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## The Challenge of Implementing Free Play in Preschool: Concept Paper

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### Abstract

The National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Revised 2017) describes that the outdoor activities component includes physical activities and free play that aim to build fitness and stimulate the intelligence of students. Free play provides students the opportunity to make independent choices about what, when and how to play. Students are also independent to determine the rules and their roles while playing. This concept paper discusses the challenges of implementing free play among preschool teachers. Based on the review, the implementation of free play is considered not crucial by several parties, causing teachers to not emphasize it and have low knowledge about its application during the teaching and learning process. Research on the implementation of free play is also still under-conducted. There are four main challenges faced by preschool teachers in implementing free play, namely issues of teacher knowledge, resources, materials and tools, time allocation and lack of support from administrators, parents and community. Some recommendations based on the findings of previous studies are also presented to address the challenges faced by preschool teachers.

**Keywords:** Free Play, Children, Preschool Teachers

### Introduction

The main goal and policy of early childhood education curriculum development is to focus on balanced and holistic student development as stated in the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Division of Early Childhood Education (PERMATA), 2013; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Therefore, preschool education is an important and meaningful early experience to give exposure to children from four to six years of age. An effective, meaningful and fun schooling and learning experiences can provide children with skills, self-confidence and a positive attitude for further learning (KPM, 2016).

The National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC) Revised 2017 described that the outdoor activity component includes physical activities and free play that aim to build fitness and stimulate students' intelligence. Outdoor activities must be carried out outside the classroom as it is the best learning environment for preschool children. Naturally, children are attracted to play actively outside the classroom. The implementation of activities outside the classroom allows children to explore their environment, build muscle strength and hand-eye

coordination as well as increase their self-confidence. The activities carried out outside the classroom are an added value to the children's learning experience and promote well-being as well as overall physical development and growth 2

Outdoor activities are divided into two components as included in the NPSC (Revised 2017) which are physical activities and free play. The main purpose of implementing outdoor activities is to build fitness and stimulate children's intelligence as well as give them the opportunity to interact and explore the existing environment. The time allocation for the implementation of physical activity is 30 minutes per session twice a week, while free play takes 20 minutes per session three times a week. In the context of NPSC (Revised 2017), free play means that teachers give children the opportunity to make independent choices about what, when and how to play. They are also independent to decide the rules and roles while playing (Teacher's Handbook, 2017). Free play is also defined as unstructured and fun play activities that involve gross motor movements using the child's entire body and energy (Truelove, et al., 2017, p. 164). Many benefits will be gained from the activities for student learning, especially from the aspects of physical, emotional, cognitive and social skills.

In addition, Catalano (2018) defined free play as a form of play where children independently choose their playmates, content and learning objectives. Free play is not a structured game program that has been planned by teachers or early childhood education practitioners. According to the Warldorf and Montessori programs, free play is one of the main types of activities used in their pedagogy. Both of these programs are based on freedom and respect for children to shape their play according to their interests, talents and creativity. Meanwhile, the teacher has a role to create the environment and maintain the atmosphere as well as ensure that every child is involved in the meaningful play activity. In this situation, children will see reality, understand life experiences and learn about the facts of life through the exploration of games created by them.

Subsequently, the implementation of the integrated curriculum through NPSC Revised (2017) on free play is also in line with the integrated curriculum by the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which is not only focus on cognitive development but also takes into account every aspects of individual development such as emotional, physical, social, language and creativity (Whitebread & Bingham, 2013; Ho and Funk, 2018). NAEYC also believed that children's learning should be based on Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). Teaching and learning (PdP) which is based on DAP and is student-centered prioritizes the ability of individual children to help them continue learning.

### **Problem Statement**

School is a place where students learn various early social skills, especially through play activities. According to Lynch & Simpson (2010), children can develop their social skills by playing, such as empathy for others, communication skills, sharing, listening skills and behaving according to the acceptance of others. If the teachers lack information and knowledge related to social development, especially children's interaction patterns in natural settings such as play activities, it will cause teachers to be insensitive and can barely identify children with social relationship problems (Hanifa & Cigdem, 2017). According to Aliza (2018), teachers recognize the importance of play, but they do not integrate play in PdP activities. This may be due to constraints from the aspects of time allocation, material management,

student control, unsuitable environment, teacher skill, and support from administrators and parents.

The Curriculum Development Division (BPK) conducted an online study on responses from 7539 teachers and PdP observations of 23 preschool teachers from five states in Malaysia (2018). The results showed that there is still confusion among teachers in the implementation of free play. Teachers still implement free play in the classroom and this restricts opportunities for children to explore and interact with materials, tools, friends and the environment. Children do not exhibit good social interaction with their environment. Teachers also lack understanding of their role as play partners in free play activities as most teachers only become observers and do not participate or play an appropriate role when children perform free play. Obstacles in implementing free play for preschool children need to be reviewed and given attention by the concerned parties so that the learning process gains benefit. According to Vygotsky (1978), the importance of play should be emphasized in improving children's language development and social interaction. It is a fundamental aspect that is essential for the child's development process.

A study by Auni & Jasmy (2019) demonstrated that most teachers do not implement free play in learning since they have to follow the desires of parents who are more concerned with academic achievement and consider playing less important and a waste of time. In addition, teachers lack knowledge related to children's social development due to their educational factors and the lack of related courses and how to apply them, resulting in ineffective guidance for children (Hanife & Cigdem, 2017). In fact, the pressure of administrators and parents who are more inclined towards academic achievement causes the bulk of the implementation of the preschool curriculum not as envisaged through the objectives of the national preschool curriculum (Nor, 2018).

However, there are also teachers who are less prepared or have less information and knowledge regarding the implementation of free play and ignore its importance. According to Chee (2017), preschool teachers do not implement PdP as intended by the KSPK Revised (2017) as they do not master the curriculum content. This is equally true to the implementation of free play. Studies from abroad have also found that teachers do not implement PdP well due to a lack of knowledge in their field of teaching in particular (Rosmah & Mariani, 2020).

Sufficient time allocation is a contributor to an effective learning process for children's development. The implementation of free play needs to be planned according to the allotted time, but preschool teachers perceive that the time allocation of 20 minutes for one slot of three times a week as specified by the NPSC (Revised, 2017) is insufficient. Various problems and challenges will arise due to time constraints such as classroom management and student control. According to a study by Aliza et al (2018) on preschool teachers of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, KEMAS kindergartens, Perpaduan kindergartens and also private kindergartens, it was found that the time allocation factor restricted preschool teachers to execute play activities in their PdP. This is because preschool teachers need to take into account aspects of classroom management, materials and tools as well as student control which will also exploit the time allocated for the implementation of free play.

### **Issues of Free Play Implementation**

Basically, the implementation of free play has been in preschool education for a long time. There are many constraints that hinder the implementation of free play based on the NPSC (2017 Review), causing teachers to ignore the free play activities. Several previous studies have reported that the implementation of free play is less implemented by teachers due to few issues that are considered relevant nowadays. In relation to that, the challenges need to be encountered by teachers to implement free play are explained based on four aspects, namely the teacher's knowledge, resources, materials and tools, and time allocation as well as support from administrators, parents and community.

### **Teacher's Knowledge**

Teacher's knowledge in implementing effective PdP is a crucial aspect and must be mastered by all teachers. Low knowledge among teachers regarding the importance of play in children's development is due to the teacher's educational factors and lack of training. According to Hanife and Cigdem (2017), teachers still lack knowledge about children's development that can be acquired through play activities as well as how to apply them for effective guidance to preschool students. In addition, teachers also lack understanding, skills, guidance and courses related to methods to handle the play approach in learning, which results in teachers not being motivated to execute it in school (Jaslina, 2020).

Furthermore, teachers also lack understanding of their role as play partners in free play activities as most of them are only observers and do not participate or play an appropriate role when students perform free play (KPM 2018). In fact, the Teacher's Handbook (2017) also stated about the teacher's role as a play partner where teachers and assistants can collaborate with each other. Meanwhile, Hornáčková (2019) stated that preschool teachers should also play the role of Play Master, where teacher acts as the main planner of the pedagogy that will support children's play by allowing children to independently explore, discover and inquire with their skills while playing. The findings revealed that teachers give less opportunities to children to explore their games and environment, and are more likely to use centralized teaching even during free play activities (Aliza, 2018). In this context, it is seen that preschool teachers still lack skills and need consistent training and guidance (BPK, 2018).

According to Jain (2017), preschool teachers do not implement PdP as intended by the NPSC Revised (2017) as they do not master the curriculum content. This is equally true to the implementation of free play. In other words, preschool teachers are less prepared, and have less information and knowledge related to the implementation of free play. Preschool teachers are also not sensitive to the importance of free play and consider it trivial to implement. Studies from abroad have also found that teachers do not implement PdP well due to a lack of knowledge in their field of teaching in particular (Rosmah & Mariani, 2020). Therefore, further research needs to be conducted to unravel this problem.

A study by Aliza et al (2018) also found that teachers prefer direct and structured teacher-centered teaching. The results of the study demonstrated that 10 of the 12 teachers interviewed chose direct teaching during their PdP. A KPM teacher also revealed that factors of time and pressure from administrators setting learning standards that children must be good at reading caused them to choose direct teaching. Two teachers of Perpaduan kindergarten claimed that the pressure from parents who desired their children to read quickly also interfered with the planning of preschool teachers to implement the student-

centered play activities. On the other hands, all private preschool teachers chose a direct approach as they were uncertain on how to execute the student-centered activities.

### **Resources, Materials and Tools**

Resources, materials and tools are among the factors that contribute to an effective PdP process. Through preschool education, play activities require appropriate and sufficient PdP resources to carry out the activity perfectly. Moreover, it can increase children's interest to try various activities. In addition, the 'hands-on' approach is emphasized to facilitate students to easily understand the the abstract and real learning concepts. The resources, materials and tools provided not only improve physical, cognitive and intellectual development, but also increase their various kinesthetic intelligences and interest when stimulated by interesting materials provided by the teacher during the PdP process (Howard Gardner, 2006).

Factors such as insufficient and impractical teaching materials for PdP, lack of skill in preparing own materials and limited financial resources are some of the obstacles and constraints faced by teachers to implement free play. According to Auni and Jasmy (2019), the problem of lack of resources and materials to handle play activities becomes an obstacle to implement play as it incurs high costs. Moreover, the appropriateness of resources, materials and play tools during the implementation of free play is the important elements in applying play pedagogy (Zakiah, 2016). Although preschool teachers use various approaches and strategies in managing appropriate PdP for self-development, needs, abilities, talents and interests of children, teachers need to provide concrete activities and materials that can attract children's interests (Jain, 2017). As a result, children will actively engage in free play activities. Thus, teachers ought to provide suitable resources and materials to stimulate children's interest in performing free play activities.

In addition, the playground and equipment provided at the preschool are also not well maintained as there is no specific provision for that purpose. Per Capita Grant Assistance (PCG) provides expenses for food and drink as well as learning equipment to student such as stationery and teaching aids (BBM). Consequently, teachers have insufficient allocations to maintain and repair the equipment. Moreover, some teachers still use playground area to carry out free play activities due to the lack of a suitable environment. In an effort to provide early schooling experience to children, the implementation of free play is crucial to be the basis of future development as it allows children to manipulate toys and see the effects (Piaget, 1962). Therefore, the method of playing between teachers and children in a natural environment as well as interactive and diverse equipment can aid children development holistically.

### **Time Allocation**

Sufficient time allocation contributes to an effective learning process for children's development. The implementation of free play needs to be planned according to the allotted time as specified by NPSC (Revised, 2017), which is 20 minutes for one slot for three times a week, but preschool teachers perceive that it is insufficient. Various problems and challenges will arise due to time constraints such as classroom management and student control. According to Aliza (2018), teachers realize the importance of play, but they do not integrate it in PdP due to time allocation constraints as they have to divide time for student management, PdP management as well as materials and tools management.

In planning PdP, time allocation need to be given attention apart from learning objectives, strategies and lesson content (Rosmah & Mariani, 2020). Chervenak (2011) observed at teachers' perspectives on play-based learning and found that most respondents agreed on the importance of integrating play into the curriculum. However, teachers have insufficient time to carry out play activities as they needed to meet the learning standards. In implementing play in preschool, teachers often think about the best way to implement activity according to the allotted time in addition to being able to provide a good and orderly environment, equipment and student control.

The Maria Montessori (1870-1952) program has also influenced early childhood education in Malaysia. The program creates time for outdoor games focusing on exploratory learning in the school environment. The time allotted for free play activities is one hour a day and is placed in the Montessori kindergarten learning timetable which is after mealtime. Johnson et al. (2005) also supported the Montessori's recommendation of allocating time between 30 to 60 minutes every day for the implementation of free play for children. This recommendation will provide children the opportunity to independently choose and explore their own play patterns. This is also similar for the daily program under the Waldorf program which emphasizes the allocation of time around 1.5 hours to two hours a day for the implementation of free play. The Waldoft program also states that free play contributes to the development of children's personality. A free play environment is created based on harmony and peace coupled with the involvement of children playing actively.

The free play planning that is placed in the timetable also needs to be flexible which can be adapted to the emotional and physical readiness of the students to carry out the activities. It will be more compelling and increase students' interest to be actively involved during free play activities. A qualitative study was conducted to examine how three preschool teachers organize the daily timetable of their preschool classes. From the study, it was found that two teachers followed the set timetable and considered it the main determinant of an effective PdP execution throughout the school day. However, it was found that the PdP was not as expected, compounded by the children's emotions being disturbed as they were attached to the timetable. Meanwhile, another teacher was much more flexible and always adjusted the class timetable to suit the planned goals and activities while looking at the level of readiness of the children. As a result, children will be engaged in active and meaningful play activities (Johnson et al., 2005; Wien, 1996).

### **Supports from Administrator, Parent and Community**

Free play recommended in NPSC Revised (2017) has long been in the context of early childhood education. In general, society realizes that play activities can improve children's intelligence and health. According to Froebel (1782-1852), play is a child's nature. Children's holistic development is also affected by part of the implementation of free play. Most of today's teachers are exerted to follow the demands of parents emphasizing on children's academic achievement, especially in the aspects of literacy and numeracy compared to other aspects of development. A study by Auni and Jasmy (2019) showed that most teachers did not implement free play in learning as they have to comply with the desires of parents who were more concerned with academic achievement and considered playing less important and a waste of time.

Foreign studies have also proved that many parents in wealthy societies, such as England, United States and Hong Kong, were not optimistic in the concept of early education to the point that they considered play a waste of time and energy (Chia, 2017). This situation prevent children from enjoying fun and meaningful play activities in their lives. As a result, children are exerted to focus on academics only, especially in the mastery of literacy and numeracy skills which are considered important for the early development of children.

In fact, teachers have not received full support from administrators in implementing free play. Administrators anticipate excellence especially in the aspects of literacy and numeracy for preschool children to maintain the school's reputation in academics in addition to insistence from the State Education Department (PPD). This puts pressure on teachers as they have to focus on academic achievement solely due to the requirement of school (Suziyani, 2021). Accordingly, it is important for administrators to recognize and understand the need for free play to achieve positive development and growth for children. The implementation of quality free play with the support of various parties can attract children's interest to continue learning and build their cognitive development. This is in line with the goals of preschool education which focuses on efforts to provide more fun and meaningful learning for children aged four to six years (Rosmah & Mariani, 2020).

In addition, community support and involvement cannot be taken for granted. The community should be given exposure and understanding about the implementation of free play through learning in preschool. However, teachers are exerted to meet the demands of society nowadays on the mastery of literacy and numeracy among children as early as preschool without considering about the real needs of children's nature to play (Froebel, 1782-1852). Indeed, it has become a common practice in society to compare the academic achievements of children. As a result, parents also compete to ensure that their children have mastered these skills without focusing on the level of development, values and personality of their respective children. In this context, society should realize the importance of play that contributes to the development of children encompassing all domains of skills holistically.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Implementation of Free Play**

Based on the issues and challenges in implementing free play in preschool, there are several suggestions for improvement based on previous studies. The purpose is to provide an overview and insight to teachers and the parties concerned to realize the implementation of free play in preschool as discussed in the following sub-sections.

#### **Free Play Training and Courses**

Preschool teachers regardless of the level of education need to be given training and pedagogical strengthening courses for the implementation of free play in preschool. The JPN and PPD are recommended to organize game workshops for teachers, which will provide them experience in contributing to the development of new knowledge about play-based PdP (Horatiu, 2018). Professional training involving preschool teachers greatly affects teachers' understanding especially about the importance of play in preschool education as well as improving the personal attitude of teachers in implementing free play (Chia, 2017).

In addition, studies on the implementation of free play need to be executed to obtain data so that the concerned parties, especially at the ministry level, can take appropriate



action. The data obtained should be used as a guideline for the ministries and related agencies such as KEMAS, the Department of National Unity and National Integration as well as private parties in their efforts to streamline and improve the effectiveness of free play implementation in Malaysian preschools by planning courses and training specifically for free play pedagogy. It will directly increase the level of competence and professionalism of preschool teachers in implementing a more effective and fun PdP.

### **Continuous Monitoring**

Monitoring the PdP process is a phase in the school administration process to achieve teaching goals, and the school administration is also responsible for supervising teaching (*School Management Division, 2018*). In the issue of free play implementation, the administrator should perform continuous monitoring of its pedagogy based on the preschool curriculum. Indirectly, administrators will also understand the content and intentions of NPSC (Revised 2017) regarding the importance of implementing free play. In addition, continuous monitoring by Nazirite Congregation and curriculum officers also need to meet their expertise criteria specifically in the field of preschool education. The aim is to comply with the coordination of monitoring between monitoring officers, and always giving accurate feedback on the field of preschool education to improve the PdP process. The monitoring officer should also be an individual who regularly attends and is involved in various workshops and special courses regarding monitoring at the school level (Juppri et al., 2020).

Monitoring should also have a special list of standards that refer to the teacher's PdP. Moreover, administrators who will carry out monitoring and observation should also use specific instruments for the implementation of free play. The administrator can also conduct a survey and review of the student's portfolio by observing how the teacher records and documents the assessment related to the implementation of free play.

### **Multilateral Support and Cooperation**

The support and cooperation of various parties is crucial in ensuring that the implementation of free play goes well and leaves a positive impact on preschool children. The administrators should always provide support by helping ensure a conducive pre-school environment and giving autonomy to teachers to use the appropriate school environment for the implementation of free play. In terms of financial funds, the administrators are strongly encouraged to channel opinions and suggestions to the Parents and Teachers Association (PIBG) to overcome the maintenance problem of damaged play equipment. PIBG, which was established under the Education Act 1996, not only able to express various ideas but can also generate finance to help achieve the aspirations of school management.

The support and cooperation of parents is also no less important as intended in the NPSC (Revised 2017). According to Paezah and Farida (2017), the increasing involvement of parents in children's learning, the higher the children's achievement or development and vice versa. Accordingly, support and cooperation are strongly encouraged, especially in the implementation of free play by providing understanding to parents of the importance of play for the holistic development of children in terms of cognitive, physical, intellectual and social aspects.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this concept paper discusses the challenges of preschool teachers in implementing free play. Free play is a component of outdoor activities contained in the national preschool curriculum that aims to build fitness and stimulate student intelligence. However, various issues and challenges have to be encountered by teachers in the implementation of free play. It should not be underestimated as play activities are crucial for children that can stimulate their development from physical, intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social interaction aspects (Eagle, 2015).

In implementing of free play, teachers are the main planners to ensure that children's free play activities are carried out effectively and meaningfully. According to Vygotsky (1978), the cognitive development of children and adolescents should continue until they reach the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where the concept explains the difference between the level of development achieved by children by self-employment or the solution of problems done by children without the help of others (Azizah, 2002). In this regard, the role of the teacher as a facilitator and acting as an indicator for a skill or activity that the child will perform is of great importance in the implementation of this free play. Therefore, the study of teachers' understanding of the implementation of free play is actually very significant in ensuring that wise teachers play their roles and responsibilities as planners, facilitators as well as observers during this free-play activity. The findings of this study will also encourage and open the minds of teachers to be more creative in their efforts and strategize PdP free play even in the national preschool curriculum, the planning of free play activities is unstructured. Therefore the teacher should take this responsibility so that free play can be carried out as intended. Teachers need to understand the main intentions and objectives of free play in particular.

This concept paper is expected to provide insights to the ministry, JPN, PPD, school administrators, parents and preschool teachers about the importance of effective free play in preschools. Preschool teachers are also anticipated to improve their competence in implementing free play to be more relevant and significant in ensuring that the achievement of children's holistic development.

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