

# A Play-based Curriculum Introduced in Myanmar's Kindergartens: An Analysis of Classroom Practices, Teachers' Understanding, and Challenges

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**Abstract:** A play-based curriculum, one of the effective ways of promoting young children's development, was introduced to Myanmar's kindergartens for the first time in 2016. Although play is gaining popularity in early childhood education in the developing world, little is known about the transitional process from an academic learning-focused curriculum to a play-based curriculum in the contexts of developing countries. Therefore, this study aims to scrutinize the play-based curriculum in Myanmar's kindergartens by examining the extent of incorporating play in the intended curriculum, teachers' understanding of the new curriculum, the implemented curriculum inside classrooms, and the associated challenges. Qualitative methods are employed to answer these questions. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 teachers from five townships in central Myanmar and non-participant observations of 13 kindergarten classrooms in one of these townships. The results indicate that highly structured teacher-directed play constitutes most of play, both in the intended and the implemented curriculum, with little emphasis on free play. While teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the new curriculum principles, they apply them at very different levels within their classrooms. Even when practicing the play-based curriculum at a higher level, teachers plan and introduce play structurally, leaving few instances for child's initiatives. Much as teachers recognize the significance of play for child development, they seem to have merely replaced the academic learning activities of the previous curriculum with structured teacher-directed play. The major challenges to introducing the play-based curriculum include large class sizes, lack of parental understanding of the new curriculum, and inadequate support from inspectors, and some teachers' preference for the old curriculum. All this amounts to saying that Myanmar's kindergarten curriculum is still at the very onset of transition to a play-based curriculum, whose advanced forms should pay more attention and give value to who initiates and controls play.

Key words: play-based curriculum, kindergarten, teachers, implemented curriculum, Myanmar

## 1. Introduction

A play-based curriculum has largely been known as one of the most effective ways of promoting young children's development, as evidenced by many past studies (Reynolds et al., 2011; Stagnitti et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Countries around the world are thus paying due attention to the incorporation of play in the curriculum of early childhood education (ECE), albeit at different magnitudes, along with the levels of the national ECE system development and its access expansion. However, past research attests that the simple introduction of a play-based curriculum does not automatically yield positive learning outcomes for children; rather, the quality of ECE classroom

practices matters the most in ensuring its benefits. Youmans et al. (2017), for instance, failed to demonstrate the effect of a full-day play-based kindergarten program in Canada in promoting child's self-regulation, literacy, and numeracy, most likely due to quality issues. A longitudinal study in Bangladesh, though not on play-based learning, provided evidence that a higher quality of pre-primary education generated better academic performance in subsequent schooling of children (Aboud & Hossain, 2011). What happens inside classrooms is called an "implemented curriculum" in contrast to the "intended curriculum" that is designed and described by policymakers in the official curricular documents. Therefore, understanding the quality of classroom practices entails careful observations of the implemented curriculum in the field.

Myanmar is one of the developing countries that recently introduced a play-based curriculum in ECE. As sketched in the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)<sup>1</sup> policy (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014b), they embarked on an ambitious curricular reform of kindergartens in 2016 to transition from the long-standing curriculum focusing on academic learning to a new play-based curriculum<sup>2</sup>. The driving force behind it was a structural reform of the education system enacted by the National Education Law (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014a). Separated from compulsory primary education where it belonged for many years, kindergarten education in the new system became a base level of primary education, preparing 5-year-olds for primary schooling through all-round development. Kindergarteners, who previously learned by subjects through a teacher-centered approach as the first graders of primary school, are now expected to learn through play where different areas of early child development (ECD) known as domains are to be promoted through play activities in a cross-cutting manner.

As illustrated by the case of Myanmar, play is gaining popularity in ECE in the third world; however, little is known about the transitional process from an academic learning-focused curriculum to a play-based curriculum in the contexts of developing countries. Analyzing and understanding the process not only facilitates a smoother transition, enabling low- and middle-income countries to provide young children with better quality ECE but also helps underpin the future work of international assistance in ECD. Although cross-sectional research on Myanmar's case, like this study, cannot clarify the process entirely, it paves the way for discerning the true picture in the long run. Regarding an important preceding study, the Ministry of Education (2018) monitored the new curriculum implementation at kindergartens nationwide in 2017 through questionnaires disseminated to headteachers and teachers. Their findings showed the need to better equip learning environments and for more teacher training to enhance quality and practices. Nevertheless, their survey relied only on headmasters' and teachers' self-reported answers, which presented a risk of distorting reality; moreover, they covered a broad set of issues in kindergartens, not necessarily focused on play, unlike the present research.

This study aims to scrutinize the play-based curriculum introduced in Myanmar's kindergartens by examining the extent of incorporating play in the intended curriculum, teachers' understanding of the new curriculum, the implemented curriculum inside classrooms, and the associated challenges. Four research questions are asked: 1) To what extent does the play-based curriculum incorporate play in ECCD? 2) What is teachers' understanding of the play-based curriculum? 3) How do teachers practice the play-based curriculum in classrooms? 4) What are the challenges to introducing the play-based curriculum in Myanmar's kindergarten classrooms? The next section describes the Myanmar's ECCD system and policy, followed by a summary of the literature review of play-based learning. After the explanation of the methods for research and analysis, the results are delineated for each question. The last section discusses and concludes the findings of the study.

## 2. Myanmar's ECCD System and the Play-based Curriculum in Kindergartens

The Myanmar's government affirms that ECCD is a national priority, acknowledging the critical importance of the early years of life to fulfill an individual's potential and consequently contribute to national progress (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014b). ECCD targets children from birth to age eight, including a wide range of sectors such as health, nutrition, care, early education, early primary grades, sanitation, and child protection, to promote their holistic development. Primary care and education services consist of daycare centers for children aged six months to three years, preschool education for those aged three and four, and kindergarten education for those aged five<sup>3</sup>. Like many other countries, these services are administered by different ministries, with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement in charge of daycare centers and preschools and the Ministry of Education administering kindergartens. Both public and private entities operate preschools and kindergartens, yet private and non-governmental preschools outnumber public ones. Other services of care and education include parent education, home visits, mother circles, and playgroups. Neither preschool nor kindergarten education is compulsory, and public kindergartens are free. Kindergarten teachers are appointed by school headmasters among primary school teachers since there is no specific pre-service training program for them.

According to the data of access expansion in the academic year 2014/15, 23.4% of children aged four were enrolled in preschools, and 93.0% of children aged five were in kindergartens which were still the first year of primary education under the old education structure (Ministry of Education, UNESCO, & UNICEF, 2018). There was no gender disparity among preschool children; however, girls' enrollment rate in kindergartens was 8.9% lower than that of boys. A more severe inequality in preschool enrollment rates was observed between urban and rural areas, with a gap of 17.0% disfavoring rural children further.

The ECCD policy has set a policy strategy for kindergartens and early primary grades, addressing the application of child-centered approaches, active learning methods, learning through play, and learning corners (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014bs). It has further asserted an end to applying outdated teaching methods such as rote memorizations and drills. Although the national curriculum framework for kindergartens has remained unpublished by the Ministry of Education for unknown reasons, the kindergarten instructional plan (Ministry of Education, 2015a) and the teacher guidebook (Ministry of Education, 2015b) were published with detailed information on the new curriculum. Myanmar's kindergartens are not allowed to develop their own curricula but should follow the detailed contents presented in the instructional plan, although they can design learning activities for implementation<sup>4</sup>.

The newly introduced play-based curriculum aims to prepare children to be self-directed, independent, happy, well-nourished, academically curious, good citizens, and to develop a strong sense of self (Ministry of Education, 2015a). It is framed around six domains: 1) well-being, 2) being and becoming, 3) communication, 4) exploring mathematics, 5) creativity and problem-solving, and 6) knowledge and understanding of the world. Children play and learn in a child-friendly environment equipped with three learning corners for creative work, pretend play, and reading. The new curriculum also brought about changes in the assessment methods. Instead of the pass or a failure judgment used previously, teachers evaluate the daily performance of each child by keeping records in reports and portfolios, which are used to improve child development and learning and for communication with parents.

### 3. Literature Review

Decades of research in ECE has proven that play-based learning stimulates the holistic development of young children. Piaget (1952) interpreted play as a process of developing cognitive frameworks for understanding the surrounding world through assimilation and accommodation of new experiences. Vygotsky (1978) viewed play not only as an essential lever for children's growing to reach a higher level of their potential but also as invaluable opportunities for realizing their unmet desires, such as assuming social roles like the adults surrounding them. More importantly, these prominent intellectuals explained how play translates into learning for a child. Symbolic substitutes and mental images necessary for symbolic play lay the foundation of cognitive and language development. Furthermore, playing imaginary roles in pretend play requires children to understand the rules of play and regulate themselves, all leading to honing their cognitive and socio-emotional abilities. Other pieces of evidence have verified the effectiveness of play-based learning in advancing literacy (Bergen & Mauer, 2000), self-regulation (Berk & Meyer, 2013), and cognitive development (Abound, 2006).

Children are motivated to play by the captivating nature of play. Eberle (2014), for example, explains play in terms of characteristics such as anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. From this perspective, it is vital to see how children themselves perceive the activities they undertake in play-based learning. In an experiment where preschoolers were allocated in a play-like activity or a not-like-play activity, Howard and McInnes (2012) demonstrated a higher level of involvement and emotional well-being for those children who participated in the activity they perceived as play-like. Interestingly, children are prone to perceive an activity as "play" when given a free choice of participation, on the floor rather than on a table, and without the direct presence of an adult.

This does not imply that the importance of children's initiatives in play invariably overrides any involvement or guidance by adults in play. As explained by Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, children can develop their abilities to a higher level when interacting with and being assisted by adults and others in play. Therefore, different extents of teachers' involvement and directions in play are observed in a play-based curriculum in different countries' contexts. According to Pyle and Daniels (2017), there are five modes of play with different degrees of teacher involvement for integrating play in academic learning: free play, inquiry play, collaborative play, playful learning, and learning through games. In inquiry play, children initiate play, while teachers extend it based on related academic standards. Collaborative play requires both children and teachers to design play context, although it is directed by teachers towards the expected outcomes. Playful learning is a more structured approach to learning academic skills in a collaboratively created play context. Lastly, learning through games demands the highest level of teacher involvement through a carefully prescribed procedure and expected play outcomes.

### 4. Research Methods

A few qualitative research methods were used in this study: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Two official documents of the kindergarten teacher guidebook (Ministry of Education, 2015a) and the kindergarten instructional plan (Ministry of Education, 2015b) were examined to understand how the intended curriculum described play. Interviews with kindergarten teachers were undertaken to determine the levels of their understanding of the new curriculum and the challenges they are facing. The curriculum implemented in the classrooms was explored through non-participant observation based on the framework of Measuring Early Learning Environment (MELE)<sup>5</sup>, a part of the ECD quality measurement tool developed by international organizations (UNESCO, UNICEF, Brookings Institution, the World Bank, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 kindergarten teachers selected by convenience sampling from five townships in central Myanmar in February 2018, based on the interview guideline developed by the authors. Meanwhile, pedagogical practices were observed in 13 classrooms from one of these townships in August 2018. The interview data, eight hours and 53 minutes in total, were first transcribed in Burmese and later translated into English, with a final sum of 25,315 words. More than 10% of the English transcriptions were randomly selected and double-checked by another bilingual university lecturer from Myanmar specializing in education. Thematic analysis was then applied to these data. As for the classroom observations, each took three hours in the morning, amounting to 39 hours in total. Field notes were written during and after each observation, with particular attention to children's opportunities and teachers' involvement in play. All the analyses were cross-checked by the two authors.

The sampled teachers had the following characteristics. All the interviewees were female junior assistant teachers<sup>6</sup> holding bachelors' degrees in arts and sciences with an average teaching experience of 19.33 years ( $SD = 6.64$ ). The following qualifications were noted: teacher certificate in either primary or secondary education, postgraduate diploma in teaching, and diploma in teacher education. In the following sections, individual interviewees are represented by T followed by a number. Teachers who participated in the classroom observation were different from those interviewed due to some logistical reasons, but they had similar characteristics. They were all female junior assistant teachers with different kinds of teaching qualifications. The average of their total teaching experience was 23.5 years ( $SD = 6.64$ ), slightly higher than that of those interviewed.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Incorporation of play in the intended curriculum

The two abovementioned official documents were analyzed from four perspectives: the definition of play, kinds of play recommended, the extent of play incorporated in the design, and the extent of teacher involvement. First, play is broadly defined as "a physical and mental activity for learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 2015a, p. 27), referring not only to learning but also to overall child development stimulated through play. It is further expounded, "Children can play freely on their own or in a group in and out of the classroom, or as part of planned activities." (Ministry of Education, 2015a, p. 27), thereby acknowledging the importance of both free play initiated by children and play planned by adults.

What kinds of play are then recommended by the government? They first list three categories of play, consisting of "free play," "play for purpose," and "systematic play." A particular note is then made to the significance of "play for purpose" as inquiry play planned by kindergarten teachers for children to achieve the intended goals of learning and development. In doing so, teachers must let children engaged in play in a fun and meaningful way. Free play is defined as "children's play without teachers' instructions;" meanwhile, systematic play is specified as "play where children follow teachers' systematically planned instructions" such as games, but with no further account for either of them, unlike "play for purpose" (Ministry of Education, 2015a, p. 27). We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that "play for purpose" through planned activities is weighed heavily in the intended play-based curriculum.

To what extent do they incorporate play in the intended curriculum, then? Table 1 shows a typical daily program for kindergartens. The program lasts 6.5 hours in total, with the following three regular activities: routines (135 minutes, 35% of the total time), planned activities (210 minutes, 54%), and free play (45 minutes, 12%). Routines are a sequence of actions and activities to establish basic and healthy habits for children, with a little room for play. Planned activities and free play, therefore,

**Table 1. A Typical Daily Program in Myanmar's Kindergartens**

Period	Activity	Contents
8:30 – 9:00	Routine	Welcome and greetings
9:00 – 9:15	Routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children sing the national anthem and pay respect to Buddha.</li> <li>▪ Teachers talk with children about the weather, home, and today's plan.</li> </ul>
9:15 – 10:15	Planned activity	<i>Domain of communication</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children listen to different sounds and speech.</li> <li>▪ Children recite poems and songs and tell/listen to stories.</li> <li>▪ Teachers read picture books to children.</li> <li>▪ Children draw pictures based on their thoughts, experiences, and imagination.</li> </ul>
10:15 – 10:45	Routine	Recess time (for snacks, cleaning, toilet)
10:45 – 11:15	Planned activity	<i>Domain of communication</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children recite "Hello" poem and greet each other by the poem.</li> </ul>
10:45 – 12:15	Planned activity	<i>Domain of being and becoming</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children recite "Birthday Train" poem and play according to the poem.</li> </ul> <i>Domain of exploring mathematics</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children play by matching materials according to their shapes.</li> <li>▪ Children play by matching materials according to their sizes.</li> </ul>
12:15 – 12:45	Routine	Lunchtime
12:45 – 13:30	Free play	Free play
13:30 – 14:00	Planned activity	<i>Domain of creativity and problem-solving</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Children play shops.</li> </ul>
14:00 – 14:30	Routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teachers discuss today's activities with children.</li> <li>▪ Children prepare to go home and sing songs.</li> </ul>

*Note.* Ministry of Education. (2015a). *Thungetansayarlannyun* [Kindergarten teacher guide], 100-101.

mainly provide children with the time for play, which account for 65% of the entire daily schedule. Since the official instructional plan already fixes the time schedule as well as the detailed contents of the curriculum, teachers are only allowed to design the concrete learning activities to the extent that they attain the expected learning outcomes predetermined by the government.

Concerning the extent of teachers' involvement in play, it may be no exaggeration to say that teachers' engagement is so intense that "play for purpose" ends up in highly structured teacher-directed play, similar to the "systematic play" mentioned above. There are two detailed descriptions of suggested play that produce evidence (Ministry of Education, 2015a, pp. 47, 89). One example is the "pretend play of a birthday child." A child who pretends to celebrate one's birthday walks with a teacher inside a circle where the other children are standing. The children in the circle pretend to be a train by putting their hands on the shoulder of the next person from behind them while reciting the poem of "birthday train." Children then take turns to be the birthday child. The other example is "play shops." A teacher first divides children into two groups of sellers and customers and uses paper cuttings to represent money. Then, they ask the sellers to sell something using surrounding materials and write the commodities' names on their plates. The teacher need to ask the children questions at this stage. These suffice to show that teachers plan, prepare, and demonstrate play while children follow all the teachers' instructions, at the least according to the teacher guidebook.

## 5.2 Teachers' understanding of the play-based curriculum

The interview data analysis indicated that teachers, in general, had a good understanding of the new curriculum. First, 51 codes were created from all the interview transcripts, which were then grouped into six categories and further into two themes. The first theme of "differences between the old and the new curriculum" was composed of the following four categories: "content organization," "teaching methods," "children involvement," and "assessment." Interviewees described the changes in the content organization by referring to the transition from subjects to domains, from lessons to activities, and from the heavy academic workload to nurturing children's curiosity, creativity, and thinking. T16 mentioned, "In the old curriculum there were many lessons and children had to learn many words; meanwhile, in the new one there are more activities for child development like play and stories." Similarly, some mentioned the change of teaching methods from passive learning and homework to child-centered activities and play. Some referred to increased involvement of children in classroom activities since they have become increasingly interested in learning and being happier. Others related the new assessment methods, departing from the long tradition of written tests to modern approaches of keeping child performance records through observation. Interestingly, however, no interviewees made references to environmental changes in kindergarten classrooms introduced in

the new curriculum.

Under the second theme of “understanding of play,” there were the two categories: “the definition of play” and “the effect of play on children.” Teachers explained what play was by saying, “Play brings happiness (T14),” and “It is fun for children (T10).” T20 stated, “Children learn from playing. Children think they are just playing, but through this, teachers are actually teaching.” The interviewees described play by referring to its effect on child development. For example, some mentioned the effect of play on social development by improving the sense of unity and social relationships. Others pointed out the effect on physical well-being by saying, “Play makes children strong and healthy (T8).” Moreover, a few others referred to children’s improved concentration and mental capabilities through play. As the effect of play for supporting learning, T2 expressed, “Games and activities are beneficial for children’s learning.”

### 5.3 Classroom practices of the play-based curriculum

A large disparity was observed among the 13 observed classrooms in the implementation levels of the play-based curriculum. According to the observation results, the average application level of play-based learning turned out to be 59.31% ( $SD = 11.62$ ), varying from the lowest level of 38% to the highest level of 80%. The MELE tool, based on which the practice levels were checked, had three areas for evaluation, namely, learning activities, classroom interactions and approaches to learning, and classroom management, space, and materials. To scrutinize these gaps, the classrooms were divided into the two groups of high-level ( $N=6$ ) and low-level ( $N=7$ ) implementation, on the basis of their average scores, as shown in Table 2.

We can see clearly from the table below that the new curriculum implemented in the classrooms mainly comprise teacher-directed play, as prescribed in the intended curriculum, since both groups have teacher-directed play observed across all classrooms. Another common characteristic is the stark absence of child-initiated play other than free play time in either of the groups. The largest gap is marked on the provision of free play time, on the contrary, being more common in the high-level classrooms while being completely absent in the low-level group. Likewise, relatively significant in-between group differences were observed in the levels that the teachers were able to extend children’s understanding, their continuous engagement in classroom activities, and their free access to learning materials, all of which were higher for the high-level group.

Reflecting on the characteristics of the low-level implementation group clearly shows that they apply highly structured teacher-directed play in the classrooms. More than half of the children do not actively participate in the activities, being instructed by the teachers who ask closed questions most of

Table 2. A Comparison between Classrooms of Low-level and High-level Implementation of the Play-based Curriculum in Myanmar’s Kindergartens ( $N=13$ )

Characteristics of the Classroom Practices	Classrooms of low-level implementation ( $N=7$ )		Classrooms of high-level implementation ( $N=6$ )	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Activities in the classrooms</b>				
Child-initiated play is observed other than free play time.	0	0	0	0
Children are given free play time.	0	0	5	83
Teacher-directed play is observed.	7	100	6	100
<b>Classroom interactions and approaches to learning</b>				
Most of the children are continuously engaged in activities.	3	43	6	100
Teachers extend children’s understandings of ideas.	1	14	5	83
Teachers use open-ended questions.	2	29	4	67
Children are allowed to ask questions.	5	71	6	100
Teachers use closed questions most of the time.	7	100	2	33
Teachers use negative verbal expressions.	2	29	1	17
Teachers use corporal punishment.	1	14	0	0
<b>Classroom arrangement, space, and materials</b>				
Teachers arrange learning corners.	2	29	3	43
Children have free access to learning materials.	3	43	6	100
Teachers arrange enough space for indoor activities.	4	57	3	50
Teachers arrange enough child-sized furniture.	4	57	5	83

*Note.* The above characteristics mostly come from the original items of MELE, with a few newly added by the authors. The locations of some MELE items were also re-arranged by the authors.

the time without being able to extend the children's ideas and understandings. Notably, more than half of the observed classrooms, even when all in the two groups are counted, had teachers who could not improve children's understanding and ideas through effective interactions and assistance. Other features of Myanmar's kindergarten classrooms that were common across the two groups draw our attention, such as inadequate physical environment and only a few provisions of learning corners.

#### **5.4 Challenges for introducing the play-based curriculum**

Four major challenges for introducing the play-based curriculum were extracted by analyzing the interview transcripts: large class sizes, lack of parental understanding of the new curriculum, inadequate support from school inspectors, and some teachers' preference for the old curriculum. In the analysis process, 15 codes were found, which were grouped into these four categories. First, several teachers made references to overcrowded classrooms as a significant obstacle to practicing play-based learning. The large class sizes disallow them to manage classrooms and resources efficiently, pay attention to individual children, and adequately assess children, consequently resulting in a teacher burnout. Second, the lack of parental understanding of the play-based curriculum emerged as an issue when the absence of children from kindergartens increased due to parents' dissatisfaction with the new curriculum for leaving their children to simply play without any academic teaching. Third, in the education administration field, school inspectors were seen as one of the obstacles for not being proficient enough to furnish teachers with adequate support or advice. T10 reports, "Different school inspectors gave inconsistent instructions," which was supported by T20, who said, "Some school inspectors did not know well about the nature of the curriculum, so sometimes it is difficult for us to work." The last factor thwarting the introduction of the new curriculum in the field was some teachers' preference for the traditional curriculum, although only a few manifested it openly. T10 confessed she preferred the old curriculum, as she could clearly confirm children's progress in learning. T13 also reported the old assessment system was more to her liking. Kindergarten teachers, if not fully convinced of the essentiality of the play-based curriculum, would certainly turn into a serious hindrance to its application in classrooms.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusions**

This paper was intended to examine the play-based curriculum recently introduced in Myanmar's kindergartens through various perspectives. We first explored the extent and kinds of play incorporated in the national curriculum design through document analysis. We then moved onto exploring teachers' understanding of the new curricular concepts and principles, their implementation levels in the field, and the challenges, based on teacher interviews and classroom observations. Important findings of this research are summarized subsequently.

First, highly structured teacher-directed play accounts for much of the play, both in the intended and the implemented classroom, with little emphasis on free play. Although "free play" and "play for purpose" are both encompassed in the national curriculum, attention to free play is comparably inferior to "play for purpose." As illustrated in the teacher guidebook, "play for purpose" entails a high involvement of teachers in directing children to play. The classroom observation results equally probe that play in kindergartens is dominated by teacher-directed play, with additional evidence that more than half of the teachers lack interactions and assistance for extending children's ideas and understanding. Second, a large disparity of the play-based curriculum implementation was witnessed among kindergarten classrooms, despite teachers' overall good understanding of the new curriculum principles. While all classrooms introduced teacher-directed play, as prescribed in the intended curriculum, none of them practiced child-initiated play other than free play time. Third, the study identified four major challenges to introducing the play-based curriculum in Myanmar's kindergartens:



large class sizes, lack of parental understanding of the new curriculum, inadequate support from school inspectors, and some teachers' preference for the old curriculum. Finally, viewed in light of the above, it is reasonable to conclude that Myanmar's kindergarten curriculum is still at the very onset of the transition to a play-based curriculum, with a long way ahead to the stage where who initiates and controls play matters more.

The reasons behind our findings are discussed here through two questions. First, why does highly structured teacher-directed play make up most of the play in the intended and practiced curriculum when "play for purpose," a synonym of "playful learning," is originally intended? As described by Pyle and Danniels (2017), though rather structured, playful learning necessitates a play context collaboratively created by both teachers and children. Three possible reasons for this are as follows. The first reason rests within the learning outcomes planned in the national curriculum. Many of the planned activities have learning outcomes as "the completion of the planned play" per se, which directs teachers' focus on the implementation of the planned activities rather than on the process of play and what developmental aspects of children should be nurtured through the play as outcomes. Another reason is found in the new concept of "domains" which have not been integrated into the curricular design well and are only vaguely delineated from "subjects." Daily programs, for example, list planned activities by each domain; however, as play is multi-sectoral in nature, simultaneously promoting different aspects of child development and learning, a curricular organization should be revised to incorporate different domains per play. Such a change can nurture a whole-child view of children among teachers and facilitate a smoother transition to the more advanced forms of a play-based curriculum. The last reason lies in a missing link between free play and play for purpose, which is a consequence of little importance given to free play. Instances of free play provide teachers with excellent opportunities to observe children, their play, interest, social relations, likes and dislikes, etc. Once teachers acquire a better understanding of individual children, it can enhance the quality of planned play. The current policy of no teacher involvement during free play may also be questioned, as evidence indicates the effectiveness of teacher involvement (Aras, 2016).

For the second question, we should ask why there was a large disparity in the play-based curriculum implementation levels among classrooms. One possible account for the low level can be teachers' likings for the long-standing direct instructional methods that is still comfortable for many (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). In Myanmar particularly, a transition to the play-based learning is even more difficult, because kindergarten teachers are selected from primary school teachers who are generally more accustomed to the traditional teaching approach. Another possible account may be parents' high demand for academic learning at kindergartens, as teachers' perceptions of parental concerns are known to influence the play-based curriculum implementation (Fung & Cheng, 2012).

This study has a couple of limitations. Different samples used for the teacher interviews and the classroom observations did not allow us to precisely evaluate the relationships between teachers' understanding of the curriculum and their implementation levels. Moreover, the small sample size in geographically limited areas makes it difficult to generalize the findings. Future studies of a longitudinal design should explore details of the transitional process to the play-based curriculum as well as the effect of the play-based curriculum on child development and learning in a developing country context.

## Notes

1. Various terms are used in different countries to refer to care and education during early childhood. ECCD is often used interchangeably with ECD, which covers all areas of child development with an emphasis on multi-sectoral support, the use of formal, non-formal, and informal modalities, and inclusion of early primary graders in its scope (Hamano & Miwa, 2012).
2. The new curriculum remains effective as of September 2021, although kindergartens have been

- closed or inactive due to the coronavirus pandemic and the military coup.
3. After kindergartens, children proceed to basic education of 12 years, composed of compulsory primary education (five years), middle school education (four years), and high school education (three years).
  4. Because the “contents” specify what needs to be done with children in detail (See Table 1), the “learning activities” teachers plan may only be the methods for application in reality.
  5. The MELE module includes items related to play-based learning, with concepts similar to those expressed in Myanmar’s play-based curriculum.
  6. Three positions for primary school teachers are primary-, junior-, and senior-assistant teachers. They attended two-week in-service training on the new play-based curriculum to teach kindergartens.

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