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The Role of Preschool Teachers in Enhancing Imaginative Free-Play Activities in Preschool

Thivasenikumari A/P Viswanathan, Mohd Nazri Abdul Rahman*

Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

*Correspondence: E-mail: mohdnazri_ar@um.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to investigate preschool teachers' roles in contributing towards the Imaginative Free-Play activities in the preschool curriculum learning activities, to explore and comprehend preschool teachers' roles in the concept of creative teaching, and to comprehend preschool teachers' roles in Imaginative Free-Play activities in order to improve preschool children's learning and development processes. This exploratory study adopted a qualitative method of inquiry to provide an in-depth understanding of the area being investigated. Interviews and observations of four preschool teachers, who were purposefully selected from a private preschool, were used to collect data. Findings revealed that all the preschool teachers in this study expressed their views that preschool teachers played multi-character roles in conducting Imaginative Free-Play activities, and it is regarded as fundamental to the child's learning and development to be creative. All the teachers also foster creative ideas to stimulate children's ideas during the teaching and learning process. Therefore, preschool teachers play a few important roles in order for children to think and act creatively while also being problem solvers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Definitions of play are hard to describe because they are critical aspects of development for all age groups. Play is not a luxury job but serves positive learning (Prince-Cohen, 2007). In addition, the term "play" is used to describe a variety of activities, including those that are spontaneous, unrestricted by rules, and enjoyable (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). According to Vygotsky's theory, play is the most important tool for children's appropriate development (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Vygotsky, 1967). Vygotsky believed that the growth of cognitive, emotional, social, language, and physical skills in a child is directly correlated with the play activities in which children are involved (Scharer, 2017; Vygotsky, 1991). Similarly, free play is also the most valuable activity for children's future development and learning (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008). It is a natural way of playing where children do not have to limit themselves with any boundaries or follow any instructions while engaging in the activities (Wan et al., 2021). Moreover, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) emphasises the development of a healthy brain and creative thinking through involvement in play activities (Shah, 2011). By recognising this, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) implemented play as one of the mandatory activities in all types of schools in Malaysia, such as child care centres, preschools, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities or colleges (Ministry of Education, 2013). Play always helps children be curious, questioning, learning, discovering, and imagining to understand and discover something new.

As we know, imaginative play is one of the types of play activities that children used to engage in at a very early age. In different cultures, imaginative play has been defined by different terms, such as pretend play, symbolic play, fantasy play, dramatic play, and role play (Hao & Fleeer, 2016). Vygotsky considered imagination to be the most important element in accessing deeper intellectual abilities and individuals' creative opportunities (Devi et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 2004). Likewise, imaginative play supports children's ability to improve their self-expression and cognitive abilities by thinking alternatively, having flexibility, and viewing things from different perspectives (Dominey, 2021). Therefore, when children engage in imaginative play, they can construct imaginary situations or objects by themselves, which helps them enrich their abstract thinking skills. Abstract thinking means the ability of a person to analyse and synthesise ideas or information in a creative way beyond reality. This means that by giving a strong foundation during the early years by implementing imaginative play in the curriculum, adults can educate and produce highly intellectual generations for the coming years (Scharer, 2017).

This article will focus on the contribution of preschool teachers to Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities. Free play is basically about children making their own decisions throughout the activity, such as what they want to play, with whom they want to play, how they want to play, what materials they want to use, etc. (Wan et al., 2021). Imaginative play generates children's creative thinking by combining both ideas and objects to produce unique products. Thus, IFP activities enable children to expand their imaginative and creative levels without any limitations or boundaries. Preschool teachers may be the best option for implementing IFP activities in the preschool curriculum because this is an open-ended activity. Preschool teachers can encourage children to actively participate in IFP activities, which promote the IFP experience by engaging in hands-on multisensory and creative activities (Dhiu & Laksana, 2021). Therefore, preschool teachers play a vital role in implementing IFP activities at the preschool level. This is because children could better understand and develop ideas when they were able to access them freely through touch, sensation, and exploration rather than through explanations in words and guidance during play sessions.

There has been very limited research done on imaginative play (Fleer & Veresov, 2018). According to Devi et al. (2018), Australian preschool contexts faced some issues during the implementation of imaginative play in preschool curriculum for some concrete reasons, which are that preschool teachers spend little time on imaginative play with the children and lack of preschool teachers knowledge on imaginative play. Somehow, Malaysia is facing the same issues in implementing imaginative play in our preschool curriculum, where our preschool teachers are more concerned with the academic syllabus (Tee et al., 2017) and busy preparing children for formal schooling (Wan et al., 2021). because preschool teachers are less exposed to this approach. Furthermore, our preschool teachers focused on the academic achievement of the children (Li & Min, 2022; Rahmatullah et al., 2021; Tee et al., 2017). Therefore, Malaysia must reinforce, improve, and monitor expertise among preschool teachers in terms of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes in the context of IFP.

2. METHODS

This is a case study that was conducted to evaluate the preschool teachers' roles during the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities with the children. In addition, this study also investigates the importance of imaginative free play in early childhood education. Data collection was done using observation and interview methods. A total of four participants were studied, and they provided the wealth and depth of information needed through this method.

The IFP activities were carried out at three different places in the preschool, such as the classrooms, indoor activity area, and outdoor activity area, which were prepared with the complete arrangement of play materials that were to be used in each of these activities. Four preschool teachers conducted this activity, and each preschool teacher organised different types of play activities for the children. Each activity has been observed by the researcher. The activity carried out by Teacher 1 is a water play activity that was conducted at an outdoor activity area. There are two different scenarios prepared by the teacher: one is a fishing scenario, and the other is a marketing scenario. Teacher 2 prepared a role-play activity at the indoor activity area, and the situation of this activity is at the burger restaurant. The activity conducted by Teacher 3 is a tangram puzzle activity with the theme of water animals. In this activity, children need to build pictures of water animals by using Tangram puzzles and create an imaginary story about the water animals they have made. Teacher 4 organised a block puzzle activity with the theme of the jungle. In this activity, children need to construct items or objects that belong in the jungle. Children are free to choose in which scenario they want to play, what materials they want to use, and what objects they want to construct.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Innovative Planner

From these imaginative free-play activities, we managed to observe how the preschool teachers conducted the activities with the children by implementing creative ideas. At the beginning of the activities, preschool teachers read a short story based on the theme of the week. This will boost the children's ideas about the theme and activity of the day. It will also be helpful for the children to use the ideas during the activity. Preschool teachers briefly explained how the activity will be and how the materials' work to the children before letting them engage in the play activity.

Through our observation, we discovered that all preschool teachers who conducted IFP activities were very innovative in designing and planning ideas to create a variety of themes and scenarios. Before the activity starts, Teacher 1 designs and sets up the activity area

according to the 'ocean theme' so that the children can easily adapt to the situations in which they are going to play the role of fisherman. As Teacher 1 mentioned in the interview session, each week the theme will be changed accordingly, but sometimes if the themes can be organised into many activities, then the preschool teachers will carry forward the same theme for next week. The aim of teachers planning and setting the area with different scenarios during these activities is to support the children in exploring real-life experiences, broadening their knowledge, and developing their imaginative thinking skills.

During the ocean theme activity, children were very curious about how they were going to go fishing. Teacher 1 gives a brief explanation of the materials that are going to be used during the activity. For example, how to wear the life jacket, how to use the fishing rod, etc. At the beginning of the activity, children were excited and curious to try fishing by themselves. Moreover, the teacher also prepared different materials for market situations based on the scenarios. The aim of preparing various creative materials for IFP activities is to allow children to expose themselves to many things and encourage them to think creatively to produce unique products.

3.2 Self-Reliance Facilitator

We identified that during the IFP activities that were conducted, most of the preschool teachers acted as facilitators for the children throughout the activities. From our observation during the tangram puzzle activity conducted by Teacher 3, we learned that children had to construct the puzzle according to the theme 'water animals'. Some of the children had difficulty building water animals using Tangram puzzles. Therefore, the teacher guides the children by showing them the correct way to construct the creative pictures. This will develop children's creative ideas and help them understand how to build the puzzles. Through the interview session, Teacher 1 stated that she would indirectly guide the children until they could find solutions for the problem that they were facing. The purpose of being a facilitator during IFP activities is to prevent the children from getting angry and frustrated when they are unable to complete the activity.

3.3 Supportive Motivator

Furthermore, we also notice that preschool teachers act as solution mediators when children have conflicts among themselves during IFP activities. According to the interview session, Teacher 4 stated that sometimes children get involved in arguments, so the teacher had to calm down the children and continue to focus on their activities. Teacher 3 also mentioned that sometimes I had to join in children's play activities to avoid fighting among them and help balance their emotions during the activities. As a solution mediator, the teacher can carry out the IFP activities in a smooth and peaceful environment without any arguments or fights between the children.

Through observation, we identified that preschool teachers used to encourage the children to complete or achieve their goals successfully. Teacher 4 used some motivational phrases with the children when they lost focus on the activity. Examples of phrases that the teacher used are 'keep trying', 'I know, you can do it', 'excellent', 'come on, let's do it together', etc. Moreover, Teacher 2 mentioned during the interview session that she always praises the children when they come out with unique products or are engaged in the role-play activities. This showed that preschool teachers were motivators during IFP activities. The aim of a preschool teacher being a motivator is to boost children's confidence levels and restore their energy, both mentally and physically.

3.4 Divergent-Thinking Playmate

According to Teacher 2, it was stated in the interview session that teachers actively participate in the children's play activities as one of the divergent thinkers (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). This is to help children stimulate their thinking skills when they face difficulties in the activities, especially in puzzle activities. In the observation, Teacher 1 shows some techniques on how to catch fish by joining in the activity as one of the players. Other than that, preschool teachers also engage in the children's activities to introduce new materials and activities for the children to develop a better understanding of the activity. The purpose of the teacher's engagement in the IFP activities with the children is to stimulate the children's alternative thinking skills and deepen their understanding of the activities.

4. CONCLUSION

In today's education system, the government has approved that all preschools use a developmentally appropriate approach to early childhood education. In the early years of a child's development, play is equally important. Children need space and freedom to prove what they want to do, to think, and to express their thoughts. This study showed that preschool teachers' creative teaching plays an important role in the implementation of the IFP activities in preschool because teachers give children the freedom to explore the activities by themselves, express their ideas and opinions freely, and communicate more expressively. In addition, the preschool teachers are aware of the effects of the IFP activities on children's development and learning. Therefore, the preschool teachers played different roles by changing them according to the situations during IFP activities. Most preschool teachers played roles as designers, facilitators, solution mediators, and playmates. Through these roles, the children were able to think alternatively and produce creative ideas to handle any objects or situations. As the literature does not have enough studies on IFP activities and teachers' roles in implementing IFP activities. However, much research has been done on free-play activities, and it can be seen that IFP activities have almost the same effects on preschool teachers' roles. Furthermore, it is hoped that more researchers will study IFP activities in preschool in the future and find more conclusive results. As a conclusion, preschool teachers played an important role in conducting effective IFP activities that helped children improve their holistic development, broaden their creative thinking skills, and be problem solvers.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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