

RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES OF INFANT AND TODDLERS IN CHILDCARE CENTRES (TASKA): A CASE STUDY ON MEETING THE ASPIRATION OF TODAY'S PARENTS

Nur Putri Sabrina Binti Ramli^{1*}, Mohd Nazri Abdul Rahman²

[¹](mailto:23003473@siswa.um.edu.my), [²](mailto:mohdnazri_ar@um.edu.my)

^[1]* University of Malaya, Malaya, Malaysia

^[2] University of Malaya, Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of teaching and learning approaches for infants and toddlers in Malaysian childcare centres (*TASKA*) and how these approaches meet the aspirations of today's parents. Using a library research method, relevant articles, policies, and reports were reviewed to identify effective practices in early childhood care and education (ECCE). The findings highlight play-based learning, responsive caregiving, and sensory exploration as key approaches that promote holistic development while aligning with parents' expectations for safe, nurturing, and developmentally balanced environments. Guided by Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study emphasizes the importance of age-appropriate, culturally responsive, and relational teaching. However, challenges remain in areas such as teacher quality and inconsistencies between public and private *TASKA*. Recommendations include strengthening teacher professional development, promoting family and community collaboration, and ensuring consistent quality standards across all centres. These efforts are essential for building nurturing, engaging, and developmentally appropriate environments that meet modern parents' expectations and support the overall growth of Malaysia's youngest learners

Keywords: *TASKA, Early Childhood Care and Education, ECCE, Infants and Toddlers, Play-Based Learning, DAP, Parents' Aspirations*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) plays a crucial role in shaping children's development from the earliest years of life. In Malaysia, childcare centres, known as *TASKA*, are entrusted with providing not only safe and nurturing environments for infants and toddlers but also meaningful teaching and learning experiences that align with developmental needs. The quality of approaches adopted in these centres has become increasingly important as today's parents aspire for holistic education that supports cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical growth from infancy.

Recognising the importance of meeting these rising expectations, the Ministry of Education initiated

a comprehensive review of the education system in 2011, which culminated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025). This review was aimed at raising national education standards to meet global benchmarks, preparing children for the demands of the 21st century, and addressing growing parental concerns about the quality of education. The Blueprint, developed with input from international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and OECD, as well as local universities, educators, parents, and communities, outlined a vision for an improved education system.

Furthermore, within this framework, the emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) underscores the need for childcare centres to adopt approaches that are responsive to young children's

stages of growth and learning. For infants and toddlers, this involves fostering secure attachments, encouraging exploration, and creating enriching experiences that build early foundations for lifelong learning. At the same time, it addresses parental aspirations for quality childcare that balances academic readiness with holistic development.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the operation of childcare centres (TASKA) is governed by the Child Care Centre Act 1984 (Act 308). The Act was introduced to ensure that the registration, inspection, and management of childcare centres place priority on the safety, welfare, and holistic development of young children. The Act sets out minimum standards to safeguard quality of care. These include limiting the number of children admitted at any one time, ensuring staff are qualified, suitable in age and character, and adequately trained, as well as requiring sufficient staffing levels to match children's needs. (TASKA) must also be equipped with safe and appropriate facilities to support children's growth. For children who stay in care for more than four consecutive hours a day, the Act stipulates that centres provide balanced meals, rest periods, and recreational activities. Collectively, these provisions highlight the government's commitment to ensuring that (TASKA) function as safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate environments for infants and toddlers.

Early childhood, defined as the period from birth up to eight years of age, is widely acknowledged as a critical stage of human development. During these years, rapid brain growth and neural structuring occur, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, health, and social well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). High-quality early education has been shown to influence not only academic achievement but also social and emotional development, with long-term benefits such as higher productivity and reduced social costs

(Heckman et al., 2006). Organisations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and *Malaysia's Modul Pendidikan Awal Kanak-kanak* similarly emphasize that early education should provide holistic care, guidance, and learning opportunities to support children's growth and future success.

Besides that, in line with global agendas, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNESCO's Education for All initiative, Malaysia has made significant progress in expanding and improving Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The sector is generally divided into two categories: childcare centres (TASKA) for children aged from birth to four, and preschools (TADIKA) for children aged four to six. While preschools mainly prepare children for formal schooling, (TASKA) plays an equally vital role in providing safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate environments for infants and toddlers.

Over the years, ECCE development in Malaysia has been shaped by both government and private initiatives. Government supported centres such as TABIKA KEMAS and PERPADUAN emerged in the 1970s–1990s, while the Child Care Centre Act 1984 was introduced to regulate quality and safety in childcare. The government has also developed a national curriculum tailored to children's developmental stages. The PERMATA curriculum provides a holistic, play-based framework for children aged 0–4, whereas the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC), under the Education Act 1996, standardizes education for children aged 4–6.

Despite this structured framework, most of ECCE services are provided by the private sector, many of which adopt international approaches such as Montessori or British curriculum (Babibibi Rahmatullah et al., 2021). This diversity reflects parents' aspirations for high-quality and future-oriented education but also raises concerns about ensuring equity and consistency across centres.

Lastly, ECCE in Malaysia mirrors the global recognition of early childhood as a foundation for lifelong development. Within this system, (TASKA) plays a crucial role in balancing caregiving and education, while ensuring

compliance with national regulations. These provisions demonstrate the government's commitment to creating safe, nurturing, and developmentally suitable environments for infants and toddlers. At the same time, they align closely with parents' aspirations for reliable and high-quality childcare, where young children are not only supervised but also supported in terms of health, safety, and early learning opportunities.

TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH FOR INFANT AND TODDLER

Play Based Learning

Play-based learning has become an important approach in early childhood education, recognized for its ability to support holistic development in young children. By emphasizing exploration, creativity, and social interaction, it encourages infants and toddlers to engage actively with their environment, experiment, and develop problem-solving skills. Activities in a play-based setting can be both structured and unstructured, indoors or outdoors, and may include pretend play, simple games, sensory exploration, and collaborative group tasks. Such experiences not only foster cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth but also help children practice self-regulation, take risks, and develop cooperation and communication skills (Fauzi, 2022; Tekyi-Arhin, 2023).

Recent studies highlight that careful planning by educators is essential for successful implementation of play-based learning. Teachers must balance freedom and guidance, ensuring that activities are safe, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate, even in settings with limited resources or higher child-to-teacher ratios (Fong & Ngadni, 2024). In Malaysian TASKA, these strategies are particularly relevant, as they align with the goal of creating nurturing environments that meet the diverse needs of infants and toddlers while supporting their holistic growth. Play-based learning provides infants and toddlers with engaging, hands-on experiences that support school readiness and lifelong learning, while aligning with the developmental needs and aspirations of parents for their young children.

Responsive Caregiver

Responsive caregiving is also an important approach in supporting the healthy development of infants and toddlers, particularly during the critical first three years of life. It involves caregivers noticing, understanding, and responding promptly and appropriately to a child's cues and needs. Such interactions not only ensure children's health, nutrition, and safety but also create meaningful opportunities for early learning, allowing infants and toddlers to explore, experiment, and engage with their environment in a safe and stimulating way (World Health Organization, 2023).

The World Health Organization's recent guidelines highlight the importance of responsive caregiving because early childhood experiences have long-lasting effects on learning, health, and overall human potential.

Traditional health and nutrition recommendations often overlook the role of caregiver-child interactions, so these new guidelines provide evidence-based strategies to support both caregivers and children. This is especially important in contexts where risk factors such as poverty, malnutrition, or maternal mental health challenges may prevent children from reaching their full potential.

In (TASKA) promoting responsive caregiving can be practiced into daily routines and learning activities. Teachers and caregivers can provide nurturing, stimulating, and safe environments while also supporting families in implementing these practices at home. Additionally, combining responsive caregiving with early learning opportunities and nutrition support ensures holistic growth for children. By focusing on both the child and the caregiver, TASKA can meet parents' aspirations for high-quality childcare that prioritizes safety, development, and well-being, same with the purpose of this study.

Exploration and Sensory Learning

Children learn about the world mostly through their senses, including sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Sensory experiences play an important role

in early development, as they encourage curiosity, independent exploration, and creative thinking. Through sensory play, infants and toddlers can experiment with different textures, sounds, and materials, which helps them build cognitive, motor, and problem-solving skills (Zainal Abidin, et al., 2021).

Sensory and exploration-based activities can be easily incorporated into daily routines. Simple activities like water play, sand play, musical games, or handling various safe objects allow children to engage actively with their environment while developing a deeper understanding of cause and effect, patterns, and their own abilities. These experiences not only stimulate curiosity and imagination but also support holistic development in a wide range.

PARENT'S ASPIRATION IN TASKA

Modern Malaysia Parent expert Taska programs to go beyond basic childcare, emphasizing academic readiness, bilingualism, and technological literacy, while simultaneously fostering holistic development, such as social, emotional, physical, and spiritual (Dan Tang, Dhamotharan, & Abdul Rahman, 2021). These aspirations shape the implementation of teaching and learning approaches, as educators need to balance structured academic activities with play-based, interactive, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Survey findings indicate that parents prioritize safe, hygienic, and child-friendly environments, with ample indoor and outdoor space for exploration and play (Dan Tang, Dhamotharan, & Abdul Rahman, 2021). This directly informs ECCE practices, teachers should incorporate active learning, sensory play, and motor skill activities, ensuring children can explore and learn in spaces that are both physically and emotionally supportive.

Parents also value curriculum flexibility, especially for children from diverse backgrounds or those with special needs, and they support the thoughtful integration of technology in learning. Educators should therefore blend traditional and digital learning tools, guiding children to use technology

purposefully while also encouraging hands-on, interactive play (Istenič, Rosanda, & Gačnik, 2023).

Parental feedback emphasizes the importance of parent-child interaction during learning. Traditional toys and play-based activities encourage verbal communication, emotional expression, and cognitive engagement, whereas digital or screen-based toys often reduce interaction quality. This suggests that (TASKA) teachers should design activities that actively involve both children and caregivers, fostering meaningful engagement and supporting language, social, and emotional development (Istenič, Rosanda, & Gačnik, 2023). When used together, both digital and traditional approaches can provide a balanced and holistic learning experience that supports children's development in multiple domains.

In summary, the results show that implementing teaching and learning approaches in TASKA must meet parents' aspirations by creating safe, engaging, and developmentally appropriate environments, integrating technology thoughtfully, and promoting rich, interactive play. Meeting these expectations requires ongoing collaboration between educators and parents, ensuring infants and toddlers benefit from experiences that support both academic skills and holistic growth.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE (DAP)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) refers to teaching methods and caregiving strategies that are grounded in what is known about how children develop and learn. Introduced by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), DAP emphasizes three core considerations,

1.age appropriateness, 2.individual appropriateness, and 3.cultural or social appropriateness. These principles guide educators to design learning experiences that match the developmental stage, personal needs, and cultural background of each child.

In early childhood settings such as(TASKA), DAP highlights that infants and toddlers learn best

through active exploration, play, and meaningful relationships with caregivers and peers. Teachers are encouraged to create safe, engaging environments that allow children to explore freely while receiving responsive guidance. Through consistent routines, play-based activities, and warm interactions, educators support the development of trust, curiosity, and confidence, the foundations for future learning.

Furthermore, DAP recognizes the importance of family and cultural context in shaping children's experiences. Teachers must respect and incorporate family values, languages, and traditions into their daily practice, ensuring that learning experiences are relevant and inclusive. By collaborating closely with parents, (TASKA) can align educational practices with families' aspirations for holistic growth, academic readiness, and emotional well-being. Applying DAP principles in TASKA promotes holistic development supporting children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights that a child's development is shaped by the interplay of multiple environmental systems, from immediate surroundings like family and school to broader societal and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, as cited in Guy-Evans, 2024). In the context of early childhood education in Malaysia, this framework provides a useful lens to understand how teaching and learning approaches can meet parents' aspirations for their infants and toddlers.

Among the five ecological systems, the microsystem and mesosystem are particularly relevant to (TASKA) settings. The microsystem includes the child's immediate environment, such as caregivers, teachers, peers, and family. The quality of interactions within this environment has a direct impact on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. For example, implementing play-based learning in

(TASKA), where infants and toddlers explore, interact, and problem-solve under the guidance of responsive caregivers, directly engages the microsystem. Similarly, responsive caregiving and sensory exploration activities enhance the child's development by fostering secure, stimulating, and supportive interactions within this immediate environment.

The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between different microsystems, such as the relationships between parents and teachers, or family and community activities. In (TASKA), alignment between parents' aspirations and the centre's teaching practices forms a strong mesosystem influence. Surveys in Malaysia indicate that parents prioritize safety, holistic development, academic readiness, bilingualism, and technological literacy (Dan Tang, Dhamotharan, & Abdul Rahman, 2021; Istenič, Rosanda, & Gačnik, 2023). When educators integrate these priorities into daily routines, through structured and unstructured play, sensory activities, and technology-supported learning the mesosystem is strengthened, creating consistent, mutually supportive environments for children to thrive.

While the exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem may show less direct influence, they are still important. The exosystem, such as government policies on early childhood care, teacher training standards, or community resources, indirectly shapes the quality and accessibility of TASKA programs. The macrosystem, including cultural values and societal expectations, informs parental aspirations for holistic, academically oriented, and safe childcare. Meanwhile, the chronosystem captures changes over time, such as evolving parental expectations or the introduction of new educational technologies, which influence how (TASKA) approaches are implemented and adapted.

In conclusion, Bronfenbrenner's framework show the importance of understanding infants and toddlers within their broader ecological context. Aligning (TASKA) teaching and learning approaches with parental aspirations requires creating strong, interconnected microsystem and

mesosystem experiences. By doing so, childcare centres can provide safe, engaging, and developmentally appropriate environments that foster holistic growth and meet the evolving expectations of modern Malaysian parents

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights the key challenges and opportunities in implementing effective teaching and learning approaches in (TASKA). This section also provides recommendations to strengthen the quality and alignment of (TASKA) programs with parents' aspirations and the principles of developmentally appropriate practice.

Challenge

Teacher's Quality

One of the main challenges in putting effective teaching and learning approaches into practice at TASKA is ensuring the quality and preparedness of teachers. Research by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) highlights that what truly shapes a child's development is not only the curriculum or the environment, but the teacher's real-time decisions, sensitivity, and responsiveness to children's needs. A teacher's ability to plan meaningful learning experiences, observe and respond to individual cues, and adjust teaching strategies appropriately has the greatest impact on a child's growth.

In many childcare centres, however, limited training opportunities and high child-to-teacher ratios make it difficult for educators to apply these practices effectively. This shows that professional development and mentoring should not be seen as optional, but as essential elements of quality childcare. Regular reflection, hands-on workshops, and collaborative learning among teachers can help them feel more confident in using play-based learning, responsive caregiving, and sensory activities in ways that align with developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2009). Strengthening teacher training ensures that children experience nurturing, intentional, and

meaningful interactions the true foundation of effective early education.

Different Between Government and Private Child Care Centre/ Nursery

Another challenge is the uneven quality and accessibility of early childhood care across different TASKA settings. In Malaysia, most TASKA are privately operated and vary widely in terms of curriculum, teacher qualifications, and available resources. Many private centres adopt international approaches such as Montessori or the British curriculum to meet parents' aspirations for modern, high-quality education. While this diversity gives parents more choices, it also creates disparities in the types of experiences children receive. Some centres are well-equipped with trained staff and stimulating environments, while others face resource limitations and inconsistent teaching standards.

The NAEYC (2009) similarly emphasized that high-quality services for infants and toddlers remain rare and unevenly distributed, with children from less advantaged backgrounds often having fewer opportunities for rich, developmentally appropriate experiences. This mirrors the Malaysian context, where differences between public and private centres can affect the equity and consistency of early education. To bridge this gap, stronger quality assurance mechanisms, better funding for teacher training, and closer collaboration between government agencies and private providers are needed to ensure all children, regardless of background, have equal access to nurturing and developmentally appropriate care.

Recommendation

Enhancing Teacher Quality and Professional Development

One of the ways to improve quality in (TASKA) is by investing in teacher training and continuous professional development. The DAP framework emphasizes that teachers play a central role in shaping children's learning experiences through their daily interactions and instructional decisions. Therefore, educators should receive regular training focused on child development, play-based

pedagogy, and responsive caregiving practices. Mentoring programs and peer collaboration should also be encouraged to strengthen teaching confidence and classroom effectiveness. By prioritizing teacher competency and reflective practice, (TASKA) can ensure that learning environments remain developmentally appropriate, engaging, and responsive to the needs of infants and toddlers (NAEYC, 2009).

Strengthening Family and Community Collaboration

Another essential step is to build strong partnerships between teachers, families, and the community. The DAP principles highlight that children learn best when their family and educational environments are connected and mutually supportive. (TASKA) should actively engage parents and communities as learning partners. Regular parent-teacher communication, family involvement in learning activities, and community engagement programs help ensure that teaching approaches reflect cultural values and parental expectations. This collaboration builds trust and strengthens the child's microsystem and mesosystem, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework.

In addition, parents and community stakeholders can play a more active role in supporting quality improvements in (TASKA) through financial contributions, resource sharing, or volunteering. For instance, parent-teacher associations can organize fundraising programs or contribute to the development of teaching materials and facility upgrades. Such shared responsibility not only eases financial constraints, especially in private centres but also fosters a sense of ownership and partnership between families and educators. Through this collaborative approach, (TASKA) can sustain higher quality standards, provide enriched learning environments, and better meet parents' aspirations for holistic, safe, and developmentally appropriate early education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, (TASKA) plays an important role in shaping the early development of infants and

toddlers by providing safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments. The implementation of approaches such as play-based learning, responsive caregiving, and sensory exploration not only supports children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development but also aligns with the aspirations of today's parents for holistic and meaningful early education. The study emphasizes that developmentally.

appropriate practice (DAP) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provide valuable frameworks for guiding teaching and caregiving practices that respond to children's developmental needs and family expectations.

Despite Malaysia's progress in ECCE, challenges remain in ensuring teacher quality, maintaining consistent standards between government and private (TASKA), and balancing parental expectations with developmentally suitable approaches. Therefore, continuous professional development, parental involvement, and stronger policy support are crucial for sustaining quality and equity in early childhood care. By working collaboratively, teachers, parents, and the community can ensure that TASKA continues to provide high-quality, inclusive, and responsive early education that lays a strong foundation for lifelong learning

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DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Nur Putri Sabarina 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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