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TEACHING PRESCHOOL DURING COVID-19: THE UTILIZATION OF PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES IN AN ONLINE SETTING

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Abstract

The study aims to showcase the utilization of play-based activities in teaching young learners during Covid-19. During the early stage of the pandemic, all Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers in Indonesia were closed for nearly two years. In July 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture published guidelines for implementing Curriculum under Special Circumstances to support the continuation of the learning process. The guidelines included the recommended educational modules for Early Childhood Learning to help the learning process from home by including activity-based education explanations for teachers, parents, and students. The preschool teachers in Indonesia had to adapt to the new guidelines to continue to educate their students at home. One of the adaptations was to use educational play-kits sent to the students directly to their houses for learning purposes. The method used in this research study is qualitative research through focus-group discussions with the respondents. The study observed 15 preschool teachers from three schools in Jakarta and Pandeglang who utilized play-based activities in their daily lesson plans for two weeks. The finding from the study concluded that play-based activities were effective for early childhood education programs during the pandemic, with solid support from the teachers and parents, sufficient training for the teachers, and a significant variety of activities for the students. In addition, key challenges to overcome in implementing play-based activities in an online setting were teachers' lack of technology-savviness, parents' limited mobile devices, network or connection problems, and budget constraints in developing play-based activities.

Keywords: Play-based activities; Preschool teachers; Teaching in Covid-19

Abstrak

Studi ini bertujuan untuk menampilkan pemanfaatan aktivitas berbasis bermain dalam mengajar anak-anak selama Covid-19. Selama tahap awal pandemi, semua pusat Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) di Indonesia ditutup selama hampir dua tahun. Pada Juli 2020, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia menerbitkan pedoman penerapan Kurikulum dalam keadaan khusus untuk mendukung kelanjutan proses pembelajaran. Pedoman tersebut mencakup modul pendidikan yang direkomendasikan untuk Pembelajaran Anak Usia Dini untuk membantu proses belajar dari rumah dengan menyertakan penjelasan pendidikan berbasis aktivitas untuk guru, orang tua, dan siswa. Para guru prasekolah di Indonesia harus beradaptasi dengan pedoman baru untuk terus mendidik siswanya di rumah. Salah satu adaptasinya adalah dengan menggunakan mainan edukatif yang dikirim langsung ke rumah siswa untuk keperluan belajar. Metode penelitian yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif melalui diskusi kelompok terarah dengan responden. Studi ini mengamati 15 guru prasekolah dari tiga sekolah di Jakarta dan Pandeglang yang memanfaatkan kegiatan berbasis bermain dalam rencana pembelajaran harian mereka selama dua minggu. Temuan dari penelitian tersebut menyimpulkan bahwa kegiatan berbasis bermain efektif untuk program pendidikan anak usia dini selama pandemi, dengan dukungan yang kuat dari para guru dan orang tua, pelatihan yang memadai untuk para guru, dan variasi kegiatan yang signifikan untuk para siswa. Selain itu, tantangan utama yang harus diatasi dalam menerapkan kegiatan berbasis bermain dalam lingkungan daring adalah kurangnya pemahaman teknologi oleh guru, perangkat seluler orang tua yang terbatas, masalah jaringan atau koneksi, dan keterbatasan anggaran dalam mengembangkan kegiatan berbasis permainan.

Kata Kunci: Kegiatan berbasis bermain; Guru prasekolah; Mengajar di Covid-19

Introduction

Play-based activities or learning through play is not new in Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED). It was first introduced in 1826 by German educator Friedrich Froebel in his book "The Education of Man." In his book, Froebel concluded that through hands-on play, children were able to construct their understanding of the world (Pound, 2011). In line with Froebel's approach, a century later, Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist known for his sociocultural theory, asserted that most children's learning occurs during play (Dolya, 2010).

"Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives - all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be considered a leading activity that determines the child's development." (Vygotsky, 1978)

During similar years, Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and cognitive theorist added that children need many objects to explore to play. Piaget believed that children would later incorporate play experiences into their symbolic thinking. To support their thinking, children also need to be involved with concrete objects and be allowed to explore and use them in their ways (Mooney, 2013). In addition, Maria Montessori, an Italian educator known for her pivotal philosophy of education, highlighted the importance of using play-based materials that appeal to the children's five senses - sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. She believed playing with different colors, shapes, and textures helped children understand abstract concepts and everyday life experiences (Mooney, 2013). Despite their different approaches and theories, these experts concluded that play is essential in children's lives.

When it comes to the benefits of play, substantial research has been conducted. At the beginning of the 20th century, most research focused on the benefits of play from an emotional perspective (Bowman, 1990). Play was believed to help children release and express their negative, hostile, and aggressive feelings. Furthermore, brain-developmental experts add that play enhances brain structure and function and promotes learning, allowing children to pursue goals and ignore distractions (Yogman et al., 2018). Play is also believed to help foster stronger bonding between children and their parents (Ginsburg, 2007). Additionally, educators' research showcased that play in the early years is a key to school success and solid development (Singer et al., 2006).

While educators and education policymakers are convinced of the critical role of play in a child's life, many struggle to incorporate play-based learning in their ECE classrooms. Pyle et al. (2020) state the case aptly: "Policymakers around the world increasingly mandate play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, a pedagogical approach backed by research espousing not only the developmental appropriateness of play-based learning for this age group but also the benefits to students' academic achievement. Yet, despite these mandates, researchers continue to see a discrepancy between policy and practice."

For many ECE centers in Indonesia, the opportunity to use and test play-based learning occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. Tesar (2021) pointed out, "Education does have the capacity to start thinking about its futures when education processes and established ways of doing things are disrupted." During the first two years of the pandemic, the Indonesian government instructed the closure of physical schools at all levels across the country, including the ECE centers, instead of maintaining the safety and health of the children during the pandemic (Nurkholis, 2020). The schools' closure significantly disrupted Indonesia's ECE sector (Arsendy et al., 2021). One of the major concerns was the possible learning loss amongst young learners, which would continue to have ripple effects as they transition to the primary education level. During such time, most ECE students were asked to join the online sessions organized by their schools, equipped with parental guidance and supervision at home.

To ensure that learning continued to take place, in July 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture published guidelines for the Implementation of Curriculum under Special Circumstances, intended to provide more flexibility for teachers in designing their lesson plans to adapt to online learning (Hamsa et al., 2022). In addition, to help with the student's learning, some schools sent play-based learning kits to their students to accompany their online sessions.

Numerous research has indicated that play-based activities are beneficial for young learners. For example, studies from Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) have compared children who attended preschool with an academic orientation with comparable children who attended a play-oriented program. The results showed that children who attended the academic program demonstrated higher levels of test anxiety, were less creative and had more negative attitudes toward school than those attending the play program. Other investigations demonstrate that low-income children profit from attending a quality early childhood education program, especially when the program is play-based (Elkind, 2007).

This paper aims to highlight the teachers' experiences in utilizing play-based activities amongst young learners during the pandemic, particularly those in preschool at the age of 4-5.

Methods

For this study, the researcher used a qualitative method by conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather in-depth views of the teachers regarding their experiences in utilizing play-based activities for their young learners. Creswell (2009) stated that a qualitative study is a successful model that exists in a realistic context and allows the researcher to establish in-depth information from a group of participants in a specific profession.

The participants for the research consisted of 15 teachers from three different schools in Jakarta (the capital city of Indonesia), namely PAUD Riang and PAUD

Bougenville 011, and Pandeglang (a city in Banten, Java), namely PAUD Al-Manshuriyah. The respondents were chosen based on their participation in play-based activities for their preschool students in an online setting for two weeks. Each teacher was involved in developing, delivering, and implementing play-based activities for their preschool students aged 4-5. In this study, all preschool teachers employed educational play kits for the students' play-based activities for two weeks. The play-kits included sensorimotor activities, cooking, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), arts and crafts, and games-related activities. Most of the activities were guided activities that the students could do with the help of their parents at home. To support the learning, the teachers sent play-based materials, accompanied by printed guidelines and recorded tutorial videos, for parents to provide a better context of the activities. After completing the two-week program, the two groups of teachers (one from Jakarta and another from Pandeglang) were invited to attend online focus group discussions to gather their thoughts and experiences when conducting the play-based activities.

While the teachers were based in two cities, the data collection was conducted similarly and in a setting. For the focus group discussions, two online sessions were organized to provide the researcher better understanding of the teachers' experiences and observations about their teaching experiences using play-based activities. The first online focus group discussion was conducted with seven teachers from Jakarta, and the second was conducted with eight teachers from Pandeglang. As Mishra (2016) pointed out, the focus or object of analysis is the interaction inside the group, as the participants influence each other through their answers to the ideas and contributions during the discussion. The moderator stimulates discussion with comments or subjects. The fundamental data produced by this technique are the transcripts of the group discussions and the moderator's reflections and annotations.

The entire research was carried out for approximately six months, starting from the identification of the research topic in July 2020, the coordination with key stakeholders to find the relevant respondents, the development of the research method, the focus group discussions' arrangement, the actual FGDs, the observation, and analysis to reporting. From the focus group discussions' results, each discussion point was documented and classified within three key categories (best practices, key learnings, and challenges) without differentiating between the two groups. Each teacher's remarks were recorded to showcase similar themes during the discussions.

Results and Discussion

The research was designed to gather in-depth information based on three main categories, including (1) the best practices; (2) the key learning; and (3) the challenges that the teachers faced when they were implementing play-based activities in an online setting.

Best Practices

Two of the best practices mentioned by the respondents based on their experiences in implementing the play-based activities were (1) training and facilitation sessions prior to the program and (2) communication and coordination with parents. For most respondents, play-based learning was a new concept to grasp. Based on the discussion during the FGDs, the respondents shared that before conducting the play-based activities, they joined training sessions to help them understand the concept of play-based activities and their roles in liaising with the parents and their students. As a result, the respondents felt better equipped to deliver the activities online by joining the training sessions. Secondly, communication and coordination with the parents were cited as another vital part of ensuring the program's success. Most teachers mentioned that they liaised closely with their student's parents to ensure that the students at home did the activities. In their book "Beginnings and Beyond: Foundations in Early Childhood Education," Gordon & Browne (2011) pointed out that "through the closer home-school relationships, families can be helped to see that their everyday experiences with their children provide teachable moments, those spontaneous opportunities for educating children." Support from the parents was instrumental in ensuring that the activities were done and done correctly.

Key Learning

When asked about their key learnings on using the play-based activities, several things continued to come up during the FGDs, including (1) the variety of the play-based activities and (2) the changes in the students when performing the activities. Many respondents expressed that the variety in the play-based activities enabled them to test new ideas in developing their lesson plans. The finding is in line with Erik Erikson's theory on the psychological development of human beings, which underlines the importance of providing a variety of play experiences so children can explore and choose what to do (Slentz & Krogh, 2001). Before using play-based activities, most teachers often resorted to sending only worksheets to their students. By including more variety of activities in their lesson plans, ranging from cooking to games, the teachers could exercise more creativity and flexibility in their teaching without sacrificing the content of their teaching.

Table 1. Sample of the play-based activities from PAUD Al-Mansyuriah for two weeks

Week and Day	Name of Play-Based Activities	Type of Play-Based Activities
Week 1, Day 1	<i>Tekstur Apa Ini?</i> (What texture is this?)	Sensory
Week 1, Day 2	<i>Bola Coklat</i> (Chocolate ball)	Cooking
Week 1, Day 3	<i>Tidak takut</i> (Not Afraid)	STEM
Week 1, Day 4	<i>Bangun dan Ruang</i> (Building and Space)	Arts & Craft
Week 1, Day 5	<i>Busa Ular</i> (Snake Bubble)	Games
Week 2, Day 1	<i>Bertumbuh</i> (Growing)	Sensory

Week 2, Day 2	<i>Es Krim (Ice Cream)</i>	Cooking
Week 2, Day 3	<i>Mobil Botol (Bottle Car)</i>	STEM
Week 2, Day 4	<i>Ketapel (Slingshot)</i>	Arts & Craft
Week 2, Day 5	<i>Boling (Bowling)</i>	Games

Another critical learning they witnessed was the change they saw in their students performing play-based activities. One teacher expressed that she was amazed at the changes she witnessed in her students. She claimed that with the play-based activities, one of her students discovered his interest in cooking, and since that, the four-year boy has continued to help his mother in the kitchen. Such an example was one of the many mentioned during the FGDs. The respondents were delighted to witness their students' positive changes as they participated in the play-based activities.



Figure 1. (a) Play-based Activity "Snake Bubble"; (b) and (c) Play-Based Activities "Not Afraid"

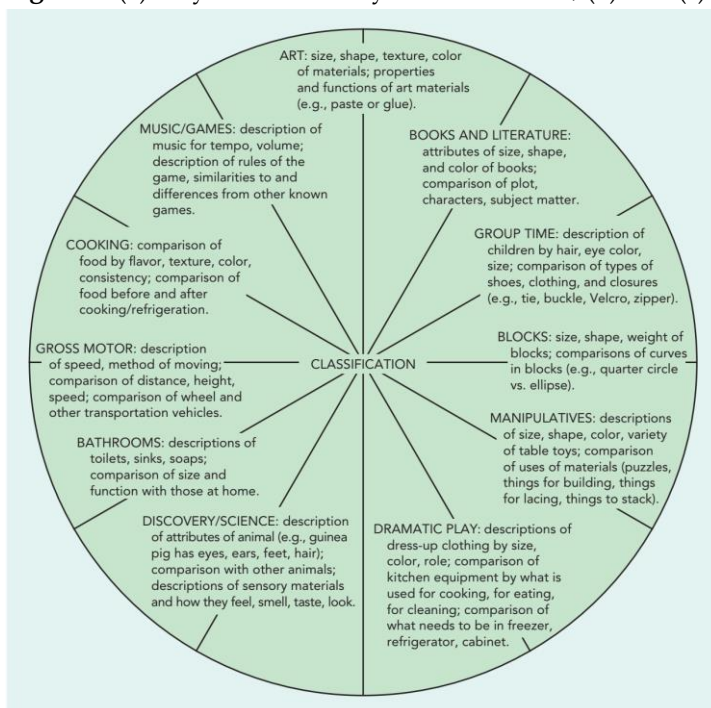


Figure 2. Sample of play-based integrated curriculum (Gordon & Browne, 2011)

Challenges

Most respondents admitted that they were ill-prepared to conduct online learning at the beginning of the pandemic. Mostly in their early 40s and 50s, the teachers claimed that adapting to the new technology was one of the hurdles they had to overcome to continue teaching their students. In addition to their lack of technology-savviness, the teachers cited network or connection problems, parents' lack of mobile devices to support learning, and budget constraints in developing play-based activities as challenges in using play-based activities in online settings.

In all education levels, network and connection issues were widely quoted as major obstacles when conducting online learning. Despite their different locations, teachers in both Jakarta and Pandeglang claimed to experience technical issues when doing online teaching. Even though the two schools in Jakarta were in urban settings, they still experienced connection and network issues when they tried to call, text, or arrange a video call with parents, similar to their counterparts in Pandeglang (which was in a rural setting). Many parents also experienced a lack of devices in a household with young children. With only one shared mobile device at home, parents often had to choose which children needed the device more for their studies. In the ECE case, the youngest sibling often missed online lessons. One respondent gave a vivid sample of her student in the below's testimony:

"Hapenya dipake bareng-bareng sama kakaknya yang SD. Jadi si adik dapat giliran terakhir dan orangtua kadang gak kirim foto" - Bunda Mariatun ("The mobile phone was shared with the child's brother, who is at primary school level. So the little girl often had the last turn and parents also did not send any picture to us" - Miss Mariatun)

From their school's readiness to implement play-based activities, the respondents also mentioned budget constraints in utilizing play-based activities in their classrooms, both online and offline, moving forward. In addition, respondents also mentioned that there is a decline in the overall school's enrolments, making them more cautious with the budget usage for their lesson plans.

Based on the overall findings in the FGDs, all of the teachers found their experiences using play-based lesson plans positive and rewarding. O'Keefe and McNally (2022), who examined early childhood teachers' reported practices of using play in Ireland's preschools, also exhibited similar findings. Flexibility, creativity, and freedom to explore were some of the respondents' feedback about the play-based implementation. In addition, the teachers consistently stated that parental involvement was instrumental in supporting and guiding the children's learning at home. While technical issues exist throughout play-based activities, the teachers claimed that they could execute the two-week program well, witnessed positive changes in their students, and obtained new ideas for their future lesson plans.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, the teachers in this research had the opportunity to use play-based activities in an online setting as part of their preschools' commitment to follow the ECE's Curriculum guidelines for Special Circumstances. Before returning to in-class education, preschool teachers learned a new approach to online teaching. From developing play-based activities, creating printed guidelines for the parents, and sending play-kits to the students' homes to ensuring the activities were correctly done by asking the parents to send the pictures when the students conducted the activities, the roles of the teachers were instrumental in preventing learning loss amongst the young learners. However, the complexity of such an approach was not to be undermined.

Since the teachers could not teach their students face-to-face, the role of parents was instigated to supervise and guide the preschool students from home. Such experience allowed the teachers to connect with the parents amidst the pandemic. From the students' perspectives, the variety of play-based learning activities also opened up their mindset and eagerness to learn again, despite being constrained at home with limited interaction with their peers.

Despite the limitations and technical issues surrounding online learning, a play-based curriculum was implemented with great excitement from the teachers, parents, and students. The next logical step would be to use the findings on best practices, key learning, and challenges in play-based activities for in-class learning moving forward.

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