

Parents' Perceptions of "Play" and "Holistic Development" in the Early Years

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study could help pre-schools to serve children and their parents through better communication about their programmes. The findings could also inform teacher education and parent education programmes as well as lead future research on children's performance/well-being in the primary years and beyond, and on life-long learning.

BACKGROUND

While parents want the "best" for their children, they may not realise the importance of non-academic skills for the holistic development or well-being of young children. They may not realise that the non-academic, soft or 21st century skills are important not just for Primary 1 (P1) but for future study, work and life (Bergen & Fromberg, 2010). Hence, it is important to probe, listen and ascertain exactly what Singaporean parents' fears, anxieties and concerns are and why they have such fears, anxieties and concerns, in order to provide the necessary programmes and initiatives to help parents understand, appreciate and support "play" and "holistic development" in the early years as well as the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework (MOE, 2012).

Research indicates that children learn through play and the holistic employment of their

physical and intellectual capacities, and social and emotional abilities (Alcock, 2013; Bergen & Fromberg, 2010).

FOCUS OF STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to understand how Singaporean parents view the terms, "play" and "holistic development" in the early years, and what these terms mean to them.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings revealed that although parents understood the importance and role of play and holistic development in the early years, they wanted pre-schools to focus either on academic skills or at least a balance of academic and non-academic skills in order for their children to be prepared for P1. Hence, their goals for their children's pre-school or overall education goals were to ensure that they become good citizens as well as perform well both in academic and non-academic areas.

Interestingly, all the parents in the study were not familiar with the NEL Framework (MOE, 2012) which is currently being used to design and develop a play-based curriculum in Singapore pre-schools. Parents also shared a list of factors which supported or impeded their support for play with their children, and felt that they would benefit much from parent education programmes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Generally, there seems to be some gaps in parents' understanding of "play", "holistic development" and "learning" in the early years. Hence, there is need to provide parent education programmes to share with them information on the types, role and importance of play in the early years as well as ideas about planning simple and inexpensive play activities for their children.

These parent education programmes could also help allay parents' fears and anxieties about their children's education as well as prevent parents from transferring their fears, anxieties and stress to their children and pre-schools, and putting undue pressure on their children to perform and pre-schools to prepare their children for primary school.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Thirty parents were recruited through purposeful sampling and interviewed face-to-face individually once for about one hour at a pre-arranged time and place convenient to them. The interview was audio-recorded, and the audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic approach for

the study. Data analysis involved reading the interview transcripts multiple times to identify codes as well as emerging themes and sub-themes (Creswell, 2008). The final themes and sub-themes which emerged for each interview question were grouped under each research question (RQ)/sub-RQ, and were presented as findings.

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This brief was based on the project OER 26/17 KN: Parents' Perceptions of "Play" and "Holistic Development" in the Early Years.

How to cite this publication

Karuppiah, N. *Parents' Perceptions of "Play" and "Holistic Development" in the Early Years* (NIE Research Brief Series No. 20-008). Singapore: National Institute of Education.

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