

Emergent Curriculum Practice in Malaysian Kindergarten

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The Asian Conference on Education 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The development of children's learning is stimulated through a learning environment that gives them the opportunity to explore. This article discusses the improvement of children's learning process as it shifts from academic-oriented to emergent form of learning. Improvements also include changes into the use of textbooks and materials as child learning aids. Action research is applied to gain insights that help stimulate the development of children's learning without drastically affecting the learning environment. Naturalistic observation is the main source of data for analyzing. Every observation of children is recorded in the researcher's observation notes. Children's journal books are also used in analyzing the outcomes of children enhancement before, during and after the improvement of their learning process. The findings are reported with narrative and visual analysis in the analysis table. The findings show that improvements in the learning process of children gave them the opportunity to create and explore their learning more meaningfully in terms of active involvement, social interaction, self-confidence and the ability to voice the ideas and, opinions, all of which showed marked improvements.

Keywords: Emergent Curriculum, Project Work, Early Years

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Introduction

The initial learning experience is cumulative, and curriculum delivered during the first seven years of life should help integrate a child's holistic development domains (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Bredekamp's (2014) brain studies show that, early childhood learning experiences between 0 and 72 months are important for the growth of their holistic development. Fun teaching activities, creating challenges, promoting responsibilities, diversifying ideas, and providing feedback can enhance the level of learning of children in terms of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development (Bandura, 1997; Roger, 2011). Thus, early education is an opportunity for children to become active and to develop creative and critical thinking in exploring their learning environment (Mendoza & Katz, 2013).

Bredekamp (2014) also notes that the key to the effectiveness of Early Childhood Education is based on a practiced approach to teaching and learning of children. The learning environment is also important in the development of children's learning especially the environment that enables active and positive interaction and gives children the opportunity to explore spontaneous learning (Hedges, 2011). A study by Li (2012) suggests the project work which is learning activity in the project approach help children learn to understand their role and be independent during the learning process. In addition, Li also stated that children can explore and build knowledge when they seek information to meet the needs of learning. Besides, project work is a designed to guide children experience experiences and heighten the senses through events and phenomena in their own environment (Katz, 1993; Katz & Chad, 2000; Mendoza & Katz, 2013).

In addition, the process of learning through project work can shape children's skills in terms of cognitive aspects of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Activities involving projects as proposed by Katz & Chard (2000) include collecting information from direct observations, interviews with related experts, experiments on topics of interest to projects, collecting artefacts and visual presentation and verbal reports based on as a results of the study. Through such activities, children can apply their investigative skills, record, and report on the results of their learning or 'research'. Indirectly children are actively involved in the process of learning through real phenomena in their own environment. In fact, the emergent process also happens spontaneously.

The emergent curriculum is a curriculum based on the growing interest of children to explore their early learning environment (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2013; Nxumalo, Vintimilla, & Nelson, 2018; Sunday & Conley, 2020). Throughout the emergent learning process, active involvement and the interest of children are encouraged compared with academically oriented approaches. Boyer & Ruth (2006) states that teaching has the 'emergent' nature that results through interaction with individuals, tools, and reflections, where it acts as a topic and learning resource. Schwartz & Copeland (2010) describes the concept of emergent curriculum as two curriculum modules with an equality of curriculum goals. The difference between each curriculum lies on the theoretical view on the development of early childhood learning that determines the designs of a program. The skill-based, action-based and child-centered curriculum approaches, have a common goal (Goffin & Wilson, 2001), namely driving the interest of the children themselves for the development of their learning progress (Schwartz & Copeland, 2010).

The action-based curriculum module covers the development of socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children. The strength of this approach is to fostering children's learning through their own efforts (Schwartz & Copeland 2010). Some action-based learning standards are outlined by Schwartz & Copeland (2010). Among them is that when children choose their own interests, they gain knowledge and improve their skills. Similarly, the knowledge of children and the use of academic skills can be extended through a set of interrelated activities. A typical program of this curriculum module is Reggio Emilia's early childhood program and the Project Approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Katz & Chard, 2000).

In this regard, the purpose of this study is to enhance the development of children's holistic learning through emergent curriculum in a private kindergarten situated in Bangi, Malaysia. In the early stage of the study, field kindergartens practiced academic-oriented teaching and learning processes. This emphasizes the use of textbooks and written exercises as the primary learning method of children. Thus, in this study, emergent curriculum is used as in practice to reduce the gap between of existing teaching and learning processes with those that have incorporated recent improved and innovative approaches. Therefore, the objectives are 1) observing the existing practices (interaction, teaching and learning, aids); and 2) introduce project work in teaching and learning.

Methods

This study employed an action research to obtain findings that are opened for modifications and improvements to achieve the objectives of the study. Four phases of the action cycle are adopted based on recommendation by MacNaughton & Hughes (2009). The four phases as follows:

Phase 1 - Understanding the learning process of children

Naturalistic observation is conducted in the kindergarten to understand the process of teaching and learning of children and to see the child's response to the academic orientation practiced before performing improvements. Furthermore, naturalistic observations form the basis of this study in making improvements according to the suitability of the development of children's learning without highlighting the changes that taking place. Children are the subject of a major study, so their emotions and behaviors on changing learning processes need to be minimized in order for emotional, mental, and social stability to be balanced in alignment with the implementation of the changes made.

Phase 2 – Planning the improvements of learning process for children

To change from academic-oriented to emergent, project work is seen as appropriate learning process for children. The emphasis on the use of textbooks and workbooks is also gradually reduced, in favor of hands-on experience.

Phase 3 - Implementation of changes

The implementation of emergent processes for children's learning practice lasted for six (6) months. Starting from January and ending in June 2016. Throughout the improvement of learning process, the topic of project work gradually developed, and emerged based on children's interest. The emergence of new topics is either from the planned topic by the teacher or the children's direct exploration of the learning environment or spontaneously through peers and teacher interaction. Particularly, children's self-confidence in expressing ideas and views on learning process is considered to form harmonious emergent processes.

Phase 4 – Reflection on intervention

Reflection helps in deepening understanding of the improvement of children's learning process. Researcher observation notes and children's journal books are critically reflected. To identify any improvements needed to enhance children's holistic learning development. The reflection notes are then used to analyze the finding of the study.

Participants

The children involved in the study were 5 years old, consisting of three boys and three girls, all had different backgrounds. These children were labelled as C1, C2, C3, C4, C5 and C6 to simplify the individual observation of changes in their learning progress. Three boys (C1, C2, and C3) were children who had followed the process of teaching and learning in the kindergarten since they were three years old. A girl (C4) had been studying in the kindergarten since the age of four. Meanwhile, another girl (C5) had been studying at another kindergarten before enrolling in the current kindergarten. Before enrolling to the current kindergarten in 2016, one girl (C6) was under the care of family members at home and had never followed any form of formal early education.

Analysis procedures

Naturalistic observation was the main procedure of this study. Observation notes are sources of raw data recorded in writing. Children's journal books are also used as references to be observing the learning changes that they had developed individually. The data obtained is then reported in the form of table analysis (Table 1).

Ethics

Parents' consent had been requested to respect the rights of the guardians of the children. The consent letter was given before starting the first observation. All six parents had given their consent on behalf of their children to be observed for the purposes of this study. The children also were notified that their learning activities will be observed throughout this study.

Conclusion

The action research process is in the form of a cycle. Each phase is constantly overlapping to seek a change in the socio-cultural context of the study which can influence the research participants to change. The implementation of each phase is also repeated, but the findings of this study are discussed in phases so that the progress of the changes on children's learning development can be seen in sequence. Table 1 summarizes the whole process of naturalistic observations whereby emergent processes were observed during the period of the study.

Phase 1 - Understanding the learning process of children

In the beginning of naturalistic observation, children were seen using workbooks continuously. All children were only following instructions from the teacher about the learning that needs to be done in the workbooks. At the beginning of the first minute of the learning process, children were observed as being focused. A few minutes later, children (C1 and C2) began to show movements like standing up and teasing their peers (C3). One child (C6) also looked at the empty workbook, without moving her hands to write, neither did she nor shows any interest in doing so. There were also children (C4 and C5) who did not know how to write and needed the teacher's help. In the first month of observation, hands-on activities were rarely practiced.

Phase 2 – Planning the improvements of learning process for children

The planning for improvement is based on the observations and reflection in phase 1. The learning process and children's learning development were considered when planning for improvement. Children's involvement, interest and dispositions towards their own learning were also taken into consideration. Hence, project work was chosen as learning activity for children. The idea of project work is used as it encompasses the four learning goals of the Project Approach (Katz & Chard, 2000). The four learning goals are knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings. Each of these goals is intertwined in connecting the holistic development of children's learning. Besides, the focus goals are also integrated between the academic (indirectly) and practical (hands-on experience) practices. Thus, the project work is appropriate for improving or changing the practice of the kindergarten from academic oriented to emergent.

Phase 3 - Implementation of change (Observe child reactions towards learning process changes)

In the first month, textbooks and workbooks were still used as the main learning process by children. Gradually academic- oriented practice was minimized in the second month, when project work kicks into place. The learning aids also improved, from workbooks to hands-on experiences through nature exploration, physical objects, and field trips. The active involvement of children in learning exploration appears to occur throughout the process of improvement. Children were also seen excited to explore the topic of project work for the whole learning session, generating various and unexpected questions and answers. Among the topics were, ants, worms, banana trees, soil, and wild grass. The topic started with an ant, then the children

moved on to a new topic, to which they found connectivity with the previous topic. This showed the development of emergent process in children's learning.

Phase 4 – Reflection on intervention

The children provided positive responses and active involvement throughout the implementation of the emergent learning process. They were also able to express their opinions to understand the topic of the project work rather than before the improvement. In fact, some (C1, C2 and C4) demonstrated self-reliance and self-esteem during project work activities. However, there were still some children who needed time to adapt to the emergent learning process especially children C3, C5 and C6, who merely followed other peers as well as waiting for directions for the next learning process. However, the changes and enhancement of children's attitudes and interests towards their learning process were flourishing much better than before the emergent implementation. However, there is still room for improvements that need to be done to empower children's holistic learning development.

Phases	Objective of observation	Learning activity	Children's reaction	Reflection	Analysis
1	Identify children's learning process	Write and count using textbooks and workbooks	Following teacher's instruction without question Waiting for teacher's instruction for next activity Losing focus on preparing exercises in the workbook Making noise and playing with peers, until they were told by the teacher to complete the given workbook activity	The children are not given the opportunity to explore their own learning Encourage child-centered activities to stimulate learning progress The children's attention span of academic activity declines rapidly Rigid learning activities, making the children always look for opportunities to escape from doing works	Workbooks discourage children's learning interest Child-centered activities need to be practiced shaping holistic children's learning The learning process needs to be hands-on Learning activities need to attract children's interest and encourage exploration and investigation
2	Identify children's learning interests	Project work - ants	Excited to see that ants live in bottles	True examples can appeal to children to respond positively	Nature's resources are teaching aids that stimulate the formation of children's learning

			Start searching for ants in the classroom environment	Children are given the opportunity to explore learning	processes Positive learning environment is important to support emergent processes
			Tracked the path of the ants, and asked questions about habitat of ants	Lots of questions and curiosity of children, harmonize their learning process	Children's curiosity makes the learning process more meaningful and interesting
			Asked teacher's permission to explore about ants	The opportunity for children to plan their learning topics is supported by teachers	Children's interests can be an interesting learning topic and enhance their concentration during the learning process
3	Looking at the child's response to the emergent learning process	Project work - ants	Voluntarily telling stories about ants found outside the kindergarten	Encourage children to begin their learning process	Encouragement and support, empowering children's interest to continue exploring their learning
		Kindergarten playground	Looked for ants, found three different types of ants - red ants, small ants, and big ants	Emergent processes occur when children identify various types of ant	The emergent process occurs spontaneously, as children explore a new discovery
		Project work - types of ants	Comparing the types of ants found by peers	Sharing results with peers can improve the social development – child's interaction and curiosity	The development of learning occurs spontaneously, in integrated and holistic manner
			Asked fellow peers about the food eaten by	Interaction between peers led to emergent	Emergent learning process occurs

ants

processes and
new learning
topics which the
children
developed
without
consciously
doing so

in every
interaction,
exploration,
and search of
information by
the child
himself

Phase	Objective of observation	Before the change	During the change
4	Changes in the learning process of the children are taking place	The use of workbooks is emphasized as a learning process for the children The opportunity for the children to express ideas and opinions is limited The children only follow the topic of learning set by the teacher A learning topic for a given learning time	Use of workbooks is reduced and the children are more interested in learning The children are more active and confident in suggesting their own learning process The children have the freedom to form their learning topics based on their dispositions and interests Hands-on activity gives the children the opportunity to explore as many learning topics as they wanted to

Table 1. Summary of naturalistic observations on child's responses during the improvement of the learning process from academic orientation to emergent according to the phase of action research

Discussion

The focus was the implementation of emergent learning processes, driving children to plan and explore their own learning although at first, the children did not say explicitly that they wanted to explore in detail. However, children's curiosity of many questions led them to explorative learning, exploration without they themselves realizing it. In addition, children could work together with their peers in harmony through the process of discussion and investigation. Emergent process also happened when children brainstormed their ideas among themselves as well as when performing their own observation towards their learning environment.

Children's interest and active involvement towards their own learning process also increased. The change result from the implementation of emergent teaching and learning processes, which is not rigid in determining the teaching process and learning outcomes. In fact, the process of teaching and learning experienced by children is the result of their learning achievements, rather than the emphasis of giving grades A, B or C that determines the ability and excellence of children's learning development. Most important is children's disposition to explore during their learning, that will determine the excellence of their holistic learning progress.

Based on the findings of naturalistic observations, the improvement of teaching and learning process from academic-oriented to emergent could stimulate children's

interest to learn. Researchers are convinced that with the ongoing implementation of the emergent learning process in this kindergarten, children's intellectual and social dispositions can be enhanced. Besides, holistic development also can be enriched without emphasizing on academic oriented methods solely. The development of holistic learning is not a skill that can be achieved in a short time. Through the appropriate practice of project work towards the improvement of children's learning of this study, researchers believe that these children can achieve a better level of holistic learning progression as they grow older.

Summary

Early Childhood Education is a foundation to any level of education. Therefore, the teaching and learning process should encourage and stimulate the active involvement of children. In the early stages of education, children need to be exposed to knowledge that includes exploration, investigation, inquiry, and explanation skills. The findings show that exposure to all these skills can be learned through the emergent teaching and learning process. An opportunity for children to be actively involved in planning, developing, and creating their own uniqueness of learning process is thereby made available. The improvement made in the kindergarten is also an attempt to change the general perception in which children must learn to read, write, and calculate using textbooks and workbooks solely. However, these skills and abilities can be trained easily through emergent learning processes such as exploration, investigation, and hands-on experiences. Thus, the process of emergent teaching and learning is seen to be enhancing to the stimulation and development of children's learning as a whole.

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