

Exploring the Gaps between the New Play-Based Kindergarten Curriculum and Teachers' Classroom Practices in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the gaps between the new play-based kindergarten curriculum introduced by Myanmar's government and the classroom practices of teachers. This study investigates kindergarten teachers' understanding of the new kindergarten curriculum and implementation at the classroom level by using classroom observation and video testing. The results revealed that although the teachers understood the concept and content of the new curriculum, they could not implement it in the classroom due to class size, parents' academic expectations and teachers' mindset. The findings suggest that the government should make sufficient investment in facilities, training for teachers and workshops for parents to implement the policy successfully.

Keywords: kindergarten curriculum, play-based learning, kindergarten teacher, classroom practices, Myanmar

1. Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were announced in 2015 and one of the goals was that all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre primary education so that they are ready for primary education by 2030 (United Nations, 2019, Target 4.2). Consequently, the global participation rate in organized learning one year before the official entry age for primary school has risen steadily over the past few years. Moreover, early childhood education has been found to be one of the strongest determinants of a child's readiness for school and good-quality early childhood education is one of the best investments a society can make in its children to build a strong foundation for learning in later years (Park & Hassairi, 2021; United Nations, 2019; Wilkinson & Kao, 2019).

Nowadays, governments are increasingly focusing on early childhood education with legislative policies

and strategies being directed at access to quality early childhood learning experiences. These sorts of phenomena are very evident in one of the developing countries, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (referred to henceforth as Myanmar). In the Myanmar National Education Law (2014), kindergarten education is termed as education that promotes holistic development using appropriate methods for five-year-olds to ease their transition to first grade. According to this definition, the National Education Strategic Plan mentioned a new kindergarten curriculum framework that provided a guide to developing an educational programme that was geared towards a more child-centred pedagogy with an emphasis on play (Ministry of Education, 2016).

In order to implement this curriculum framework, according to National Education Strategic Plan (Ministry of Education, 2016), the government supported the development of new classrooms or the renovation of existing classrooms to be welcoming,

safe and secure settings for children. The government supplied age-appropriate and suitable furniture for active learning and learning materials that were in line with the new play-based curriculum. Moreover, the class size was also planned to provide a sufficient teacher-student ratio for play activities. In addition, the Ministry of Education established a national teacher training programme using a cascade method of curriculum distribution to train a large number of teachers to be able to teach at kindergarten level, using the new play-based kindergarten curriculum. After these preparations, the new kindergarten curriculum was first applied in practice in kindergarten classrooms in the 2016-2017 academic year. It is underpinned by six learning areas: (1) wellbeing; (2) moral, social and emotional development; (3) communication; (4) appreciation of the arts and creativity; (5) exploring mathematics; (6) knowledge and understanding of the world (Ministry of Education, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Developmental theories were used to highlight the importance of play in kindergarten classrooms, as well as to examine teachers' perspectives and beliefs about play. The teacher's role is essential to play-based learning environments, and how teachers view themselves in the process of play is essential to creating sustainable play environments. Play-based environments are most effective when teachers facilitate learning while students explore with materials (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Pedagogical play includes an intentional focus on the role of the teacher as learning facilitator during children's play as a learning support (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). How and where play-based learning is implemented in classrooms is to some extent dependent upon how teachers identify their role within that play (Howard, 2010).

Miller and Almon (2009) have identified many challenges described in play literature that led to activities being categorised as play that are actually teacher-directed. Lynch (2015) analysed online discussion board messages of kindergarten teachers and found that teachers felt the pressures of academic expectations from a variety of sources, including other teachers, administration, and parents. These pressures

resulted in limitations in the integration of play opportunities in their classrooms. Even when teachers were able to overcome the many challenges and implement more child-centred practices into their pedagogy, they continued to experience pressure from their colleagues in upper grades (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett 2006). Kindergarten teachers face the daily struggle of trying to balance their own pedagogical beliefs regarding play-based learning and the use of appropriate assessments, while managing curriculum expectations (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

3. Purpose of the Study

Although the teachers' role and challenges to implementing play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom were pointed out by many researchers, there is limited research into exploring the factors that create these challenges. Having a better understanding of these factors will provide further insight into how the policymakers can enhance more effective policies and programmes.

In Myanmar, the old kindergarten curriculum was subject-centred, the teachers applied the old curriculum for many years, and the parents were very demanding regarding exam success. In consequence, since applying the new play-based kindergarten curriculum, the government needs to verify its impact. However, there has not been any research or evidence regarding how the new play-based kindergarten curriculum has been implemented in Myanmar. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the gaps between the new play-based kindergarten curriculum and the classroom practices of the teachers in the real setting of Myanmar and to provide recommendations for policymakers.

4. Methods

4.1. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested to achieve the aims of the study.

Hypothesis 1

Is the kindergarten classroom environment in Myanmar organized to successfully implement the new play-based kindergarten curriculum?

Hypothesis 2

Are the applied teaching strategies and the

established interaction between teachers and children in Myanmar kindergartens functional to implementing the new play-based kindergarten curriculum?

Hypothesis 3

Is the teachers' understanding of the classroom practices based on learning through play congruent with the practices written in the new play-based kindergarten curriculum?

4.2. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed because it studies a topic of interest in its natural settings and sets out to interpret phenomena through the meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 2013). Observation was chosen among qualitative research tools to explore the classroom practices of the teachers since it provides the opportunity to follow natural processes and reveal complex interactions in natural settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In addition, video testing was employed to explore the teachers' understanding of the new curriculum classroom practices.

4.3. Target Area

This study was conducted in the Yangon Region of Myanmar for the following reasons. It is the principal habitation area for the Burmese (who comprise most of the population), eliminating the additional effect of ethnic characteristics. It has more basic education schools (primary, middle, and high school) with kindergarten classrooms than the other regions and states, and therefore the perspectives and practices of the teachers from different school levels can be studied in one region.

4.4. The Settings

The six schools were selected from six different townships having different sociodemographic characteristics. Three were selected from rural areas and three from the urban area of Yangon. Also, they are two Basic Education High Schools, two Basic Education Middle Schools and two Basic Education Primary Schools. The six female teachers were chosen within the age range of 30-45 years, with more than ten years' experience as kindergarten teachers.

4.5. Data Collection Instruments

Classroom Observation

Based on kindergarten classroom planning and the responsibilities of teachers of the new kindergarten curriculum, classroom observation with 43 items was constructed. Part A had 18 items covering classroom environment planning, and Part B had 25 items, covering teaching strategies and interaction with children (see Table 1).

Table 1. Classroom observation

Part A
(a) Preparation of facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the teacher-children ratio - age-appropriate materials - tables and chairs for the children - space - condition of gross motor equipment
(b) Display of materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - display of the daily schedule, classroom rules and children's artwork - arrangement of the classroom materials to be easily seen by the children and supervised by the teacher
(c) Planning for learning corners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - presence and condition of learning corners (e.g., reading corner, art corner, sand/water play and block play, etc.)
Part B
(d) Teachers' interactions in learning corners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provision of concrete and hands-on experiences - observation for assessment - using small or large groups
(e) Connection with children through the daily schedule <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - allowing choice of play - providing individualized attention to children - setup of the classroom to provide order and continuity
(f) Motivating children to think and collaborate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - providing opportunities to collaborate with others - talking through problems - discussing classroom rules - solve problems - promote children's thinking

Video Testing

To explore teachers' understanding of the classroom practices of the new play-based learning curriculum, video testing was employed. In the procedure, the six teachers were shown the videos, including the classroom practices of play-based learning. There were four video parts and after watching each video part, the teachers had to answer questions (e.g., "What is the aim of the teacher in doing this activity?", "How can the children learn from this activity?", etc.), based on the videos.

The researcher selected the video parts including the classroom practices of a play-based kindergarten classroom in Japan because kindergarten education in Japan emphasized play-centred instruction and based on the idea of play as a child's voluntary activity (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008). All videos were taken about the kindergarten children in Tokyo Gakugei University and selected by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology as industrial film video competition category award in 2005. In Part 1 of the video, the teacher plans the activities for the children to have independent play in the classroom. In Part 2 of the video, the teacher asks the children to solve a problem by themselves in order to introduce the foundation of mathematics. In Part 3 of the video, the teacher conducts a small ceremony and asks the children to cooperate with friends to complete the materials for the ceremony. In Part 4 of the video, the teacher allows children to have outdoor play to observe the environment.

After classroom observation and video testing, the interview questions were asked to grasp more facts and information.

Table 2. Summary of research method and targets in accordance with the hypotheses

Type of method	Target	Description	Hypotheses
Classroom Observation	6 teachers	Prepared 18 items (part A) and 25 items (part B). Applied Likert scale (4 grades)	1 and 2
Video testing	6 teachers	4 videos (parts 1-4) selected by testing topics. Applied Likert scale (4 grades)	3

4.6. Analysis Procedure

For the observation checklist, the researcher kept records in the form of memos, detailing descriptions of the interactions and activities in each classroom. The observation checklist was used to guide the observations with a 4-point Likert scale (never, sometimes, often, always). The researcher checked how frequently the teachers carried out the classroom practices of the new kindergarten curriculum in the classroom. These frequencies were categorized into four groups (never-not appropriate, sometimes-low appropriateness, often-moderately appropriate, and always-highly appropriate to the concepts and content of the new kindergarten curriculum).

For the video testing, the answers to the items for each video part (Parts 1-4) were examined from the planning of the kindergarten classroom and the responsibilities of teachers in the new curriculum. The researcher analysed the answers against four criteria (no answer, inexact answer, incomplete answer, and correct answer). Then the responses were coded and categorized into four groups (no answer-not appropriate, inexact answer-low appropriateness, incomplete answer-moderately appropriate, and complete answer-highly appropriate to the concepts and content of the new kindergarten curriculum).

5. Results

5.1. Findings from the classroom observation

Table 3 shows the classroom observation results of the classroom practices of six kindergarten teachers.

Table 3. Overall results from the classroom observation

	Class size for each teacher	Part A Planning the classroom environment			Part B Teaching strategies and interaction with children		
		(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
Teacher 1	60	×	×	×	×	×	×
Teacher 2	59	×	○	○	△	△	△
Teacher 3	58	×	×	△	△	△	△
Teacher 4	62	×	×	△	△	△	△
Teacher 5	50	△	△	△	○	○	○
Teacher 6	48	△	×	△	○	○	△

Note: ◎ = Highly appropriate, ○ = Moderately appropriate, △ = Low appropriateness and × = Not appropriate

In Part A(a) of the classroom observation (preparation of facilities), four teachers' preparation was not appropriate, and two teachers exhibited behaviour with low appropriateness to the new curriculum. Moreover, for Part A(b) (displaying materials in the classroom), four teachers exhibited practices not appropriate, and the other two showed low appropriateness and moderate appropriateness to the new curriculum. For Part A(c) (the planning of learning corners), the results revealed that the preparation of four teachers had low appropriateness and the preparation of the other two was either not appropriate or moderately appropriate to the new curriculum.

On the other hand, in Part B(d) (teachers' interactions in the learning corners) and (e) (connection of the teachers with children through the daily schedule), the classroom practices of three teachers were of low appropriateness, two were moderately appropriate and one was not appropriate to the new curriculum. Furthermore, the results revealed that for Part B(f) (motivation of teachers for children to think and collaborate), four teachers showed practices of low appropriateness, and the other two displayed practices either not appropriate or moderately appropriate to the new curriculum.

5.2. Findings from the video testing

Table 4 shows the video testing results of six kindergarten teachers. For video Parts 1, 2 and 4, the understanding level of four teachers about the classroom practices of the new curriculum was highly appropriate. The understanding of the other two teachers was moderately appropriate to the new curriculum. For video Part 3, five teachers had a

highly appropriate level of understanding about the classroom practices of the new curriculum and one teacher was moderately appropriate in their level of understanding.

Table 4 shows that video Part 1 indicated that the teachers understood the purpose and advantages of block play and the role of the teacher while children were playing. Video Part 2 showed that the kindergarten teachers understood how to introduce the foundation of mathematics to the children by asking them to solve the problem. In video Part 3, the teachers said that the children learned how to cooperate and collaborate with friends through the classroom activities. In video Part 4, the teachers expressed the importance and advantages of outdoor play and learning through the five senses.

6. Discussion

6.1. Is the classroom environment organized appropriately?

Table 3(a): Teachers 1-4 could not prepare the facilities appropriate to the new curriculum because of the large class size of around 60 children. Table 3(b): Classroom preparation is one of the main concepts of the new curriculum, and it is totally different from the old framework. However, due to the narrowness of the kindergarten classroom, Teachers 1, 3, 4 and 6 could not display materials in the classroom, whereas Teachers 2 and 5, who had a wide classroom, could. Teacher 3 described how the narrow space made it difficult to display the materials systematically and separately in the classroom. Table 3(c): In Myanmar, the teaching learning materials for children were supplied by the government only once at the initial stage of curriculum distribution. In consequence, because of limited materials for the learning corners, Teachers 3 to 6 displayed low appropriateness and Teachers 1 and 2 displayed not appropriate and moderate appropriateness to the new curriculum in the planning of learning corners. Teacher 5 explained that some materials were broken accidentally by children, but they had nothing to replace these materials for the next academic year.

Moreover, among the six teachers, Teacher 1 answered 'not appropriate' to all categories of Part A. She said that she could not plan the classroom environment according to the new curriculum because this school is very famous for high academic

Table 4. Results from the video testing

	Video Testing			
	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
Teacher 1	◎	○	◎	◎
Teacher 2	◎	◎	◎	○
Teacher 3	◎	○	◎	◎
Teacher 4	○	◎	◎	○
Teacher 5	◎	◎	◎	◎
Teacher 6	○	◎	○	◎

Note: ◎ = Highly appropriate, ○ = Moderately appropriate, △ = Low appropriateness and × = Not appropriate

achievement in the township and parents want to keep their children in this school for this reason even at kindergarten age. Teacher 1 explained that parents wanted her to emphasize literacy and numeracy for the subsequent grades. From Part A shown in Table 3, the classroom environment of the kindergarten classrooms could not be organized appropriately according to the new play-based kindergarten curriculum because of class size, narrow space, limited facilities and materials, and parents' academic expectations.

6.2. Are the applied teaching strategies and the interaction between teachers and children functional?

In the curriculum handbook for the new kindergarten curriculum, although it mentions that the teacher-children ratio is 1-35, four teachers (Teachers 1-4) had large class sizes and therefore their interactions in the learning corners, their connection with children through the daily schedule and their motivation of children to think and collaborate were either not appropriate or of low appropriateness to the new curriculum as shown in Table 3. Teacher 2 described that assessment has to be done through observation of each student, but they cannot observe each child due to the big class size. Teacher 4 explained that the class size and the numbers of learning materials were not in proportion, so it was difficult to provide hands-on experiences.

On the other hand, for Teachers 5 and 6, their class sizes were smaller than the other teachers so their classroom practices were moderately appropriate to the new curriculum in most of the categories of Part B. Furthermore, Teacher 1 recorded not appropriate in all categories of Part B because of the high parental expectations of this school. According to Part B in Table 3, the applied strategies and interactions between the kindergarten teachers and children are not congruent with the new play-based kindergarten curriculum because of big class sizes and parents' academic expectations.

6.3. Are the teachers' understanding levels congruent with the new play-based curriculum?

Among the six kindergarten teachers, the understanding level of Teacher 5 was highly appropriate to the new curriculum in all video parts

because she had only had seven years working with the old curriculum and so was less embedded in that. While Teachers 1 with 12 years and Teachers 2 and 3 with 15 years of working service with the old curriculum mentioned high appropriateness in three video parts and moderate appropriateness in one video part, Teachers 4 with 18 years and Teacher 6 with 20 years of working service with the old curriculum showed highly appropriate congruence in two video parts and moderately appropriate congruence in two video parts. The teachers' understanding about the classroom practices are congruent with those of the new play-based kindergarten curriculum as shown in Table 4. However, the teachers described different levels of understanding according to their working experiences and residual ideologies of the old curriculum.

6.4. Summary of discussion and recommendation

- (1) The biggest problem that prevents successful application of the new play-based curriculum in the classroom is large class size. Limited space and limited learning materials also underpin this problem. The government should separate big classes into two classes, assign more kindergarten teachers and supply enough teaching materials regularly. Although it is a large burden for the government to build permanent buildings, they can create temporary buildings for kindergarten children, as in Japan, according to the population of each township (Ministry of education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2010).
- (2) The second obstacle is parents' high academic expectations even in kindergarten age groups because today, literacy, numeracy and technology proficiency are some of the skills that are fast becoming highly prized by modern parents. Therefore, policymakers need to prepare parent education classes or media broadcasting to help parents to understand the purpose and advantages of the new play-based curriculum for the holistic development of their children.
- (3) In order to solve the third challenge of the teachers' adherence to the old curriculum, the government should manage more training and workshops for kindergarten teachers that can include the innovations and advantages of the new play-based kindergarten curriculum for the development of

children.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the gaps between the implementation of the new play-based kindergarten curriculum by the government and the classroom practices of the teachers in the actual classrooms of Myanmar. According to the results of the study, the teachers could not apply classroom practices successfully in their classrooms although they understand the classroom practices and methods of new play-based curriculum, because of big class sizes, the pressure of parents' academic expectations and the mindset of teachers adhering to the old curriculum. In order to reduce these gaps, the government should plan adequate investment in buildings (e.g., temporary buildings), adequate ratios of teachers to children and adequate learning materials for applying the new curriculum. Moreover, the attitudinal obstacle of expecting academic achievement even in kindergarten education by parents, and adherence to the old curriculum by the teachers should be targeted with parent education classes, with media broadcasting and more teacher training and workshops by the policymakers in order to promote acceptance of the early childhood education innovations of the new play-based kindergarten curriculum.

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