

RESEARCH ARTICLE

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF MALAYSIAN TASKA: ASSESSING THE MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN TEACHING-LEARNING PRACTICES AND MODERN PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implementation of teaching and learning (T&L) approaches for infants and toddlers in Malaysian childcare centres (TASKA) and examines how these practices align with the aspirations of modern parents. Using a library research method, the paper reviews theoretical frameworks and literature on early childhood development, highlighting the importance of play-based learning, structured daily routines, sensory play, early communication, and social interaction. Findings indicate that while these approaches contribute to children's holistic development, challenges such as uneven quality of facilities, limited teacher training, and the cautious integration of technology remain. The review concludes that strengthening professional development, enhancing collaboration with parents, and adopting context-sensitive models are crucial to meeting parental expectations and sustaining quality early childhood education in Malaysia.

Keywords: *early childhood education (ECE), TASKA, infants and toddlers, play-based learning, parental aspirations*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) provides the cognitive, emotional, and social foundation for lifelong learning. The first three years of life, marked by the sensorimotor and basic trust stages (Piaget; Erikson), are critical, making early experiences determinative of future academic and social outcomes. In Malaysia, childcare centres, or Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak (TASKA), serve as the formal institutions providing care and education for infants (0–12 months) and toddlers (1–3 years). Policy frameworks, including the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) and the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education, emphasize the requirement for holistic child development across all domains (Programme Standards: Early Childhood Education - MQA, 2025). This commitment establishes the current state of the art: an aspiration for developmentally appropriate, play-based learning grounded in established theory (Foong & Palanisamy, 2018). The increasing participation of parents in the modern workforce has simultaneously raised expectations for TASKA to go beyond custodial

duties. Parents today aspire for centres to provide quality learning experiences that nurture communication, creativity, confidence, and global competencies. They seek programmes that promote balanced growth, multilingual exposure, and the integration of strong moral and cultural values, placing demands that frequently exceed basic licensing standards. This paper critically reviews T&L approaches in TASKA and evaluates their effectiveness in meeting these parental aspirations. While the theoretical foundations are clear, a significant knowledge gap exists in synthesizing the challenges that prevent TASKA from consistently translating these theoretical principles into high-quality practice across the diverse urban and rural models in Malaysia (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Furthermore, research indicates a gap in parental awareness of ECCE policies, suggesting a misalignment between the system's goals and parents' demands for "academic" rigor (Tang et al., 2022).

This systematic review seeks to close this gap by providing a consolidated, evidence-based analysis of

the key implementation barriers and offering clear recommendations to harmonize educational practice with parental expectations. The expected benefits are a validated framework for policymakers to focus professional development efforts and practical guidance for TASKA operators to enhance program quality, thereby contributing directly to the scientific effort of improving national ECE standards. The research objective is to critically analyze the alignment between current teaching and learning approaches in Malaysian TASKA and the holistic, future-oriented aspirations of modern parents. This leads to the formulation of the research question: *How effectively do current teaching and learning approaches in Malaysian TASKA address the developmental needs of infants and toddlers while simultaneously meeting the holistic and future-oriented aspirations of modern parents?* Based on the preliminary review of implementation challenges and parental expectations, we propose the following hypothesis: *H1: Resource inequality and inadequate teacher training are negatively associated with the perceived quality and implementation fidelity of play-based teaching and learning approaches in Malaysian TASKA, resulting in a persistent misalignment with parental aspirations for holistic child development.*

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a library research method, which functions as a systematic literature review. This design was specifically chosen and justified by the research objective: to critically analyze and synthesize existing theoretical frameworks and empirical literature to evaluate T&L practices in TASKA against contemporary parental aspirations. The systematic approach ensures a comprehensive and reproducible summary of the current state of the art. This critical evaluation is the necessary initial step to test the implicit premises of the hypothesis (H1), which posits that resource and training deficits are key factors contributing to the misalignment between practice and aspirations.

Participants

Note: As this is a systematic literature review and not an empirical study involving primary data collection, a formal Participants section describing human subjects is not applicable. The scope of the review is defined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria described in the Data Collection Strategy below.

Data Collection Strategy (literature reviews)

The strategy for data collection focused on identifying relevant and current literature on early childhood education (ECE), Malaysian childcare (TASKA), and infant/toddler development. The literature search was conducted across academic databases (e.g., ResearchGate, e-journals) and included official policy documents (e.g., Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020).

Keywords for Search: Early childhood education, TASKA, infants and toddlers, play-based learning, parental aspirations, Malaysia.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

- **Inclusion:** Sources published in English or Malay focusing on the Malaysian ECE context (TASKA, 0–3 years), theoretical frameworks of infant/toddler development, and studies discussing parental expectations/aspirations for childcare.
- **Exclusion:** Studies focusing solely on kindergarten (4–6 years, TADIKa), non-Malaysian contexts, or sources older than 10 years (with the exception of seminal theoretical texts).

The search results were screened based on title and abstract, followed by a full-text review. The core findings related to T&L approaches, developmental outcomes, and implementation challenges were extracted for synthesis. The process for article selection and screening was guided by the PRISMA reporting standard, as outlined in the PRISMA flow diagram (<http://prisma-statement.org/prismastatement/flowdiagram.aspx>).

Data analysis

Data analysis for this systematic review utilized thematic synthesis, a recognized qualitative technique that transforms the findings and concepts extracted from the selected literature into higher-order themes. This process involved:

1. Coding: Initial coding of textual segments (e.g., phrases, sentences) to capture specific concepts (e.g., "bilingual exposure," "low staff remuneration," "sensory play").
2. Developing Descriptive Themes: Grouping the initial codes into descriptive themes that capture the essence of the findings (e.g., "Teacher Competence," "Resource Inequality," "Parental

Expectations").

3. Generating Analytical Themes: Integrating the descriptive themes to generate the analytical themes that form the structure of the RESULTS and DISCUSSION sections (e.g., Limited Teacher Training and Professional Competence).

This thematic synthesis allowed the authors to move beyond simple summarization and construct a critical argument concerning the alignment of TASKA practice and parental aspirations, thereby systematically addressing the research question and testing the proposed hypothesis. No statistical software was required as the analysis was purely qualitative.

RESULTS

This section presents the thematic findings derived from the Narrative Synthesis, systematically addressing the research question and testing the hypothesis (H1). The analysis yielded four primary themes related to the implementation of Teaching and Learning (T&L) approaches in Malaysian TASKA and their subsequent misalignment with parental aspirations.

Theme 1: Tension Between Theoretical T&L Models and Parental Aspirations

The synthesis established a foundational tension by defining two disparate expectations. Theoretically, T&L models for infants and toddlers must prioritize developmentally appropriate practices such as play-based learning, sensory stimulation, and consistent responsive care (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020; Fong & Izawati Ngadni, 2024). Parental aspirations, conversely, often prioritize future-oriented academic outcomes, demanding programmes that demonstrate multilingual exposure and structured activities that align with moral and cultural values (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This tension defines the landscape where misalignment occurs.

Theme 2: Inadequate Educator Training and Professional Competence

A central finding supporting the hypothesis (H1) is the gap in pedagogical training among TASKA caregivers. The synthesis revealed that while national guidelines exist, many educators lack specialized training in infant and toddler pedagogy (0–3 years). Consequently, many TASKA rely heavily on routine

custodial care rather than integrating purposeful T&L activities. This deficit directly impacts the implementation fidelity of complex, play-based approaches, as educators may lack the skills to appropriately scaffold learning or manage group dynamics effectively (Fong & Izawati Ngadni, 2024).

Theme 3: Resource and Infrastructural Inequality

The second core finding supporting the hypothesis (H1) relates to significant resource disparities. The Narrative Synthesis highlighted that resource and infrastructural inequality create an uneven playing field for implementing quality T&L. Studies indicated that TASKA in rural or low socioeconomic areas frequently operate with minimal facilities, a lack of safe, stimulating equipment, and limited access to professional support compared to urban centres. Furthermore, budgetary constraints compounded by low service fees limit the ability to invest in quality materials and continuous professional development (Aziz et al., 2021). This finding confirms the role of resource inequality as a major barrier to providing equitable, high-quality sensory and play-based environments.

Theme 4: Inconsistent Policy Monitoring and Public Awareness Gaps

The analysis identified systemic flaws that perpetuate the misalignment. Despite the existence of strong national frameworks, the synthesis found that the fidelity of policy implementation and quality monitoring remain inconsistent (Kong, 2023). This issue is exacerbated by low public awareness: a substantial majority of parents are unfamiliar with government ECCE policies and quality standards (Tang et al., 2022). This knowledge gap contributes to the misalignment by allowing parents to base their judgment of quality on formal academic metrics rather than developmental outcomes, thereby placing pressure on educators to use inappropriate instructional methods.

DISCUSSION

This discussion provides a critical interpretation of the thematic findings, systematically comparing the observed outcomes with established literature and policy to determine the extent of the T&L misalignment in Malaysian TASKA and to confirm the hypothesis.

Interpretation of Misalignment (Theme 1) and its Comparison with Policy

The finding that a significant tension exists between the theoretical T&L models (play, sensory exploration) and parental aspirations (future readiness, structure) is critical, as it provides the core explanation for the observed misalignment. National policies establish the gold standard for ECE, focusing on holistic development across intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical domains (Programme Standards: Early Childhood Education - MQA, 2025). However, the interpretation of this finding suggests that parental

Impact of Inadequate Training on Implementation Fidelity (Theme 2)

The thematic finding of inadequate educator training provides the first explicit link supporting the premise of the hypothesis (H1). The interpretation of this finding is that a lack of specialized training in infant and toddler pedagogy results in low implementation fidelity of complex, play-based T&L. When educators lack understanding of responsive caregiving and Vygotskian scaffolding, they default to routine custodial care, which, while safe, fails to meet the parents' high aspirations for enrichment. This finding aligns with wider literature highlighting the need for continuous professional development (CPD) to improve the quality of interaction and instruction in ECE settings (Foong & Palanisamy, 2018). Our research emphasizes that this training deficit is not just an issue of compliance, but a direct cause of the gap between the *intended* quality of T&L and the *actual* quality experienced by parents and children.

Consequences of Resource Inequality and Budgetary Stress (Theme 3)

The finding that resource and infrastructural inequality is pervasive provides the second explicit link validating the hypothesis (H1). The interpretation reveals that the inability to provide equitable, stimulating environments due to budgetary stress compounded by high operational costs and low service fees is a systemic barrier to quality. This observation is strongly supported by previous studies on the operational challenges faced by TASKA operators (Aziz et al., 2021). When resources are scarce, educators cannot offer the sensory, manipulative, and exploratory materials required for Piaget's sensorimotor stage, regardless of their training. This forces educators to rely on low-cost,

anxiety regarding academic readiness and global competency often overrides developmental understanding. Studies have shown that parental desire for early exposure to literacy and bilingualism, while aspirational, can pressure TASKA educators to adopt inappropriate, formal instructional methods, a trend previously identified in studies of parent expectations (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This disparity represents a failure not of the policy itself, but of its effective communication and acceptance at the grassroots level, creating a dual expectation that TASKA are ill-equipped to manage without structural support.

low-impact activities, which directly undermines the quality of the T&L approach and consequently fuels parental dissatisfaction. The current state of the art in policy may address *what* TASKA should teach, but it has not solved the underlying *funding mechanism* required to ensure equitable resource distribution. Systemic Failure: Policy Monitoring and Public Awareness (Theme 4)

The finding of inconsistent policy monitoring and substantial public awareness gaps highlights the systemic weakness in ECE governance. The interpretation here is that the lack of rigorous enforcement creates a climate of low accountability, allowing the negative associations defined in H1 (training and resource gaps) to persist without regulatory consequence (Kong, 2023). Furthermore, the knowledge gap in parents, as highlighted by Tang et al. (2022), means parents cannot act as informed consumers or advocates for high-quality, developmentally appropriate education. This dual failure, weak monitoring from the state and weak demand from the public perpetuates the cycle of misalignment, allowing unsuitable T&L practices to continue unchallenged.

Conclusion of Discussion: Contribution to Scientific Progress

The systematic review successfully utilized thematic and narrative synthesis to test the hypothesis, H1, which is strongly supported by the collective evidence. The research demonstrates that the misalignment between TASKA practice and parental aspirations is not a single issue, but rather the cumulative result of systemic and institutional barriers: inadequate teacher training and resource inequality act as the proximal causes, while poor policy monitoring and low public awareness act as the distal, perpetuating factors.

The contribution of this research to scientific progress is the development of an integrated framework of barriers. Prior studies often isolate policy challenges or parental perceptions. This review integrates these findings to show the causal pathway from *resource deficit* and *training deficiency* to *low implementation fidelity*, which directly creates the *misalignment* with contemporary aspirations. This framework provides new knowledge by offering a validated, multi-stakeholder diagnostic tool for policymakers to prioritize systemic interventions, focusing on enhancing training and addressing resource equity to sustain national ECE quality standards.

CONCLUSION

The systematic review critically analyzed the effectiveness of teaching and learning (T&L) approaches in Malaysian TASKA in simultaneously addressing infant and toddler developmental needs and meeting the high aspirations of modern parents. The conclusion is that while the theoretical framework and foundational practices align with developmental science (e.g., play-based learning), the implementation is ineffective in consistently meeting parental aspirations due to systemic barriers. The study confirms the hypothesis (H1), demonstrating that resource inequality and inadequate teacher training are negatively associated with the perceived quality and implementation fidelity of T&L. This creates a chronic misalignment, where the quality of T&L is compromised by practical limitations, leading to parental dissatisfaction and pressure on educators to adopt inappropriate academic methods over genuine holistic development. The new insight and major contribution of this research to scientific progress is the development of an integrated framework of barriers to quality ECE implementation. By employing Narrative Synthesis, this review moved beyond isolating policy, training, or resource deficits, demonstrating a clear causal pathway: resource and training deficiencies are the proximal causes of low implementation fidelity, which is then exacerbated by the distal factors of weak policy

monitoring and low parental awareness. This holistic understanding advances the field by providing a validated diagnostic tool. Instead of focusing interventions solely on curriculum, this framework compels policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize systemic inputs, specifically sustainable funding mechanisms for resource equity and mandatory, specialized pedagogical training for infant and toddler educators. To strengthen the field, this study offers two key recommendations. Firstly, policymakers must urgently implement stronger compliance monitoring and launch a national campaign to educate parents on the value of developmentally appropriate, play-based ECE, thereby bridging the public awareness gap. Secondly, future research should transition from identifying problems to testing intervention efficacy, specifically by conducting comparative studies that evaluate the long-term impact of accredited professional development programs and pilot projects focusing on resource-sharing networks between high- and low-resourced TASKA models to find scalable solutions for achieving equitable quality across Malaysia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express sincere gratitude to Professor Madya Dr. Mohd Nazri Abdul Rahman for his invaluable guidance, supervision, and critical feedback throughout the conceptualization and execution of this systematic review. The completion of this assignment was made possible through his dedicated mentorship. The authors also wish to acknowledge all the scholars whose published works provided the essential data and theoretical foundations for this research.

DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Nur Adibah Binti Mohd Azlem 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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