

The Implementation of Play-based Approach at Private Islamic Preschools in Ampang, Selangor

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ARTICLE INFO: Received: **06 October 2020**; Revised: **07 December 2020**;
Accepted: **21 Dec 2020**; Available Online: **28 Dec 2020**

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to seek understanding on the teachers' perceptions of the play-based approach implementation at private Islamic preschool context located in Ampang, Selangor. This study employed qualitative approach in collecting data and thematic method in analysing data. The purposive sampling was used and data collection was done through semi-structured interview. A total of 11 preschool teachers from three private Islamic preschools located in Ampang, Selangor were selected purposively in this study. The qualitative data was transcribed and analysed using thematic method. The results of the study indicated that the teachers believed that play is undeniably beneficial and impacted the children positively. However, issues and constraints related to children, teacher, school management and parents are discovered which lead to few suggestions towards improvement. This research also reveals that training on how to deliver lesson through play-based approach is necessary for the preschool teachers.

Keywords: *Islamic preschool, play-based approach, preschool teacher*

Introduction

Play is amongst the popular topics for early childhood education due to its significance and contribution towards children early years. All child needs to play because play serves as a mean of learning about and making sense of children's development (Essa, 2014). American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) stressed that play is important to healthy brain development and allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Gray (2013) beautifully describes play in one of his pieces as "serves the serious purpose of education, but the player is not deliberately educating himself or herself. The player is playing for fun; education is a by-product. If the player were playing for a serious purpose, it would no longer be play and much of the educative power would be lost". The definition of play includes the ideas of pleasure, self-imposed ideas and spontaneous activities and activities not restricted by instruction (Gestwicki, 2017). Elkind (2007) suggested that play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels.

Literature Review

Children learn about their world through play where they can freely explore and practice adult roles, master their fears and develop confidence and new competencies (Essa, 2014). According to Morrison (2011), children play will continue to be important in early childhood education because play result in learning. For this reason, it is vital to integrate play as part of early childhood curriculum to help children make sense of life through meaningful and fun experience. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. This is in accordance to Constructivist learning theories whereby learners construct meaning based on first-hand interaction through play as they learn and develop in a holistic manner. Piaget and Vygotsky were notable Constructivists who contributed significantly on the knowledge about how play enhances children's learning and development (Tee & Mariani, 2018). Piaget in his theory of cognitive development believes play is important to the development of children cognitive and play should encourage further children intellectual. While Vygotsky in his social cultural theory stated that the Zone of Proximal (ZPD) was created through play when children perform at their highest possible intellectual level without help. The ZPD is the skill level just above where the child skill is close to mastering through social interaction but need more guidance from competent peers or adults to perform this action independently. Vygotsky believed that children's learning takes place when they receive assistance and support from competent peers and adult. With appropriate support, children learn how to complete their task independently.

Although many prominent theorists believe that play is crucial to children learning and development, research has found that preschool teachers in Malaysia are not ready to adopt play-based approach and, knowledge and skills are the factor that hinders preschool teachers' decision to adopt play in learning (Aliza et al., 2011). Similar finding was also reported by Tee and Mariani (2018) where they found that a large number of young Malaysian preschoolers in private settings still learn in traditional, structured classrooms where academic and rote learning take up most of the daily preschool routine. In spite of widely acknowledged as an important learning path in early childhood education, many early childhood educators have limited knowledge in making learning experience at preschool more interesting and engaging, and little is known about the effectiveness of play in comparison to other ways of learning in early childhood education settings (Vogt et al., 2018). According to Wood (2014) at the kindergarten level, direct instruction of teaching may limit children's opportunities to communicate and understand the world. It is equally and even more important to know the strategies employed by the teachers such as the conduct of play and Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) to achieve an enjoyable, productive and meaningful learning among children (Aquino et al., 2019).

Likewise, our very own National Preschool Standard-Based Curriculum (NPSC) highlighted that the learning through play approach is established as an effective teaching and learning approach for meaningful early learning experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017). Moreover, KSPK recognised approach grounded by research and aimed to optimise children learning, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), stated under one of its principles of child development and learning, is that play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence. NPSC emphasises the use of play-based approach at all preschools to ensure the curriculum is successfully in meeting curriculum outcomes. The NPSC is mandatory to all preschools in Malaysia and its focus on standard contents and standard learning based on Constructivist theory and DAP model.

Meanwhile, Islamic preschools in Malaysia are part of the education system in Malaysia and offer basic early education alongside the religious curriculum. Many Islamic preschools in Malaysia apply different orientation and approach, depending on their

programme aims and objectives. Mursyidah et al. (2015), reported that Islamic preschools in Malaysia mainly differ in the portion of religious instruction in their curriculum, management and funding sources. With mandatory of NPCPS, preschool teachers at Islamic private preschool are not only required to focus on Islamic foundation of Islamic studies and Quran reciting but also need to possess child centred pedagogy skills such as learning through play. Teachers with thorough pedagogical knowledge understand how children construct their knowledge and skills (Sharifah Nor & Aliza, 2013). However, how preschool teachers at Islamic preschools help children to learn and develop through child-centred pedagogy is still uncertain and unknown. Essa (2014) stated that educators have expressed concern about societal changes that have decreased children's opportunity to play.

Simultaneously, the number of private Islamic preschools has been increasing rapidly recently in Malaysia and the majority of Muslim parents prefer their children to have the foundation of Islamic knowledge at early level. They would prefer to send their children to Qur'an reciting or Tahfiz preschool. For Muslim parents who are looking for good moral and religious values in their children, they will look for preschools that are associated with the Islamic religion (Lily Muliana et al., 2014). However, most parents are not aware of what quality means in early childhood education and they send their children to preschool because it is the first platform where their children can learn. Therefore, in line with the brief scenario described above, this research will under study the perceptions of the play-based approach implementation at private Islamic preschool context located in Ampang, Selangor, from the teachers' perspective.

Research Objectives

The main aim of this study is to explore the perception of private Islamic preschool teacher towards the implementation of play-based approach. Specifically, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To determine the teachers' perceptions towards the use of play-based approach at private Islamic preschools in Ampang, Selangor;
- ii. To identify how play-based approach is embedded in the current learning programme at private Islamic preschools in Ampang, Selangor;
- iii. To identify what are the issues and constraints in implementing play-based approach at private Islamic preschools in Ampang, Selangor.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative approach in collecting data. Purposive sampling was used to select 11 preschool teachers from three private Islamic preschools located in Ampang, Selangor. Qualitative data collection was carried out through semi-structured interview. Prior to the data collection interview protocol was developed and validated by an appointed expert. This was carried out to ensure the validity and reliability of the items and overall plan for the interview. The interview data was transcribed and later underwent member checking for data validity and reliability. The qualitative data was transcribed and analysed using thematic method.

Findings

According to the results of teachers' interview regarding their perception towards play-based approach at Islamic preschool, the following two emerged.

Theme 1: Play-based learning is Important and Benefits many children

Most teachers in this study believed that play is important and benefits many children. According to Teacher 1 (T1), we must apply play-based approach at preschool because children love to play. Teacher 2 (T2) believed that every child has their own pace of learning and Teacher 3 (T3) believed that play is good for children overall development.

- T1 – “Play-based learning is a must for these early years!”*
- T3 – “..they love to play and play is their nature.”*
- T1 – “Every child has their own stage and pace.”*
- T3 – “Also, play is good for their brain development and overall child development.”*

Theme 2: Teachers use Various Methods to Deliver Learning Activities through Play

Based on the data gathered, in general, all teachers indicated that they do embed and implement the play-based approach when delivering the Islamic learning activities. Activities were delivered through various methods based on teachers' creativity, or engaging play session conducted as a reward and as fillers in between activities. Teacher 1 (T1) and Teacher (2) stated that they conducted lesson through play learning activities. Teacher (3) reported that she uses play to engage children in craft activities.

- T5 – “Yes, the lessons are also delivered through various fun methods such as stories, singing and craft.”*
- T10– “Yes, the activities here embed play during the learning process such as reading through play, learning maths through fun way and a lot of activities that invite and encourage creativity.”*
- T1 – “For the student that has done with the activity, they will have the chance to play as a reward.”*
- T2 – “They also have a chance to play with various materials during craft activities, after the lesson.”*

Meanwhile, the results of teachers' interview regarding issues related to play-based approach implementation at Islamic preschool have been categorised into three aspects as follows.

i. Issues and constraints related to the teacher

Eight out of 11 interviewed teachers conveyed that among the challenges from the teachers' perspective are the management of classroom activities, student attention and lesson timing. Amongst the popular challenges is to attract their attention to the classroom activities as well as to manage conflict that occur between the students. Some of the students could not tolerate delay or changes in activities, impatient and encounter from their friends. Four teachers raised the challenges in preparing the lesson plans and related documentations prior classroom activities. One of the teachers stated that they understand the need to make sure that the teachers are well prepared with the lesson plan in ensuring smoothness of classroom activities, however, few teachers are struggling to plan the teaching materials for each class. Three of the interviewed teachers are actually self-reflecting themselves and they are in the view that the personality of the educator has also impacted the learning activities with the students. Different teachers would possibly have their own teaching preference, different style and values whilst every individual teacher has his/her own passion, either current job as a teacher or otherwise which may impacted work commitment.

- T10– “Time management in classroom could also be challenging for me to plan for the activities with children and materialise lesson plan due to time constraint”*

- T2 – *“..planning part for the teachers in preparing the teaching materials for each class”*
- T3 – *“..to fill up the lesson plan and come out with creative ideas”*
- T3 – *“..different teacher would possibly have a different style and values:*
- T5 – *“..the individual teacher has his/her own passion, I mean other passion rather than current job as a teacher and every teacher has own preference in teaching method.”*

ii. Issues and constraints related to the school management

Five of the interviewed teachers mentioned that among the challenges in implementing the play-based approach is to align or meet the syllabus standard or target as required by the preschool management. Another factor that surfaced under this perspective is the lack of relevant trainings for teachers specifically for play-based training and lack of enriching platform for teachers to spark discussions on creative ideas.

- T1 – *“..juggle the commitment between school events like sports day and normal classroom days. I think because we aimed to meet the lesson target and complete the syllabus for specific year”*
- T8 – *“..to execute the play and balance with book utilisation especially for 4 years old”*
- T10 – *“Challenge for new teacher since there is no introduction training for the teacher, unfamiliar on terms in lesson plan and school system”*
- T11 – *“As a new teacher, it is quite challenging for me here since I am not familiar with the school system, for example, how to complete the lesson plan or how to deliver certain topic to the children”*

Other responses included challenges in getting them to familiarise with the schooling routine. In this case, according to the teacher, it is important for the teacher to be creative and provide reward to maintain interest of the student. Four of the teachers raised on time management issue in conducting the classroom activity. They mentioned that they usually require extra and longer time to settle down everything including managing the children conflict, prior focus on executing the activities with children and materialise lesson plan. Hoping to be able to manage time wisely, handling the classroom with time constraint factor would hinder smooth implementation and pleasurable environment. For example, teacher 5 (T5) and teacher 10 (T10) mentioned:

- T5 – *“..to handle the conflict that occurs amongst the students”*
- T10 – *“Time management in classroom could also be challenging for me to plan for the activities with children and materialise lesson plan due to time constraint”*

iii. Issues and constraints related to the parent

A total of six teachers raised and supported issues and challenges related to the parents' expectation and cooperation. Four of the teachers mentioned that it is quite tough to manage the high expectations of parents, even though it was not a majority and only involved few cases. Some of the parents are highly concerned about the children's literacy especially involving six years old students; hence the challenge for the teacher is to explain well to the parents and meeting their base expectations. One of the teachers expressed that this scenario will also potentially influence the teacher to revisit lesson design that could prioritise academic over play. Another two teachers raised their concerns in getting the parents' cooperation to initiate revision at home with their children or during holiday for lesson continuation.

- T1 – “From the parent’s perspective, it is quite tough to manage their expectations. Not all of them have that high expectation but maybe few cases”*
- T11 – “..parents who complain on their child’s progress such as reading, the challenge is to explain well to the parents and meeting their expectations”*

Besides, additional questions were also asked to the teachers on any suggestions in overcoming challenges mentioned or general suggestions towards improvement. The interview data for this part is also analysed and the outcome revealed four main points or suggestions, covering syllabus and programme enhancement, enriching training for development, discussion platform to spark ideas as well as parents’ involvement.

Discussion

The findings in this study showed that the teachers have good and positive perception toward play-based approach implementations with supporting explanations that play environment makes learning more meaningful, play is the most effective approach for early years, play aligns with kids’ nature and lastly, play is beneficial and impacts the children positively. In general, all the teachers are observed to have good belief and acceptance towards play-based learning approach provided the reasoning mentioned on benefits of play toward the students, in line with the results concurred from several research studies previously conducted by Aliza et al. (2013); Norsuhaily et al. (2015). Furthermore, the themes surfaced in the above findings on the teachers’ perception corresponded with Hoisington (2014); which posited on learning through the meaningful context and natural process of play. Vogt et al. (2018) in his study examines the effects on the mathematical competency of these play pedagogies indicate higher learning gains overall for the play-based approach.

Despite the positive findings on the teachers’ perception towards the use of play-based approach, the sound knowledge on early childhood education and play amongst the teachers is not being addressed since the perception might possibly being gained through own experience, instinct or common sense, while still lack of strong foundation and related knowledge gained from any training or study. Realising the difference between how the teachers perceive and the foundation on play-based learning knowledge, it is equally important to ensure that they are able to comprehend the substance since it contributes towards a more meaningful implementation and a better appreciation.

Also, the findings from supporting query conveyed that the teachers’ exposure or opportunity to learn about play-based learning topic is very limited whilst there is no specific play-based training attended by them. The results are in contrast with the Australian Government’s Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) that stressed on the necessity of an experienced educator who knows each child’s overall development, emerging strengths and interests whereby through play-based learning, skilled educators can introduce and reinforce concepts for the children learning according to each child’s interests. Thus higher level of experience and professional training may help teachers bridge the gap between practice and implement their knowledge (Wen et al., 2011). Howes, et al. (2013) suggested teachers training and professional development that focuses on improving the ability to keep children engaged and productive within varieties of learning formats.

In providing suggestions towards improvement, majority of the teachers expressed their concerns on the need for training on play for self-development, guidance on the best way to deliver the lesson and handle day-to-day activities, effective platform to spark creative idea among teachers as well as understanding the student interest, individual strengths and learning preferences. This reflects the willingness and openness of the teachers to learn the required skills and they are aware that they need to be upskilled in

order to perform the job well. According to Abdul Halim et al. (2019), preschool teachers in Malaysia always need to enhance their teaching knowledge. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has imposed a minimum qualification condition for all preschool teachers in the country where by the year 2020 all preschool teachers in Malaysia must possess a minimum qualification of diploma certificate in early childhood education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). Subsequently, teachers that have strong knowledge on early childhood and play will be able to articulate the topic well, understand the main intent, its impact as well as how best to embed and implement play in the lesson. According to Abdul Halim et al. (2019), knowledge refers to known and possessed information from experience, learning and observation through the senses. Therefore, knowledge of the development of different types of play gives educators and parents a foundation of proper teaching strategies (Biddle et al., 2014).

This study found that all the teachers declared that they do embed play-based approach in the current learning programme. However, upon analysing the teachers' elaborations on current lesson implementation, it seems that in some context, but not all, play is rather implemented as a reward or fillers in between lesson and play is conducted to retain students' motivation towards overall classroom lesson. Teachers will set the objectives and rules of play, simultaneously, prioritising and focusing on meeting target from the academic perspectives rather than just observation of child free play. Although play is widely acknowledged as an important learning path in early childhood education, little is known about the effectiveness of play in comparison to other ways of learning in early childhood education settings (Vogt et al., 2018). Additionally, rigidity on types of play conducted is observed as there was very limited activities implemented while a lot of other play categories are not fully optimised or utilised. On the same note, the result concurred with previous research conducted by Tee and Mariani (2018) on the mismatch between ideal and reality that explicitly pointed out by the participants on the discrepancies between the planned philosophy or the ideal and how far it has been implemented in practice.

Notwithstanding the predicament, there are efforts by a few teachers to adopt multiple learning styles in delivering the lessons such as through singing, storytelling, games, drawing and acting to attract students' attention. The continuous effort is related to the motivation of teachers to implement the play-based approach during lessons at their preschool and the positive impact observed towards the student which was asked as part of the supporting query. In any case, it is undeniable that play enhances children's learning and development by providing rich experiences for students to learn through teaching big concepts in classroom using many student activities, social interactions, and authentic assessments per the goal of Constructivism inspired by notable Constructivists, Piaget and Vygotsky.

On the aspect of teachers' resources of the learning content, the study found that teachers mainly referred to the prepared and readily available syllabus, designed in line with the school model and philosophy which are later translated into lesson plans and delivers the lessons based on their own creativity. At the same time, some of the teachers also reported that they find it challenging and often struggle on the planning part to prepare the lesson plans and related documentations prior classroom activities as they are still unfamiliar and unable to appreciate the syllabus content and reporting method, lack of creative ideas and all other sort of related challenges. Einarsdottir (2012) suggested that the teacher must contribute to a rich environment that gives emphasis on children's own choices and initiatives.

Hence, the suggestion to revisit the syllabus, curriculum outline and related learning content for further enhancement towards continuous improvement need to be considered seriously with the intent to assess and reflect how play-based approach can be implemented in the syllabus as well as the best way to impart Islamic values in current

learning content in a more effective manner in parallel with views by Zakaria, et al. (2012) on Imam al-Ghazali with regards to children learning environment from Islamic perspective. Moving forward, the teacher would be able to refer to a comprehensive, structured and enhanced syllabus while also able to focus more time to plan on their teaching.

At private Islamic preschool context, most of the time, respective school management or principal will have full control and influence in determining their school philosophy, principles and syllabus framework which typically relates back to their belief towards early childhood education. The group of teachers will subsequently be the front liner in realising the agenda and be involved during daily operations. Positive cooperation and relationship between the parties is vital in ensuring the smoothness of overall preschool operation. Upskilling and developing teachers are equally important as having a school management team that provides clear direction, are committed, and facilitates teachers to performing their level best.

Based on the study conducted, most of the challenges highlighted by the teachers are due to preschool operational implementation issues rather than play topic itself. Amongst the challenges are teachers being unfamiliar and struggling to adapt with the school system, lack of relevant trainings which includes introduction training especially for new teachers, classroom management skills, and unclear on the expectations in delivering the lesson which are supposed to cover both play and Islamic values as well as to cope with audit requirement imposed by preschool management. As a result, since teachers are already on the job and they are supposed to deliver as expected, the teachers will try to fulfil the requirements accordingly.

Considering the concerns raised during the interview sessions, the role of management would be much more effective if they take up this matter seriously. This includes the necessity of reviewing syllabus and learning programme specifically on how play and Islamic-based approach are embedded in the learning programme, the effective method of the students' assessment that needs to align with the learning objective, clear expectations on teachers' reporting, essential scoping of audit, outline essential training programme and establish discussion platform towards competent educators and fruitful conversation between the teachers. End in mind, the overall intent is to provide the best learning environment for children's' development. On another pressing factor raised by the teacher related to the parents' concern on their children literacy due to mainstream academic environment as also mentioned in study by Mardziah et al. (2017); Norsuhaily et al. (2015), the management is encouraged to wisely assess the scenario, impact and the benefit to the children, ultimately, in terms of what matters most and prioritise accordingly instead of simply fulfilling the expectations and demands on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy among the students hence becoming the barriers for the preschool to implement learning through play-based approach.

Meanwhile, the collaboration between parents and teachers in ensuring that children are benefitting from the learning environment and play-based approach is also essential. The importance of parental involvement reflects Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the substantial influence of environmental interactions on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This theory holds that the relationship between the parents and school is multidirectional; the parent influences the school, while the school influences the parent. The development of a strong relationship between early childhood programmes and parent is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). A study conducted by Zaiton et al. (2017) founded that parents perceive that Islamic preschools have a significant role as an early educational centre to inculcate Islamic teachings for their children. Adibah et al. (2014) his view on education clarified that a child is God's gift entrusted to the parents to bring up the child and

shape the heart and the mind of the child who are still pure and untainted to become a precious and valuable person.

On the aspect of teachers' resources of the learning content, the study founded that the teachers mainly referred to the prepared and readily available syllabus, designed in line with the school model and philosophy which was later translated into lesson plans and delivers the lessons based on their own creativity. At the same time, some of the teachers also reported that they found it challenging and were struggling to plan in preparing the lesson plans and related documentations prior classroom activities, they are still unfamiliar and unable to appreciate the syllabus content and reporting method, lack of creative ideas and all other sort of related challenges. Hence, the suggestion to revisit the syllabus, curriculum outline and related learning content for further enhancement towards continuous improvement need to be considered seriously with the intent to assess and reflect how play-based approach can be implemented in the syllabus as well as the best way to impart Islamic values in current learning content in a more effective manner.

At private Islamic preschool context, most of the time, respective school management or principal will have full control and influence in determining their school philosophy, principles and syllabus framework which basically relate to their belief towards early childhood education. The group of teachers will subsequently be the front liner in realising the agenda and involved during daily operations. Positive cooperation and relationship between the parties is vital in ensuring the smoothness of overall preschool operation. Upskilling and developing the teachers is equally important as having school management team that provide clear direction, committed and enabling the teachers in performing their level best. Thus, it is important to educate preschool teachers about appropriate teaching approach such as learning through play and its role in overall child development.

In this study, the teachers conveyed that they require cooperation from parents to provide support through information sharing on their children background, character, behaviour and interest. This joint effort and collaboration is aimed to understand the children better, manage them in a more effective manner and even to further facilitate on developing the student's individual profiling for both teachers and parents' reference later on. The parents should reflect and rationalise their own expectations on the concerns on the children literacy and focus more attention on how they can collaborate with the school as it impacts their children development as well as having more awareness and understanding towards the play-based approach. According to Gestwicki (2020) teachers are required to have not only a base of child development understanding but also a fundamental knowledge of potential of each material, an opportunity for learning that each may offer. They stated that they exercise the approach and keep improving from time to time in delivering better learning experience for their students. At the same time, teachers also shared numerous challenges and issues faced during the implementation phase. Successively, the discussions that took place at the later stage elaborated by the researchers covering aspect of the teachers' positive perception towards play-based approach, the enrichment of early childhood education and play knowledge amongst the teachers, syllabus enhancement, preschool management roles, parent-teacher collaboration and last but not least the enforcement by policy maker or authority.

According to Zaiton, Hishamuddin et al. (2017), parents actually play equally a significant role with the teachers to ensure a more effective parent-teacher collaboration exists. Furthermore, parents' participation enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while augmenting parent-teacher collaboration that reinforces mutual beliefs and practices. Parental involvement can be a positive experience for everyone involved if handled professionally whilst maintaining the harmonious relationship among all parties. The most important aspect is that all parties understand the importance, intent and being objective. Positive and optimistic collaboration with parents will definitely benefit not

only the children, but also school, parents and community. Ultimately this collective effort shall prevent, or at least reduce, the negative impact of play deprivation (Brown, 2009; Hughes, 2003).

Conclusion

This study found that teachers perceived play-based approach positively as they believe that children could mostly benefit from it. The implementation of play-based approach as part of the children's learning enables meaningful learning experience, provides holistic and optimises the learning dimensions through various medium, subsequently producing higher self-confidence children. At the same time, Islamic values that inspired as per the preschool philosophy would be able to be embraced as part of the children's learning aspect in more interesting, fun and stress-free learning setting. The parent-teacher collaboration through meaningful conversation sessions and continuous discussions in analysing the children growth and development during early years, will definitely contribute towards the children's biggest potential. Realising the exhaustive evidences on the play benefits towards children development, in line with the existence and high demand of private Islamic preschool amongst Muslim parents with the intent to nurture religious and spiritual aspect during early years, this study is hoped to provide the readers with understanding on the perceptions of play-based approach from the teachers' perspectives within the context of private Islamic preschool education towards harmonising and finding the balance between Islamic values and play pedagogical approach.

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