

# **Exploring Play-based Pedagogy in Government Pre-primary Classrooms of Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates classroom practices and teachers' perception to implement play-based pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms in Bangladesh. By applying a qualitative framework for data collection from six government pre-primary schools, and analysing those data, this paper critically examines the limitations exist in regard to implementation of play based pedagogy. It argues that implementation of play-based teaching and learning approach in the government pre-primary classrooms in Bangladesh has its own boundaries in terms of inadequate teachers professional development insufficient space for large number of students, and conservative use of play materials. Findings of the study indicates the focus of one-year pre-primary education mostly towards formal school readiness, hence emphasizes on classroom activities to develop children's academic skills. It also shows less scope of child directed spontaneous play to foster those academic skills, and wide use of teacher directed structured play-based activities during classroom hours, often compromising free play hours. Finally, this paper signposts the ambiguous perception of teachers regarding play based pedagogy as teaching-learning method. Furthermore, considering the emphasis of learning through play by the Government of Bangladesh (NCTB, 2011), this equivocal perception of teachers about play based pedagogy may lead the generation backward to the traditional rote based teaching-learning method. Therefore, high attention should be paid for strengthening teachers' professional development.

## **Key words**

Play-based pedagogy; play-based learning; play; teachers' perception; free play; guided play

## **Background**

Play is the tool children use to explore their physical and social world. Through the phenomenon of play, children develop and learn as they participate in the classroom activities (Sussman, 2012, p.3). The fact that children learn and explore about their surroundings, and develop essential life skills most effectively through play, has been proved through numerous researches around the world (Anderson-McNamee, 2010; Cutter-Mackenzie et al.,; Whitebread, 2012). Play is primarily viewed as an instrument of learning and development but also as the means by which children learn to be happy, and mentally healthy human beings (Cannella & Viruru, 1997). There have also been positive linkages established between play and school readiness of children (Gilbert, Harte, & Patrick, 2011). Play has been recognized by researchers of child development as an important pedagogical tool for children's social, emotional, intellectual and physical development (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, & Ingram, 2010). Pedagogical play has a long and contentious history in early childhood education, beginning with the argument that children learn most 'naturally' from play, and focusing more recently on problematizing what and how children learn through play (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore, & Boyd, 2014). Pedagogical play refers to the use of play in early childhood education to promote the learning of young children (Wood, 2010). Play based learning has been emphasized in the early years learning framework of many countries in different parts of the world (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; Ministry of Education, 2013; NAEYC, 2009). Following are examples from some of the countries which have put play-based learning at the core of their learning framework:

Play based pedagogy has been emphasized in Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, p.6) where it is defined as: "a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations."

According to Singaporean Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education, 2013, p.25?), "Play is the primary mechanism through which children encounter and explore their immediate environment. As such, the play becomes a natural way to motivate children to learn about themselves and the world around them".

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) states play based learning (CMEC, 2010, p.1), "When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles, or experimenting with different materials, they are engaged in learning through play." Therefore, it is easy to comprehend from the global discourse of play in early childhood education that play based pedagogy is about facilitating a learning environment for children where children would naturally and spontaneously explore their environment and learn by doing, creating, making and manipulating.

With the global movements on early childhood development, early childhood education has received significant growth and attention over the past three decades in Bangladesh. Early childhood education and development has been recognized and strengthened through a number of important policies and frameworks taken by the government such as: The Pre-primary Operational Framework 2008, National Education policy 2010, National Children Policy 2011, and most importantly the Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy drafted in 2013. Pre-primary education has been a success story in Bangladesh since post 2013. The Government of Bangladesh has invested heavily in pre-primary education resulting in significant increase in net enrolment rate through universal pre-primary education; developing

national pre-primary curriculum, textbooks, and teachers' guide; professional development for thousands of pre-primary teachers. More than 93,000 primary education institutions in Bangladesh offer pre-primary classes, which together served 2.9 million children in 2015 (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education [MoPME], 2015).

However, play phenomena in terms of 'learning through play' or 'play based pedagogy' is still a nascent concept in the area of early childhood education in Bangladesh. There has not been much discussion or research on play and early year's education in the context of Bangladesh. It has been explicitly mentioned in the Operational Framework for Pre-primary Education (2008, p. 8) in Bangladesh,

Pre-primary education is the developmental and educational support provided to the child in the age range of 3 to <6 years in order to ensure the child's right to protection, care, survival and preparation for school education through play, amusement and introduction to literacy and numeracy, irrespective of the child's physical, mental and social status.

Learning through play is also emphasized in the government pre-primary curriculum of Bangladesh. Two out of the five learning principles for children says: "Children learn by playing and doing"; and "Play is a joyful learning experience for children" (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2011).

Yet, there is rarely any relevant study or evidence that can be found that explores the scope and practice of play based pedagogy that takes place in the pre-primary classrooms in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study looks into the research questions below:

- What is the scope of using play-based pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms in terms of space, materials, and pedagogy?
- How the activities are being implemented using (or not using) play based pedagogy in the classrooms?
- What is the understanding and perception of the teachers on play-based teaching-learning approach and their role in it?

## **Methodology**

To explore the answers to the mentioned research questions, this study has adopted a qualitative approach to explore the existing classroom practices and teacher's role and perception on the implementation of play based pedagogical approach in the pre-primary classrooms in two different districts, Dhaka and Comilla, in Bangladesh. For this study, the qualitative framework has considered most appropriate given the interests of this paper to 'how' (perception) and 'what' (experiencing the real setting) rather than a quantitative interpretation of 'how many' (Silverman, 2010). Researchers (Creswell, 2007) also argued that the decision of choosing research methods (qualitative or quantitative) for a particular study depends on the research problem that study is analysing. If the problem intrinsically refers to highlighting on 'capturing the context within which people interact', emphasizing on 'voice' and individual narration, then a qualitative framework is ideal for that.

Data were collected primarily through classroom observation of six government pre-primary classes (2 urban, 2 semi-urban, 2 rural) and in-depth interviews of six government pre-primary teachers from the same schools. The classroom observation helped this paper to assimilate the ways children interact and perform in classroom settings, the ways teaching-learning materials are organized and prioritized for learning in (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012, p.150-160). Moreover, combination of both observation and interview method guided this paper to recognize the interrelationships between the implementation of play-based learning in the classroom settings and the teachers' (informants) perspective through further in-depth interviewing the teachers which has given them enough freedom to enter into the details of the issue (Del Rio-Roberts, 2009).

### *Classroom Observation*

Six government pre-primary classrooms have been observed for at least two hours each day on an average. The observation period was typically from 9:00 am and to 11:00 am. Each classroom has been observed for three consecutive days. The number of children varied from 30 to over 100 in different classrooms. The urban classrooms were particularly large in numbers. The observation was conducted using an open-ended observation checklist. The observation checklist was developed combining adapted indicators/question-structures from Rubin's Play Observation Scale (Kenneth, 2001) and the teachers' guide for pre-primary education.

### *In-depth Interview with Teachers*

One teacher from each of the six observed classrooms and in total, six teachers have been interviewed. Each of the interviews was 60 minutes long on an average. An open-ended interview protocol has been used for the interviews considering the key research questions.

The study sites have been chosen considering the easy accessibility in the government pre-primary schools by the researchers. Purposive sampling technique has been used to include representative sample from rural, semi-urban and urban contexts. The main two criteria for selecting pre-primary classrooms were: a) government pre-primary that caters for 5 – 6 year old children, b) functional and accessible for classroom observation during the data collection period of this study. The teachers for interviews had been selected from the classrooms that had been observed for cross analysis of classroom practices and teachers' perception.

The data had been analysed mainly through content analysis. According to Krippendorff (1980), "Content analysis is a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action". Data analysis was an on-going process from the beginning of data collection and had been captured through field notes and audio recordings during data collection. Then the data (from each of the observations and interviews) had been transcribed verbatim from the field notes and recordings. After that, the transcribed data had been reviewed and progressively following the content analysis technique, data had been categorized into three broad themes (Elo & Kyngas, 2008): physical infrastructure, materials and classroom activities. Classroom activities has further been narrowed down into smaller sub-themes such as: literacy, numeracy, health and hygiene, science and play time. Then the data collected from observation and interview had been triangulated using the categorized themes according to the main issues/ideas found. Ethical considerations have been ensured by taking written consent from the school authority and the teachers.

## Findings

The findings have been organized in four main sections according to the data collected from classroom observation and interview. First section reflects the physical facilities of the classrooms for facilitating play environment followed by the section that reflects on availability and use of play materials in those classrooms. Here, the data from classroom observation and teachers' interview have been triangulated and represented thematically. The third section mainly presents the findings on classroom activities and the extent and use of play based pedagogy for different lessons. The fourth or final section presents the findings mainly from teachers' interview to portray teachers' perception on play based pedagogy. Overall, each section presents thematically organized data according to the key research questions for this study.

### *Physical facilities for play environment in the schools*

For implementing play-based pedagogy this study observed infrastructural facilities, in terms of space and materials in the six pre-primary schools. Classroom environment and space arrangements are two of the important key elements to enhance young children's play in the classroom (Heidemann, 2010). Since all six pre-primary classrooms observed were situated within the primary school premises, all of them had reasonable sized playgrounds as outdoor space inside the schools. However, most of the playgrounds did not have any play equipment except for one having a slide and a see-saw at one corner of the playground. One playground was non-functional due to the water clogging for rainfall. Whereas researchers argue about the influence of planned outdoor space on children's learning and development (White, 2008) and its compatibility with the philosophy of the whole institutional policies (McAuley, 1992). Debord (2005) argued about the positive relationship between higher quality outdoor environments and children's constructive play behaviour.

Findings show, four out of the six pre-primary classrooms had adequate indoor spaces with rectangular or square shaped rooms with at least two big windows allowing plenty of air and light. However, two of them were quite small in size and one of them was turned into a classroom out of a store room due to lack of availability of additional classroom within the primary school premise. According to one of the teachers interviewed, "Not all primary schools had an extra classroom which could be given for the pre-primary class. Some schools had to build one additional classroom and some just utilized an existing space that was used for some other purposes before". Although most of the classrooms observed had sufficient space for movement and activities, a couple of pre-primary classes were still cramped with huge number of children. One classroom had, on an average, 93 children present out of 110 registered children during the observation period. Although being a newly built large size classroom, it was impossible for children to engage in any activity that required any sort of movement. A relevant study found that children in smaller classes interact more with their teachers, which is on average 213 times compared to 144 times in a large class (Blatchford, 2003).

In two out of six classrooms there were corner areas found for free play that include four defined play corners labelled as: imagination corner, block corner, water and sand corner, and book and art corner, with sufficient amount of play materials. In response to the absence of play corners in the other four classes, one teacher said, "We usually keep the play materials inside the cupboard due to scarcity of funds for the materials and we need to take care of those. We usually give children the play materials during the free play time." Another teacher said, "Although we don't have the

designated play corners, children usually divide them in groups and play in different corners during the play time.” However, such situation could not be observed during the observation period. The two urban classes and one semi-urban classroom were well decorated with charts, pictures and children’s artworks, while rest of the classrooms observed, were not decorated at all. The walls were empty in these classrooms only with a blackboard hung on one wall.

In terms of sitting arrangement, children in all classrooms sat on the floor on a floor mat. The common furniture in all the classrooms were: a cupboard for keeping books, copies and play and other learning materials, a table and chair for the teacher. In all pre-primary classrooms, except one, children’s sitting arrangement was being changed from big circle to small groups to pairs according to the activities. However, in one classroom with 93 children, no pattern or group could be observed due to the large number of children cramped in an insufficient space. There was no space for any sort of movement and children had to sit in the same place for the entire duration of class. Here class size is a concern for optimum level of development of children because smaller classes ensure more active involvement with the teachers and there’s a higher chance of kids and teachers being off task (Francis, 2014). Another study suggests that students from lower-socioeconomic groups, at-risk students and English Language Learners (E.L.L.) benefit the most from smaller class sizes (Jenkins, 2014).

#### *Availability and use of play materials*

Plenty of teaching-learning and play materials were available in all pre-primary classes except one. As teaching-learning materials, the government textbook for pre-primary - ‘*Amar Boi*’, a writing practice book, alphabet charts, flash cards with alphabets and numbers, were commonly available. As play materials, in the two pre-primary classrooms that had play corners, had materials such as: story books, colour books, crayons/colour pencils etc. for book and art corner; dolls, plastic boats, plastic cooking utensils, plastic animals etc. for imagination corner; blocks with and without alphabets, words or pictures, and puzzles for block corners; and sand, plastic bowl, funnel, measuring cup etc. for the sand and water corner.

Despite not having any play corners in rest of the classrooms there were sufficient play materials available. Only one pre-primary classroom having highest number of children had no play materials as observed. Only some alphabet flash cards were used by the teacher during teaching Bangla alphabets. In response to the query regarding play materials, the teacher said, “There are some materials available which are kept inside the cupboard in the teachers’ room due to lack of space within the classroom. However, using them in a classroom full of 93 children is an extremely challenging task.”

Regarding the use of play materials by the teacher and the children, the teachers did not seem much enthusiastic about giving the materials in children’s hand. This supports the findings by Chowdhury and Rivalland where they revealed, that the young children did not have access to challenging play materials that encourage diverse play activities, or involve problem solving or decision making (Chowdhary & Rivalland, 2011). Most of the classes had no play corners or designated spaces for keeping play materials where children could get an easy access to them. Instead, the materials were put inside the cupboards. Goldstein (2012) established in their study that children with access to a variety of toys were found to reach higher levels of intellectual achievement, regardless of their sex, race, or social class. Although the play materials were given to the children during the free-play time, the teachers mostly seemed to be concerned about the

issue that children may break or lose toys. One teacher said, “It becomes difficult to manage the children when I give them play materials and toys. Children start fighting over the toys and sometimes break the toys.” Another teacher said, “I always have to be careful while giving them toys as they tend to lose those. The school does not have enough budgets for play materials. I have to sustain them for this academic year.” Therefore, it was of no surprise to see the play materials as intact even in the classes with play corners. Some cooking utensils, dolls, plastic animals and blocks were still newly packed and unopened. In one of the classrooms, few children were observed to be discussing among themselves, “Today may be we will get a chance to play with the new toys since there are visitors here”. During the free-play time, the teacher’s job was mostly to observe the children so that they don’t destroy the play materials.

### *Classroom Activities and Play*

Classroom activities in all pre-primary classes were conducted according to a routine set for that particular class which usually divided the class hours into a number of periods, such as: language, mathematics, rhymes/songs, science/environment, free play etc. To understand the classroom activities from the lens of play-based pedagogy, different types of activities observed in the six classes have been categorized according to the key activity areas that have been commonly done in the observed classes:

**Literacy:** A big chunk of the classroom activities is taken by literacy activities that mostly included two main areas: a) Identifying and writing alphabets and numbers; b) Rhymes, songs and storytelling.

*Identifying and writing alphabets:* Teachers in all observed classes conducted activities with flash cards for alphabet identification. Showing the flashcards to the children teachers commonly asked questions like: “Which letter is this?” “Can you name a word begins with this letter?” usually in big groups or to the whole class. In one classroom, the teacher put the children into two groups and gave them two sets of flash cards of Bangla alphabets and asked to separate the vowels and consonants. While the children were sorting, the teacher went around to support them so that they can do the activity correctly.

For letter identification, another common thing that the teachers did in most of the classes was to write letters on the board and ask children the same sort of questions mentioned above. The children would answer and repeat the same answer a number of times. For example, in one class the teacher wrote Bangla alphabet ‘*Oi*’ on the board and did the following activity:

Teacher: “Which letter is this?”

Children (all together): “*Oi*” (repeated these two lines twice)

Teacher: “What is a word with *Oi*?”

Children: “*Oirabol*” (Elephant) (repeated again)

Thus, the teacher repeated the same thing a number of times with a couple more alphabets. Since the social interactions involving language that children experience during play helps construct their literacy knowledge (Tsao, 2008), such repetitive activities made the children restless sometimes due to less interaction and more rote learning.

In two out of six classrooms teachers played a game using an indigenous rhyme with the children. The name of the game was *Mala go Mala* (*Mala o Mala*, where *Mala* is a name of a girl) which is described below as observed:

The teacher instructed the children to come to the middle of the classroom and form a circle, holding hands. Then she picked one girl as 'Mala' and asked her to stand in the middle of the circle. After that she picked up the alphabet flashcards and asked Mala to pick one card. Then the teacher addressed the girl as 'Mala' and asked, "Which alphabet did you pick?" If the girl couldn't answer, then the teacher asked other children to say the correct answer. But if the girl could answer, the teacher started the rhyme "*Mala go Mala esho kori kbela*" (*Mala o Mala come let's play*) with which the children sang in chorus and walked around in a circle. Then again, the teacher would pick the next 'Mala' to continue the game.

Despite 'Mala' refers to a girl's name, boys also played as 'Mala' in the game. The game engaged the whole class and children seemed to be enjoying it.

In terms of writing alphabets and numbers, the usual practices that have been observed in most of the classes were either writing on the board or practice writing in the workbooks or notebooks. The teacher usually wrote a letter or number on the board and asked the children to identify it and then bring children to the board to write it. In some of the classes it has been observed that the teacher would just pick a child to come to the board and ask him/her to write an alphabet on the board. Another common writing activity in most of the classes was to practice writing alphabets and numbers on the pre-primary workbooks. Writing exercises seemed to be a tool for the teacher to keep the children busy or engaged. In one of the classrooms, with a large number of children, the teacher asked the children to write the alphabets in their notebook while it became so chaotic and unmanageable. Drawing was also a part of regular classroom activities which can be considered as a pre-writing activity.

*Rhymes, songs and storytelling:* In the classrooms observed, teachers were usually leading the rhymes or songs and children were repeating after them. In one classroom, the teacher asked the children about which song they wanted to sing and children answered "*megher kole rod besbebe*", a common Bangla Tagore song about children on holidays. In other instances, teachers called children one by one and they had to come and recite a rhyme in front of the class, while the rest of the learners clapped with it.

Findings show, story-telling as an engaging task for the children and challenging for the teachers. One of the teachers said, "Children love listening to stories. However, it is difficult to engage all children through storytelling, especially in a large classroom as this one". Another teacher said, "I can teach children new vocabulary and discuss about different types of events and places through storytelling". In her classroom, the storytelling activity has been observed to be conducted in the following way:

The teacher started the story by showing the children the book and the picture on the front cover, and at the same time telling children the name of the story '*Beranor Ekdin*' (A day out). The children repeat after the teacher.!" Then showing the picture she asked children, "This owl likes to go out. Do you like to go out?" Children replied all together, "Yes!"



This is how the teacher started the class. However, as she continued with the story, in few minutes some of the children became restless at the back and started moving. When it became chaotic, the teacher had to stop the story and told them to calm down or she will not continue with the story. The children calmed down for a while but started becoming restless again in a few minutes. It was difficult for the teacher to keep the attention of all children.

However, she utilized the storytelling activity to teach children names of different fishes, names of seven days in a week, etc. The teacher was also asking questions like, “Do you like it?”, “Do you know about it?”, “Which colour is this?”, “Which animal is this?” etc. The children were enthusiastically answering those questions.

**Numeracy:** Numeracy is another big portion of the classroom activity in the pre-primary classrooms. The main topics that have been covered in the observed classes were concepts of number, counting and size.

**Number and Counting:** The concept of number and counting have been introduced using clapping, pictures on the board, number flash cards, seeds/pop sticks counting or counting objects surrounding the children and through a number rhyme in three of the observed classrooms. In one classroom, the teacher showed children flashcards with a number in one side and corresponding objects (pictures of birds, flowers etc.) on the other side. Showing the flashcard, the teacher asked children to count the flowers in another side. Later on, she asked them, “How many flowers were there?” The children answered, “Three.” Then the teacher repeated the same exercise with few more students with numbers from one to five. After continuing this activity for a few minutes, the teacher started a rhyme with numbers from one to five. She performed the rhymes with movement and gestures and asked the children to follow her. In another classroom, the teacher took small pots full of seeds and gave them to the children in four groups. Then she told children a number and asked them to count this number of seeds and put them in a separate place. The teacher then tried the same activity using pop sticks instead of seeds. The children seemed to be excited with these activities. The teacher said, “Children like counting with different types of objects and therefore I try to collect materials that could be used for this type of activities.” However, in the rest of the observed classes, the only type of activity that have been used were counting one to five and writing them on the notebook along with the teacher.

**Concept of Size:** The concept of size has been introduced in the observed classes mainly through comparing real objects or drawing pictures on the board. In one classroom the teacher showed children two different sizes of pencils and asked them, “which one is short and which one is tall?” In another instance, the teacher drew a smaller and a bigger tree and asked similar questions in terms of their sizes. This type of activity has been done with the whole class as well as by asking individual child.

**Health and Hygiene:** Health and nutrition education was another area emphasized in the class routine of the observed pre-primary classes. In one of the classes the topic “hand washing” was discussed by the teacher. The teacher basically described the process of hand washing to the children and explained them step by step the process and reasons behind washing hands without any demonstration. In the same class, as part of the nutrition education, just before the end of the class the teacher went round and asked everyone what their favourite fruit is. Then she discussed about the nutritional value of fruits and about maintaining a good diet.

In another pre-primary classroom, the teacher engaged the children in a “Train game” to make them aware about the importance of cleanliness. The game is described below as observed:

The teacher instructed a group of students (first the boys and then the girls) to form a line that would look like a human train and then move like a train within the classroom. The children started moving around making train like whistles with their mouth. Each time the teacher asked the students to stop at a specific station. The stations were named as different body parts e.g. nail-station (*Nokhpur*), ear-station (*Kanpur*), eye-station (*chokhpur*), teeth-station (*daatpur*) and hair-station (*chulpur*). When they stopped at a particular station, e.g., the nail-station (*Nokhpur*), the teacher said, “Show me your nails.” Each of the children showed their nails to the teacher. The teacher then checked if the nails of the children were clean. Children whose nails were not clean were asked to come out of the line. The rest of the children stayed in the train and moved until the teacher asked them to stop at another station and checked their cleanliness.

**Science:** Pre-primary schools also have a dedicated science class. The observed classes covered environment, technology, and transportation under science education.

In one of the classes, while discussing home environment activity with the children, the teacher first took out a chart of domestic animals, then asked the children to tell the names of the animals. All children could tell the names of all the animals. Then the teacher selected one child from the class and asked her, “Tell us about your home environment. What types of things and animals do you have at your home?” The child answered, “At home I have my mother, father and sister, soil, straw, pond, cow, goat, hens, ducks and trees.” The teacher then picked another child and asked the same question and he responded with similar answer. Then she asked the whole class, “Have you seen the same animals at your home?” They all responded together, “Yes.” She then added that some animals live in the pond, e.g. ducks, some stays on the ground, e.g. goat. She also made them aware that going near to the pond can be dangerous if children cannot swim. At the end she summarized the discussion by saying “All these you have mentioned, and we have discussed about are the part of our environment and this is our home environment.”

Then she invited another child in the front and asked him, “Please tell us the names of some of the elements that you have in your classroom.” The child responded, “We have blackboard, books, chalk, pens, pencils, pictures, toys and posters.” The teacher then asked a couple more children the same question and they responded in a similar manner. Finally, the teacher summarized by saying, “All the components those we have in our classroom are called the classroom environment.”

While providing the concept of technology, the common practices that have been observed in the preschools were using flipchart followed by repeating the names of the objects. A flipchart containing the pictures of iron, bulb, tube light, mic, speaker, umbrella, fan, hurricane, lamp was hung up on the wall of one side of the classroom was used in one class. Pointing to the pictures in the flipchart the teacher read out each of the object’s name. Although the chart was not clearly seen by all the students, the teacher asked them to repeat the names of the objects several times. At the end of that repetition, the teacher described the functions of each of the objects.

The lesson on transportation was also done in a similar repetitive style using a chart, except for one class where the teacher started with asking children about which transport, they have taken to come to school and asked them to identify those vehicles from the chart.

**Play time:** Play time was structured in the classroom activities mainly through guided play and free play. There were a number of guided plays suggested in the teachers' guide which the teachers used sometimes for teaching academic skills and sometimes just as fillers between two particular academic lessons. As described by one teacher, "Guided play was a teacher-led play designed to engage children in a joyful learning environment." A guided play as observed in one of the pre-primary classes is described below:

Mirror Game: The teacher started the game saying, "Do you want to play a game now? Let's play Mirror game." The teacher then started acting as a mirror and asked the children to imitate her activities considering her as a mirror. Then she began to touch different parts of her face and hands and the whole class started imitating her. After doing this for a few minutes she stopped and asked children, "Now who wants to be the mirror? Raise your hand." All children raised their hands and she picked one child among them and asked him to act like a mirror. The child started different activities like, moving body parts, jumping etc. and the rest of the class along with the teacher started following her. Then after letting few children to act like a mirror, she concluded the activity by asking children about whether they have a mirror at home or not, and explaining children that mirror does the same things as people do.

Free play time was the only time when children could play spontaneously on their own and with their choice of materials available in different corners. However, particular play corners were assigned to particular groups by the teacher. Children in the groups did not have the opportunity to choose the corner where they would like to play. The lowest time allocated for free play was five minutes in one class and the highest was 15 minutes in other classes. During the free-play time children were mostly engaged in solitary play and parallel play. In a particular corner, an individual child had the opportunity to choose the play materials s/he wants to play with. In the imagination corner girls started playing with dolls, however, they were mostly engaged in parallel plays. Few children started playing with cooking utensils and few boys started playing with toy cars. One child started playing a flute. The group assigned to the book and art corner eventually moved away from that corner and started playing in the block or imagination corner. Only in one class, children were allowed to play with water and sand.

However, the teacher looked mostly conscious about children making the classroom messy with water and sand. Children seemed to be enjoying playing with plastic ducks in the water bowl. Few children took the funnels and started pouring water into the funnel with plastic bottles available in that corner. In the block corner, few children started making beautiful structures such as: tall buildings, planes, cars etc. with Lego pieces. Outdoor space was not utilized at all for the free play time in any of the classes during the observation period. Teachers' involvement during the free play time was minimal. In one class teachers attempted to go around and ask children about what they were doing. But in most cases teachers spent more time in managing the children when children at times started fighting about sharing toys, and for saving the toys so that children don't destroy or lose them. However, free play time seemed to be the most chaotic yet most enjoyable and happy time for children. Research shows that free play fulfils a crucial role in the child's

holistic development and should therefore take a central role in the preschool curriculum. Employing free play as a major teaching technique prepares the child for formal school and life in general (Dube, 2013).

### *Teachers' perception on play-based pedagogy*

Six teachers (one from each pre-primary class) have been interviewed to understand their insight on play-based pedagogy. Five of them (ages 20-35) received the 15 day induction training for pre-primary and had teaching experience of 1 – 7 years, except for one who had 15 years of teaching experience.

In response to understanding about play based learning, most of the teachers mentioned phrases such as: “joyful learning” and “learning through play, song, dance, drama etc.” However, one teacher said, “Singing and dancing are part of cultural activities, not play.” She mostly mentioned about the examples from the guided play in terms of play-based teaching learning activities. In response to the types of play-based activities in the class, all teachers mentioned about the teacher-led guided plays, for instance, different songs and rhymes on learning *shorborbo* (vowels), *byanjonborbo* (consonant) and *Shonkhyia* (numbers).” One teacher mentioned, “I take children outside sometimes to teach them about plants and environment.” Another one said, “We have acting, role play and story-telling among the play activities.”

While providing opinion about significance of learning through play for children, all teachers responded positively. One teacher stated, “Teaching through play-based activities attract children. They have fun while playing. I can teach alphabets and numbers easily through the game *mala-go-mala*.” Most of the teachers mentioned that children can learn about new things through play. One of the examples was: “*Jemon dboro* game (from the guided playlist) through which children can learn about the names of animals, flowers, countries etc.” Another example was: “Through story-telling, children learn about good and bad, morals, numbers and colours.” One of them also mentioned, “If the children just memorize the letters, sometimes they cannot remember it. But using flashcards and pictures together to teach letters and words, children can remember them easily.”

In terms of implementing play-based activities in the classroom, teachers mentioned this as a relief from the monotonous regular teaching-learning practices. It does not let children become bored or restless in the class and keep them active. However, they have also highlighted some challenges while implementing play-based pedagogy. Most of the teachers mentioned about the scarcity of materials and space compared to the number of children. One of the teachers mentioned,

Play materials are expensive and not much available in the schools in rural areas. Some of the materials (e.g. flash cards, number cards, toys etc.) were received from government, some were donated by NGOs and some from the community. Government has a pre-allocated special budget for each pre-primary school for providing play-based materials, which is insufficient compared to the need.

Another teacher from one of the rural schools said, “I don't give them play materials every day. If we let children play with all materials, then they might lose or destroy them, and I have to be accountable to the school authority.”

Insufficient space was another challenge identified by teachers as previously mentioned in the infrastructure section of this chapter regarding lack of space of play corners.

Managing a large number of children following a time-crunched structured class routine is one of the challenges of implementing play-based learning. One of the teachers mentioned,

We have to follow the routine. The time allocated for each period is not sufficient. For example: there is 10 minutes allocated in the beginning of a class for an activity called ‘introducing yourself’ which takes longer than 10 minutes because I have about 45 children in my class. Furthermore, in the routine, there is 25 minutes of pre-reading and pre-writing and 20 minutes rhymes, songs and dance which also takes longer than the allocated time. Therefore, it is difficult to plan and implement different play activities for the children.

Another teacher said, highlighting the difficulty of classroom management, “It is difficult for one teacher to implement all activities according to the routine. If two trained teachers could manage one class, it would have been easier for us to implement all play activities.” Despite the challenges mentioned by the teachers, most of them realize that children can learn better through play.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the classroom practices of children in regards to play and teachers’ perception towards implementing play-based pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms in Bangladesh. The study shows that, classroom activities in the pre-primary level are mostly focused on academic skills, particularly literacy and numeracy skills. Since the one-year pre-primary education in the context of Bangladesh is mainly focused on preparing children for formal schooling. Emphasis on learning alphabets, words, numbers, counting, environmental education etc. were more evident in the classroom activities through the findings of this study. However, in terms of conducting activities for fostering these skills, not much scope of child directed, spontaneous play in the classroom activities is observed during the class time. Apart from the guided play and free play time, classroom activities were mostly found as structured focusing on teacher directed lectures, discussions, rote learning and repetition. This contradicts with the conviction that *children learn by being active* which is defined as a *child’s inner drive* by Froebel and Montessori, *teachers adapting activities to the child’s level of development* by High/scope program, and *children’s interaction with the world around them* by Reggio Emilia (Samuelsson, 2008). While researchers argue that, literacy and numeracy skills for early years are best developed by engaging in play (Hall, 1991), during the day to day routines and don’t need to be ‘taught’ (McMonagle, 2012), this study indicates, alphabets and numbers are being taught mostly through reading and repeating letters with the teacher and writing them in the notebook or on the board in the literacy and numeracy classes. However, vocabulary, oral language, counting and concept of measurement are mostly being developed through stories, rhymes or using real life objects which is more engaging for the children. According to Saracho and Spodek (2006), “Play and literacy relationship become more striking as play helps young children explore and comprehend the interactions between these two realms of activity.”. Although the discussion method (as described in the science class) and story-telling classes signpost the engagement of the children, many a time the classes are being chaotic with a large number of children.

However, the play was not entirely absent from the daily classroom activities. In spite of a number of limitations, a few examples of play-based teaching learning practices were observed in the government pre-primary classrooms. The findings indicated a number of guided plays were being implemented as suggested in the teachers’ guide. Rhymes, songs and story-telling were also some

engaging activities for children, not only for developing their literacy skills, but also encouraging social and emotional skills (participation, interaction, self-confidence, empathy etc). According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland (Kernan, 2007; p. 14),

In countries where the pre-primary or readiness for school model of ECCE dominates (Ireland and the UK have been cited as pertinent examples by Bennett, 2005), play tends to be curricularised with an associated need to identify specific purposes or functions of play in children's learning and development which are often articulated in terms of specific academic subjects.

The pre-primary education context of Bangladesh seems to have a similar model of school readiness where guided plays have been designed in a way to achieve some specific academic skills.

In terms of scope of play, as described by the teachers and as observed in the classes, guided plays, songs, rhymes, drawing, story-telling and free play were commonly implemented play activities in the observed classes, which were again mostly teacher-directed. One relevant study argues that the roles of teachers and children are complementary and dependent on each other: the more the teacher is leading the play or play process, the less possibilities children have to be active (Hyvonen, 2011). The only scope of spontaneous play time was the 'free-play time' which was not being utilized properly to promote different developmental aspects of children. The allocated 20 minutes of free-play time was being compromised due to more focus and time on other subject based learning, providing less scope for children to explore and interact with play materials and peers. As a result, there have been little or no scope of socio-dramatic play, cooperative play, creative play, fantasy play, pretend play, role play, rough and tumble play, and loco-motor play could be observed in these classes. The little amount of free play time that the children were getting in the observed classes, mostly gave the opportunity for a little amount of solitary play and parallel play. Although few teachers mentioned that they take children outside sometimes for playing, there was no outdoor play event could be observed in the pre-primary schools in spite of having playgrounds in the school premises. Kernan (2007) reveals, children at this age (5 – 6 years old) prefer to enjoy more free-time and spontaneity, playing with friends and playing outdoors in their school time, which was not much evident in the pre-primary schools observed under this study.

On the other hand, teachers had minimum involvement in children's play during the free-play time. Not much scope of creativity or support could be observed from the teachers' side. In this case, support of play is defined as a subtle presence of the preschool teacher, who builds on children's interests (Miller, 2009). In spite of having sufficient space and materials in some of the classrooms, creating a play environment, and utilizing the play materials, were not a priority for the teachers. They seemed to be mostly concerned about keeping the materials safe and intact because of no certainty of available funding in the school for purchasing new materials. With the only induction training received for pre-primary, most of the teachers tend to fall back to their traditional teaching method of rote learning and repetition. Classroom management seemed to be the most challenging task for them because of the large number of children in pre-primary. Moreover, their perception of play-based pedagogy seemed to be ambiguous in terms of the way they defined play, their idea of the use of play in teaching-learning and their role in play. This may lead them back to the traditional rote based teaching-learning method, which has been widely used in Bangladesh, if their concept and practice of play-based pedagogy is not strengthened through further professional development. The finding in this case is similar to what another study on play-based pedagogy found in the context of Bangladesh, where teachers' play perception and practices

mostly focused on teacher-directed activities where children had little opportunity to choose (Chowdhary & Rivalland, 2011). Similar studies also suggest that non-involvement of preschool teachers or involvement in terms of regulation is more dominant in the reality of institutional early childhood education, which indicates the importance of researching preschool teachers' attitudes towards play (Rengel, 2014).

Therefore, implementing play-based pedagogy in the government pre-primary schools of Bangladesh is still a challenging mission where more investment in teachers' capacity development, materials and space are required. Teachers' capacity development can be aligned in such a way that it would bring changes in knowledge, understanding, behaviour and practices of teachers to implement play-based pedagogy effortlessly in the classrooms. One relevant study suggests that teacher education programs should incorporate the latest research on learning and play, and practice integrating them as adaptation of the process play. It also argues that play in its many forms is significant, but particularly process play should be a part of teacher education, so that new teachers will be competent in designing playful learning processes (Hyvonen, 2011). Pre-primary education has made significant progress in recent years in terms of enrolment, capacity development and policy implementation (MoPME, 2013). Now the focus should go into professional development for teachers in facilitating child-centred, play-based pedagogy as play-based learning can assist children in adjusting to a school setting, enhance children's learning readiness and their cognitive development, allow children to practice basic social skills, develop a sense of self and learn to make friends (Anderson-McNamee, 2010).

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