Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, volume 303

International Conference of Primary Education Research Pivotal Literature and Research UNNES 2018 (IC PEOPLE UNNES 2018)

Children's Experience and Learning Opportunities in PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school Settings in Malaysia

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Abstract—This paper focuses on children's experience and learning opportunities in ethnically diverse pre-school settings. The study involved 60 children and three teachers from three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings. A qualitative methodology was applied to explore children's experience and learning opportunities. Direct observation of children's free play and in-depth interviews were conducted with the children and teachers within 16 weeks. Observation based on instruments from the ECCE Research Project which included two main standards, an element of children's learning and meaningful learning. An indicator of standards started with working towards, meeting the standard and exceeding the standard. The primary findings of this case study emergent from the exceeding standard that children's learning experience and opportunities are divided into three: Children need the challenge to be competent, Active learning and learning comes from social interactions. Given an opportunity, the children are skillful in the initiated learning experience. Finally, the PERPADUAN Pre-school ethos toward children's social development is to promote a feeling of unity and acceptance among the ethnically diverse society of Malaysia.

Keywords— pre-school, teaching and learning, early childhood.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on a study that is part of a longitudinal research project that analyses Quality of Early Childhood care and education in formal early years settings with 4 – 6-year-old children in Malaysia. The overall project aims to provide Early Childhood Care and Education(ECCE) as a national framework for Malaysia.

The provision of quality ECCE programs is an important investment in the overall social, economic and human capital development of a country. In Malaysia, there is an increasing attention, funding, capacity building programs and support in the form of national constitutions, policies, laws, and legislation to provide an enabling environment for ECCE to develop. Besides the government, the development of ECCE programs in Malaysia is also through efforts and contributions of local communities, religious bodies, private entities, and charitable organizations. Against this background, it is necessary to evaluate the different programmes in terms of antecedents, transactions, and outcomes in terms of relative comparison. In addition, it is also necessary to evaluate the programmes in terms of absolute comparison in relation to standards of excellence both global and local. This evaluation would make a significant contribution towards the quality development and learning for young children's. In ensuring the standards and provision of a firm preparatory foundation for primary schooling, the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) was introduced and implemented in 2010. The implementation of the PERMATA Negara program in 2007 and formulation of policy related to the care and education for 0-4 years old, form important milestone for Malaysian ECCE.

II. THEORY AND FRAMEWORK

The Montessori theory of child development is based on human tendencies to explore, move, share with a group, to be independent and make clear decisions, create order, develop self-control, abstract ideas from experience, use creative imagination, work hard, repeat, concentrate, and perfect one's efforts.

There are three stages of learning from the perspective of this theory: Stage one is the introduction to a concept by means of a lecture, lesson, something read in a book or other relevant activities. Stage two involves processing the information, developing an understanding of the concept through work, experimentation and creation. Stage three is the process of "knowing" where the child possesses understanding which could be demonstrated by his/her ability to pass a test with confidence, to teach another child with confidence, or to express themselves with ease. According to this approach, a child learns directly from the environment, and from other children-rather than from the teacher. The teacher is trained to one child at a time, with a few small groups and almost no lessons to a whole class. The teacher guides the child's research and exploration, capitalizing on interests and excitement about a subject.

Piaget's stage theory describes the cognitive development of children. In Piaget's view, early tears cognitive development involves processes based on actions and later progresses into changes in mental operations. Piaget proposed four stages of development. The first two stages describe the child's development during the early years. The first stage is the sensorimotor

– where the child learns about himself and his environment through motor and reflex actions. According to Piaget, teaching for a child in this stage should be geared to the sensorimotor system to enable the child to modify his/her behavior by using the five senses. The second stage is the preoperational stage which begins about the time the child starts to talk to about age 7. During this stage, the child applies his/her knowledge of

language and begin to use symbols that represents objects. Early in this stage, the child personifies objects, able to think about things and events and much of his/her thinking is influenced by fantasy. Teaching must take into account the child's vivid fantasies using neutral words, body outlines and equipment a child can touch, gives him/her an active role in learning.
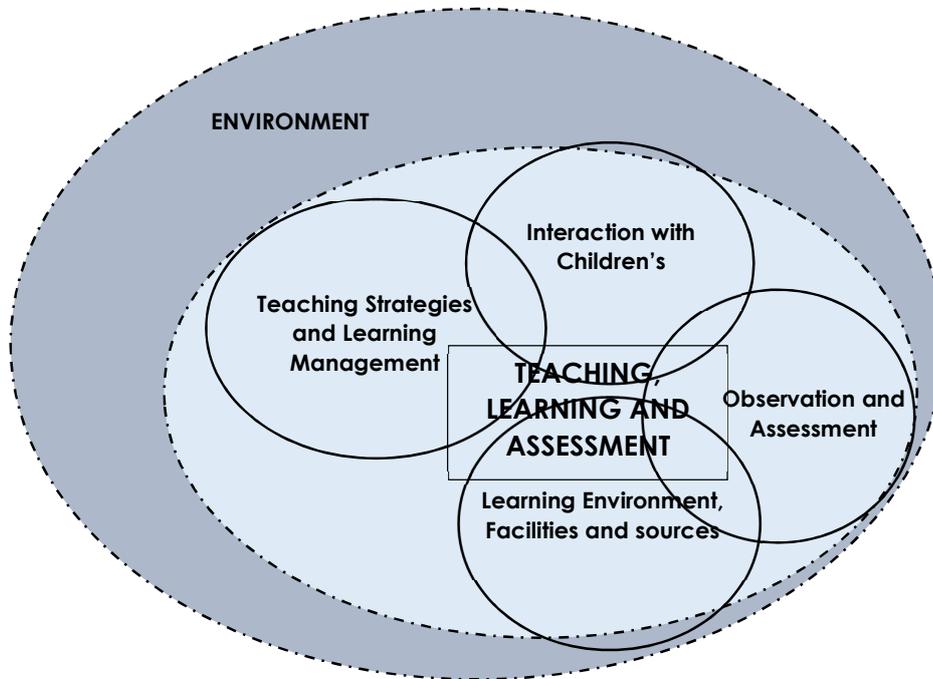

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine how children experience and learning opportunities in ethnically diverse pre-school settings.

Literature Review

Learning activities should be based on the needs, desires, abilities of the baby and children's background and development. Educators or teachers should provide an activity space, organize physical needs in the classroom to carry out learning activities. In addition, educators or teachers also need to provide activity and teaching planning as well as the implementation of activities and teaching and learning appropriate to children at kindergarten level (PERMATA, 2013; KPM, 2016; Morrison, 2004; Beaty, 2014; 2016; Loy et al., 2017; Nordin et al., 2017).

In this study, learning activities include (i) learning of children divided into the effectiveness of learning activities as well as support, encouragement and guidance; (ii) focus, active and reflective in the implementation of activities divided into the use of child information in the implementation of activities and

activities and involvement of children; (iii) parenting and education strategies that are divided into the skills of using the child's interests and the understanding of the baby's needs; and (iv) meaningful learning that is divided into interest and involvement of children as well as understanding children with language diversity.

Previous studies show that the quality of kindergartens is determined by the best practices in kindergartens in terms of curriculum, the profile of children, quality of the teacher, facilities, and teaching and learning practices. This study, however, is managed solely to first aspects, namely the curriculum practices implemented. A quality kindergartens curriculum can be seen in learning and teaching (PdP) goals and teaching and learning (TL) practices. Also, the background of students attending school shows a sign of the quality of the kindergartens curriculum.

Meanwhile, the quality of teachers gives the greatest impact on kindergartens quality as teachers greatly influence the literacy and social development of children, especially children at the age of 5. A quality teacher needs to have high professional qualifications, experienced enough, and have high commitment and trustworthiness.

As such, this study was formulated and implemented to identify and compare these two dimensions among kindergartens representing the Ministry of Education (KPM), KEMAS, JPNIN, and private kindergartens.

The quality level of kindergartens can be referred to as the extent to which the overall attributes and characteristics of the products and services in [respective preschool] are in line with the ability to meet the purpose of its existence (International Organization for Standardization, 2012). In other words, the quality level of kindergartens is closely related to its practice and performance in producing learning and child development. Parents generally relate the quality of a preschool with the ability of the preschooler to make their children read, write and count (3M). In fact, the achievement of 1st-year pupils in Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) is now used to assess the quality of preschool.

In addition to 3M's achievement, the pre-school education literature is loaded with a variety of key performance indicators that are often used to measure, assess and assess pre-school quality practice (see for example, Barnett, 2004; Coffman & Lopez, 2003; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2012; Kod Pennsylvania, 1988; dan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER); UNESCO, 2012).

The curriculum developed and practiced is always used as a measure of performance and achievement of preschool quality (UNESCO, 2012). The EPPE (2003-2008) study shows that the most important asset of preschools is trained teachers and assistants. In addition to curricula and teachers, performance and quality achievements are also determined by management practices, pre-school-parent interactions and community, health, nutrition, and safety in the preschool.

In the meantime, information and knowledge on the practices, performance, and achievement of quality of preschool products and services in the country are limited. Although there are some academic studies related to kindergartens quality (Nordin Mamat, 2012; 2013), nationally, periodically and continually kindergartens quality assessment assessments are still in the planning (MOE Education Implementation and Performance Unit [PADU], 2014). During this time the process of monitoring and evaluating the performance and achievement of kindergartens quality in Malaysia depends largely on benchmarking activities carried out by international agencies, especially UNESCO.

This limitation is more significant, and even confusing if we try to compare the quality of practice and performance between different preschools. There are assumptions that preschools managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) are of higher quality than preschools from other agencies, namely KEMAS, National Unity and National Integration Department, and private agencies. On the other hand, there is evidence based on the assertion that private kindergartens are of higher quality, especially when private kindergarten children overcome the performance of preschool children in KPM in the 1st LINUS Screening test at primary school (PADU, 2014).

Multi-ethnic pre-school refers to "pre-school that includes children of different ethnic groups, which is the policy of the pre-school itself to ensure the composition of the pre-school entrants consist of a mix of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others. The aim of the multi-ethnic pre-school is to unite three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysian in order to ensure national integration" (Majzub, 2006, p. 87). Many scholars have addressed the benefits of pre-school settings for children's attention during learning activities. Pre-school setting promotes children's attention and learning at an early stage. Children's participation in classroom activities is highly influenced by pre-school setting and teacher's approach (Mura et.al, 2015). According to Nordin & Ainon (2013) direct cross-ethnic and teaching, multiculturalism awareness is more effective in changing children's intergroup attitudes.

Bentley, F.D (2012) explains the meaning of multiculturalism in the early childhood classroom practices in the everyday lives of four- and five-year-olds. The study examines classroom practices as children and teachers construct meaning around multiculturalism in early childhood. Through classroom research and discussion, the children develop their own concepts around these issues, finding meaningful ways to share their knowledge with the larger school community. These fundamental values can be integrated into the lives of young children, especially in the early childhood classroom. According to Chi-Hung & Ming-Tak (2017), the practice of multicultural teaching in early childhood education is an important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programmes. The study investigates the perceptions of teaching competency in the multicultural classroom held by 347 teachers at 22 kindergartens in Hong Kong. The result indicates that preschool teachers fit with the model of multicultural teaching competency scale (MTCS) for children from ethnic-minority. The most important element of high-quality developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood programmes is preschool teachers.

Meanwhile, Buchori, S & Dobinson, T (2015) deduct a different view; early childhood teachers view the children's previous cultural background as a burden. They are concern for the children who are not performing up to the curriculum standard and fear of not meeting their own expectations, those of the system and those of the children's parents. In the Australian Early childhood education, in order to address the needs of the children from a diverse cultural background in their care, they implemented a setting of a culturally diverse classroom and pedagogic practice. This shows the teachers' understandings of the multicultural education goals. It is important to teach children about different cultures and the most effective way to do this is to emphasise points of comparison between cultures.

According to Samni Suraji, Abdul Razaq Ahmad, Mohd Mahzan Awang, Nordin Mamat & Ahmad Ali

Seman (2018), results from their study at preschool settings show a different significant on the effectiveness of Fun Learning module in enhancing patriotism among preschool children. This quasi-experiment involved 1000 sample from 4 preschools under government. Treatment group involved 50 pupils from 2 classes in 2 preschools as well as a controlled group. The study demonstrated that fun learning approaches are suitable for cognitive level and preschool children's interest in improving learning at the early childhood stage.

A Qualitative Design

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) emphasize that a qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand the elements of behaviours by getting to know those involved, their values, beliefs, and emotions. A qualitative methodology was used in this research because it was considered to be the most appropriate way of discovering or uncovering the perceptions about children's social behaviour held by parents of a different background. This study is a qualitative study involving three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings that conduct early education programs for children aged 4 to 6 years either preschool or kindergarten. This methodology was applied to explores children's experience and learning opportunities. The study involved 60 children and three teachers from three PERPADUAN (Unity) Pre-school settings. Direct observation of children's free play and in-depth interviews were conducted with the children and teachers within 16 weeks. Observation based on instruments from the ECCE Research Project which included two main standards, an element of children's learning and meaningful learning. An indicator of standards started with working towards, meeting the standard and exceeding the standard.

The observation checklist for this Project focused on the teaching and learning the quality area. Three quality standards were developed after numerous considerations. These quality standards are children's learning and meaningful learning. An indicator of standards started with working towards, meeting the standard and exceeding the standard. Selected sample ECCE Centers from all over the country were visited by the researchers to obtain information through classroom observation, document analysis, and teacher interviews.

The qualitative part of the research employed a combination of observation and interviews to serve as data collection instruments as well as means of data triangulation; to estimate the validity and reliability of data and research procedures. A series of workshops were carried out to construct the interview protocols and observation checklist. Observations analysis were done by at least two researchers for two consecutive days at each selected child centres. The interviews were divided into individual interviews. Whenever necessary, researchers would also conduct interviews at the centres to have a deeper understanding of data. Respondents' consents were procured prior to the interviews and observations while observing their anonymity and confidentiality of data. To ensure data saturation, interviews were also held during several seminars and workshops on parenting and early childhood education; to maximise the number of respondents. Hence, representativeness of the population was also taken into consideration in the sampling procedures. Respondents were selected from the same selected zones, from different types of pre-schools identified in the quantitative part of the study. v Interview data was transcribed from the audio recordings and then analysed using the n-vivo applications. Transcripts were divided into three categories: teachers/carers, and educationist. A series of workshops were held to thrash out the nodes, axial nodes and the systematic nodes. Relationships between the axial nodes were scrutinised to narrow them down into major themes. Each transcript underwent pair-comparison, then each group presented their own mapping in the group comparisons sessions and finally, the mapping for each group was drabbed based on factors that contribute to quality teaching and learning.

III. RESULTS

The primary findings of this case study emergent from the exceeding standard that children's learning experience and opportunities are divided into three: Children need the challenge to be competent, Active learning and learning comes from social interactions. Given an opportunity, the children are skillful in the initiated learning experience.

Learning comes from social interactions

Through daily interactions with responsive, affectionate adults, young children experience positive social relationships. Self-confidence develops and children learn to communicate their needs and master challenges in their world. Young children thrive when they encounter challenges they can meet; they flourish when they are free to explore and feel that caring adult encourage and take pleasure in their emerging interests and skills. According to Goleman, 2006 "a simple sign that a child feels he has safe a safe haven is going out to play. Playful fun has serious benefits; through years of hard play, children acquire a range of social expertise. For one, they learn social savvy, like how to negotiate power struggles, how to cooperate and form alliances, and how to concede with grace.

It seems important in this study to investigate social interaction activity through children's play activity that the children were involved in. Most of the observation showed that children relate to each other based on the play either during free time or learning time. They develop communication skills and learns new knowledge when interacting with each other happen during the play activities. The play here is initiated by the children, not the organised play activities initiated by the teacher. For example, here we have a type of play activity that a group of children created:

> *May Ling saw Harun and Vejay jumping on the green carpet with a square shape design on the floor. They played with the carpet shape. She went to Harun and Vejay to play*

*with them. She imitated what they did which
was jumping inside the shapes.*
(Observation Session 1: Child 17)

In this case, a group of children created a type of play, jumping on the floor based on a carpet shape. The children carried out their assigned roles among their group and imagined that the square shape design on the floor was part of their rules. We observed that the children created and engaged in cooperative play. Cooperative play occurs when two or more children are engaged in a play activity. This play activity initiated an interaction, communication, and understanding with other children who were involved. They were copying the activity that the others were doing and showing their willingness to become friends. The children communicated through the activity they were involved in together and had the same feelings towards each other.

The case below could be described as similar to the one above:

*Si Mi followed Wee Jo, she put a pencil
between her nose and her mouth and showed
it to Asmira. They looked happy with this play
activity.*
(Observation P096: Child 22)

Like the case before, a friend is a play partner, so learning comes from the children relate to each as a partner to interact or to share the fun with. Another thing, social interaction such as shared play activity developed children's social and cognitive development.

Children are Active learner

The active engagement of children in the learning process and their engagement with others in interactive activities, or engagement with materials, forms the dynamics of knowledge and understanding. Through active learning, children are constantly changing, adjusting and rearranging meaning and their understanding of things. Children are interested in experiments, trial and error, and representing what they are learning through construction and play. Active learning takes place with experiences, for example, children will learn more about the weather rather than hearing a story.

In this case study, the children interacted with each other when they shared the same interest or had something to share or talk about. For example, the children would relate to each other when they wanted to share a story from a TV programme. The children related to each other because they had something to share. By sharing, they built up a relationship based on something to play or to discuss. The observation showed that:

*Harun had a new handkerchief, he showed it
to May Ling. May Ling took out her
handkerchief and showed it to Harun too.
Then May Ling told him that they could do
shapes using the handkerchief, Harun asked
her to teach him to make shapes. May Ling
showed him the steps to do it, and Harun*

*followed. He liked to show the hanky to the
few children nearest to him like Suriani and
Wee Jo, like putting his hanky on Wee Jo's
head and Wee Jo looked like he enjoyed it.*
(Observation Session 1: Child 9)

In this case, the boy liked to play with the object with the girl as his playmate. The boy enjoyed that play with materials forms and followed what the girl showed him. The interaction here was driven by the handkerchiefs, and then the child initiated another interaction with other children. In this case, the learning process happened in their engagement with others in interactive activities.

The active engagement of children develops meaning and their understanding by using an object or fantasy play when they talk and to sit together. They were talking to each other about what they did during the everyday activity. Through this discussion topic, automatically new ideas will come up.

*R: Let's look together at the photos from today
- can you tell me about what your friends are
doing? Ardini: We eat fruits…apple and
watermelon.
R: Do you like it?
Ardini: Yes it tastes great!
R: Do you have any relationship with them?
Ardini: Yes, we are friends.
R: What makes you all become friends?
Ardini: Chatting together...work together. We
play together...sit together. They always help
me.
R: Have you ever become angry with anyone?
Ardini: No… but we always tease each other.*
(Interview on Observation P004: Child 5)

The child understood the meaning of something here as having a conversation, chatting and working together about fruits. In this case, the fruit helped to create an interaction.

Children need the challenge to be competent

Every child is unique and competent in their own way, and the way they think, feel and interact with others reflects their uniqueness and competence. Some children are outgoing and some are shy, some show a preference for physical activities and some children love stories and music. To view the child as unique and competent is to see his or her potential. Children need an environment in which they can flourish and grow develop positive self-esteem.

In this case, a challenging place that enabled them to do different movements like crawling and jumping or climbing became an interesting place for boys and girls. In another example, they were shown as preferring to play in a place which looked adventurous such as on top of a block.

*Most of the group of boys playing in this place
and at top of the block and most of the girls
played inside the block circle. After a while*

*they feel low challenge and has high
capabilities, they are bored, and a girl starts
climb block and walk on tunnels.*
(Observation P122: Children Group)

In this case, a group of children was playing in the block area. A first most of the boys preferred to play on the top rather than inside the block circle or tunnels. Several boys competed with each other to be at the top of the block circle. They climbed to the top of the block first and then shouted: "I won". In this case, the action showed that the boys tend to choose places and friends which are challenging. Later on, girls started to follow the same games to try the adventurous activity.

In this case, according to Mihaly Csikszentmihaly's theory of flow or optimal, learning children are happy most happy when completely absorbed in an activity they are engaged in and learn most when they are happy. The theory explains:

If a child is asked to perform a low challenge and has low capabilities, they have apathy.
If a child is asked to perform a low challenge and has high capabilities, they are bored.
If a child is asked to perform a high challenge and they have low capabilities, they panic and anxious.
If a child is asked to perform a challenge that is equal or slightly higher than their capabilities, they are in flow.
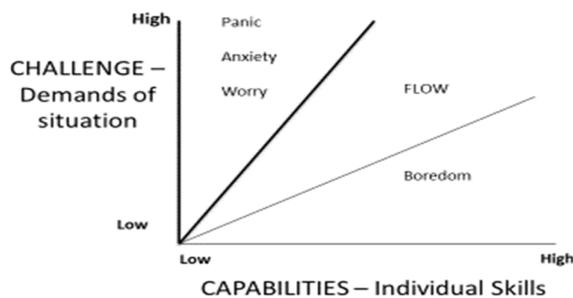

Figure 2. Individual Skills

Offering children uninteresting, unstimulating, experiences do not physically or intellectually challenge them, and this usually leads to disruptive behaviour.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of interviews and observation from this research refer to teacher and children. The following construct included teacher's interaction, teaching strategies and learning management.

The evidence shows that there is an interaction between childcare provider or teacher with children is one of the factors that contribute to the quality of early childhood in line with Nordin et al. (2017) study which explains the interaction exists in care and learning activities. Teaching strategies and learning management include two themes: (i) effective activities (ii) methods, practices and levels of learning progress that are one of the factors that contribute to the quality early childhood

care and education in line with Loy et al. (2017) and Nordin et al. (2017) which states that educators or teachers should also provide activity and teaching planning as well as implementing activities and teaching and learning appropriate to children at the TASKA and TADIKA levels. The indoor and outdoor environment play an important role in children's learning activities (i) an environment that meets the needs of children who contribute to quality early childhood care and education in line with Loy et al. (2017) and Nordin et al. (2017) which explains that childcare provider and teachers should provide an activity space, organizing physical needs in the classroom to carry out learning activities.

Another issue concerning the setting of the pre-school is the use of materials which represent the contextual culture which follows the ethnic groups. Therefore, the pre-school ethos works in line with the behaviour accepted by the parents and community, and this is consistent with findings from Corsaro and Molinari (2000) on the types of priming events in the pre-school in which children participate and attend prospectively to on-going or anticipated in activities have changed their lives. They identify different types of priming events in pre-school and show how collective activities in these events affect the children's representations (p.16). We found that different types of priming events involving children's collective and practical activities with others in the pre-school setting such as seating formation, school routines and rituals, are crucial in priming children's behaviour.

The surrounding of the pre-school setting is made up of materials which represent the ethnic groups and this provides a climate of Malaysian culture for the children and gives them a psychological message that affects awareness of multicultural society. The features of the pre-school materials totally stimulate and inculcate national unity values. This study is consistent with studies by Majzub (2006) and Prochner, Clegmen & Green (2008) who examined the way the pre-school space is constructed and used with reference to pedagogical materials. Materials are described as an element of the spatiality of pre-school, their meaning constructed from the interaction between physical and social forces, and which cultivated the children's aesthetic sense and self-confidence (Prochner, et al., 2008, p. 190). Materials in the pre-school space encourage the children's interactions. It depends on what way the pre-school materials and environment reflect the three ethnic backgrounds. This includes the design of the building, its location in the community, the people, materials, and furnishings within it. Finally, the preliminary findings show that childcare provider's or teacher from different agencies, academic and professional qualification have different perception towards teaching, and learning.

Overall, preliminary findings show that there are both the best qualities and obstacles in ching and learning. Through observation, there are few best practices found. First, there are many learning activities integrated into the kindergarten majority so that cross-learning learning activities can improve the understanding of the children. Consequently, there is an environment that promotes child

inquiry. This indirectly stimulates children's learning interests. Furthermore, the majority of kindergartens are found to provide suitable facilities according to age. As a result, there are also opportunities for children to participate in learning activities. In addition, most kindergarten practices take into account children's ideas in planning activities so that it can attract children. In addition, learning compliance is also a best practice. In other words, this means there is a continuation of learning from every kind of activity done in kindergarten in relation to the daily life of the child. Furthermore, individual holistic assessments are also seen as among the best practices that include physical, social and emotional, language, spirituality, creativity and cognitive.

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