

Exploring Preschool Teachers' Planning for the Implementation of Free Play Activities

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/22239>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i3/22239

Published Online: 23 July 2024

Abstract

The outdoor activities component includes physical and free-play activities that aim to build fitness and stimulate children's intelligence. Free play provides children the opportunity to make free choices about what, when, and how to play. Children are also free to determine the rules and their roles while playing. Therefore, this study aimed to explore preschool teachers' planning for the implementation of free play. This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study research design. Research data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis of four preschool teachers under Ministry of Education in Putrajaya. The data were then analyzed thematically using NVIVO 12 software. The findings of this study revealed that all study participants had relatively limited knowledge of preschool curriculum and pedagogy content. The participants also agreed that the learning environment and the preparation of materials and tools are criteria for preschool teachers' planning for the implementation of free play. In addition, it was also found that preschool teachers need to make preliminary plans to identify the children's existing skills. The constraint faced by the participants in planning is the time allocation specified in the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC) which is insufficient for the activities and management of free play implementation. Since the implementation of free play activities is a contributor to related domains of children's development, it should be well planned for a meaningful and enjoyable impact on children.

Keywords: Free Play, Children, Preschool Teachers

Introduction

The main goal and policy of early childhood education curriculum focus on aspects of balanced and holistic pupils development as stated in the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Division of Early Childhood Education (PERMATA), 2013; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Preschool education is imperative in providing meaningful early education to children aged 4 to 6 years old in a comprehensive and integrated manner in emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical and social aspects. This can be achieved through a safe and conducive learning environment as well as fun and creative learning activities. An effective, meaningful and fun learning experience can provide children with skills, self-confidence and positive attitude for subsequent learning (KPM, 2017).

To achieve the goals and aspirations of preschool education, National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC) aimed to meet the demands of the new policy as contained in the PPPM (2013-2025). Therefore, the revised NPSC was established by integrating six pillars in its framework: i) communication; ii) spirituality, attitudes and values; iii) humanity; iv) physical and aesthetic development; v) science and technology; vi) personal skills. Whereas the component of outdoor activities included under the pillar of physical and aesthetic development aims to build fitness and stimulate the intelligence of children.

In NPSC Revised 2017 Ministry of Education (2017), outdoor activities are divided into two components, which are physical and free play activities. The main purpose of implementing outdoor activities is to build fitness and stimulate intelligence of children as well as give them the opportunity to interact and explore their surroundings. The time allocation for the implementation of physical activities is 30 minutes per session, twice a week, while free play activities is 20 minutes per session, three times a week. Based on NPSC Ministry of Education (2017), free play is implemented outside the classroom, and teachers give children the opportunity to make free choices about what, when and how they play. They are also free to define rules and roles while playing.

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). During free play activities, children are given the opportunity to choose the form and pattern of the game and build their own rules of play. In free play, children freely choose their play partners as well as the content of the play itself (Catalano, 2018). The implementation of free play is one of the vital learning activities in preschool education as it encompasses cognitive, social and emotional aspects. Previous studies have also stated that play activities implemented in preschools can fulfil the developmental needs of children which include cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development (Griswold, 2018).

A study by the Curriculum Development Division BPK (2018) revealed that there is still confusion among preschool teachers regarding the implementation of free play activities as outlined in the NPSC Revised 2017. The study found that preschool teachers still implement free play in the classroom, which restrict children's opportunities to explore and interact with their materials, tools, friends and environment. Preschool teachers also do not understand their role as planners, facilitators and play partners in free play activities, and thus prevent good planning for free play activities. Preschool teachers are not only an observer, but they should participate or play an appropriate role when children perform free play activities (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Furthermore, most preschool teachers are also unable to plan learning through free play as they must comply with the desire of administrators and parents who are more concerned with academic achievement and consider play activities less important and a waste of time (Auni & Rahman, 2019). In fact, the guidance that should be given to children cannot be implemented effectively as preschool teachers have slight exposure to children's social development, relevant courses and appropriate implementation method. This statement is supported by a previous study which reported that teachers have limited understanding, skills, guidance and courses related to methods to handle play in learning, causing them to be unmotivated to implement it in preschool (Makantal et al., 2020). This indirectly has an impact on parents and administrators as preschool teachers are not able to convince them of the importance of free play activities in learning.

Therefore, studies on preschool teachers' planning for the implementation of free play are important to examine in-depth the obstacles faced by preschool teachers to plan free

play activities. Good and effective planning will be able to highlight the benefits of playing in improving the development of children's learning in the aspects of physical, language and social interaction of children. Thus, this study intends to explore preschool teachers' planning for the implementation of free play activities. The research question raised in this study is how preschool teachers plan for the implementation of free play activities.

Literature Review

NPSC describes the components of outdoor activities that include physical and free play activities to build fitness and stimulate intelligence of students. Outdoor activities are learning activities implemented outside the classroom that allow children to explore the environment and materials, build muscle strength and hand-eye coordination, and increase self-confidence (Ministry of Education, 2016). The environment outside the classroom is the most suitable place for children to learn and play as they can interact with friends and adults as well as interact with nature and materials. During free play activities, children are free to determine the type of game, rules and their role while playing Ministry of Education (2016)

In addition, free play is also a form of play, where children freely choose their play partners, content and learning objectives (Catalano, 2018). It is an unstructured play program that is regulated by teachers and early childhood education practitioners. Moreover, preschool teachers play their roles as facilitators and guides as well as participate as play partners in free play activities. In addition, preschool teachers are also responsible for ensuring that every child is actively involved in the activities.

From psychoanalytical aspect, play activities give children the opportunity to gain feelings to control the situation that can help them to deal with the real world (Hurd et al., 2021). Sigmund Freud (1856-1839), a neurologist, defined psychoanalysis as a method to treat an individual for his emotional problems. Thus, free play activities can help children to be more confident and braver to prepare themselves for future learning in the mainstream.

The implementation of free play is also emphasized through the Montessori Program curriculum as one of the main activities implemented in pedagogy and placed in the daily timetable in the relevant kindergartens. Furthermore, the Montessori Program is based on freedom and respect for children's freedom in shaping their play according to their interests, talents and creativity. This program proves that children receive effective benefits on cognitive and social skills Chloe (2017) through the active involvement of children in learning activities by using the materials they choose. Meanwhile, the roles of the preschool teachers are to create and maintain suitable atmosphere and ensure that every child is involved in play activities. Therefore, children will see reality, understand life experiences and learn about the facts of life through the exploration of games they create. To realize the implementation of free play activities, preschool teachers must have knowledge especially in aspects of curriculum content and pedagogy.

Quality teaching results when teachers have pedagogical knowledge in implementing PdP activities in preschool classes (Jadira, 2019). Low knowledge among teachers regarding the importance of play in children's development is due to the teacher's unpreparedness as well as lack of training and guidance in the proper implementation of free play. Preschool teachers are also slightly aware of children's development through play activities, and how to apply them effectively for exploration, communication and interaction as well as socialization of preschool students.

Previous studies have also shown that teachers encounter lack of understanding, skills, guidance and courses related to methods of handling play activities in learning, thus causing

them to be unmotivated to implement them in preschool (Makantal et al., 2020). It should be noted that a preschool teacher needs to be knowledgeable in pedagogy and curriculum related to play to help improve children's development from intellectual, cognitive and social aspects. As their efforts to plan free play activities, preschool teachers need to be sensitive to the children's developmental level and their existing skills by planning appropriate activities. Referring to the study of Masnan (2014), there are three aspects of knowledge that a preschool teacher must have, namely learning outcomes (content and practices that are appropriate to development), preparation of teaching aids (selection and preparation management factors), and preparation of the Daily Lesson Plan (referring to NPSC content and child development factors). The teacher's knowledge in all the aspects mentioned above is the vital component in planning fun, meaningful, and effective free play PdP. According to Shulman (1986), knowledge of teaching content is one of the three domains of teachers' professional knowledge in implementing effective teaching.

Therefore, the knowledge of preschool teachers that includes pedagogy and curriculum of play as well as skills regarding the children's developmental level need to be mastered to plan meaningful and effective free play activities. A quality preschool teacher should be wise to implement PdP and plan attentively to achieve teaching objectives that need to take into account materials and tools as well as environment preparation.

Basically, teaching planning refers to decisions on the implementation and evaluation of a PdP process (Paul & David, 2003). In this study, the teacher's planning for quality and effective teaching is to diversify teaching methods as well as provide teaching aids that are appropriate to the children's developmental level and a conducive environment to exploration in learning. In planning effective and meaningful free play activities, there are several constructs that preschool teachers need to consider that are selected based on the researcher's reading of past studies and teaching models related to play activities in preschools. Among the constructs include the preschool teachers' knowledge, planning criteria, preliminary planning and constraints in planning free play activities. All the constructs mentioned refer to the planning of the PdP approaches adapted to free play activities through the Montessori Teaching Model (Montessori, 1964).

In planning free play activities, teachers must be attentive in the process of preparing materials and teaching aids. According to Xiaolin et al (2019), materials and equipment that promote the development of children's skills during free play activities will help them obtain different and meaningful experiences, and positive emotions. Teachers with quality teaching planning need to ensure that the existing teaching materials selected are suitable for the topic, developmental level and interest of children (Jadira, 2019). The use of teaching aids needs to be well planned and managed as it will produce more meaningful and fun free play activities, reduce children's boredom, and enhance the quality and effectiveness of teachers' teaching.

In addition, environmental factors also provide opportunities for children to explore and build learning experiences, and further enhance the development of the human brain optimally if there is an interaction between the two (Saleha, 2019). Thus, the teacher's role is essential to provide a meaningful and conducive environment. The environment refers to the learning area outside the classroom which can stimulate children's interest in play activities in addition to exploring in their own way as required by the NPSC (Ministry of Education, 2017). Therefore, teachers should use their wisdom to provide a suitable and safe environment for children to implement free play activities. An interactive and conducive

environment can encourage children's interest to explore, play and learn something new joyfully, safely and comfortably.

According to Storli & Ellen (2019), physical environment plays an important role in the development and learning of children which will indirectly affect their emotions to highly involve and execute free play activities. Children are strongly encouraged to play and explore the environment actively and freely with fun, and they are encouraged to determine their own rules of the game they create (Ministry of Education, 2017). Through this study, the planning of preschool teachers to provide teaching materials and suitable environment is crucial for free play activities.

Methodology

Research Design

Research design is a planning process using certain methods to solve problems in research (Cresswell, 2012). This study employed a qualitative approach through a case study. Data of this study were collected using semi-structured interview and document analysis. According to Merriam (2016), case studies allow researchers to form a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of real events. Qualitative study helps researchers understand in-depth regarding the implementation of free play by preschool teachers.

Study Participants

The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling in accordance with (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The researchers will select their study participants and location to obtain an in-depth, focused and objective understanding (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This study consisted of four preschool teachers in Putrajaya with more than 10 years of teaching experience as study participants, in addition to the teacher's willingness to be respondents. Background information of the study participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Information of preschool teachers as study participants

No.	Teacher's Name (Nickname)	Teaching Professional	Highest Education Level	Teaching Experience
1.	GP01 – Cikgu Ili	Diploma in Preschool Education	Bachelor's Degree	15 years
2.	GP02 – Cikgu Intan	Diploma in Preschool Education	Bachelor's Degree	13 years
3.	GP03 – Cikgu Liza	Diploma in Preschool Education	Bachelor's Degree	10 years
4.	GP04 – Cikgu Aina	Diploma in Preschool Education	Bachelor's Degree	12 years

The number of participants involved in this study was small to represent and describe the actual study. Creswell & Creswell (2018); Patton (2002) asserted that there is no rule to determine the sample size in qualitative research. The number of selected respondents is also not set in qualitative research in contrast to quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants agreed to be respondents in this study by signing a declaration form.

Instruments

Questions in structured interviews were pre-determined, but the answers to the questions were open-ended and developed according to the suitability and discretion of the researcher and participants. The interview questions were in line with the research question, namely how preschool teachers plan for the implementation of free play activities. The interview questions are as follows: What are the criteria that teachers think are necessary in planning free play activities?

1. What do the teachers think should be present when conducting the initial planning for free play activities?
2. What are the constraints faced by teachers in planning free play activities?

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection procedures were conducted through interview and document analysis protocols. Semi-structured interview technique was employed in this study. According to Nigel et al (2019), interviews are the established method to obtain in-depth information related to the social experiences of individuals in education field.

Meanwhile, document analysis method was used to analyzed timetables, daily lesson plans (RPH) and student portfolios.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is the degree to which all evidence supports the intended interpretation of test scores for the objectives proposed by a researcher based on the data (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Therefore, the conclusion must be appropriate, meaningful, accurate, and useful. According to Cohen et al (2000), there are several best ways to increase the validity of the instrument such as attentive sampling. Through qualitative study, the interview protocol needs to be viewed from the aspect of construct validity and the consistency of the informant's answers (Darusalam & Hussin, 2021). To ensure the validity and reliability of this study, peer review (member checking) method was employed. This method entails other individuals to provide opinions, comments and suggestions related to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data obtained from interviews and document analysis were analyzed thematically. The process of analyzing the data of case study qualitatively was conducted based on the framework of (Miles et al., 2018). Themes and subthemes were determined through four phases: a) preliminary analysis by reading the transcript several times to be familiarized with the data while making brief notes; b) coding by dividing and marking the text; c) coding and grouping codes under a theme with the same meaning; d) establishing relationship between themes. To avoid information leakage as a result of data collection, data analysis must be conducted simultaneously. All interview transcriptions and document analysis notes need to

be read and understood repeatedly (Norliza, 2011). To increase the reliability of the data, the interview transcripts were emailed to the study participants to make revisions or any improvements on the information provided. Meanwhile, the peer review method was used to verify the themes and subthemes that were constructed. Findings of this study were also analyzed using NVIVO 12 software.

Findings

Findings of interviews and document analysis of participants are presented in this section to answer the main research question, i.e., to explore preschool teachers' planning for the implementation of free play activities. Based on the interviews and document analysis, there were five themes and subthemes identified as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Findings of the Exploration of Preschool Teacher's Planning for the Implementation of Free Play Activities

No.	Construct	Theme	Subtheme	Method	
				Interview	Document analysis
1.	Knowledge	Knowledge of preschool teachers	a. Knowledge of preschool curriculum content	√	√
			b. Pedagogical knowledge	√	√
2	Planning	Planning criteria	c. Environmental setup	√	√
			d. Preparation of materials and tools	√	√
3.	Preliminary planning	Different skill levels of children	-	√	-
4.	Constraints	Time allocation	-	√	√

Knowledge of Preschool Teachers

Interview analysis was conducted on the knowledge of preschool teachers as the main basis for planning the implementation process of free play. In achieving an effective PdP plan, preschool teachers need to have in-depth knowledge, especially in the aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. GP01, GP02, GP03 and GP04 agreed that teachers can plan free play well with knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy content.

Knowledge of Preschool Curriculum Content

In achieving effective free play PdP planning, preschool teachers need to have knowledge and master the content of free play teaching with reference to the NPSC. Through NPSC Revised 2017, free play is implemented by offering children the opportunity to make free choices about what, when and how to play. On the other hand, teachers play the role of planner, facilitator, play partner and observer. They also need to wisely plan their

implementation methods to ensure that children gain benefits as intended in NPSC Revised 2017. Based on the interviews, GP01, GP02, GP03 and GP04 perceived that preschool teachers need to have knowledge regarding the implementation of free play based on NPSC Revised 2017.

“...in my opinion,...according to the free play structure of NPSC, free play can be implemented inside or outside of class, which is a game and also an effort to give students...opportunities and...space to play according to their way...play according to their experience...play according to their will.”

TB1/GP01

“In my opinion, free play is a learning activity that gives children the opportunity to make free choices about what, when and how they play as stated in the NPSC Revised 2017.”

TB1/GP02

“Okay in my point of view, free play is a physical activity that can give students the opportunity to make a choice freely about what they want to play and how the game will be played. According to NPSC, the allotted time for free play is 20 minutes and three times a week...so I will put it in the timetable before the recess.”

TB1/GP03

“According to NPSC, free play is a component of outdoor activities...which includes physical activity and free play is included in integrated learning...where 20 minutes are allocated for free play and is carried out three times a week...the teacher acts as facilitator and also play partner”.

TB1/GP04

The findings are also proven through data obtained from document analysis. It was found that GP01, GP02, GP03 and GP04 possessed knowledge in preschool curriculum to plan the implementation of free play. This can be seen through the preparation of timetable by the participants by scheduling three slots of free play with time allocation of 20 minutes as specified in (NPSC, 2017). The timetable of each participant was well organized and easy to understand as follows:

SEKOLAH KEBANGSAAN PUTRAJAYA PRESINT 11(2) PRESINT 11, 62230 PUTRAJAYA PRASEKOLAH					
RANCANGAN PENGAJARAN HARIAN					
MINGGU / WEEK :		HARI / DAY: RABU / WEDNESDAY			TARIKH : 30 NOVEMBER 2022
KEHADIRAN : 20/25		STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN :			
MASA / TUNJANG TIME / DOMAIN	STANDARD PEMBELAJARAN / LEARNING STANDARD	OBJEKTIF OBJECTIVE	KRITERIA KEJAYAAN SUCCESS CRITERIA	AKTIVITI ACTIVITIES	BAHAN/ IMPAK MATERIALS / IMPACT
8.00 – 8.20 (PAGI)	1. Pupil <u>queue</u> up in front of class 2. Recite morning prayer, al-fatimah, taking <u>attendance</u> , checking children hygiene & health. 3. Singing national anthem song, state's song & simple children song. 4. Teacher's will explain the today <u>activities</u> .				
CIRCLE TIME					
8.20 – 8.40 (PAGI)	MATERIALS AND TOOLS - Ball, basket, magnifier skittle, <u>pundi kacang</u> - Monkey bar, slides PLACE - School field			FREE PLAY	Impact: Ariff – Memilih kawan dan suka bermain bola Nuh – Tantrum bila kawan berjaya lebih darinya – jatuhkan pin bowling Dewi – Bermain dan membimbing rakan.

Figure 1: Sample of Timetable of Participants for the Implementation of Free Play in Preschool (GP03/AD02/JW03)

Pedagogical Knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge is a principle that refers to the planning and management of teaching. Based on the interview data, all participants emphasized that preschool teachers should have pedagogical knowledge for the implementation of free play activities in preschool classes. In general, free play activities are implemented based on student-centered method.

“Teachers should also know how to plan the implementation of free play where the PdP method is student-centered...children play their role in deciding what to play, making play rules either by themselves or discussing with friends and choosing friends to play with but still under the supervision of the teacher and the teacher can also play together”.

TB1/GP01

“The implementation of free play is also student-centered, and these children not only receive instructions from the teacher solely...with free play, children can also develop their physical and social skills.”

TB1/GP02

“To implement it...I will make sure that all my students are not excluded from doing free play activities...if there are passive students...I will use the best approach to stimulate them to be actively involved in free play PdP...I adhere to the goal of preschool education where children need to be active and free to explore in their learning”.

TB1/GP03

“As a preschool teacher, it is a must to have the skills to plan the implementation of free play activities...indirectly, teachers try to plan the implementation of free play according to teaching methods and strategies to achieve the purpose of free play as specified in the curriculum, i.e. children are free to play in their own way and explore.”

TB1/GP04

This was proven through triangulation with findings from the document analysis of RPH of all participants, which revealed that all participants have pedagogical knowledge in planning the implementation of free play. They prepared RPH by writing the location, materials and tools to be used during the implementation of free play. All participants also made an assessment of the children by writing it in the RPH reflection space after the free play activities as follows:

RANCANGAN PENGAJARAN HARIAN					
MINGGU / WEEK :		HARI / DAY: RABU / WEDNESDAY			TARIKH : 30 NOVEMBER 2022
KEHADIRAN : 20/25		STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN :			
MASA / TUNJANG TIME / DOMAIN	STANDARD PEMBELAJARAN / LEARNING STANDARD	OBJEKTIF OBJECTIVE	KRITERIA KEJAYAAN SUCCESS CRITERIA	AKTIVITI ACTIVITIES	BAHAN/ IMPAK MATERIALS / IMPACT
8.00 – 8.20 (PAGI) CIRCLE TIME	1. Pupil queue up in front of class 2. Recite morning prayer, al-fatihah, taking attendance, checking children hygiene & health. 3. Singing national anthem song, state's song & simple children song. 4. Teacher's will explain the today activities				
8.20 – 8.40 (PAGI) CIRCLE TIME	FREE PLAY MATERIALS AND TOOLS - Ball, basket, magnifier skittle, pundi kacang - Monkey bar, slides PLACE - School field				Impact: Ariff – Memilih kawan dan suka bermain bola Nuh – Tantrum bila kawan berjaya lebih darinya – jatuhkan pin bowling Dewi : Bermain dan membimbing rakan

Figure 2 : Sample of Daily Lesson Plan (GP03/AD02/PM04)

In fact, the participants also prepared a follow-up report by referring to their notes in the reflection space. All participants provided reports on children’s developmental level by preparing a checklist or through continuous record entries. Reports of children's development were kept in the student's portfolio for the purpose of recording the assessment of children specifically for free play activities. This portfolio was prepared by the participants systematically according to the learning activities implemented as depicted in Figure 3.

REKOD SENARAI SEMAK				
Tarikh / Hari		: 7/12/2022 (KABU)		
Masa		: 8-20 - 8-40 am		
Fokus		: MAIN BEBAS		
Standard Kandungan		: KD 3.2 Menggunakan kemahiran sosial dalam hubungan dengan orang lain		
Standard Pembelajaran		: KD 3.2.2 Berkongsi alat dan bahan dengan orang lain semasa melaksanakan aktiviti KD 3.2.3 Menunjukkan kebolehan menyertai sesuai permainan yang sedang berlangsung (play entry)		
BIL	NAMA MURID	ITEM / KEMAHIRAN		ULASAN
1.	MUHAMMAD ABID PUTRA B. MOTAMMAD MUMAMIN	TP 3	7/12	- Berkongsi bahan - Kemahiran sosial sesama kanak-kanak
2.	NUR FARHA MEDINA BT FAZRU-SYAH	TP 3	7/12	- Boleh menunjukkan keadaan hatinya
3.	RAFIF HAIL B. MOHD ASYRAF	TP 3	7/12	- Berjasama - play entry
4.	AIRIEZ SAFIYYA BT ROZMAN APENDI	TP 3	7/12	- Kerjasama - kemahiran sosial
5.	RAYYAN ZAFRAN B. MUHAMMAD ZUHAIER	TP 3	7/12	- play entry (kerjasama) - kemahiran sosial


Tandatangan 
 NORHAYATI BINTI RASHID
 SK PUTRAJAYA PRESINT 9/2

Figure 3 : Example of Student Portfolio Document Analysis (GP04/AD03/PM04)

Based on the findings obtained from the interview analysis of preschool teachers' knowledge, all participants stated the importance for preschool teachers to have knowledge in preschool curriculum content and pedagogy.

Planning Criteria

Preschool teachers need to plan for their teaching process by taking into account essential criteria. Through the interview analysis, two subthemes were identified from the theme of planning criteria, namely environment preparation, and materials and tools.

Environment Preparation

A conducive, suitable and safe environment plays a vital role in the development and learning of children as it will indirectly affect their emotions which lead to high and encouraging involvement in free play activities. Findings from the interview analysis found that GP02, GP03 and GP04 mutually agreed that environmental preparation is one of the criteria for free play planning.

"I am looking for an environment that can accommodate 25 students at a time. There are 25 students in one class. So, we have to find a suitable place".

TB1/GP02

"I will make sure that the environment of the school or the place I want... to carry out the activity must be safe... I need to make sure that the environment meets the capacity... there are 25 students. I will ensure the place is not cramped".

TB1/GP03

"Before I plan the implementation of free play activities, we usually look at our school environment first"

TB1/GP04

This finding is supported by document analysis which found that GP02, GP03 and GP04 planned for the selection of the environment for free play activities by writing the selected place in RPH.

Materials and Tools

Materials and tools provided by preschool teachers are able to help children to further develop their skills in cognitive, communication, social and emotional aspects. The provision of interactive teaching aids and materials attracts children's attention to follow learning easily and effectively. From the interview analysis, GP02, GP03 and GP04 stated that materials and tools are important criteria for free play planning.

"Usually, I will use the existing materials according to the skills to be achieved that day".

TB1/GP02

"Materials available in sports stores such as beanbags, skittles and balls. Usually, that's all I use for free play activities which are already enough."

TB1/GP03

"Usually, I will use the materials provided in the preschool classroom."

TB1/GP04

The researcher also analyzed the documents provided by the participants, and found that GP02, GP03 and GP04 made plans for the preparation of materials and tools to be used during the implementation of free play by noting in RPH the names and types of tools used by children.

From interview and document analysis, it was found that GP02, GP03 and GP04 required a conducive and interactive environment as well as materials and tools in making plans to implement free play activities.

Preliminary Planning

A child's existing skills refer to knowledge in cognitive and physical skills acquired through previous experiences either directly or indirectly. Based on the findings from the interview analysis on preliminary planning, GP01, GP02 and GP03 agreed that children's existing skills can be seen from an early age.

"I would rather see the preliminary skills to be achieved by the students in line with the pillars in the curriculum such as personality, personal and social skills... after that, I will try my best to see the physical skills that the students will apply."

TB1/GP01

"In the preliminary planning, we will refer to the skills that can be used in free play activities according to the child's developmental level. So, I hope to be able to see the development of students' socialization and physical skills in free play activities."

TB2/GP02

"I will integrate the skills that I want to achieve from the beginning of the year...for example, communication, socialization and physical skills."

TB1/GP03

Furthermore, GP01, GP02 and GP03 were found to make preliminary plans for the implementation of free play activities to see the children's existing skills.

Constraints and Challenges During Planning

Time allocation is an essential aspect for preschool teachers to plan appropriate activities for the implementation of free play. In principle, the time allocation given is based on the NPSC Revised 2017. Through the interview analysis, all participants informed that there was a constraint in terms of insufficient time allocation, which is 20 minutes. Ample time allocation is one of the contributors to an effective learning process for children's development.

"The time given is very limited...20 minutes. For me, the problem that arises in planning is the time allocation".

TB1/GP01

"One of the challenges is definitely time allocation. It takes a long time to organize students if the environment is quite far from the classroom. Free play activities that are carried out for 20 minutes limit the movement of students to walk to the field or playground. Student movement takes a long time and students do not achieve optimum satisfaction in playing".

TB2/GP02

“In terms of constraints, the problem is the allocation of 20 minutes for free play implementation. If the duration is longer, maybe the activity can be diversified and the time to play in the environment that we have prepared allows more activities to be implemented”.

TB1/GP03

“In my opinion, the time constraint factor is a challenge for free play planning, especially since the distance from the classroom to the field and playground is quite far and time-consuming”.

TB2/GP04

Thus, triangulation through document analysis found that GP01, GP0, GP03 and GP04 complied with the time allocation given, which is 20 minutes for a slot of free play implementation. This was displayed in the timetable provided by the participants (the time allocation is based on the content of the NPSC Revised 2017).

Moreover, GGP01, GP02, GP03 and GP04 also encountered constraints with the time allocation set by NPSC Revised 2017 based on the problems that raised during the implementation of free play activities as indicated in the interview and document analysis.

Overall, the findings of this study are able to answer the research question regarding the planning of preschool teachers in the implementation of free play activities. Preschool teachers made meticulous plans before implementing free play activities since the beginning of the year. However, existing factors such as the environment, materials and tools as well as time allocation were identified as constraints which need to be emphasized.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the teacher's planning for the implementation of free play activities in preschool. This section discusses in-depth several relevant themes identified through the interview and document analysis conducted.

Preschool Teachers' Knowledge - Knowledge of Preschool Curriculum and Pedagogical Contents

Overall, this study found that the participants possessed the preschool curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge. However, they still need to delve into both knowledge since the answers received indicated significant limitations. In addition, the participants gave relatively simple answers without specifying the preschool curriculum content in detail. A person's knowledge refers to the understanding of that particular matter. The findings are supported by Masnan (2019) that knowledge refers to information known and owned by a person based on experience, education and observation using the senses. In fact, the findings of this study reinforce the statement regarding the importance of knowledge of lesson to be taught to achieve effective teaching (Aguinaldo, 2017; Hasniza, 2014). On another note, Halim et al (2019) stated that prior to teaching, the educator needs to possess knowledge and understanding of a lesson in advance so that children can learn well. Good knowledge and understanding refers to preschool teachers' understanding of the content and intentions of (KSPK, 2017).

Planning Criteria - Environmental Preparation as well as Materials and Tools

In this study, three participants were highly concerned about environment as well as materials and tools as the main criteria for planning the implementation of free play. Referring to environmental factor, previous studies have reported that this factor gives children the opportunity to explore and build learning experiences and can further improve the development of the human brain optimally if there is an interaction between the two (Saleha, 2019). This interaction refers to the child's exploration of the environment and how the environment impacts the child's learning level. Therefore, the planning and preparation of the environment is crucial to investigate to create a joyful situation and atmosphere without any stress. According to Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782-1852), teachers should provide a comfortable, spacious, attractive, safe and controlled environment. Children will also learn in a planned environment and explore and gain new and meaningful learning experiences. This is also supported by Storli and Ellen (2019) that the physical environment plays an important role in children's development and learning which can influence children's emotions to be actively involved in stimulating activities. Nevertheless, only one participant disagreed with environmental factor as one of the planning criteria.

Meanwhile, materials and tools should not be underestimated as planning criteria. Three participants perceived that materials and tools are essential factors in planning free play activities. However, these participants had constraints with materials as they used existing materials from the school's sports store which had to be shared with mainstream class children. The existing materials also did not meet the specifications for preschool students. Based on the findings of this study, the materials and tools provided should be suitable for the children to ensure the teacher's planning to implement free play effectively. According to Aliza & Zamri (2019), the selection and use of appropriate materials and tools also affect the effectiveness of a PdP process. In this study, the provision of interactive teaching aids and materials attracts more children's attention to follow learning easily and effectively. The findings of this study are also supported by Liu et al (2019) that the availability of materials and tools that are beneficial and do not restrict the children's skill development during free play activities enable them to gain different and meaningful experiences independently in addition to achieving positive emotions. Therefore, preschool teachers should be wise to provide materials and tools that are suitable for children's development level in the implementation of free play not only depending on the existing materials and tools in preschool and sports store.

Preliminary Planning - Children's Existing Skills

Preschool teachers as implementing agents of the national preschool curriculum should be wise in making preliminary plans from the beginning of the year for the implementation of free play. Although free play is an unstructured PdP process and children are free to determine their play patterns, preschool teachers should make the best PdP plans according to the children's developmental level. Through the interview analysis, the theme of children's existing skills was identified an important aspect that should be considered by preschool teachers in preparing preliminary plans for the implementation of free play since the beginning of the year. This is in line with the Sim Model which stated that the teacher's planning should be according to the children's existing abilities and skills. Similarly, Slavin (1995) also asserted that teachers' teaching level should be based on the children's ability, while their teaching quality is observed from the delivery of lesson content and concepts or skills that are easy for children to understand. In other words, the teacher's teaching practice

should be based on the children's existing skills and abilities. Moreover, Mokhlis (2019) also stated that teachers need to follow the suitability of the skill level of children in making PdP planning. Based on these findings, there needs to be a comprehensive plan that includes aspects of the children's existing skills to produce a fun, effective and meaningful implementation of free play PdP.

Constraints and Challenges during Planning - Time Allocation

Basically, NPSC Revised 2017 allocates 20 minutes for a free play slot. However, through the interview data obtained, time allocation became a constraint as expressed by the participants. Apparently, the allocation of 20 minutes for a free play teaching slot recommended by the national preschool curriculum Ministry of Education (2017) was still insufficient for teachers to implement free play activities as intended. According to Aliza (2018), unstructured play activities involving children's initiative require a long time. The findings of this study are also supported by previous studies which stated that the playing time required for children to master a skill through playing is at least 30 minutes (Leong & Kamariah, 2021). In this situation, teachers need to take the initiative to plan lessons to make the best use of the time allocated.

Conclusion

This study emphasized the importance of planning by teachers as the main planner to ensure effective and meaningful implementation of free play activities. Therefore, there are several aspects that should be emphasized by teachers before planning for free play PdP in particular. Among the aspects identified are the knowledge of preschool teachers, environment preparation, existing skills of children, preparation of materials and tools, and time constraints. Based on this study, it was found that preschool teachers have the knowledge and skills to plan the implementation of free play activities.

However, there were implications such as the long distance between the environment and preschool classes, limited existing materials and tools, and limited time allocation as recommended by NPSC Revised 2017. These implications to some extent interfered with the planning of free play implementation by preschool teachers. Therefore, administrators should always provide support by encouraging a conducive environment and giving autonomy for teachers to use the appropriate environment in all school areas. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) should also reconsider the 20 minutes given for each free play slot to a more relevant time allocation. To improve the professionalism of teachers, preschool teachers should seek knowledge through self-study or attend courses organized by the MOE or the private sector to realize free play.

It is expected that the findings of this study to be used as a guide for future research, particularly in examining elements of preschool teachers' planning practices in the implementation of free play. This study only involved four preschool teachers under MOE, which is a limitation of this study. Further research is proposed to be conducted in other government agency kindergartens, such as KEMAS, Perpaduan and GENIUS, and also private kindergartens by involving a larger study sample. In addition, future research could use quantitative approach to identify what are the factors of teachers' practice in planning the implementation of free play based on the children's developmental level.

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