Learning through Play in the early childhood classroom: Myth or Reality?

LAU Grace
Department of Early Childhood Education
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

CHENG Pui Wah Doris
Department of Early Childhood Education
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Abstract

Since the Llewellyn Panel Report in 1982, the Hong Kong government’s official guidelines on Early Childhood Education have emphasized the importance of ‘learning through play’. Yet Quality Assurance Inspection Reports from 2001 to 2007 repeatedly document the prevalence of teacher-centred approaches. This paper reports the findings of a study to ascertain whether learning through play is a myth in Hong Kong, a question which has long puzzled practitioners and academics. It centres on the issue of whether “real” play exists in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms. A questionnaire was administered to a principal, a teacher, parents and young children to find out why learning through play is a myth in Hong Kong. A case study of a kindergarten with episodes of play and work was used to illustrate the findings. It concludes with a discussion that education is a complex and complicated endeavour involving a plethora of judgements and ideologies affecting diverse people and the “meanings” of their experiences, lives and institutions.

Introduction

The climate for change

It is well documented that during the colonial era when Hong Kong was governed by Great Britain, there was little government intervention in preschool provision in Hong Kong (Lau, 2005).

In the colonial era, curriculum in Hong Kong was described as being based on the ‘academic model’, where teachers expected young children to learn through early academic instruction. Since 1982, following the recommendation of the Llewellyn Panel Report, the curriculum...
guidelines have then placed child-centred, play-based pedagogy at the heart of Early Childhood Education quality. However, quality assurance reports indicate that a gap exists between policy and practice, with many pre-primary schools persisting in teacher-directed approaches and academically oriented practices (Cheng, Ho, Lau & Benson, 2009, p.1).

In the year 1996, the government has again provided guidelines concerning new approaches to curriculum by using a less formal type of approach in teaching and learning. The Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum issued in 2006 was to reiterate and to reconfirm the captioned Early Childhood Education curriculum reform proposal started years ago by adopting play for facilitating the “child-centred” concept of children’s learning. In this latest Guide, play is recommended as a learning strategy to be incorporated into different learning areas in an integrated holistic manner (2006, Hong Kong Government, p.41).

The old paradigm of a teacher-centred curriculum has since the launch of the educational reform been considered out-dated and should give way to holistic development underpinned by a child-centred ideology for Quality education. It is a fact that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong committed HK$2 billion since 2006 to enhance the quality of ECE and play-based learning has been advocated as the key approach to achieve this goal (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008, p.1 and Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009, p.1).

Literature Review

The development of the whole child is facilitated through play in an integrated curriculum

According to Gordon and Williams-Browne (1995, p.540-541), an integrated curriculum means a set of courses designed to form a whole; coordination of the various areas of study, making for continuous and harmonious learning.

The concept of the whole child strongly suggests the uniqueness of the person. Interestingly, the whole-child approach is seen from a medical point of view as well. Although they are often discussed separately, the areas of development (social, emotional, physical, and intellectual) cannot be isolated from one another. They each make a valuable contribution to the total well-being of the child. Since play is a chain of integrated and interrelated activities and is not subject-based, it fits well with the enhancement of the holistic development of the whole child (Derman-Sparks in Gordon & Browne, 1995, p.84-85).

The term ‘holistic’ carries a viewpoint that takes into account several conceptions of a child or situation to form a wider, more rounded description; in early childhood terms, this view includes a child’s history, present status, relationships with others, and the interrelationships of development to arrive at a picture of a child; in medicine, this view includes dealing with a person’s mental and emotional state, relationships, etc., as well as body signs. In short, the notion of holistic development which originated from the whole child concept and is best facilitated through play.

Pioneers in Early Childhood Education such as Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, Patty Smith and their approach to learning has reflected that educating the whole child through play is very much in evidence in their work, as is their basic connection to child development theory and research (Gordon & Browne, 1995, p.60).

Learning through play is still a myth in Hong Kong

As play is related to the holistic child-centred approaches, which is dynamic and creative by nature, it is promoted to meet the dynamic environment of society. Despite the calling for a child-centred curriculum over the fourteen years since the publication of the 1996 Curriculum Guide for early childhood education, the degree to which these principles and approaches have been embraced by teachers and implemented in Hong Kong Chinese Kindergarten classroom practice, varies to a great extent.

Kindergarten programmes range from relatively traditional classes to highly structured, academically oriented classes. The push to teach separate skills, such as reading, writing and mathematics, has created more and more academically-focused kindergarten where worksheets and teacher-directed lessons are the norm. This movement has caused deep concern in the early childhood field since most of these programmes seem inconsistent with the developmental and learning styles of five- and six-year-olds and are viewed as preparation for advancement to Primary One level rather than as high quality programmes aimed at the development of the whole child. Curriculum trends in kindergarten, where play is not respected as a vehicle for learning, where reading is taught as a separate skill, and where attempts are made to accelerate children’s learning are at odds with the developmental theoretical practice. When educators speak about play, it is mostly in this instrumental sense of play: “play as a means to reach a further goal or learning result, not the inherent value of play is central in this vision” (de Jonghe, 2001, p.7, cited in Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p.49).

Without a genuine understanding of the holistic development of young children through the integrated play-based curriculum and pedagogy, it is understandable why learning through play is still a myth in the classrooms for young children in Hong Kong. It is no wonder that David Elkind in his book “The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon” (Elkind, 1989) to disregard for activities and curriculum conducted in the early childhood classroom being too teacher-directed and have not geared to a child’s appropriate developmental level. It is not an exaggeration to say that the “hurried child” is indeed a product of the lack of understanding on the part of the practitioners of the need for the child’s holistic development. What was seen instead was that children are forced to sit and pay attention for longer than their bodies or minds can tolerate; attempts are made to teach reading and writing before children are developmentally prepared; and curriculum for fours, fives, and sixes include content best suited for later years (Gordon & Browne, 1995, p.75).

To provide a basis for the study, it was necessary to have an understanding of the meaning of play to young children and its role and function in a child’s development. The understanding of the concept of ‘play’ by the practitioners is crucial since the application of it has direct impact on children’s learning.

While we are all familiar with the activity of play, a review of the literature on children’s play suggests a lack of consensus among scholars and researchers on a definition of play (Lau, 2008).

Cheng et al. (2008) also mentions the difficulty of defining ‘play’ in Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong in that, “The implementation of child-centred, play-based pedagogies in classrooms is a recognized field of theory and practice in ECE. Yet, with the current popularity of social constructivist theory, international and local scholars find it difficult to tell where the boundary lies between teacher-centred and child-centred play-based approaches”. Similar findings are reported in the previous research conducted by the author of this paper (Lau, 2009).

One might perhaps borrow the chart illustrated by Miller and Almon (2009, p.22) to give an idea of how might the kindergarten curriculum
guidelines have then placed child-centred, play-based pedagogy at the heart of Early Childhood Education quality. However, quality assurance reports indicate that a gap exists between policy and practice, with many pre-primary schools persisting in teacher-directed approaches and academically oriented practices (Cheng, Ho, Lau & Benson, 2009, p.1).

In the year 1996, the government has again provided guidelines concerning new approaches to curriculum by using a less formal type of approach in teaching and learning. The Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum issued in 2006 was to reiterate and to reconfirm the captioned Early Childhood Education curriculum reform proposal started years ago by adopting play for facilitating the “child-centred” concept of children’s learning. In this latest Guide, play is recommended as a learning strategy to be incorporated into different learning areas in an integrated holistic manner (2006, Hong Kong Government, p.41).

The old paradigm of a teacher-centred curriculum has since the launch of the educational reform been considered out-dated and should give way to holistic development underpinned by a child-centred ideology for Quality education. It is a fact that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong committed HK$2 billion since 2006 to enhance the quality of ECE and play-based learning has been advocated as the key approach to achieve this goal (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008, p.1 and Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009, p.1).

Literature Review

The development of the whole child is facilitated through play in an integrated curriculum

According to Gordon and Williams-Browne (1995, p.540-541), an integrated curriculum means a set of courses designed to form a whole; coordination of the various areas of study, making for continuous and harmonious learning.

The concept of the whole child strongly suggests the uniqueness of the person. Interestingly, the whole-child approach is seen from a medical point of view as well. Although they are often discussed separately, the areas of development (social, emotional, physical, and intellectual) cannot be isolated from one another. They each make a valuable contribution to the total well-being of the child. Since play is a chain of integrated and interrelated activities and is not subject-based, it fits well with the enhancement of the holistic development of the whole child (Derman-Sparks in Gordon & Browne, 1995, p.84-85).

The term ‘holistic’ carries a viewpoint that takes into account several conceptions of a child or situation to form a wider, more rounded description; in early childhood terms, this view includes a child’s history, present status, relationships with others, and the interrelationships of development to arrive at a picture of a child; in medicine, this view includes dealing with a person’s mental and emotional state, relationships, etc., as well as body signs. In short, the notion of holistic development which originated from the whole child concept and is best facilitated through play.

Pioneers in Early Childhood Education such as Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, Patty Smith and their approach to learning has reflected that educating the whole child through play is very much in evidence in their work, as is their basic connection to child development theory and research(Gordon & Browne, 1995, p.60).

Learning through play is still a myth in Hong Kong

As play is related to the holistic child-centred approaches, which is dynamic and creative by nature, it is promoted to meet the dynamic environment of society. Despite the calling for a child-centred curriculum over the fourteen years since the publication of the 1996 Curriculum Guide for early childhood education, the degree to which these principles and approaches have been embraced by teachers and implemented in Hong Kong Chinese Kindergarten classroom practice, varies to a great extent.

Kindergarten programmes range from relatively traditional classes to highly structured, academically oriented classes. The push to teach separate skills, such as reading, writing and mathematics, has created more and more academically-focused kindergartens where worksheets and teacher-directed lessons are the norm. This movement has caused deep concern in the early childhood field since most of these programmes seem inconsistent with the developmental and learning styles of five- and six-year olds and are viewed as preparation for advancement to Primary One level rather than as high quality programmes aimed at the development of the whole child. Curriculum trends in kindergarten, where play is not respected as a vehicle for learning, where reading is taught as a separate skill, and where attempts are made to accelerate children’s learning are at odds with the developmental theoretical practice. When educators speak about play, it is mostly in this instrumental sense of play: “play as a means to reach a further goal or learning result, not the inherent value of play is central in this vision” (de Jonghe., 2001, p.7, cited in Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p.49).

Without a genuine understanding of the holistic development of young children through the integrated play-based curriculum and pedagogy, it is understandable why learning through play is still a myth in the classrooms for young children in Hong Kong. It is no wonder that David Elkind in his book “The Harried Child: Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon” (Elkind, 1989) to disregard for activities and curriculum conducted in the early childhood classroom being too teacher-directed and have not geared to a child’s appropriate developmental level. It is not an exaggeration to say that the “hurried child” is indeed a product of the lack of understanding on the part of the practitioners of the need for the child’s holistic development. What was seen instead was that children are forced to sit and pay attention for longer than their bodies or minds can tolerate; attempts are made to teach reading and writing before children are developmentally prepared; and curriculum for fours, fives, and sixes include content best suited for later years (Gordon & Browne 1995, p.75).

To provide a basis for the study, it was necessary to have an understanding of the meaning of play to young children and its role and function in a child’s development. The understanding of the concept of ‘play’ by the practitioners is crucial since the application of it has direct impact on children’s learning.

While we are all familiar with the activity of play, a review of the literature on children’s play suggests a lack of consensus among scholars and researchers on a definition of play (Lau, 2008).

Cheng et al. (2008) also mentions the difficulty of defining ‘play’ in Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong in that, “The implementation of child-centred, play-based pedagogies in classrooms is a recognized field of theory and practice in ECE. Yet, with the current popularity of social constructivist theory, international and local scholars find it difficult to tell where the boundary lies between teacher-centred and child-centred play—based approaches”. Similar findings are reported in the previous research conducted by the author of this paper (Lau, 2009).

One might perhaps borrow the chart illustrated by Millar and Almon (2009, p.22) to give an idea of how might the kindergarten curriculum
and pedagogical practises lie along a continuum between the child-initiated play and focused, experiential learning in the situation of Hong Kong as in the United States.

**THE KINDERGARTEN CONTINUUM**

The range of kindergarten education illustrated in the continuum above marked the two central methods in the continuum: namely the child-initiated play and focused, experiential learning. The illustrator of this diagram has cited the description by researchers Elena Bodrova and Deborah of the dangers of the extremes in that, we have found that both extremely chaotic classrooms and extremely teacher-directed classrooms are counterproductive to developing self-regulation and other underlying skills in children. Classrooms where children flit from activity to activity support reactive behaviour. But when all the instruction is whole-group, students become too teacher-regulated” (Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. J. 2005, cited in Miller & Almon, 2009, p.22).

**Definition of “Play” by**

(a) Rubin, Fein and Vendenberg(1983): Play is intrinsically motivated, and that the players are more concerned with activities than with goals. ‘Play’ requires the active engagement of the participants and is free from rules imposed from outside. Thus, active engagement, as seen from the above features, is one of the key factors of play.

(b) Gadamer, H.G.(1960) : Play has the connotation of not being serious, as people have a feeling of ‘mere play’. Yet, embedded in the surface connotation, the behaviour of the player has to be serious as ‘seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play’ (p.2) Thus, ‘play’ seems to have split and contrasting meanings, as it can refer to both the superficial meaning of unserious play as well as to the serious engagement of the player, which is the condition that makes the activity ‘play’. The complexity of play is such that it has to be disguised from even the players themselves, as they have to think that what they are doing is merely ‘play’. Their seriousness in approaching the activity must be outside their conscious awareness so that they are free of external pressure (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008, p. 20).

(c) King, N.R. (1979): A lack of adult involvement seems to be a necessary ingredient in the play experience.

(d) Dewey, J. cited in Parker-Rees (1999). The concept of ‘playfulness’ when the players are intrinsically motivated should be used to apply for real play.

(e) Csikszentmihalyi (1991). The idea of ‘playfulness’ also advocated under another terminology of ‘optimal experience’. It is a condition of deep enjoyment, which is the focus of the Experiential Education in Flemish preschools. Csikszentmihalyi terms the experience ‘flow’, when concentration is so intense that there is no spare attention of anything irrelevant, or for worry about other problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted. Six qualities have been highlighted by Csikszentmihalyi when someone is in this state, which are also indicators that a child is in a state of playfulness. They are having clear goals (which are imposed by the player himself; concerned attention; loss of self-consciousness; an altered sense of time; intrinsic motivation and belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake.

In short, in the data collection process, playful scenarios identified in the present study were defined by the following qualities (Cheng, Benson, Lau & Fung, 2010, p. 6).

(a) having clear goals (which are imposed by the player himself)

(b) having concerned attention

(c) loss of self-consciousness

(d) an altered sense of time

(e) intrinsic motivation

(f) a belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake.

**Definition of “Play-based pedagogy”**

Play-based pedagogy is perceived here as the teacher’s intended act in mobilizing contextual resources (the school and classroom environments and the available human resources from the children’s macro surroundings) to capture, sustain and extend the children’s unintended enjoyable experience through a continuous process that helps them construct and reconstruct new meanings of the world. It is the repertoire that a teacher adopts to interweave the children’s optimal experience with teaching and learning objectives (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008).

**Rationale for investigation in the Hong Kong situation**

The lack of genuine understanding of the holistic development of young children through the integrated play-based curriculum and pedagogy has made learning through play still a myth in the classrooms for young children in Hong Kong. This is one of the additional insights gained by the author of this paper while analyzing the data collected from the five kindergartens that she has visited.

In a publicly funded research project conducted by four researchers, including the author of this paper, to investigate the ‘implementation of play-based pedagogy’ in Hong Kong, the researchers found that practitioners had different interpretations of the notion of learning through play. In essence, of the twenty kindergartens in this research study, four of which had been identified as good kindergartens in the QAI reports (Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009), it is surprising to note that only piece-meal incidences of play episodes were recorded as ‘genuine play’ in these kindergartens. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to state that basically no genuine play-based pedagogy is being observed in Hong Kong. What has accounted for this phenomenon could be a good topic to share with stakeholders in the Early Childhood Education field.
and pedagogical practices lie along a continuum between the child-initiated play and focused, experiential learning in the situation of Hong Kong as in the United States.

Definition of “Play” by

(a) Rubin, Fein and Vendenberg (1983): Play is intrinsically motivated, and that the players are more concerned with activities than with goals. ‘Play’ requires the active engagement of the participants and is free from rules imposed from outside. Thus, active engagement, as seen from the above features, is one of the key factors of play.

(b) Gadamer, H.G. (1960): Play has the connotation of not being serious, as people have a feeling of ‘mere play’. Yet, embedded in the surface connotation, the behaviour of the player has to be serious as ‘seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play’ (p.2). Thus, ‘play’ seems to have split the superficial meaning of unserious play as well as to the serious engagement of the player, which is the condition that makes the activity ‘play’. The complexity of play is such that it has to be disguised from even the players themselves, as they have to think that what they are doing is merely ‘play’. Their seriousness in approaching the activity must be outside their conscious awareness so that they are free of external pressure (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008, p. 20).

(c) King, N.R. (1979): A lack of adult involvement seems to be a necessary ingredient in the play experience.

(d) Dewey, J. cited in Parker-Rees (1999). The concept of ‘playfulness’ when the players are intrinsically motivated should be used to apply for real play.

(e) Csikszentmihalyi (1991). The idea of ‘playfulness’ also advocated under another terminology of ‘optimal experience’. It is a condition of deep enjoyment, which is the focus of the Experiential Education in Flemish preschools. Csikszentmihalyi terms the experience ‘flow’, when concentration is so intense that there is no spare attention of anything irrelevant, or for worry about other problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted. Six qualities have been highlighted by Csikszentmihalyi when someone is in this state, which are also indicators that a child is in a state of playfulness. They are having clear goals (which are imposed by the player himself); concerned attention; loss of self-consciousness; an altered sense of time; intrinsic motivation and belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake.

In short, in the data collection process, playful scenarios identified in the present study were defined by the following qualities (Cheng, Benson, Lau & Fung, 2010, p. 6).

(a) having clear goals (which are imposed by the player himself)
(b) having concerned attention
(c) loss of self-consciousness
(d) an altered sense of time
(e) intrinsic motivation
(f) a belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake.

Definition of “Play-based pedagogy”

Play-based pedagogy is perceived here as the teacher’s intended act in mobilizing contextual resources (the school and classroom environments and the available human resources from the children’s macro surroundings) to capture, sustain and extend the children’s unintended enjoyable experience through a continuous process that helps them construct and reconstruct new meanings of the world. It is the repertoire that a teacher adopts to interweave the children’s optimal experience with teaching and learning objectives (Cheng, Fung, Lau & Benson, 2008).

Rationale for investigation in the Hong Kong situation

The lack of genuine understanding of the holistic development of young children through the integrated play-based curriculum and pedagogy has made learning through play still a myth in the classrooms for young children in Hong Kong. This is one of the additional insights gained by the author of this paper while analyzing the data collected from the five kindergartens that she has visited.

In a publicly funded research project conducted by four researchers, including the author of this paper, to investigate the ‘implementation of play-based pedagogy’ in Hong Kong, the researchers found that practitioners had different interpretations of the notion of learning through play. In essence, of the twenty kindergartens in this research study, four of which had been identified as good kindergartens in the QAI reports (Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009), it is surprising to note that only piece-meal incidences of play episodes were recorded as ‘genuine play’ in these kindergartens. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to state that basically no genuine play-based pedagogy is being observed in Hong Kong. What has accounted for this phenomenon could be a good topic to share with stakeholders in the Early Childhood Education field.
Design of the study

Methods of data collection

As case study is the ideal method to look into teacher’s practical knowledge and to understand its link with practice. It is adapted for this study to allow links between decisions and actions to be identified. Qualitative method in the form of case study is used in this investigation. Means of data collection employed in this project involves kindergarten visits, classroom observations and conducting interviews with all key stakeholders.

Data Collection

Selection of sample schools

The 20 kindergartens taking part in this project were drawn from a wide catchment area which covered Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. The sample included 2 nurseries and 18 kindergartens, of which 2 were on Hong Kong Island, 7 in Kowloon, and 11 in the New Territories. K1 classes were sampled in five kindergartens, K2 in seven, and K3 in eight. All the kindergartens had joined the Preprimary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS). Four had been identified as good kindergartens in the QAI reports (Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009, p. 6).

Data collection process

The data collection was conducted by four researchers and one research assistant from September 2008 to March 2009. After a thorough documentary analysis, the 20 sample kindergartens were selected. Consent was sought from the kindergartens and a date to visit each was negotiated (either a half or whole day, depending on the mode of the kindergartens). Before the class started, the researcher interviewed the teacher while the assistant set up the audio and video equipment. While taking field notes of the teaching and learning activities, the researcher also had to identify playful scenarios and ask the assistant to videotape those episodes. After a day’s programme, the principal, teacher and parents’ interviews took place. A set of semi-structured questions were used to guide the stakeholders for answers on the play research (see appendix A). Other documents such as the teaching plan, kindergarten leaflets, and floor plans were collected from the kindergarten during the visit (ibid., p. 7). All the interviews and audio recordings were then transcribed. The video clips were reviewed and the duration of each session was noted down. Together with the video clips, a comprehensive dataset for each kindergarten was collated into a package ready for the researchers to conduct an initial analysis. Each of the investigators then analyzed their own data according to an agreed template. With the help of Nvivo, discourse analysis, as well as discussions within the team, the data was then coded according to the emerging features and the results were analyzed (ibid., p. 7).

Background of the Kindergarten in the present study

Space does not permit the author to present each of the various texts of the 20 kindergartens involved in this project. Those outlined below reflect the practices and interpretation of a play-based curriculum and pedagogy displayed by a typical case of the project kindergartens.

The kindergarten under study is a non-profit making kindergarten which has a long established history. It was established by the former supervisor who was a Protestant though the kindergarten has claimed that it has no religious affiliation. The medium of instruction is Cantonese. The facilities include 8 classrooms (separated by partitions), a computer room, an art room, a science room and an indoor playground. In 2007, 3 teachers are claimed that it has no religious affiliation. The medium of instruction is Cantonese. The facilities include 8 classrooms (separated by partitions), a computer room, an art room, a science room and an indoor playground. In 2007, 3 teachers are mainly responsible for the nursery section. 2 of them are Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) teachers and one has a Certificate in Education (CE) qualifications or above.

The Findings

An overview of the findings

Two episodes were reported as findings to reveal the practice of play-based pedagogy in this case study, namely the play episode (A) and the play episode (B). Both play episodes are regarded as game episode by the researcher/s since the activities are teacher-led. Interestingly, it is the parents of this kindergarten regarded play episode (B) as play since they have found that their children enjoyed the music lesson very much.

Play episode (B)

Music activities in a K2 (four-year-old) classroom.

Class schedule: Music activities

Description: The girl sitting in a corner at the back of the room (girl X) keeps touching the empty seats next to her when the teacher is teaching the children a new song. Most of the children listen quietly in their seats, but girl X keeps rubbing the surface of the empty seat and even leans against the seat. The teacher notices this and thus brings her seat a little bit closer to herself, in order to prevent her from touching the seats again. But still, girl X seems not to be involved in the class. When the teacher asks the children to pretend to share the fruits with their neighbors, she stands up and walks around. Teacher instructs her back to return to her seat and reminds her to follow the instructions. She appears excited, sometimes jumps up and swings her head up and down without listening carefully to the teacher’s instruction during the lesson. The other children in class show their excitement during the music activities as well.

Music activity/game for each class is a highlight of the day’s programme

In Play episode B, the researchers noticed the teacher tends to find ways to keep girl X under control so that she could follow what the rest of the class is doing. There is an expectation of conformity in practice from every student in the music lesson. Conformity is expected of
**Design of the study**

**Methods of data collection**

As case study is the ideal method to look into teacher’s practical knowledge and to understand its link with practice. It is adapted for this study to allow links between decisions and actions to be identified. Qualitative method in the form of case study is used in this investigation. Means of data collection employed in this project involves kindergarten visits, classroom observations and conducting interviews with all key stakeholders.

**Data Collection**

**Selection of sample schools**

The 20 kindergartens taking part in this project were drawn from a wide catchment area which covered Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. The sample included 2 nurseries and 18 kindergartens, of which 2 were on Hong Kong Island, 7 in Kowloon, and 11 in the New Territories. K1 classes were sampled in five kindergartens, K2 in seven, and K3 in eight. All the kindergartens had joined the Preprimary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS). Four had been identified as good kindergartens in the QAI reports (Cheng, Lau, Fung & Benson, 2009, p. 6).

**Data collection process**

The data collection was conducted by four researchers and one research assistant from September 2008 to March 2009. After a thorough documentary analysis, the 20 sample kindergartens were selected. Consent was sought from the kindergartens and a date to visit each was negotiated (either a half or whole day, depending on the mode of the kindergartens). Before the class started, the researcher interviewed the teacher while the assistant set up the audio and video equipment. While taking field notes of the teaching and learning activities, the researcher also had to identify playful scenarios and ask the assistant to videotape those episodes. After a day’s programme, the principal, teacher and parents’ interviews took place. A set of semi-structured questions were used to guide the stakeholders for answers on the play research (see appendix A). Other documents such as the teaching plan, kindergarten leaflets, and floor plans were collected from the kindergarten during the visit (ibid., p. 7). All the interviews and audio recordings were then transcribed. The video clips were reviewed and the duration of each session was noted down. Together with the video clips, a comprehensive dataset for each kindergarten was collated into a package ready for the researchers to conduct an initial analysis. Each of the investigators then analyzed their own data according to an agreed template. With the help of Nvivo, discourse analysis, as well as discussions within the team, the data was then coded according to the emerging features and the results were analyzed (ibid., p. 7).

**Background of the Kindergarten in the present study**

Space does not permit the author to present each of the various texts of the 20 kindergartens involved in this project. Those outlined below reflect the practices and interpretation of a play-based curriculum and pedagogy displayed by a typical case of the project kindergartens.

The kindergarten under study is a non-profit making kindergarten which has a long established history. It was established by the former supervisor who was a Protestant though the kindergarten has claimed that it has no religious affiliation. The medium of instruction is Cantonese. The facilities include 8 classrooms (separated by partitions), a computer room, an art room, a science room and an outdoor playground. In 2007, 3 teachers are mainly responsible for the nursery section. 2 of them are Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) teachers and one has a Certificate in Education (CE) qualifications or above.

**The Findings**

**An overview of the findings**

Two episodes were reported as findings to reveal the practice of play-based pedagogy in this case study, namely the play episode (A) and the play episode (B). Both play episodes are regarded as game episode by the researcher/s since the activities are teacher-led. Interestingly, it is the parents of this kindergarten regarded play episode (B) as play since they have found that their children enjoyed the music lesson very much.

**Play episode(B)**

**Music activities in a K2 (four-year-old) classroom.**

**Class schedule:** Music activities

**Description:** The girl sitting in a corner at the back of the room (girl X) keeps touching the empty seats next to her when the teacher is teaching the children a new song. Most of the children listen quietly in their seats, but girl X keeps rubbing the surface of the empty seat and even leans against the seat. The teacher notices this and thus brings her seat a little bit closer to herself, in order to prevent her from touching the seats again. But still, girl X seems not to be involved in the class. When the teacher asks the children to pretend to share the fruits with their neighbors, she stands up and walks around. Teacher instructs her back to return to her seat and reminds her to follow the instructions. She appears excited, sometimes jumps up and swings her head up and down without listening carefully to the teacher’s instruction during the lesson. The other children in class show their excitement during the music activities as well.

**Music activity (game) for each class is a highlight of the day’s programme**

In Play episode B, the researchers noticed the teacher tends to find ways to keep girl X under control so that she could follow what the rest of the class is doing. There is an expectation of conformity in practice from every student in the music lesson. Conformity is expected of...
every student even in this music lesson, which is supposed to be the most favourite play activity of the children in the half day kindergarten programme (according to the parents). This came as a surprise to the researchers. Parents want their children to be happy and they think that one of the ways to make their children happy is by getting them to participate in a music activity.

To the researcher, a music activity is also teacher-directed though some moments are allowed for children to walk around, to dance around and to make expressions according to their ‘creativity’. It was observed that children sat in semi-circles in the music room when the teacher gave a specific signal/ melody on the piano. Teachers tended to pause or stop, if they needed to get children’s attention or encourage participation.

**Summary of findings of the case study**

As the present research study was conducted in a kindergarten underpinned by the Protestant belief system and infused with the traditional Confucius thinking as the ideology of the school, what is regarded as play in the diagram below is basically seen as opposite to work. The ideology of the school could be traced to the five thousand years of Chinese history, play is not regarded as conducive to learning. There is a long established belief that play is even harmful to learning. Play is thus seen as opposite to work – an activity done for its own sake, without external constraint. As such, children are taught to draw a clear distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’. All Chinese children have learnt by heart the old saying that ‘play when it is time to play, and work when it is time to work’ (Lau, 2005).

It is well documented that in its early teachings the Christian Church very much reflected the dictum of Saint Chrysostom (347-407) in that “It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil” (PG 57, 70D). Together with Saint Augustine of Hippo’s teaching on self-denial, Saint Chrysostom has amounted to the de-valuation of play in the pedagogy of teaching children for many years to come and could apply to the reformed Churches in Christianity history (Lau, 2005).

The findings reported below on “work” is basically opposite to the characteristics of what is defined as “play” and “play-based pedagogy” in this paper.

**Work is being emphasized than play in this case study**

1. The majority of time at kindergarten is devoted to work activities (105 minutes), leaving 57 minutes for play activities (including the teacher-led game activities). Within the 57 minutes, 10 minutes were indeed not scheduled in the three-hour school time. Children who are willing to play before the start of the ‘normal scheduled school hour’ have to arrive at school 15 minutes earlier. What is shocking perhaps is the time allotted for activity which is regarded as genuine play activity that could facilitate the holistic development of the children has accounted for more than 30 minutes in a three-hour school programme. The distribution of time in play and work is recorded in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free play before the start of the formal day’s programme. (42 minutes)</td>
<td>Thematic teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Playing clips (learning task) (55 mins.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Musical activities (35 mins.)</td>
<td>Group activities (Allotted time: 15 mins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toy kitchen</td>
<td>Physical exercises (Allotted time: 15 mins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning aids (教具)</td>
<td>(Jump and leap on the ground)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>57 minutes</td>
<td>Sub-total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Routine work and toileting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Toilet break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Snack time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Delivering homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The teaching style of the teacher is generally considered as didactic though the teacher has tried very hard to enable children to express themselves.

3. Children were instructed and programmed by the teacher about what to do. After the initial training behind the scene, children were found to be automatically geared to the demands of the teacher. It was observed that during the Free Play, they have to follow what the teacher has instructed them to do or else they would be scolded.

4. Teacher will write lesson plans and carry out her plans accordingly. The scheduled activities would not be changed so as to respond to the needs of the children.

5. There are consistent views about teaching and learning amongst teachers, parents and the Head of kindergarten. All the three parties agree that play is good for the children as long as children could play safely and constructively though their ideas of play is a kind of mechanic game and is far from the genuine notion of play (holistic play).

6. All the three parties agree with the idea of teaching children Chinese hand-writing even at the very young age (K1 children). Both the Head and the parents try to find excuses to justify their practices.

7. Although the idea of play is welcomed by the parents, teachers and School Head, play should not infringe on the ‘learning’ of children in an academic way. Given the limited school hours in a half-day programme, ‘learning’ through direct and pre-planned teaching has the first priority. The periphery time, such as time before
It is well documented that in its early teachings the Christian Church very much reflected the dictum of Saint Chrysostom (347-407) in that “It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil” (PG 57, 70D). Together with Saint Augustine of Hippo’s teaching on self-denial, Saint Chrysostom has amounted to the de-valueation of play in the pedagogy of teaching children for many years to come and could apply to the reformed Churches in Christianity history (Lau, 2005).

To the researcher, a music activity is also teacher-directed though some moments are allowed for children to walk around, to dance around and to make expressions according to their ‘creativity”. It was observed that children sat in semi-circles in the music room when the teacher gave a specific signal/melody on the piano. Teachers tended to pause or stop, if they needed to get children’s attention or encourage participation.

Summary of findings of the case study

As the present research study was conducted in a kindergarten underpinned by the Protestant belief system and infused with the traditional Confucius thinking as the ideology of the school, what is regarded as play in the diagram below is basically seen as opposite to work. The ideology of the school could be traced to the five thousand years of Chinese history, play is not regarded as conducive to learning. There is a long established belief that play is even harmful to learning. Play is thus seen as opposite to work – an activity done for its own sake, without external constraint. As such, children are taught to draw a clear distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’. All Chinese children have learnt by heart the old saying that ‘play when it is time to play, and work when it is time to work’ (Lau, 2005).

The findings reported below on “work” is basically opposite to the characteristics of what is defined as “play” and “play-based pedagogy” in this paper.

Work is being emphasized than play in this case study

(1) The majority of time at kindergarten is devoted to work activities (105 minutes), leaving 57 minutes for play activities (including the teacher-led game activities). Within the 57 minutes, 10 minutes were indeed not scheduled in the three hour school time. Children who are willing to play before the start of the ‘normal scheduled school hour’ have to arrive at school 15 minutes earlier. What is shocking perhaps is the time allotted for activity which is regarded as genuine play activity that could facilitate the holistic development of the children has accounted for less than 30 minutes in a three-hour school programme. The distribution of time in play and work is recorded in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free play before the starts of the formal day’s programme.</td>
<td>Thematic teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 minutes</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing clips (learning task)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(55 mins.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group activities (Allotted time: 15 mins)</td>
<td>Musical activities (35 mins.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing blocks</td>
<td>Physical exercises (Allotted time: 15 mins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toy kitchen</td>
<td>(Jump and leap on the ground)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning aids (教具)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Sub-total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77 minutes</td>
<td>105 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) The teaching style of the teacher is generally considered as didactic though the teacher has tried very hard to enable children to express themselves.

(3) Children were instructed and programmed by the teacher about what to do. After the initial training behind the scene, children were found to be automatically geared to the demands of the teacher. It was observed that during the Free Play, they have to follow what the teacher has instructed them to do or else they would be scolded.

(4) Teacher will write lesson plans and carry out her plans accordingly. The scheduled activities would not be changed so as to respond to the needs of the children.

(5) There are consistent views about teaching and learning amongst teachers, parents and the Head of kindergarten. All the three parties agree that play is good for the children as long as children could play safely and constructively though their ideas of play is a kind of mechanic game and is far from the genuine notion of play (holistic play).

(6) All the three parties agree with the idea of teaching children Chinese hand-writing even at the very young age (K1 children). Both the Head and the parents try to find excuses to justify their practices.

(7) Although the idea of play is welcomed by the parents, teachers and School Head, play should not infringe on the ‘learning’ of children in an academic way. Given the limited school hours in a half-day programme, ‘learning’ through direct and pre-planned teaching has the first priority. The periphery time, such as time before
the start of the formal teaching and time after the thematic teaching is set aside for children to engage in genuine play activities.

(8) As all the three parties hold the same concept on teaching and learning, there is harmony in the school when implementing the curriculum.

Discussion and Recommendations

The main points identified in this section are presented either in the question form or in relevant headings below for reflection.

(1) Is there a misconception of a play-based pedagogy and learning through play by the stakeholders?

Play-based pedagogy is perceived as the teacher’s intended act in mobilizing contextual resources (the school and classroom environments and the available human resources from the children’s macro surroundings) to capture, sustain and extend the children’s unintended enjoyable experience through a continuous process that helps them construct and reconstruct new meanings of the world. It is the repertoires that a teacher adopts to interweave the children’s optimal experience with teaching and learning objectives. In other words, a play-based pedagogy would honour the inherent value of play, as expressed by Samuelsson and Johansson (2006).

Reference to the definition of what is considered as a play-based pedagogy in the project shows that the kindergarten under study appears to deviate from this practice.

In short, what was found in this case study reveals that of all the roadblocks that hinder the genuine practice of play-based pedagogy, the (a) ideological issue is highlighted more than the others, as could be seen in point 5 to point 8 in the previous paragraph while (b) the misconception of the stakeholders on holistic development of young children through the integrated play activities, as evidenced by point 1 to point 4 in the previous paragraph has accounted for the second important roadblock for a genuine play-based pedagogy in the kindergarten under-study.

(2) What are the roadblocks for realizing the play-based pedagogy in Hong Kong?

Roadblock (a) : Ideologies of the stakeholders

Ideologies are deeply held beliefs that fill the vacuum created by the unavailability of hard data, writes Lilian Katz, who directed the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education for 30 years (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.13). Katz expressed her resentment of an ideological approach to teaching young children, on the ground that such an approach would undermine the evidence of decades of research and experience. Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) have also mentioned the different theoretical perspective of the teachers that would affect their decision on whether to relate learning mainly to specific organised situations, to affirm the child to the idea of ‘becoming’ a person with little or no knowledge and therefore thinking that children must be taught and moulded by the teacher or vice versa.

Evidence of teacher’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy

In contrast to a play-based pedagogy is the work-based pedagogy. In a work-based pedagogy, the teacher in this case study would expect children to behave themselves and be disciplined while playing. The teacher thinks that it is her responsibility to ‘instruct’ and ‘intervene’ with children in their grouping, and thereby their learning. The teacher thinks that it is her duty to ensure that children could learn something from her planned activities.

The teacher is keen to reflect on those activities which she has planned and to assess whether children could acquire learning in through these activities. In other words, activities that are those that emerge freely from children during the Free Play. Group activities time are not regarded as moments for children to acquire learning themselves.

Since the mechanical writing of Chinese characters is not encouraged in contemporary teaching and learning theory from a holistic ideological stance, the teachers would skillfully hide her real intention of asking children to write by carefully re-phasing her words in order to reach her goals.

Evidence of school head’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy

From what the Head has understood of the concept of play and her understanding of ‘learning through play’, learning is not necessarily related to numeracy and literacy, but to human relationships, connectiveness with society and self-regulation. A form of play encouraged by the School Head is picture drawing. She thinks that it is through picture drawing that children could write Chinese characters.

Other than the picture drawing activity, the Head is confident that the parents would support her learning and teaching idea since parents are being made aware of the approaches long before they have enrolled their children in the school. According to the Head, as long as the parents would understand the end product of the teaching, the parents would not query the pedagogy used by the school.

The Head would require teachers to write lesson plans though she admits that she would not spend much time in reading them.

Evidence of parent’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy

Parents are concerned about whether children are happy and that they have learned how to behave themselves properly at school. They are also concerned about whether children could learn how to discern right from wrong. This request of parents on the acquisition of moral standards is in contrast to the stance lamented by the educators who have adopted the views of moral relativism.

Parents explain that they do not mind so much as before whether their children could gain entry to ‘famous’ primary schools ever since the abolition of the ‘interview system for prospective new students’ to these primary schools. Following on that, what parents are concerned most is whether their children could behave properly as well whether they could learn their language well. Parents welcome the idea of learning through play to achieve these ends as long as children could play safely (without lurking danger underpinned by the genuine free play activities).

Parents are very pleased by the fact that their children are given chances to practise Chinese writing even at the K1 level. They tried to find a good reason to justify the writing practice fostered by the kindergarten. According to the Head, parents as well as teachers would require children to
the start of the formal teaching and time after the thematic teaching is set aside for children to engage in genuine play activities.

As all the three parties hold the same concept on teaching and learning, there is harmony in the school when implementing the curriculum.

Discussion and Recommendations
The main points identified in this section are presented either in the question form or in relevant headings below for reflection.

(1) Is there a misconception of a play-based pedagogy and learning through play by the stakeholders?

Play-based pedagogy is perceived as the teacher’s intended act in mobilizing contextual resources (the school and classroom environments and the available human resources from the children’s macro surroundings) to capture, sustain and extend the children’s unintended enjoyable experience through a continuous process that helps them construct and reconstruct new meanings of the world. It is the repertoires that a teacher adopts to interweave the children’s optimal experience with teaching and learning objectives. In other words, a play-based pedagogy would honour the inherent value of play, as expressed by Samuelsson and Johansson (2006).

Reference to the definition of what is considered as a play-based pedagogy in the project shows that the kindergarten under study appears to deviate from this practice.

In short, what was found in this case study reveals that of all the roadblocks that hinder the genuine practice of play-based pedagogy, the (a) ideological issue is highlighted more than the others, as could be seen in point 5 to point 8 in the previous paragraph while (b) the misconception of the stakeholders on holistic development of young children through the integrated play activities, as evidenced by point 1 to point 4 in the previous paragraph has accounted for the second important roadblock for a genuine play-based pedagogy in the kindergarten under-study.

(2) What are the roadblocks for realizing the play-based pedagogy in Hong Kong?

Roadblock (a): Ideologies of the stakeholders
Ideologies are deeply held beliefs that fill the vacuum created by the unavailability of hard data, writes Lilian Katz, who directed the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education for 30 years (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.13). Katz expressed her resentment of an ideological approach to teaching young children, on the ground that such an approach would undermine the evidence of decades of research and experience. Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) have also mentioned the different theoretical perspective of the teachers that would affect their decision on whether to relate learning mainly to specific organised situations, to affirm the child to the idea of ‘becoming’ a person with little or no knowledge and therefore thinking that children must be taught and moulded by the teacher or vice versa.

Evidence of teacher’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy
In contrast to a play-based pedagogy is the work-based pedagogy. In a work-based pedagogy, the teacher in this case study would expect children to behave themselves and be disciplined while playing. The teacher thinks that it is her responsibility to ‘instruct’ and ‘intervene’ with children in their grouping, and thereby their learning. The teacher thinks that it is her duty to ensure that children could learn something from her planned activities.

The teacher is keen to reflect on those activities which she has planned and to assess whether children could acquire learning in through these activities. In other words, activities that are those that emerge freely from children during the Free Play. Group activities time are not regarded as moments for children to acquire learning themselves.

Since the mechanical writing of Chinese characters is not encouraged in contemporary teaching and learning theory from a holistic ideological stance, the teachers would skilfully hide her real intention of asking children to write by carefully re-phrasing her words in order to reach her goals.

Evidence of school head’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy
From what the Head has understood of the concept of play and her understanding of ‘learning through play’, learning is not necessarily related to numeracy and literacy, but to human relationships, connectiveness with society and self-regulation. A form of play encouraged by the School Head is picture drawing. She thinks that it is through picture drawing that children could write Chinese characters.

Other than the picture drawing activity, the Head has a clear demarcation of the concept of play and the concept of work.

In the opinion of the school head, work too could enable children to learn and could be enhanced through the direct teaching of teachers, the pre-set content of teaching, the mechanical drilling of Chinese hand-writing, (though at times word making through the medium of picture drawing are encouraged), the teaching of text books, the teaching of poetry (唐詩) and the teaching of musical elements through the music lesson.

The Head is confident that the parents would support her learning and teaching idea since parents are being made aware of the approaches long before they have enrolled their children in the school. According to the Head, as long as the parents would understand the end product of the teaching, the parents would not query the pedagogy used by the school.

The Head would require teachers to write lesson plans though she admits that she would not spend much time in reading them.

Evidence of parent’s ideological preference for a work-based pedagogy
Parents are concerned about whether children are happy and that they have learned how to behave themselves properly at school. They are also concerned about whether children could learn how to discern right from wrong. This request of parents on the acquisition of moral standards is in contrast to the stance lamented by the educators who have adopted the views of moral relativism.

Parents explain that they do not mind so much as before whether their children could gain entry to ‘famous’ primary schools ever since the abolition of the ‘interview system for prospective new students’ to these primary schools. Following on that, what parents are concerned most is whether their children could behave properly as well whether they could learn their language well. Parents welcome the idea of learning through play to achieve these ends as long as children could play safely (without lurking danger underpinned by the genuine free play activities).

Parents are very pleased by the fact that their children are given chances to practise Chinese writing even at the K1 level. They tried to find a good reason to justify the writing practice fostered by the kindergarten. According to the Head, parents as well as teachers would require children to
erose those characters which are not well written. Children at K3 level would automatically erase the characters which they think are not beautifully written. In this way, children are trained to be responsible persons.

The only autonomy granted to the children on the issue of Chinese writing is that children are allowed to write at their own pace. Usually, it will take two days for children to complete a page of writing. The parents did agree with this practice, as confirmed by the School Head.

Roadblock (b) : Misunderstanding on the concept of learning through play in an instrumental sense or in an inherent value of play which would foster the holistic development of young children by the stakeholders.

Evidence of teacher’s conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what does she think about play?)

The teacher thinks that play occurs when children are engaging concept of play in activities through action. Following this line of thought, when children are engaging in music activities or in the activities which involve movement, the activity could be regarded as play. Teacher thinks in this way since she tells the researcher that, “this new generation of young children cannot sit down and learn for hours...” The Head of kindergarten has designed activities that the children could learn as well as the whole class.

The evidence showed that she has a conception of learning through play as instrumental, through using a work-based pedagogy.

Evidence of Head’s conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what does she think about play?)

Evidence of teacher’s conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what does she think about play?)

Play should be enjoyable to self as long as the action/sequences of play would not hurt others.

As could be seen from the Head’s perception of the holistic development of children through play, like her teacher, she has a conception of learning through play in an instrumental sense.

Evidence of parents’ conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what do they think about play?)

Parents appreciate that the school has designed activities so that their children could learn happily through play. Nevertheless, parents expect the school to take good care of their children while playing by ensuring that their children could play safely.

Parents think that their children could memorize better when they learn through play. Parents think that children could learn how to behave and learn the details of life through play.

Parents are of the opinion that in order for ‘good’ play to take place, certain things have to be observed,

1. to pay attention to safety;
2. to teach children again after play.

In case that children have accidentally hurt themselves during play, parents think that it could be an opportunity for children to learn through this experience. But this experience is to be learnt only when unforeseeable accidents occur and that teacher has the responsibility to teach children safety rules to safeguard the children from accidents.

Parents have devoted most of the interviewing time in talking about the writing of the children, the self-regulatory behaviour of children, the self-discipline of children...etc. These are the good learning outcomes that this group of parents would expect from schooling. In this way, parents in this case study also have a conception of learning through play in an instrumental sense.

In implementing the ‘academic curriculum’, the Head of Kindergarten has successfully gained the support from the teachers and the parents. Hence, not much difficulties or conflicts are found among the three parties, namely parents, teachers and the School Head when enforcing the school-based curriculum.

Recommendation

Strategies for implementing the play-based curriculum calls for a change of ideological stance on the part of the stakeholders

(a) The need for standardized teacher training programmes

Differences in teacher training have led to
erases those characters which are not well written. Children at K3 level would automatically erase the characters which they think are not beautifully written. In this way, children are trained to be responsible persons.

The only autonomy granted to the children on the issue of Chinese writing is that children are allowed to write at their own pace. Usually, it will take two days for children to complete a page of writing. The parents did agree with this practice, as confirmed by the School Head.

Roadblock (b): Misunderstanding on the concept of learning through play in an instrumental sense or in an inherent value of play which would foster the holistic development of young children by the stakeholders.

Evidence of teacher’s conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what does she think about play?)

The teacher thinks that play occurs when children are engaging concept of play in activities through action. Following this line of thought, when children are engaging in music activities or in the activities which involve movement, the activity could be regarded as play. Teacher thinks in this way since she tells the researcher that, “this new generation of young children cannot sit down and learn for hours in the ways we did before. Children really need to be challenged by the activities set by the teacher. In this way, children could acquire knowledge.”

The teacher tries to integrate different learning domains for the children in separate episodes rather than a continuous manner throughout the day’s programme.

When asked what are the hindrances for play to be conducted in kindergarten, the teacher expresses that it is the time factor that matters. This is due to the fact that she has difficulties in allocating time for children to play in face of a tight curriculum.

It seems that the teacher does not understand that if children are to learn through play, then what she perceives as difficulties should not be difficulties at all. It is because real play only needs the teacher to provide the environment and ensure autonomy for the young children while playing. Teacher has confused the concept of real play with learning through play. It is through the ‘learning through play’ activities that the teacher needs to spend more time by scaffolding or by ‘intervening’ so as to ensure that learning takes place for children.

(3) Were there no discrepancies between teachers’ beliefs and their practice in class?

The fact that there were not many discrepancies to be found between the teacher’s beliefs and her practice revealed the firm ideological stance of the teacher. There was consistency between what the teacher in this case study planned and did. She was able to carry out the teaching activities. What she anticipated as ‘difficulties’ and ‘fruitful results’ came out as she expected. For example, in an interview before the lesson, the teacher anticipated that the activity she had designed would be favoured by the children though the children might be a bit ‘active’ while ‘playing’.

The evidence showed that she has a conception of learning through play as instrumental, through using a work-based pedagogy.

Evidence of Head’s conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what does she think about play?)

At the interview, the Head explained that genuine play is an activity in which children engage in play that is free from any considerations that may affect the playing. The Head has a conception of genuine play that her ideological stance on play does not allow her to accept this practice. In short, form of genuine play is not recommended by the School Head since it would ‘train’ children to be irresponsible persons. Play could be dangerous to children if attention has not been paid to safety rules while playing.

The Head has developed her own concept of play, one could say that this is the form of play (in an instrumental sense) which is allowed to be practised on the school campus.

(1) Play must be productive. The outcome of play should contribute to the society at large. In this case, learning should benefit not only the child but the whole class.

(2) Safety measures must be observed while playing.

Play should be enjoyable to self as long as the action/consequences of play would not hurt others.

As could be seen from the Head’s perception of the holistic development of children through play, like her teacher, she has a conception of learning through play in an instrumental sense.

Evidence of parents’ conceptions of play in relation to teaching (i.e. what do they think about play?)

Parents think that their children could memorize better when they learn through play. Parents think that children could learn how to behave and learn the details of life through play.

Parents are of the opinion that in order for ‘good’ play to take place, certain things have to be observed,

1. to pay attention to safety;
2. to teach children again after play.

In case that children have accidentally hurt themselves during play, parents think that it could be an opportunity for children to learn through this experience. But this experience is to be learnt only when unforeseeable accidents occur and that teacher has the responsibility to teach children safety rules to safeguard the children from accidents.

Parents have devoted most of the interviewing time in talking about the writing of the children, the self-regulatory behaviour of children, the self-discipline of children...etc. These are the good learning outcomes that this group of parents would expect from schooling. In this way, parents in this case study also have a conception of learning through play in an instrumental sense.

In implementing the ‘academic curriculum’, the Head of Kindergarten has successfully gained the support from the teachers and the parents. Hence, not much difficulties or conflicts are found among the three parties, namely parents, teachers and the School Head when enforcing the school-based curriculum.

Recommendation

Strategies for implementing the play-based curriculum calls for a change of ideological stance on the part of the stakeholders

(a) The need for standardized teacher training programmes

Differences in teacher training have led to
some of the problems associated with kindergartens. A standardized teacher training programme would perhaps provide opportunities for the practitioners (including the Head and the teachers) to change their long-held ideological stance on teaching and learning. It is a fact that kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong are trained in different programmes organized by different Institutions that have different approaches. Differences in approaches and variations in interpretation of theory in learning and teaching originating from different ideological stances would in turn jeopardize the consistency of practice among preschools in Hong Kong.

(b) Implementing the play-based curriculum by adopting a Hong Kong version as an interim measure

Allowances should be made for practitioners either to practise what is considered in the definition of this research as the “play-based pedagogy” or a “work-based pedagogy” or along a continuum so as to provide room for the stakeholders to comprehend learning through play, recognising the inherent value of play over time OR to practise a mode that the stakeholders would prefer to according to their school mission or the ideological stance of the school. According to Miller and Almon (2009, p.12 and 13), a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean “anything goes”. It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartens are therefore advised by Miller and Almon (2009) to maintain a balance of child-initiated play and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers. In this connection, policymakers and professional organizations, stakeholders should develop the two central methods in the continuum of approaches to kindergarten education: please refer to the following diagram again.

THE KINDERGARTEN CONTINUUM

Laissez-Faire, Loosely Structured Classroom

Classroom Rich in Child-Initiated Play

Playful Classroom with Focussed Learning

Didactic, Highly Structured Classroom

Ample play but without active adult support, often resulting in chaos

Exploring the world through play with the active presence of teachers

Teachers guiding learning with rich, experiential activities

Teacher-led instruction, including scripted teaching, with little or no play

Conclusion

In the face of the requirement of the educational reform and the introduction of the school voucher scheme, the long-established school (the school under study) has to find ways to survive and to cope with the challenges.

On one hand, the school under study needs to preserve the “reputation” of the school which excels in academic studies, but on the other hand, she needs to update her school curriculum by introducing the trendy mode of art teaching.

Although the tension exists between the two modes of curriculum and pedagogy with its alternative underpinning philosophy, the teacher-centred curriculum and pedagogy still gain an upper hand. The introduction of the teaching of poetry in its originality and the requirement of the mechanical practice of Chinese hand-writing are good examples.

In order to meet with the requirement of the Quality Assurance (QA) inspection, the school has tried to provide more opportunities for children to play, but not to the extent of ‘sacrificing’ precious teaching time within the three hours of formal teaching. As a result, 10 minutes’ extra time has been allotted apart from the normal three hours of schooling in a half day kindergarten.

Echoing what Lilian Katz (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.13) has suggested, the ideological stance of stakeholders is difficult to change in spite of research evidence collected over time. It is more feasible for the practitioners to work within the practices recommended by Miller and Almon (2009) and to make allowances for practitioners to practise in a mode that would match with their ideological stance as an interim measure. It is anticipated that only when the practitioners are given autonomy to launch changes out of willingness and without coercion from any source, could the chance for ‘real’ changes be realized. Along with this allowance, policy makers should seriously rethink the issue of teacher training programmes that would illuminate the misconceptions of practises in fostering the holistic development of children by means of learning through play. It is hoped that stakeholders will practise learning through play with a deepened understanding of learning through play in as advocated in this research.

References


some of the problems associated with kindergartens. A standardized teacher training programme would perhaps provide opportunities for the practitioners (including the Head and the teachers) to change their long-held ideological stance on teaching and learning. It is a fact that kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong are trained in different programmes organized by different Institutions that have different approaches. Differences in approaches and variations in interpretation of theory in learning and teaching originating from different ideological stances would in turn jeopardize the consistency of practice among preschools in Hong Kong.

(b) Implementing the play-based curriculum by adopting a Hong Kong version as an interim measure

Allowances should be made for practitioners either to practise what is considered in the definition of this research as the ‘play-based pedagogy’ or a "work-based pedagogy" or along a continuum so as to provide room for the stakeholders to comprehend learning through play, recognising the inherent value of play over time OR to practise a mode that the stakeholders would prefer to according to their school mission or the ideological stance of the school. According to Miller and Almon (2009, p.12 and 13), a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean “anything goes”. It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartens are therefore advised by Miller and Almon (2009) to maintain a balance of child-initiated play and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers. In this connection, policymakers and professional organizations, stakeholders should develop the two central methods in the continuum of approaches to kindergarten education: please refer to the following diagram again.

THE KINDERGARTEN CONTINUUM

Laissez-Faire, Loosely Structured Classroom

Classroom Rich In Child-initiated Play

Playful Classroom with Focused Learning

Didactic, Highly Structured Classroom

Ample play but without active adult support, often resulting in chaos

Exploring the world through play with the active presence of teachers

Teachers guiding learning with rich, experiential activities

Teacher-led instruction, including scripted teaching, with little or no play

Conclusion

In the face of the requirement of the educational reform and the introduction of the school voucher scheme, the long-established school (the school under study) has to find ways to survive and to cope with the challenges.

On one hand, the school under study needs to preserve the ‘reputation’ of the school which excels in academic studies, but on the other hand, she needs to update her school curriculum by introducing the trendy mode of art teaching.

Although the tension exists between the two modes of curriculum and pedagogy with its alternative underpinning philosophy, the teacher-centred curriculum and pedagogy still gain an upper hand. The introduction of the teaching of poetry in its originality and the requirement of the mechanical practice of Chinese hand-writing are good examples.

In order to meet with the requirement of the Quality Assurance (QA) inspection, the school has tried to provide more opportunities for children to play, but not to the extent of ‘sacrificing’ precious teaching time within the three hours of formal teaching. As a result, 10 minutes’ extra time has been allotted apart from the normal three hours of schooling in a half day kindergarten.

Echoing what Lilian Katz (Miller & Almon, 2009, p.13) has suggested, the ideological stance of stakeholders is difficult to change in spite of research evidence collected over time. It is more feasible for the practitioners to work within the practices recommended by Miller and Almon (2009) and to make allowances for practitioners to practise in a mode that would match with their ideological stance as an interim measure. It is anticipated that only when the practitioners are given autonomy to launch changes out of willingness and without coercion from any source, could the chance for ‘real’ changes be realized. Along with this allowance, policy makers should seriously rethink the issue of teacher training programmes that would illuminate the misconceptions of practises in fostering the holistic development of children by means of learning through play. It is hoped that stakeholders will practise learning through play with a deepened understanding of learning through play in as advocated in this research.

References


Appendix A

Interview questions (semi-structured)

Interview of the School Heads
1. Mission of the school
2. What kind of curriculum and pedagogy does the school adopt? Why?
3. Briefly ask about the teachers’ professional biography
4. Get some information on parents’ background.
5. What do you see as the needs and threats of the school?
6. What do you feel about the curriculum? Excellent/ Good / Acceptable / Unsatisfactory
7. In what way do you want to improve?
8. What’s the main obstacle for the improvement of curriculum?
9. What are the things you feel proud of?
10. How would you describe the learning of the children, and the teaching plan in your school?
11. Do they learn through play? Why yes? Why not?
12. How do you define play?

Interview of teachers

Before the lessons
1. How do you see your mission?
2. What are the main educational aims of the day?
3. How could you achieve that?
4. Do you anticipate any difficulties?
5. How can you overcome that? (briefly)

After the lessons
1. What do you feel about the day’s work? Are you satisfied? Why yes? Why not?
2. If yes, what are the factors which make you satisfied? / If not, what are the obstacles?
3. How can you improve the situation?
4. What is your view in learning through play?
5. In what way do your teaching relate to the concept of play?
6. Do you think that learning through play is feasible in Hong Kong? Why and Why not?
7. What are the obstacles?
8. Is there any way to improve it?

Interview of Parents
1. Is your son/daughter happy in the school? Why yes? Why not?
2. Why do you choose this school?
3. Do you know the mission of the school?
4. Do you agree with the teaching and learning mode of the school? In what way you agree? In what way you don’t?
5. What’s your expectation on the school?
6. In what way do you think that they can match your son’s learning style?
7. How does the school prepare for your son’s future study (e.g. Primary school study)?
8. Do you think children should ‘learn through play’? Why yes? Why not?
9. What is your concern if the school adopts ‘play’ or does not adopt ‘play’ in the curriculum?

Appendix A

Interview of teachers

Before the lessons
1. How do you see your mission?
2. What are the main educational aims of the day?
3. How could you achieve that?
4. Do you anticipate any difficulties?
5. How can you overcome that? (briefly)

After the lessons
1. What do you feel about the day’s work? Are you satisfied? Why yes? Why not?
2. If yes, what are the factors which make you satisfied? / If not, what are the obstacles?
3. How can you improve the situation?
4. What is your view in learning through play?
5. In what way do your teaching relate to the concept of play?
6. Do you think that learning through play is feasible in Hong Kong? Why and Why not?
7. What are the obstacles?
8. Is there any way to improve it?

Interview of Parents
1. Is your son/daughter happy in the school? Why yes? Why not?
2. Why do you choose this school?
3. Do you know the mission of the school?
4. Do you agree with the teaching and learning mode of the school? In what way you agree? In what way you don’t?
5. What’s your expectation on the school?
6. In what way do you think that they can match your son’s learning style?
7. How does the school prepare for your son’s future study (e.g. Primary school study)?
8. Do you think children should ‘learn through play’? Why yes? Why not?
9. What is your concern if the school adopts ‘play’ or does not adopt ‘play’ in the curriculum?

Interview questions(semi-structured)

Interview of the School Heads
1. Mission of the school
2. What kind of curriculum and pedagogy does the school adopt? Why?
3. Briefly ask about the teachers’ professional biography
4. Get some information on parents’ background.
5. What do you see as the needs and threats of the school?
6. What do you feel about the curriculum? Excellent/ Good / Acceptable / Unsatisfactory
7. In what way do you want to improve?
8. What’s the main obstacle for the improvement of curriculum?
9. What are the things you feel proud of?
10. How would you describe the learning of the children, and the teaching plan in your school?
11. Do they learn through play? Why yes? Why not?
12. How do you define play?