music, and

problem-solving play, reflecting global trends that highlight play as a foundation for early learning (Pramling, Kultti, & Samuelsson, 2018). However, despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in understanding how these approaches are implemented and how effectively they address parental aspirations and developmental goals. Many childcare centres still face challenges such as limited resources, high child-to-teacher ratios, and differing expectations between educators and parents. This research seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the implementation of teaching and learning approaches for infants and toddlers in Malaysian TASKA. The study aims to identify the methods used, evaluate how they align with parental expectations, and explore the challenges

educators encounter in practice. It is hypothesized that while current play-based strategies support holistic development and respond to parental demands, continuous adaptation and improved teacher-parent collaboration are required to enhance the overall quality of early childhood education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a **qualitative research design** to explore how teaching and learning approaches are implemented for infants and toddlers in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practical challenges, which are difficult to capture through quantitative methods. This design aligns with the study's objective of exploring real-world teaching practices rather than measuring numerical outcomes. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to collect rich, descriptive data and observe how teachers interpret and apply early childhood education principles within their classroom contexts. The use of this design is justified as it provides flexibility and depth in identifying themes related to teaching strategies, parental expectations, and institutional constraints, thereby addressing the study's exploratory nature and hypothesis.

Participants

The participant in this study was one TASKA teacher who worked directly with infants and toddlers aged between six months and three years old. The teacher was selected using a purposive sampling technique, which is appropriate in qualitative research as it targets individuals with specific knowledge and experience relevant to the study's objectives. The selected participant had several years of experience in early childhood care and education, allowing her to provide detailed insight into classroom management, learning implementation, and parental communication. As the researcher also had a background in early

childhood education, this shared professional understanding helped build trust during the interview process but was carefully managed to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were observed, and the participant provided informed consent before participation, ensuring voluntary involvement and confidentiality.

Measurement

Data for this study were collected through a **semi-structured interview conducted via WhatsApp chat**, which served as the main method of data gathering. This approach was chosen to provide convenience and flexibility for both the participant and the researcher, ensuring effective communication despite time and location constraints. The interview questions were designed to explore three main areas: (1) the teaching and learning strategies used by the teacher in TASKA, (2) parental expectations regarding early education, and (3) challenges encountered in implementing these approaches. The conversation was conducted in a respectful and interactive manner, allowing the participant to elaborate on her experiences through written responses. This method also provided a comfortable environment for the teacher to share her insights openly. The entire chat conversation was saved and later transcribed for analysis, ensuring that all responses were recorded accurately. The use of WhatsApp as a data collection tool was appropriate for qualitative research, as it supports flexibility, privacy, and clarity in communication while maintaining the depth and richness of qualitative data.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using **descriptive thematic analysis**, a method suitable for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes in qualitative data. The researcher first read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content, followed by coding phrases and sentences related to the research objectives. Codes were then grouped into broader categories such as *teaching approaches*,

parental expectations, and challenges faced which to form meaningful themes. These themes were compared with previous research findings to strengthen interpretive validity. The analysis was carried out manually without software, however, a systematic coding matrix was used to maintain consistency and reduce subjective bias. This analytical process provided a comprehensive understanding of how TASKA educators implement learning strategies and how these align with the expectations of modern Malaysian parents.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis generated three primary themes that describe the implementation of teaching and learning approaches for infants and toddlers in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA). These themes were identified from the WhatsApp interview transcript through a process of coding and thematic categorization. The main themes are: (1) *teaching and learning approaches*, (2) *parents' aspirations and expectations*, and (3) *challenges in implementation*.

The first theme, teaching and learning approaches, indicates that TASKA educators emphasize holistic child development through play, exploration, and interaction. The participant described using sensory and manipulative materials such as building blocks, puzzles, and storytelling to sustain children's interest and foster creativity. These strategies support emotional security and help children learn through discovery rather than direct instruction.

The second theme, parents' aspirations and expectations, demonstrates how parental involvement shapes educational practice in TASKA. The teacher explained that parents expect both nurturing care and early learning, particularly in language and cognitive areas. Some parents also requested bilingual exposure to strengthen communication skills. The teacher maintained frequent contact with parents through WhatsApp updates to align activities with parental expectations and strengthen mutual understanding.

The third theme, challenges in implementation, reveals that teachers face limitations in managing classroom activities effectively due to large child-to-teacher ratios and insufficient resources. The participant also reported limited opportunities for professional development, which hindered the introduction of innovative teaching strategies. Despite these obstacles, the teacher showed resilience and commitment by continuously adapting methods and collaborating with parents to maintain a supportive learning environment.

Overall, the results confirm the research hypothesis that TASKA teachers implement play-based and interactive learning approaches aligned with parental expectations; however, these practices are often constrained by systemic and resource-related challenges. The themes collectively provide insight into how Malaysian childcare centres balance educational objectives with real-world limitations.

Table 1. Key themes and examples of findings derived from qualitative coding.

Main Theme	Subthemes / Key Findings	Description / Example Evidence
Teaching and Learning Approaches	Play-based learning; Sensory activities; Emotional connection	Teachers use storytelling, block-building, and colour sorting to promote physical, cognitive, and emotional development among infants and toddlers.
Parents' Aspirations and Expectations	Desire for early academic exposure; Bilingual learning; Parental communication	Parents expect TASKA to provide early literacy and numeracy experiences while ensuring safety. Daily updates and chats strengthen

		parent-teacher collaboration.
Challenges in Implementation	Limited materials and staffing; Large group sizes; Time constraints	Teachers face difficulty giving individual attention due to high ratios and limited resources, though efforts to adapt and improve remain consistent.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of how teaching and learning approaches are implemented in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA) and how these practices reflect both developmental and parental expectations. The results show that teachers emphasize play-based, sensory, and interactive learning strategies that encourage cognitive, social, and emotional development among infants and toddlers. This finding is consistent with global perspectives on early childhood education, which highlight play as a central medium for learning and growth. According to Pramling, Kultti, and Samuelsson (2018), play promotes active engagement, creativity, and early problem-solving, making it an effective approach for nurturing foundational skills in young children. In the Malaysian context, the teacher's focus on guided play and emotional connection reflects efforts to create a balance between structured learning and nurturing care, aligning with the holistic goals of early childhood education.

The second major finding concerns the growing influence of parental expectations on childcare practices. Parents today no longer view TASKA as solely a place for supervision but as an important platform for early education that prepares children for formal schooling. The participant's experience of receiving requests for bilingual instruction and

early literacy exposure supports the argument of Mustaffa, Abdullah, and Ismail (2019), who found that Malaysian families increasingly expect early childhood programmes to provide both educational and developmental outcomes. This alignment between family aspirations and teaching strategies highlights a shift in societal priorities toward academic readiness at a younger age. However, it also raises the issue of potential mismatch between parental expectations and developmentally appropriate practices. When parents expect structured academic teaching for toddlers, educators face the challenge of balancing these expectations with children's need for play and exploration. The present study therefore underscores the importance of ongoing communication and parental education to ensure that families understand and support age-appropriate teaching approaches.

The final theme on implementation challenges reveals that while TASKA teachers are dedicated to creating meaningful learning environments, they face systemic constraints that limit their effectiveness. Limited resources, large child-to-teacher ratios, and a lack of professional training opportunities were identified as significant barriers. These findings resonate with Mustaffa et al. (2019), who emphasized that many childcare centres in Malaysia struggle to maintain quality standards due to resource shortages and workforce issues. The teacher's description of balancing multiple roles—caregiver, educator, and communicator—illustrates the demanding nature of early childhood work. This supports the ecological systems perspective proposed by Bronfenbrenner, which suggests that children's development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including the family, school environment, and broader policy context. In this case, the effectiveness of teaching approaches is shaped not only by teacher skills but also by institutional conditions and parental involvement.

Overall, the results of this study contribute new insights into the current state of early childhood education in Malaysia. By focusing on the lived experiences of TASKA teachers, the research highlights the ongoing tension between

pedagogical ideals and practical realities. The findings expand existing literature by showing how teachers interpret and adapt play-based learning in response to parental and institutional pressures. This study also fills a knowledge gap by examining how digital communication tools, such as WhatsApp, can be effectively used in qualitative research to capture authentic reflections from educators in real-time contexts. As a contribution to the field, the study reinforces the need for policies that support smaller class ratios, improved teacher training, and stronger partnerships between educators and parents. Addressing these areas can help Malaysia's early childhood education system better align with both developmental needs and contemporary family expectations. Ultimately, this research adds to the growing body of evidence that emphasizes the importance of integrating care, play, and education to ensure holistic learning experiences for young children.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that teaching and learning approaches in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA) play a critical role in supporting infants' and toddlers' holistic development while responding to the evolving expectations of modern parents. The research question such as *how are teaching and learning approaches implemented in TASKA and do they meet developmental and parental needs?*, was addressed through the analysis of the teacher's experiences. The results reveal that teachers rely on play-based and sensory learning strategies that foster emotional, cognitive, and social growth. However, these efforts are often constrained by large class sizes, insufficient resources, and differing parental demands. This suggests that while the approaches are effective in principle, their success depends greatly on adequate institutional and parental support.

This study also highlights the importance of communication between teachers and parents as a foundation for maintaining quality in early

childhood education. Through consistent updates and collaboration, educators can align teaching activities with family aspirations while ensuring that practices remain developmentally appropriate. The study further supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective by showing that children's learning outcomes are influenced by interactions between the home, the childcare setting, and broader social structures. Hence, strengthening partnerships among these systems is crucial for ensuring positive developmental outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, the findings point to the need for continuous teacher training, improved funding for teaching materials, and the establishment of lower child-to-teacher ratios in TASKA. Policymakers should focus on enhancing the professional status of early childhood educators and ensuring equitable access to resources across childcare centres. For future research, it is recommended that similar studies include a larger number of participants and explore parent perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of early childhood learning practices in Malaysia. Overall, this research contributes to the growing knowledge base in early childhood education by emphasizing the balance between care and learning, and by offering insights that can guide future improvements in the field.

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DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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