EXPLORING IMPLEMENTATION OF IMAGINATIVE FREE-PLAY ACTIVITIES BY PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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2023

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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA
KUALA LUMPUR

2023

UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

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ABSTRACT

The issue of exploring the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities in preschool brought understanding of how this practical teaching experience worked among preschool teachers. The importance of IFP activities in children's development and how preschool teachers implement IFP activities in the preschool have not been studied, despite the fact that many other studies on other types of play activities have been conducted. The aims of the study were to: 1) To explore the importance of Imaginative Free-Play Activities in children's development. 2) To explore the role of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play Activities in class. 3) To observe the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing Imaginative Free-Play Activities. 4) To explore the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play Activities. The study was a qualitative case study. A private preschool located in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, was selected to sample four preschool teachers. The data was gathered in two ways: through interviews and observational analysis, as well as through a checklist review and administration. Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to organise the interview transcripts and observation analysis forms. Through the software, thematic analysis was conducted and codes were created and reformed after conceptual grouping to form descriptions and themes. The findings of the study revealed that the implementation of IFP activities by preschool teachers had positive effects on children's holistic development. Overall, it was seen that the children had built and strengthened all their developmental areas: cognitive development, social development, language development, physical development, emotional development, and creative development. The role of preschool teachers in IFP activities was linked to the theory that IFP activities were a form of creative teaching with given elements: innovative planner, self-reliance facilitator, supportive motivator, and divergent-thinking playmate. The

effectiveness of IFP activities is linked to the strategies of preschool teachers used during IFP activities, which are to boost children's curiosity, stimulate children's imaginative thinking, and develop children's innovative and creative skills. However, some issues and challenges encountered by preschool teachers during IFP activities were related to children's behaviour, the environment, and the teacher's behaviour. The study concluded that the implementation of IFP activities by preschool teachers is important because it has positive impacts on the children's holistic development, academic achievement, and broadened knowledge.

ABSTRAK

Isu penerokaan pelaksanaan aktiviti Main Bebas Imaginatif (MBI) di prasekolah membawa pemahaman tentang bagaimana pengalaman pengajaran praktikal ini berfungsi dalam kalangan guru prasekolah. Kepentingan aktiviti MBI dalam perkembangan kanak-kanak dan bagaimana guru prasekolah melaksanakan aktiviti MBI di prasekolah masih belum dikaji, walaupun pada hakikatnya banyak kajian lain mengenai jenis aktiviti permainan lain telah dijalankan. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk: 1) Untuk meneroka kepentingan Aktiviti Main Bebas Imaginatif dalam perkembangan kanak-kanak. 2) Untuk meneroka peranan guru prasekolah semasa Aktiviti Main Bebas Imaginatif di kelas. 3) Untuk memerhatikan strategi yang diterapkan oleh guru prasekolah dalam melaksanakan Aktiviti Main Bebas Imaginatif. 4) Untuk meneroka isu dan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh guru prasekolah semasa menjalankan Aktiviti Main Bebas Imaginatif. Kajian ini adalah kajian kes kualitatif. Sebuah prasekolah swasta yang terletak di Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, telah dipilih untuk memilih empat guru prasekolah sebagai sampel kajian. Data dikumpul dalam dua cara: melalui temu bual dan analisis pemerhatian, serta melalui semakan senarai semak dan pentadbiran. Nvivo, perisian analisis data kualitatif, digunakan untuk menyusun transkrip temu bual dan borang analisis pemerhatian. Melalui perisian tersebut, analisis tematik dijalankan dan kod dicipta dan diperbaharui selepas pengumpulan konsep untuk membentuk penerangan dan tema. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan bahawa pelaksanaan aktiviti MBI oleh guru prasekolah memberi kesan positif kepada perkembangan holistik kanak-kanak. Secara keseluruhannya, kanak-kanak telah membina dan mengukuhkan semua bidang perkembangan mereka: perkembangan kognitif, perkembangan sosial, perkembangan bahasa, perkembangan fizikal, perkembangan emosi, dan perkembangan kreatif. Peranan guru prasekolah dalam aktiviti MBI dikaitkan dengan teori bahawa aktiviti MBI merupakan satu bentuk pengajaran

kreatif dengan elemen yang diberikan: perancang inovatif, pembimbing berdikari, pendorong penolong, dan rakan sepermainan pemikiran yang berbeza. Keberkesanan aktiviti MBI dikaitkan dengan strategi guru prasekolah yang digunakan semasa aktiviti MBI, iaitu meningkatkan rasa ingin tahu kanak-kanak, merangsang pemikiran imaginatif kanak-kanak, dan mengembangkan kemahiran inovatif dan kreatif kanak-kanak. Walau bagaimanapun, beberapa isu dan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh guru prasekolah semasa aktiviti MBI adalah berkaitan dengan tingkah laku kanak-kanak, persekitaran dan tingkah laku guru. Kajian tersebut merumuskan bahawa pelaksanaan aktiviti MBI oleh guru prasekolah adalah penting kerana ia memberi impak positif kepada perkembangan holistik kanak-kanak, pencapaian akademik dan pengetahuan yang meluas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to God for giving me the information and direction I needed to complete this dissertation. I want to sincerely thank everyone who has helped me along the way with my thesis and who has been there for me through the good times and the tough ones.

First of all, heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Madya Dr. Mohd Nazri Bin Abdul Rahman, who has spent many hours pointing me in the right direction, reading my thesis work, helping me solve problems as they arise, and always supporting me throughout the entire process.

Without the assistance of the private preschool, this study would not have been accomplished. I would especially like to thank the preschool teachers and administrators for their encouragement and helpful advice both before and throughout my research study. I will always be thankful to them for helping me finish this thesis with their assistance.

I also want to express my gratitude to my three experts, Dr. Khairul Syafiq bin Razali, Dr. Tee Ying Qin, and Miss Hasviniy A/P Padmanathan, for their knowledge, advice, and input during the thesis. This helped me grasp the entire process much better.

Additionally, I want to convey my genuine thanks to my family, particularly to my parents and brothers, who never stop and honestly pray for me, as well as support and stand by me through my ups and downs. I'm aware that if I don't get them all, I might not be allowed to climb the stairs until I've finished.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

IFP : Imaginative Free-Play

MOE : Ministry of Education Malaysia

SNPC : Standard National Preschool Curriculum

SOP : Standard Operating Procedure

ZPD : Zone of Proximal Development

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Preschool education is the basic basis of learning for children aged three to six years old (Mohidin et al., 2015). It is a small step in an individual's life to expose themselves to giant skills at a very young age that help build their development process after home education (Rosli & Lin, 2018). It builds and develops children's skills, confidence, and positivity by providing a useful, meaningful, and enjoyable learning environment (Bakken et al., 2017). It is a valuable experience for children to prepare themselves for formal and lifelong education. As a result, most preschool education programmes integrate academics with play activities to make sure that the environment fosters friendly and delightful memories for the children. However, there are some parents and preschool teachers who are still focusing more on their children's academic performance than their skills in non-academic activities (Kheioh & Low, 2022).

According to Vygotsky (1967), play indicates that children explore and develop curiosity in them as it is a flexible, effective, comprehensive, and interactive activity (Mayesky, 2008). Moreover, he also includes three components according to play theory, such as creating an imaginary situation, acting out roles, and following a set of rules in specific roles (Bodrova & Leong, 2010). Free-play is a natural way of playing without any boundaries, whereas children make their own decisions on what they want to play, how they want to play, and with whom they want to play (Rosli & Lin, 2018). Simultaneously, the teachers can supervise the children's behaviour and participation in free-play activities, although the teachers are not part of the free-play activities (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2016). Free play is important for the cognitive development of children

because it simulates their thoughts and feelings spontaneously and actively (Tovey, 2020). Therefore, free-play activities provoke the process of imaginative development in children's lives without any boundaries in this study.

Children aged two and up engage in imaginative play. Imaginative play is also known as pretend play or make-believe play (D. Weisberg, 2016). Based on Vygotsky's perspective on imaginative play, children could develop an in-depth awareness of adults' actions by imitating them. He believed that imagination is active thinking, conscious, and a cultural psychological function (Devi et al., 2020). Similarly, Albert Einstein stated that "imagination is more important than knowledge." He means that knowledge is the only thing that we learn and understand, but imagination will get to know and experience the entire thing and also stimulate it (Agee & Welch, 2012). Imagination is also defined as the creation of new ideas, images, or concepts through the action of the mind without the use of the external senses (Hatt & Graham, 2018). Through imaginative play, the children decontextualize meaning by imitating something that does not exist in action. Imaginative play actually becomes important for children during the school transition as they are developing their mental functions and verbal thinking (Hostettler Scharer, 2017).

Recognizing this, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) implemented an extra preschool education program in 1992 based on the Cabinet's decision to establish 1,131 preschool programs. (Abu Bakar et al., 2015; Centre & Education, 2008). In 2003, the MOE implemented the National Preschool Curriculum. After five years of implementation, the National Preschool Curriculum was revised and finally produced as the Standard National Preschool Curriculum (SNPC) (Abu Bakar et al., 2015; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). In the SNPC, outdoor activities were implemented as one of the mandatory activities that should be carried out by all preschools in Malaysia. It

consists of two types of activities, such as physical activity and free play activity. Physical activity is an activity that focuses on the child's physical fitness and body movement. While free play allows children to choose their own play activity (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2018). Therefore, the role of preschool teachers in organising play activities for children is a very important factor for strengthening children's developmental outcomes and helping them gain more knowledge in this study. But there are some preschool teachers who are still implementing some traditional practices during children's play activities, such as being observers, narrators, and appearing as question askers (Devi et al., 2018).

The implementation of free-play activities in the SNPC increases awareness among people about the need to be involved and apply themselves in the teaching and learning process. Free-play activities need to be exposed in the early years, when children and preschool teachers more actively interact with various types of play activities. However, Devi and her colleagues (2018) found that preschool teachers rarely join in children's play activities, although they know the importance of play for the development of children. Therefore, Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities are one of the very important activities to implement in each preschool as one of the subjects. This is because it benefits children's growth and development. It does not only focus on one particular area of a child's development but on multiple areas of a child's development, like cognitive, physical, language, social, emotional, and creative.

Moreover, IFP activities are also necessary for children's academic achievement. It can integrate with academic subjects, especially mathematics and science. It helps preschool teachers teach academic subjects using different teaching methods so that the children also develop interest and are happily involved in the teaching and learning process.

Specifically, in the Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities, preschool teachers can be able to support and develop children's holistic development process in a healthy way. It is possible to ensure that the lesson goes smoothly by taking into consideration the preschool teachers' understanding, roles, and strategies when implementing IFP activities with the children. Furthermore, it's important to take into consideration the challenges that all preschool teachers may encounter while implementing the IFP activities in practice.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Free-play has a crucial value for all people in this world, including young children. Based on Zeng et al. (2017), it is stated that the physical environment of early childhood plays a serious role in encouraging preschool children to participate actively and exploit physical skill development. Therefore, play activities to improve children's developmental skills must be a priority. According to Dankiw et al. (2020), providing opportunities for children to access and engage in free-play activities with appropriate materials is important to ensure adequate opportunities for skill development. Hence, it is critical to provide appropriate experiences that promote varying degrees of success in children's developmental areas.

A context in which children construct or reconstruct from their experiences is referred to as "imaginative play" by using the process of assembling and separating their past knowledge and experience, which is also equally important in the cognitive development of children (Sansanwal, 2014). This play allows children to improve their thinking skills and develop creatively in a holistic manner. According to Vygotsky (1967), imaginative play helps children improve internal speech, logical memory, and abstract thinking, where it appears to serve as a mediator for increased perceptions of self-regulation and creativity

in children's development (Zhang, 2017). Moreover, problem-solving skills can also be fostered through engaging in imaginative play.

The development of imaginative skills in someone needs experience and knowledge gained through engaging in imaginative play activities. In this regard, in the preschool context, teachers are the main source of knowledge who teach, guide, and conduct play activities that help to develop their imaginative development. With reference to Fives & Buehl (2016), it was demonstrated that teachers give meaningful experiences to children by understanding the importance of a creative environment during the teaching and learning process. As Hannah Scott explained, "Imagination comes first before creativity and innovation because creativity and innovation are practical processes, whereas imagination generates new ideas and thinking" (Reich, 2017). Preschool teachers may perceive children's imagination when they concentrate on children's cognitive processes rather than the results of their academic achievement.

Implementing IFP activities in children's teaching and learning processes may develop preschool teachers' responsibility for providing or creating appropriate imaginative play activities for children (Neha & Rule, 2018), and the role of preschool teachers was reported to be positively affected by developing imaginative play (Devi et al., 2018). According to Tee, Mariani, & Leng (2017), shown evidence on time constraints for play activities has been shown to be more related to specific academic outcomes. The issues about the preschool teacher's role during IFP activities need to be considered, and the importance of providing appropriate IFP platforms for children to participate must be increasingly focused on.

By implementing imaginative play in the free-play activities, preschool teachers need to apply a variety of strategies in order to make the children active and energetically involved in the activity. Hence, strategies for the implementation of imaginative play provide children with a quality early education. Imaginative play has much to offer as a mechanism where children might gain not only from the aspects of development but also from the aspect of motivation. With reference to Whitebread et al. (2017), imaginative play is strongly tied to its importance as both self-awareness and self-directed speech, which can provide rules, behaviour patterns, and directions for the development of a growing awareness of the motivation context.

Implementing IFP activities in the curriculum has given many developmental benefits to children and helped them overcome obstacles without any anxiety while practicing IFP activities. IFP activities are regarded as one of the most comprehensive developmental activities for children. It is vital to take measures to better understand the benefits and advantages of IFP activities. According to Dominey (2021), indications are that imaginative play is currently encouraged by many preschools for young children (under 4 years old) to be involved in it. Upon acknowledging these young children's exposure to imaginative play, another population of children (above 4 years old) who depend on imaginative play does not seem to be getting similar encouragement, even though they too deserve the opportunities and platforms.

Nevertheless, this study largely explores the implementation of IFP activities, particularly in a private preschool in Malaysia. IFP activities should be based on developmentally appropriate practices to foster holistic development in children. Therefore, the researcher used this qualitative study to study the implementation of IFP activities deep into the early school year with four experienced preschool teachers. In order to achieve these objectives,

a single-case study approach was used to determine the sample as well as the study location.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Imaginative play is one of the most important play activities for all ages of children in this world (Dominey, 2021). Bring in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and only limited research has been investigated, particularly on children's imagination play in foreign countries (Hakkarainen, 2010; Hao & Fleer, 2016; Veresov & Fleer, 2018). According to Zhang (2017), regardless of the advantages of pretend play or imaginative play in cognitive development, especially in problem-solving ability, self-regulation ability, and creativity ability, research shows that there is a gap in imaginative play that aims to raise preschool teachers' awareness of the importance of implementing imaginative play in early childhood education. Instead of focusing on the achievement of the child's academic level, preschool teachers and school authorities need to motivate and guide the children to actively engage in imaginative play.

Correspondingly, in the Malaysian preschool context, there are very few studies that have been examined on conducting imaginative play among preschool children. As stated in Tee et al. (2017), the creative play approach has become an effective medium for children's developmental needs. However, the study found that preschool teachers focused more on children's academic mastery while failing to put imaginary skills into practice (Kheioh & Low, 2022). Additionally, private preschools, according to Rahmatullah, Muhamad Rawai, Mohamad Samuri, & Md Yassin (2021), are more focused on children's scores in the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) than on children's skills in extracurricular activities. However, in these studies, nothing was specifically addressed about imaginative play in preschool.

In 2018, Devi conducted a study regarding the pedagogical use of imaginative play using cultural-historical theory in the Australian preschool curriculum. It found that during the children's imaginative play time, preschool teachers spend very little time with the children. Preschool teachers mostly do reading sessions or take attendance during children's free-play activities (Aras, 2016). This shows that during playtime, preschool teachers focus more on completing their pending work than joining in children's play activities together. Research evidence from the Malaysian context revealed similar findings. According to Tee, Mariani, & Leng (2017), some private preschools in Malaysia reduced the duration of play activities in the preschool curriculum. The children spent less time on play activities at preschool because teachers focused more on preparing them for formal schooling. Similar evidence raised in the Apu, Nazri, & Rahman (2019) study shows that children do not have enough time during free play, although they build up their thinking skills to creatively solve the problem.

Preschool teachers' progress and professionalism are also important for implementing imaginative play in preschool. As stated in Rosli & Lin (2018) in Malaysia, constructing blocks stimulated children's imagination and helped them understand concepts of mathematics, like balancing, as well as problem-solving skills. However, it found preschool teachers' progression and professionalism towards play activities in the curriculum was very weak, as it was influenced by their personal emotions when implementing play into a learning program (Rosli & Lin, 2018). Moreover, the gaps in this research do not focus on a specific type of play, such as imaginative play. This is consistent with the findings of Lydia Foong, Veloo, Dhamotharan, & Loh (2018), who found that some preschool teachers in Malaysian private preschools are under the required age, are paid less, and, most importantly, lack experience and qualification, which affects

the children's curriculum activities due to the preschool teacher's professionalism and progression.

Similarly to the preceding findings, Azah, Aziz, Zakaria, Hashim, & Rasli (2021) also pointed out that some private preschools in Malaysia paid preschool teachers regardless of their work load or qualification. In addition to Liyana, Rauf & Bakar (2019) reported that some private preschool teachers in Malaysia lacked skills in the play approach due to a lack of preschool teacher training, particularly in play activities. According to Rahmatullah et al. (2021), similar barriers were found in this study as mentioned above. Moreover, preschool teachers are only involved in children's play activities when children are having difficulties or need guidance (Aras, 2016). Otherwise, they stand back or observe the children's play (Åström et al., 2020). Preschool teachers mostly represent the central role of task management, such as focusing more on organising materials and activities (Åström et al., 2020). This highlighted the fact that preschool teachers play an observer role during play activities in preschool.

Preschool teachers spend a minimal amount of time with children in imaginative play activities in Australian preschool contexts, according to Devi (2018), due to their lack of understanding about children's imaginative play in preschool. As in the Malaysian preschool context, the majority of preschool teachers conduct creative play with children in preschool, but they still mismatch between the theory of play and hands-on practice. As such, it was found that preschool teachers have a lack of understanding and knowledge about the pedagogical aspects of creative play (Kheioh & Low, 2020; Tee et al., 2017). With regard to Rahmatullah et al. (2021), preschool teachers' understanding of the curriculum affects the progress of children's learning and development. As evidence, it was identified that preschool teachers had little understanding of curriculum requirements

and needs. Therefore, preschool teachers are unable to implement appropriate play activities in the teaching and learning curriculum.

Recently in Malaysia, several studies have pointed out that most preschool teachers are still using traditional method teaching approaches in their teaching practice, especially when conducting free-play activities. As maintained by Kheioh & Low (2020), they highlighted the challenges that occurred during implementing free-play activities in the curriculum. Research has shown that preschool teachers implement teacher-centred teaching during free-play sessions rather than child-centred teaching. As an example, preschool teachers only allowed children to engage in structured play activities during free-play teaching practice. Moreover, Rahmatullah et al. (2021) found the same obstacles in this research as preschool teachers used teacher-oriented approaches in all curriculum activities because they believed that this approach was an appropriate method to strengthen children's development and skills.

According to Jantan, Bin Hamdan, Yahya, & Binti Saleh (2015), some studies have reported that the selection of materials and the use of materials during play time were not suitable for some types of play activities in Malaysia. Although they have a good understanding of play, they are still putting a lower priority on material selection during play (Hutagalung et al., 2020). Besides that, Pearly Lim Pei Li & Bahauddin (2017) revealed that the children were not fully able to use the materials freely and were also unable to choose the materials by themselves as only preschool teachers handed them the materials during play activities.

Additionally, the conducive environment is also significant for imaginative play, which helps the preschool teachers conduct play activities without any complications.

Subsequently, in Malaysia, the majority of private preschools provide a safe environment for children to learn academically but not for play activities (Fatai O et al., 2014). Similar issues were found in Pearly Lim Pei Li & Bahauddin (2017), which indicated that Malaysian preschools showed less supportive behaviour in the play environment. Based on a study by Tee (2022), it was also found that most of the preschools in Malaysia rarely allow children to play independently, whereas if they are allowed to play, it is under restricted conditions due to children's safety concerns and time factors.

Through these findings, it was revealed that limited opportunities for creative play activities in preschools have deprived children of their innovative thinking skills, especially their ability to think "out of the box." The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) proved that Malaysia ranked 39th out of 44 countries assessed in terms of creative problem-solving among 15-year-olds (*PISA 2012 Results: Creative Problem Solving*, 2012). Based on this dismal ranking, it is possible that it is due to Malaysia's less supportive environment and less emphasis on children's creative development beginning in preschool. These below-average results should enforce children's creativity development as early as preschool level through a play-based approach.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Imaginative Free-Play is the key to unlocking deeper brain stimulation in children through improved cognitive functioning and inspirational opportunities for children. For instance, during play, a child sees an object-substitution pretence such as a used banana being represented as a telephone (Göncü & Vadeboncoeur, 2017). As described by Vygotsky (1967), it demonstrates the separation of meaning from object and action by bringing the banana near the ear, which represents the telephone (Weisberg, 2015). According to

previous research, imaginative play, or pretend play, supports and improves children's holistic development skills while also providing opportunities to learn practical life skills.

The first and foremost purpose of this study is to explore the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities by preschool teachers in preschool settings in depth within a bounded system. The goals of this study are to investigate the significance of implementing Imaginative Free-Play activities in children's development, examine the role of preschool teachers in Imaginative Free-Play activities, and investigate the strategies used by preschool teachers in Imaginative Free-Play activities.

Another purpose of this study is to identify the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities. There would also be another purpose of this study, which is to create more awareness and opportunities that could assist in the development of IFP activities for preschool teachers in Malaysia. This is to make sure the preschool teachers understand the techniques and strategies for implementing IFP activities in the preschool curriculum.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of this case study, as listed below:

1. To explore the importance of Imaginative Free-Play Activities in children's development.
2. To explore the role of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play Activities in class.
3. To observe the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing Imaginative Free-Play Activities.

4. To explore the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play Activities.

1.6 Research Question

To achieve the research objectives outlined above, research questions for this study were devised as follows:

1. What is the importance of Imaginative Free-Play Activities in children's development?
2. What are the roles of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play Activities in class?
3. What are the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing Imaginative Free-Play Activities?
4. What are the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play Activities?

1.7 Significant of the Study

The study's findings will be able to provide valuable understanding and awareness of the importance of implementing IFP activities for preschool children, which will improve aspects of children's holistic development. Additionally, the roles of preschool teachers implemented in IFP activities and, subsequently, the strategies used by preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities will also be highlighted in the findings. This study also aimed to disclose the issues and challenges faced by the preschool teachers during the establishment of IFP activities with the children.

From the findings of this study, stakeholders, such as preschool teachers and assistant teachers, can assuredly apply this knowledge to other levels of education. Furthermore,

this study contributes to the new format of physical activity regarding IFP activities in the early childhood education field. Finally, to raise awareness among preschool teachers and assistant teachers that a creative teacher is necessary and needed for all preschools, this document guides preschool teachers by transforming and applying alternative and creative ideas into teaching and learning activities. Therefore, this is one of the ways to let children explore and express their critical and creative thinking skills, as well as advance other domains of development.

By applying this study, preschool management would be able to gain a better understanding of the effects of IFP activities and recognize the strategies that could provide a platform for children to improve their performance and behaviour skills by overcoming children's passive behaviour. As a consequence, it is hoped that preschool management could expose, recruit, educate, and train more preschool teachers to become creative teachers and organise courses for preschool teachers. As a result, preschool teachers improve their teaching skills in IFP activities in order to achieve the best results in their strategies and roles when implementing IFP activities and incorporating IFP activities into the academic program.

This study can bring great benefits to children as it can improve their holistic development. This will be helpful in their future and can be applied to their daily routine activities because their development will be optimal. Moreover, children could be able to apply their imaginative thinking skills during their academic learning process because it can help them understand better and be able to think in multiple ways. Through engaging in IFP activities, children could be able to use and be exposed to various types of plays and materials. By doing so, they could be able to develop their unique thinking skills from their variety of experiences.

By applying this study in academic settings, it would benefit parents of children because they can provide valuable input, understanding, and awareness about IFP activities. As this study focuses on and explores the implementation of IFP activities related to the strategies and roles of preschool teachers, this will benefit parents, as they will gain knowledge of the techniques of IFP activities that have multiple benefits for their children. Through this study, parents can include IFP activities in their children's play activities at home, particularly during school holidays, so this will encourage, motivate, and support their children's participation in IFP activities. This activity also develops strong bonding and understanding between parents and their children when they engage in the activities together.

1.8 Limitation of the Study

One of the limitations of qualitative research is the generalization of study results. This is because the study analysis depends on the personal opinions of preschool teachers who teach IFP activities and their perspectives in some areas, as well as the researcher's view and perspectives. It is possible that preschool teachers may offer only their positive opinions on the children, and that may cause wrong data collection due to bias, even though they had agreed to offer unbiased opinions and information in the interview procedure.

In addition, the researcher uses a small sample of four participants as the sample for the study. All the participants in this case study have had teaching experience in preschool for more than five years. However, none of them has a qualification in early childhood education. The first teacher graduated from Performing Arts; the second teacher has a background of study in TESL; the third teacher graduated from Counselling; and the fourth teacher's background of study is in Elementary Education. Under certain

circumstances, the findings may not be applicable to other settings, as different individuals are submitted to different types and contexts of the teaching and learning process in the Imaginative Free-Play activities.

This research is also limited by the time allowed by the participants for the research to be conducted, due to the preschool teachers' obligation to fulfil various functions or tasks in carrying out their duties, for instance, as an administrator (attending meetings, completing paper work), as a counsellor (matters of pupils' discipline and other related problems), and as an organizer (school-related activities, for example, sports day, a concert, etc.).

This study was limited to children who were aged from 4 to 6 years old, and it was done in an urban private preschool located in Petaling district, Selangor, Malaysia. Petaling district has lots of preschools that have implemented free play in the preschool curriculum. Yet in this case study, the focus is solely on Imaginative Free-Play activities. As such, in describing the sample, observation and data collection can only be obtained from a single case study of Imaginative Free-Play activities. Finally, this study will conclude that all the participants understood and were able to answer all the questions accurately.

1.9 Operational Definition

This section introduces the operational definitions of terms used in this study.

1.9.1 Imaginative Play

Imaginative play is specifically a play that uses imagination throughout the game without any rules, boundaries, or structure (Plocha, 2007). Meanwhile, Neha (2018) highlighted that imaginative play would be considered in any preschool activity to foster children's abstract thinking skills, bravery and determination. In psychology, imaginative is defined

as a combination of creative activity or brain elements. Combining previous experience with new ideas during playtime is similar to imaginative play (O'Connor et al., 2017). In this study, the context of imaginative play refers to how preschool teachers implement this play into the curriculum by giving benefits to the children.

1.9.2 Free-play

Free-play is known as an unstructured, voluntary, child-centred activity that allows children to develop their imaginations while exploring and experiencing the world around them. Free play can also be defined as child-initiated play without adult intervention (Guidelines for good practice, 2009). It is a form of play in which children freely choose their teammates, content, and learning objectives (Catalano, 2018). It is not a fixed program, and the activity is not directed by adults. Children learn from the spatial and social learning conditions that are offered to them and organize various plays with materials. In this context of study, "free-play" refers to children being free to choose their own scenario, role, types of materials, and teammates during the activity.

1.9.3 Imaginative Free-Play Activities

In this study, Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities refer to play activities in which children can freely create their own products or storylines by using their imaginative skills based on the given theme or scenario. IFP activities are conducted in a variety of play types, like dramatic play, physical play, nature play, art play, and sensory play (White, 2016), where each child can use any materials and tools provided by preschool teachers. Additionally, the materials and tools provided to children are based on their age as well as their level of achievement in an activity. IFP activities are carried out with certain modifications to support and enable children to participate with full spirit and happiness. IFP activities have specific characteristics that contribute to children's holistic

development with unlimited boundaries (Dominey, 2021). This means IFP activities strengthen mental functions through social interaction with others (humans, animals, nature, things, etc.) (Devi et al., 2020). Therefore, it mostly enhances the critical and creative thinking skills of the children. IFP activities also boost the social skills of the children without fear or shyness. This will be the most important factor for all children's growth and development, which will help them in the future. These IFP activities also engaged children with curiosity, motivated them, and made them spontaneous, divergent thinkers, learners, and explorers (Devi et al., 2018). In this study, the context of IFP activities refers to how important these activities were for the children's development, academics, and knowledge.

1.9.4 Preschool

In this study, the term "preschool" generally refers to pre-primary education, which provides education to children before they receive formal primary education (Mohidin et al., 2015). In the context of this study, "preschool" refers to all of Malaysia's private early childhood programmes that provide education for pre-schoolers from the age of four to six years old (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). Public and international preschools, as well as childcare services for children under the age of 4, are not included in the scope of this research.

1.10 Summary

This chapter discussed free-play activities in general and Imaginative Free-Play activities in the preschool curriculum in particular. It also discusses the needs and gaps between reality and the ideal practice of Imaginative Free-Play in preschool curriculum settings. Based on the identification of problem statements, the research objectives and questions are stated accordingly by the phase. Further, it also discusses the previous research studies

about the Malaysian preschool curriculum settings, especially on free-play activities and imaginative play. Following that, there will be a discussion about the key stakeholders in this study. The limitations of the study are also described in this chapter. This chapter ends with operational definitions, which are used throughout this research. The follow-up chapter will explore the previous literature and work done by named scholars in detail to support this research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this second chapter, commands describe the theories and models related to children's Imaginative Free-Play activities. It will guide the researcher and provide ideas and directions throughout this study. To make it clear, the related theories used in this study will be outlined in a visual chart known as the theoretical framework. Furthermore, this chapter includes a brief discussion of previous research studies as well as similar research studies of teaching and learning activities in Imaginative Free-Play activities in preschool that have been conducted. However, the researcher acknowledged that there were very few studies on Imaginative Free-Play activities instead of other types of play activities conducted in preschool. Consequently, the researcher will compile and incorporate the relationships and gaps of past studies into this present study. The chapter includes a definition of imaginative play, an overview of early childhood development, the role of adults, and a conceptual framework.

2.2 Related Theories and Model

In this section, the researcher introduces the related theories and models that have been proposed by various scholars based on the field. Moreover, the researcher also discusses the concept of imaginative play in preschool children, the theoretical framework, and the conceptual framework of the study in this section. The theories that this case study supports are then presented.

2.2.1 Theory of Sociocultural

Lev Vygotsky was one of the Soviet psychologists who established an influential theory known as "sociocultural theory" that is concerned with social lifestyle aspects. In Vygotsky's view, the relationship between a person's internal mental world and the social world has received special attention in the intellectual developmental process of an individual (L. Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Similarly, the processes of development in children occur through social connections with others. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, he believed that the neuropsychological and mental internal functions of a child developed faster through social interaction with others. Therefore, children's development did not develop in one particular area but in various areas, which was known as a complex dialectical process.

Vygotsky (1998) highlighted that children's development is a complex dialectical process. He said that *"children's growth is not a single self-development process"* (p. 189) (Devi et al., 2020). He declared that the cognitive development of a child is correlated with the elements of a holistic development model that involves psychological, biological, and cultural factors (Rauf & Bakar, 2019). In sociocultural theory, a child's development emphasises a whole process of transition. For example, describe the entire process from seed to fruit production of a fruit tree's growth, not just the single fruit's or leaf's growth (Veresov & Fleer, 2018).

In the theory of sociocultural development, Vygotsky established the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept. The bonds that exist between adults and children focus on the concept of ZPD through human mediation and collaboration (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010). For children's learning and development, interconnection between adults and children forms the framework of current educational practises (Devi, 2018; Fleer, 2010).

The most important sociocultural concepts implemented in this research will be examined in more depth in the following subsections below.

The concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

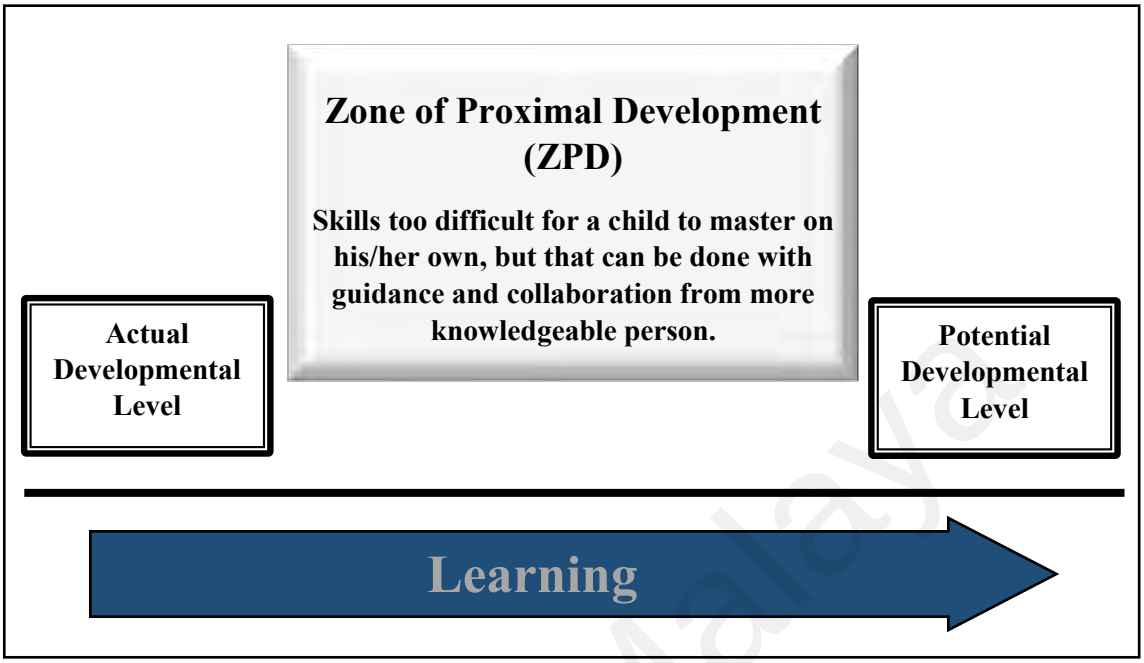
The ZPD has been defined in two different situations, such as in the play environment and in the learning environment. During the play environment, ZPD improved the children's personality development. While in the learning environment, ZPD boosted children's psychological development by teaching them problem-solving abilities (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008). The meaning of play in terms of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is heavily influenced by the *"degree and quality of adult mediation"* (Bodrova & J. Leong, 2010, p. 359). Vygotsky's (1978) most frequently referenced definition of the ZPD is as shown below:

> *"The zone of proximal development of a child is the gap between the actual development level, which can be solved independently while working on tasks, and the potential development level, which can be solved through the adult's guidance or collaboration with superior partners."*
>
> (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 379)

ZPD helps identify with more rigor the individuals' developmental levels of structures. In any given situation, the structure of children's developmental level increases depending on how ZPD directs the children to master their skills, abilities, and knowledge. Figure 2.1 depicts the distance between the children's actual developmental level and their potential developmental level using the zone of proximal development (ZPD) construct.

Figure 2.1

Zone of Proximal DevelopmenT (ZPD)



Note. This model is adapted from Lev Vygotsky (1978)

The figure above displays the actual developmental level of the child, which indicates the child's intellectual functioning level by allowing the child to handle situations independently while engaging in IFP activities. Meanwhile, the potential developmental level of the child indicates how the child can handle the situation with guidance and collaboration from more knowledgeable people while engaging in IFP activities. In the area of ZPD, adults or teammates assist and work together to solve problems with children by helping them improve their skills and achieve higher mental functions. This study is based on the concept of ZPD, as preschool teachers guide children with ideas, techniques, and strategies while implementing IFP activities. Through this ZPD concept, preschool teachers can focus on the children's holistic developmental areas while engaging in IFP activities.

Collaboration

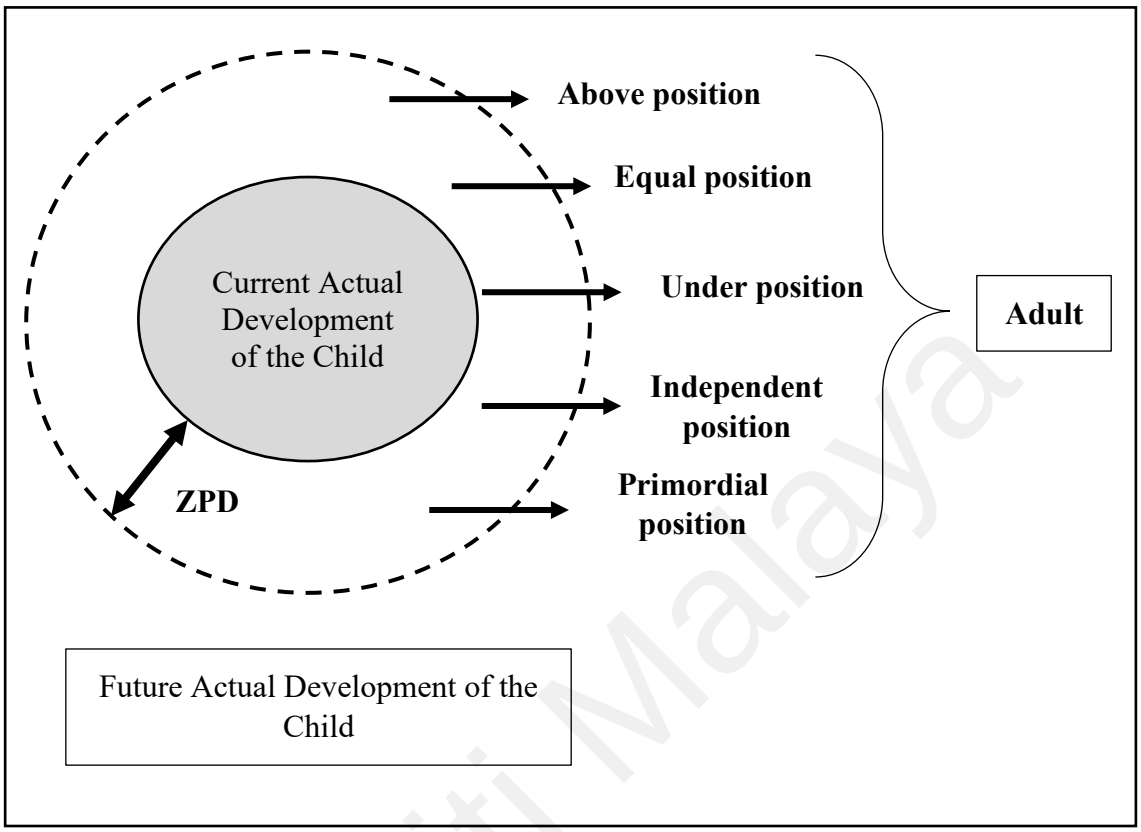
Roth and Radford (2011) highlight the ZPD's concept by stating that in cooperative awareness, the knowledge of teachers and students can be generated through cultural and social interaction processes. Therefore, in this study, preschool teachers and children must be interconnected with each other while participating in IFP activities. Based on Morgan and Skaggs (2016), they stated that:

> *"Vygotsky repeatedly employed the word 'collaboration' in his research process to evaluate the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The word 'collaboration' can be interpreted just like creating a united attempt with the more knowledgeable partner who provides assistance to proceed further when maturing functions are insufficient. This word's action is being used to solve any issue or situation when a child experiences difficulties at any point by being given the opportunity to interact with another expert person. (p. 11)"*

According to Elena Kravtsova and her partner, they theoretically analysed a study regarding the imagination development of a person, which indicates a combination of mental processes based on their experience, ideas, and senses through engaging in play-based programmes (Devi et al., 2020). Based on the ZPD concept, Kavtsova amplified a study about the involvement of adults in children's play activities. It revealed a few different ways of approaching adult involvement in children's play activities. In figure 2.2 below, display the types of adult involvement with the children under consideration of the ZPD concept.

Figure 2.2

The Five Position of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)



Note. This model is adapted from Li (2012)

The diagram above illustrates five different approaches by adults who supported the children in their learning skills and developmental areas during play activities. It was adapted from the ZPD concept that consists of five different positions, which are the 'above position', 'equal position', 'under position', 'independent position', and 'primordial position' (Li, 2012). According to Kravtsova, the 'above position' means adults take over the lead in the play activities. In other words, adults guide the children fully without giving them the chance to try themselves. Throughout the play, adults explained and demonstrated the pathway of the activities to the children. The children just have to implement the actions of adults by imitating them in their play activities (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010).

In the ‘equal position’, the role of adults will be as co-players with the children when engaging in play. The adults assist the children by giving instructions and guiding them during play activities. Through this, the children follow the adults’ actions in play (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010; Li, 2012). Meanwhile, the ‘under position’ means that children take the lead in the play activities but are under the supervision of adults. The adults encourage the children to explore it themselves. From this, the children learn the skills of trial and error (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). The ‘independent position’ is known as the lowest level of adult guidance. This means that the outcome of the play activities will be fully dependent on the children’s ideas and actions. In this position, the adults’ role as observers is to always be aware of the children’s movement and behaviour during the play activities (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010).

Finally, the ‘primordial position’ means that this occurs apart from the child’s ZPD concept. In other words, the children played among themselves without any adults’ assistance throughout the play activities. Through this position, the children have to solve problems by themselves that might involve the wrong actions or pathways during the play activities (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). In line with this notion, these five different positions of adult involvement contribute to this case study because they guide the preschool teachers' involvement during the implementation of IFP activities. By doing so, the preschool teachers can encourage and support the children's learning and development during IFP activities.

Human Mediation

A group of sociocultural researchers has been working on Vygotsky's theory of human mediation in children's play. According to Vygotsky, human mediation means humans are used as tools to broaden higher mental functions through interacting or communicating

with the surrounding environment (Devi et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1967). In other words, Vygotsky also mentioned that human mediation is a psychological tool that controls or maintains human behaviour and development. Psychological tools are defined as the communication or interaction among people during play activities (Vygotsky, 2004). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1987) stated that the materials or objects used during play activities also act as mediators. This demonstrates that children's higher mental functions widen when engaging in play activities with the support of adults, peers, and the surrounding environment (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Kozulin, 2003).

Based on Vygotsky's theory concept, Kozulin (2003) comes up with human mediators and symbolic mediators. In these two mediations, it has its own instrumental agent in play activities. Human mediators are defined as the interconnection between adults and children, whereas symbolic mediators are known as the interaction between objects and children (Devi et al., 2020). These two mediators support the development of children's cognitive levels and help them learn problem-solving skills. As a result, these theories are used to support the current study. In this study, the purpose is to explore how preschool teachers act as mediators by using imaginative free-Play activities to develop children's higher mental functions.

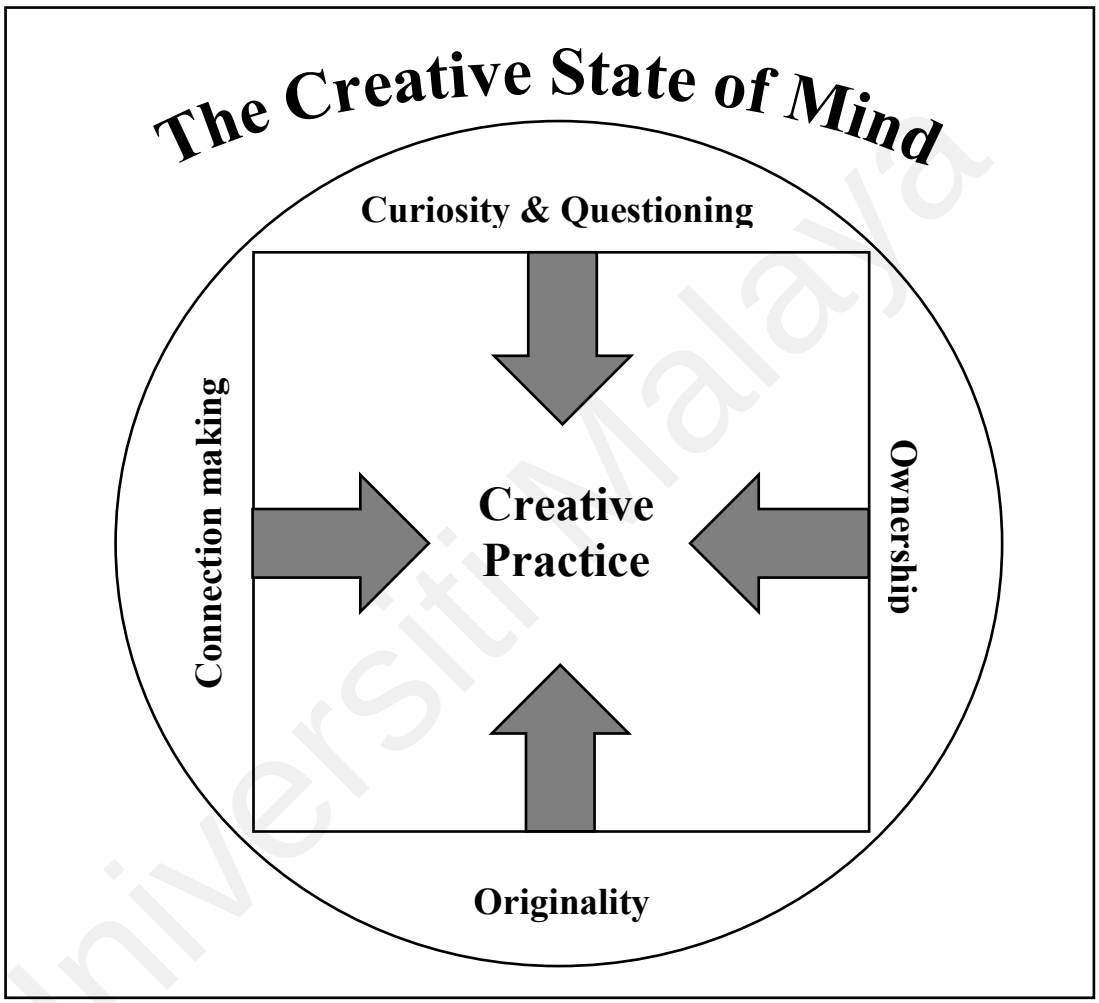
2.2.2 Theory of Creative State of Mind

With reference to Cremin, Barnes, & Stephen (2009), creative teaching is multi-layered and complex, in which teachers combine a range of personal qualities, pedagogical strategies, and thoughtfully created environments in their classroom. By doing so, each dimension of creative teaching develops the teachers' creative mind-sets during teaching and learning. From these dimensions, it imposed four elements of creative practise, such

as curiosity and questioning, making connections, ownership, and originality. Below, Figure 2.3 illustrates a diagram of the creative state of mind.

Figure 2.3

The Creative State of Mind: Creative Teaching



Note. This model improved by Cremin, Barnes and Stephen (2009)

Curiosity

According to Cremin et al. (2009), it has been proven that teachers show curiosity and passion to learn more about the world. For further improvement, teachers develop a genuine interest as they master their self-learning skills in different domains. Moreover, teachers are also curious about children's understanding and knowledge throughout the teaching and learning process.

Similarly, teachers also implemented a set of questions during the teaching and learning process. They come up with many open-ended questions that encourage children to be deeply involved in the learning process (Fisher, 2001). By doing so, children are able to create their own questions and seek to challenge their thinking as well as foster risk-taking.

Regarding safe and affirmative environments, teachers create a safe, positive, and inclusive environment in both lessons and classrooms (Cable et al., 2014). This environment appeared to encourage confident questioning by both teachers and children. In IFP activities, teachers' curiosity and questions play an important role in children's teaching and learning processes. Teachers stimulate children by combining their brilliant ideas into children's activities.

Ownership

Another element of creative teaching stated by Cremin et al. (2009) is ownership. Ownership refers to the personalities of teachers in terms of their independence. As teachers, they were able to develop a stronger sense of flexibility and confidence, which enabled them to make their own choices. It can also be applied to children, as they can freely make their own choices without any boundaries.

During the teaching learning process, teachers focused their trust, interest, and respect on the children's ideas, facilitated and supported their self-determination. According to Jeffrey and Craft (2004), teachers were always aware of handling children's control as well as collaborative work during the lesson. This will assist and guide teachers in self-direction and collaborative creativity when implementing IFP activities.

Moreover, regarding classroom ethos, teachers focus on the needs of children by providing an appropriate environment and learning agenda for them. Teachers were also aware of the spaces for conducting activities and teaching materials that were critical for children's creative learning (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004).

Originality

Referring to "originality" as the other element in creative practice, as stated by Cremin et al. (2009), teachers who engage in creative teaching have generated an original idea and a novel action in their classroom. For example, teachers respond to the children spontaneously, bravely taking the risk and providing open questions for them during the teaching and learning process. This is due to teachers' engaging with various techniques and innovative ideas throughout the IFP activities. Furthermore, originality refers to spontaneous actions and techniques that assist teachers and students in developing their creative thinking.

Connection Making.

Cremin et al. (2009) revealed that the next element in the theory of mind-creative teaching is connection-making. It refers to teachers who use imaginative connection to help children make connections between their personal lives and the activities of their school. Teachers were also aware of potential and existing connections across the curriculum so that they could fully occupy the nature of the subject without any boundaries. Teachers facilitate the children's making connections during IFP activities based on their needs and interests.

In pedagogical strategies, teachers engage actively with children to stimulate their intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. Preschool teachers create new, diverse

teaching styles by connecting children's minds and work during IFP activities. For instance, children make links between education and personal life experiences through the teacher's guide. According to Cable et al. (2014), the environment tends to be open and encouraging for learning so that teachers and children can foster lateral thinking and make connections throughout the teaching and learning process.

2.3 Theoretical Framework of the Study

A theoretical framework is the structure that helps the researcher analyse the data and interpret the meaning contained in the data by synthesizing with related theories based on the field of study (Kivunja, 2018). According to Grant & Osanloo (2014), the theoretical framework is the "blueprint," which consists of theoretical principles, constructs, concepts, and tenants of a theory for research (Adom et al., 2018). In this study, the framework engages with two theories: the first is the sociocultural theory invented by Vygotsky (1978), and the second is the theory of the creative state of mind developed by Cremin, Barnes, and Scoffham (2006).

Additionally, the theory of sociocultural development highlights the connection between children's development and their surroundings. The children learn new skills and improve their development skills from the surrounding atmosphere. Vygotsky discovered the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept under sociocultural theory, which refers to the difference between a child's actual developmental level and the child's potential development under adult guidance (Abu Bakar & Puad Mat Som, 2018).

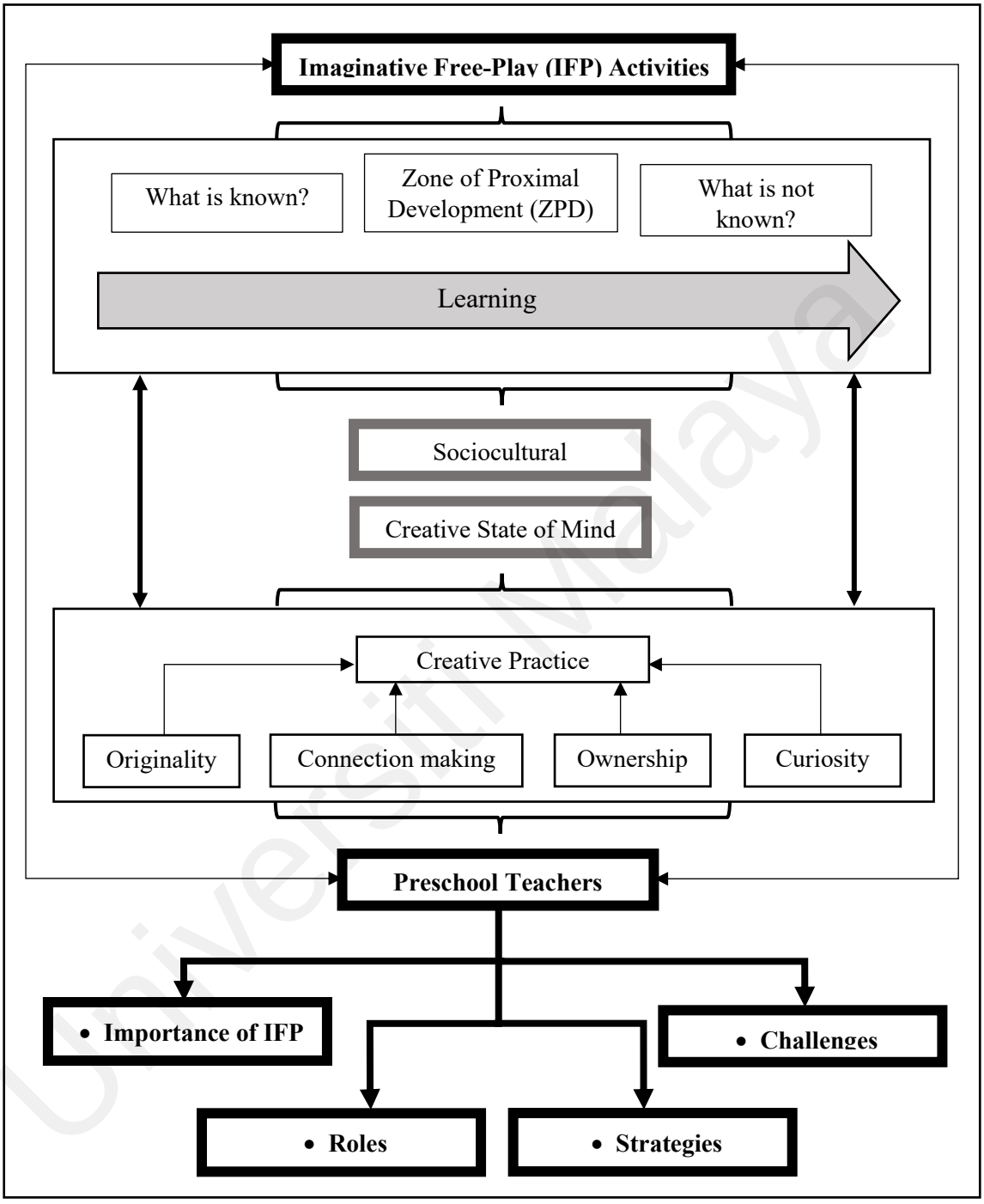
This theory illustrates the interconnection between the social process and children's learning development. Lev Vygotsky was referred to, who believes that developing children's higher mental-order functions is the responsibility of parents, caregivers,

teachers, peers, and the culture as a wholly integrated cycle (Cherry, 2022). Meanwhile, the theory of the creative state of mind highlights the creative teaching skills of educators in teaching and learning activities at preschool. With regard to Cremin, Barnes, & Stephen (2009), the creative state of mind theory rests on four elements, which are curiosity and questioning sequence, making a connection, autonomy and ownership, and also fostering originality.

Apart from the listing of the theories and concepts that could potentially affect preschool teachers' teaching skills, it also outlines potential relationships between children's development and Imaginative Free-Play activities. The framework in Figure 2.4, therefore, describes the broad spectrum of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept and the Creative State of Mind theory that may help preschool teachers in exploring the teaching and learning process of Imaginative Free-Play activities.

Figure 2.4

Theoretical Framework of the Study



2.4 Imaginative Play Defined

According to sociocultural theory, imagination is a core content of a play that is an indication of the critical thinking of young children (Dorsch, 2005; Worst & Beach, 2007).

Through imagination, children are able to develop their abstract thinking and also generalize about objects' meanings through their creative thinking (Vygotsky, 1967). In addition, imagination is an essential tool for observing children's learning and development. This is due to children expressing their imaginations by entering a creative world through play. Children combine their real-world experiences and their artistic way of thinking by being transformed into innovative ideas during the play (Judson, 2008).

Each child has various developmental periods as they have different needs. For further understanding, young children immediately assure their interest, while older children satisfy their unrealizable wishes by creating an imaginary situation through play (Vygotsky, 1967). As Vygotsky mentioned, when a child plays in an imaginary situation, they can develop their understanding of the concepts. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the pedagogy of preschool teachers in imaginative play underlies the children's learning and development, which are explored in this study.

Bodrova and Leong (2015) stated that the term "play" is the same as described by Vygotsky, which does not include many other activities, like physical activities (movement activities), object manipulations, and explorations. Vygotsky, on the other hand, referred to play in these three components (Leong & Bodrova, 2012):

* Children invent imaginary environments.
* Children play different parts and act them out.
* Children obey a set of principles that are dictated by particular roles.

2.5 Types of Imaginative Free-Play

In order to support learning through play for young children, the first important thing to understand is the different types of Imaginative Free-Play and why they are beneficial for children.

2.5.1 Role Play

Role-play is an activity that children use to act out or get into character for a role or real-life context (Claudia Vlaicu, 2014). This play is one of the favourite activities for young children who like to play at home as well as at preschool. Role-play is an active social activity where children get into character and reflect on that character through physical action (Erturk, 2015).

Similarly to Wyant & Bridges-Nieuwenhuyse (2021), children are able to create and imagine beyond their life experiences during role play. By playing roles, children think in abstract ways and also assume the roles of adults according to their creativity. Moreover, children expand their imagination skills through role-play as they use new words and numbers to express their ideas, imaginings, and personal experiences.

Many researchers used different terms as synonyms for role play, such as “pretend play,” “make-believe play,” “small world play,” and “dramatic play” (Kong, 2015). Pretend play is a form of play that children construct or reconstruct from their previous experiences with it (Sansanwal, 2014). According to Vygotsky, pretend play is the mature form of play for children (Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2000). During play, they tend to use their imaginations to relate to the actual objects and their meanings. Children who are three years old, also known as preschool-aged children, are involved in this pretend play.

However, in the Piagetian model, pretend play occurs during the sensorimotor stage (from birth to two years old) and preoperational stage (from two to seven years old) of early childhood. According to Piaget, pretend play is a form of interaction with peers, and each of the members plays different roles within themselves (Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2000; Zulkarnaini, 2017). It also indicated that "a lifelong mental capacity to consider alternatives to reality" (Rao & Gibson, 2021) means teaching children to think in many other ways than just reality.

Role play encourages children to think creatively and imaginatively by combining personal experiences in the play (Erturk, 2015). Children are able to recreate situations, experiment with languages, and learn to express emotions during role play. Therefore, role play helps children to think in an abstract way to stimulate their thinking skills more deeply, quickly, and emotionally.

2.5.2 Symbolic Play

Symbolic play occurs when children replace various objects to represent various people, objects, situations, and activities (Aksoy, Özkan Kunduracı, and Aksoy, 2022; Umek, Musek, Pecjak, and Kranjc, 2007). In symbolic play, children use real objects or acts to represent different objects in their play. Example of symbolic play: a child used a teddy bear as a baby and a wooden stick as a thermometer, and the child's gestures and verbalizations indicated particular activities and situations (Umek et al., 1999).

In corresponding to Lillard (2017), children's symbolic thinking develops when children substitute the real object with another object or an action in the play. Through symbolic play, children develop their milestone especially in cognitive development, social

development, emotional development, physical development, language development, and creative development.

2.5.3 Sociodramatic Play

A group of two or more children involved in dramatic play is known as “sociodramatic play” (Abraham, 2015). Mostly, children who are three to five years old engage in sociodramatic play. In this play, children strengthen their understanding of the world through their body language, spontaneous oral language, and expressive imagination (Rajapaksha, 2016).

Sociodramatic play helps children read the scripts and act out the roles. Through this play, it enriches children’s literacy, language, and vocabulary development, as well as their problem-solving skills (Meacham et al., 2014). According to Vygotsky, sociodramatic play has three features, such as an imaginary situation, the ability to act out roles, and a set of rules to determine specific roles (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). These features are important for children as they develop higher mental functions.

2.5.4 Creative Play

Creative play is the combination of children's play and imagination (Tee et al., 2017). According to Vygotsky, "creative play" is the expression of children's thoughts, feelings, and emotions through play, art, music, dance, and writing (Bodrova and Leong, 2015). In this play, children use their imaginations to explore new ideas and make something new from familiar materials.

Children generate and improve their physical, social, and cognitive development through creative play (Talib et al., 2014). Similarly, it also helps children become problem solvers

when they engage in creative play, as they are able to overcome the problem (Plocha, 2007). Therefore, creative play is one of the most important play activities for young children, as it provides opportunities for children to self-express their uniqueness.

2.5.5 Fantasy Play

When children are involved in activities that have no real-world application, it is called "fantasy play." Fantasy play is also known as pretend play or make-believe play, according to Mansor (2019). During these play activities, children's imagination and creativity become limitless. Pretending to be a superhero or acting out a fairy tale character are two examples of fantasy play.

With reference to Helena Plocha (2007), the wonderful thing about fantasy play is that children not only get to practice these roles and relationships, but they also learn to think outside the box through the ability to question and explore multiple possibilities and challenge the logical processes of the world. In fantasy play, children can create different scenarios with varying elements. Along with the important skill-building capacity of fantasy play, it also presents an opportunity for children to escape and have fun. Children can benefit from the opportunity to escape to a world of their own creation, just as adults might dive into a book or watch a movie to temporarily escape the stress and responsibilities of everyday life.

Fantasy play is important in children's lives because children can share, explore, and act out their understanding of the world without any boundaries (Abraham, 2015). Dominey (2021) stated that through fantasy play, children's anxiety and fear can be released by expressing their emotions and feelings. The children also build confidence by

participating in fantasy play because they explore and get more experience from the play (Wyant and Bridges-Nieuwenhuyse, 2021).

2.6 Benefits of Imaginative Free-Play

In addition, the benefits of IFP activities contribute to the development of children. Development refers to the progressive change over time and improvement in the growth rate of children (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). Children's development can be long-term or short-term. There are six areas of overall development, which are cognitive development, social development, language development, physical development, emotional development, and creative development.

2.6.1 Cognitive Development

The children develop their classification skills through Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) using their senses. IFP promotes the development of multisensory skills in toddlers, such as hearing, seeing, and feeling (Kostelnik, Whiren, & Soderman, 2007). For instance, a child recognizes the sounds, textures, and shapes of the toys through their senses. Toddlers and children can benefit from this by playing and developing their multisensory skills. The children also develop their imaginary thinking when they participate in IFP activities. Abstract symbolic thinking develops when children engage in pretend play. According to Rosen (2020) and Smilansky & Shefatya (1992), the cognitive skills children use in pretend play are essential for school success (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2009).

Aside from that, IFP allows children to face challenges during play time. Children have better knowledge about convergent and divergent problem solving when they engage in IFP activities (Henniger, 2018). Through this, the children understand better about their surroundings, which they can apply to their future. IFP fosters children's intellectual

development from the moment they are born. IFP promotes cognitive development in young children in three ways, including improving children's multisensory, abstract-symbolic, and effective problem-solving abilities.

2.6.2 Social Skill Development

Imaginative Free-Play strengthens children's social skills by helping them get along with others. The children get opportunities to make new friends during free-play time (Patricia F & Verna, 2014). For example, a child may join a group of children on the playground who are playing the game Ice Freeze. As they participate in IFP activities, the children learn to be cooperative and collaborative with their peers. IFP helps the children understand appropriate social interaction among their peers. The children know how to communicate with others in a good manner as they engage in play (Mayesky, 2008). For example, a child who is good at social interaction can learn to deal with more people at once. In addition, children who are regularly involved in imaginative play develop positive social behaviours compared to those who are rarely involved. This is because children who regularly interact and play as a group can learn group responsibility and show positive social behaviour towards other children (Plocha, 2007).

According to Haight (2006), parents from different cultures engage in their children's fantasy play to develop sociality (Laura E. & Joyce, 2010). By doing so, the children can learn about and understand other cultures and skills. They also develop good relationships among themselves by giving and taking as well as sharing. Similarly, during IFP activities, children use cultural substrates to promote their own development (Gray, 2011). As they master socializing skills, the children's egocentric behaviour is reduced by IFP. According to Piaget (1962), free play provides them many opportunities to decrease egocentrism (Henniger, 2018). This is because IFP helps the children accept other ideas

or points of view. Two young girls, for example, are pretending to be chefs. Suddenly, a boy child wants to join in their play as a chef. They claim that a chef can only be played by a girl, not a boy, but they later realize that a boy can also be a chef, so they include the boy in their play. This shows that they accept other viewpoints.

2.6.3 Language and Literacy Development

Imaginative Free-Play influences language and literacy skills when involved in children's play. The children used vocabulary during play by communicating using different tones and speeds with their peers. According to Garvey (1990), almost all levels of language development are potential play materials (Marjorie J. , Anne K. , & Alice P. , 2010). Children develop new vocabulary through IFP activities. Other than that, they also improve their writing skills when they engage in sand play. This allows the children to explore more words, and they can use words with different rhythms, tones, and sounds.

2.6.4 Physical Development

The act of Imaginative Free-Play is intended to strengthen children's body fitness and muscles. Children who participate in IFP activities can improve their gross motor skills as well as their fine motor skills. For gross motor skills, the children use their large muscles in their IFP activities such as climbing, dancing, kicking, jumping, etc., whereas for fine motor skills they use their small muscles, which is called eye-hand coordination. Examples of activities are buttoning, painting, writing, cutting, and many more (Kimberly A. , Ana G. , Wanda J., & Alicia Valero, 2014). The children also develop good muscular control and maintain balance in their body coordination. The children are able to control their movement when they engage in IFP activities (Mayesky, 2008). For example, when children play with a balancing beam, they can control and balance their body movements.

2.6.5 Emotional Development

According to Johnson, Christie & Yawkey (1999), Imaginative Free-Play is an excellent vehicle for helping children with their emotional development (Kimberly A. , Ana G. , Wanda J., & Alicia Valero, 2014). IFP activities develop children's internal feelings such as happiness, fear, excitement, etc. Through imaginative free play, the children develop a positive self-concept by feeling proud of themselves as they succeed in their achievements (Santer et al., 2007). Children develop and express their feelings through observation and imitation of others.

2.6.6 Creative Development

Children's creativity develops through Imaginative Free-Play as they explore and experiment with their surroundings. From here, the children use their imagination to create or form new things during their IFP activities. According to Singer (1973), children develop their creativity in IFP situations that require them to use their imagination (Kimberly A. , Ana G. , Wanda J., & Alicia Valero, 2014). Therefore, help children to be exposed to new things and environments during their IFP time so that they can develop their creative talent.

2.7 Categories of Imagination

According to Dorsch (2005), people who examine the elements of any concept through cognitive means make judgements on what exists or their perspective of reality. Meanwhile, analysing through imagination means they design based on what has been represented in their minds. Therefore, imagination has no ability to make any judgements about the knowledge of a person. He also indicated the themes that integrate an understanding of the imagination by identifying five categories of imagination, such as sensory imagining, affective imagining, intellectual imagining, experiential imagining,

and imaginative projects (Shank, 2015). These classifications of imagination provide guidelines and a framework for this study, especially for Imaginative Free-Play activities.

2.7.1 Sensory Imagining

The first people to discuss the sensory imagination by using images were Plato and Aristotle. Then, many other philosophers from different countries started to review the sensory imagination, such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, etc. (Mary, 1976). According to their beliefs, imagination arises from the knowledge gained through a person's senses and their personality's development. Dorsch (2005) asserts that the visual senses are heavily used in the imagination process. For example, images or actions that have been seen are restored in the brain and later used in the thinking process by trying to recreate or imitate the images or actions. Based on Sartre and Wittgenstein, they believed that the visual perception of a person does not provide information or teach anything new. However, it helps to reproduce unique ideas in them. Similar to Aristotle's assumption, imagination is created in a person based on their own experiences and ideas through their senses, as it is an internal mirror of a person (Egan, 2014). Sensory imagination is mostly all about sensory content that initiates the mind to be imaginatively entertained (Dorsch, 2005). In simple words, the images viewed through sensory imagination were restored in the viewer's mind, and later, the viewer could recreate them again.

2.7.2 Affective Imagining

A person who generates imagination in them from their personal emotional experience is known as having affective imagination. The term "affective imagination" refers to emotional imaginative experience (Dorsch, 2005). This imagination normally occurs while reading books, listening to stories, or watching movies. It's totally different from the real emotional experience. For example, a person will experience lots of emotions

while reading a storybook, such as becoming worried when the storyline is sad. This is considered "virtual-emotional" as the person is affected emotionally (Walton, 1991). During an imaginary moment, emotional understanding is separated from reality experience. Although these emotions are just temporary, they are based on real emotions. Consider the emotions or feelings that someone else might be experiencing in a specific situation. It doesn't mean that everyone experiences the same emotions or feelings (Shank, 2015). Therefore, each person can come out with their own unique emotional perceptions to evaluate the scenarios according to the situation. Through psychological practise, affective imagining has been used as a tool to help understand a problem from a different point of view (Goldie, 2005).

2.7.3 Intellectual Imagining

Intellectual imagining is similar to other types of thinking known as the deliberate act of the thinker and generates hypotheses about something (Dorsch, 2005; Shank, 2015). This type of imagination helped to generate ideas in a variety of contexts by changing from psychological imagination to geometric visualisation. Imagination arises in a person through their mental thinking, whether from creative thinking or critical thinking. Make-believe and propositional imagination are the other familiar words for intellectual imagining (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2003). This intellectual imagining developed in people when they engaged in storytelling, role-playing, and imaginative games. According to Craft (2001), the aspect of creative thinking that includes the mastery of both thinking skills and problem-solving skills is defined as intellectual imagining, whereas Vygotsky stated that the gap was filling up between what is known and what is possible. This type of imagining is required for creative thinking. Through this imagination, people form a set of rules or ideas based on situations that create hypothetical conclusions from their logical thinking skills (Dorsch, 2005).

2.7.4 Experiential Imagining

A person's imagination is stimulated from the surrounding objects or incidents that occur around them. The term of experiential imagining is defined as the object awareness (Dorsch, 2005). Experiential imagining is when a person carries out intellectual imagining through their previous sensory experiences and executes a task in an imaginative way. For instance, a person imagining a tree means they are recalling their memories or can also sense the textures, colours, and shapes of the tree's leaves, branches, and bark (Shank, 2015). In other words, experiential imagining is a trial-and-error experience where the person performs some sort of task through actual actions. The strategies of experiential imagination develop cognitive achievement by increasing the exercise of creating sole ideas so that they stimulate a person's intellect.

2.7.5 Imaginative Projects

The imaginative project is a combination of all types of imagination in a person and produces extraordinary outcomes. For example, the innovative elements from sensory imagining, emotional representation, mental imagining, and object imagining were combined together to create a unique holistic product (Shank, 2015). This imagination context explains that the thinker integrates directly to evaluate the cause-and-effect relationship in the state of decision-making by generating imagination (Dorsch, 2005). Other than that, different perspectives from a particular person or situation are also known as the imaginative projects. For instance, during story reading, each reader will undergo different experiences and stimulate different imaginations based on their own point of view about the story. The imaginative projects seem to be limitless combinations of the various creative aspects. Therefore, these imaginations are the most complex and wide-ranging.

2.8 Role of the Adult

When children are playing, they are engaging in a complex process that affects all aspects of their development. The role of the adult in IFP activities is equally complex because the adult must develop a repertoire of responses that are appropriate to each individual play situation, appropriate for children at different points in their development, and responsive to a range of individual needs. The literature on IFP activities reflects different and strongly held perspectives on the nature of play and its place in children's development. Each of these has a view on the role of the adult, guided by their own specific values and beliefs.

The role of the adult will vary depending on the processes or products the adult perceives as being central to the play. Adult roles may involve participation, observation, consultation, selecting materials and resources, involving parents, planning, and writing policies. The most important aspect of play is the relationships that the adult develops, which give children the confidence to act autonomously, make choices, follow their interests, and interact with peers. In other words, creating a context in which children feel psychologically safe as well as socially.

2.8.1 Planning Safe Activities for Children

The adult's main responsibility is to establish a setting that is secure on a psychological and physical level. This is to make sure the children feel protected, recognize their value, and have the freedom and autonomy to explore and play (Bennett et al., 1998). Although the physical environment should be free of unanticipated risks, it should also give children the chance to push themselves and grow by taking risks that are acceptable for their developmental stage. The relationships between adults and children have a major impact on how children grow and develop their personalities, identities, social skills, and

dispositions to explore and learn. Children seek out social relationships when these relationships are healthy and they become confident. The physical environment affects children's cognitive development, social development, and emotional development (Pearly & Bahauddin, 2017).

Strong emotional bonds or attachments are necessary for healthy development (Ainsworth, 1982; Atherton & Nutbrown, 2016; Meins et al., 2001). The child's security is bound up in these, for they meet the child's instinctive need to be close. Key factors in attachment sensitivity are acceptance, cooperation, and responsive interactions with children (Ainsworth et al., 1969). This leads children to understand themselves and others. Therefore, they are better able to take on the role of a play partner.

Teachers' involvement in children's play activities played an important role in children's developmental-appropriate practice (Gaviria-loaiza et al., 2017). By engaging in children's play, teachers can set up various materials and themes based on the children's interest during the play time (Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Wathu, 2017). Teachers get to know and understand each child's developmental level. They can set-up the materials according to their level of developmental. However, there are also some teachers were control children on material usage during the play (Pearly & Bahauddin, 2017; Rajapaksha, 2016). This is because teachers are concerned that the materials will spoil and deteriorate quickly.

Other than that, teachers plan and implement many types of play activities, which is also one of their roles in children's play (Sandseter et al., 2021; Wathu, 2017). Combining different types of play allows children to discover more about their surroundings. Children can broaden their knowledge while also developing their curiosity. This helps children

restore and create many ideas as they engage in various play activities and different themes or scenarios. According to Wiseman, Rossmann, Lee, & Harris (2019), children involved in natural environments during play activities give importance to children's learning as they can gather more information from exploring the natural environment. In addition, preschool teachers provided external mediator to solve disagreements during pretend play (Thelen, 2012).

2.8.2 Observing Children at Play

Observation is a key tool for those working with young children. It opens their eyes to the competencies of young children, deepens their respect for them as learners (Drummond, 2012), and informs them about development and learning. Observations also inform adults about the child's interests, how long they persist in play, the patterns and rhythms of their play, and the partners who share their play. Through these observations, children who are in danger of exclusion can be identified and supported in accessing play materials and companions. Insights into the child's affective state can be gained through observing body language, and the skills of communication and language are also visible in play. Observations of children's free play reveal how children differentiate their own learning and set themselves challenges. Familiarity with children's interests in free play also provides information on which adult-initiated activities or visits can be based in order to make them relevant and meaningful to the child.

The work of Piaget and Isaacs used detailed observations to understand learning processes. Working with children today is demanding on many levels. It requires astute and observant people to go beyond nurturing to develop effective practice (Atherton & Nutbrown, 2016). When observing, adults should place themselves in the child's shoes and ask how the event is being experienced by the child. Observation should be rigorous

and reflective. When shared with others, insights are enhanced. Observation will sensitise adults to the play cues that children use when drawing peers and adults into their play.

Adults' observations of children should be validated by discussion with the child and, where possible, the parents or caregivers, each of whom will contribute their own unique insights. These insights will give children a voice and enhance the quality of their experience. According to Wiseman et al. (2019), children had the opportunity to control their activity during unstructured activities.

2.8.3 Interacting with Children in Play

The extent to which the adult interacts with children during their free play will vary depending on the circumstances. One school of thought advocates non-intervention as an appropriate means of interacting because a more interactive approach interferes with the child's play (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). For example, during play with the 'treasure basket'. Goldschmied and Jackson (2003) establish the adult's role as one of 'emotional anchorage', a quiet reassuring presence whose body language encourages the child to explore, yet does not actively participate. This enables the child to make his or her own choices concerning the materials and how they are used.

Adults are advised against premature intervention in children's play as this robs them of the opportunity to make mistakes, learn from them, solve problems creatively and negotiate solutions to social conflict (Ismail et al., 2015). (Missiuna and Pollock, 1991) found this is to be true particularly when working with children who were disabled because when the adult solves problems and intervenes inappropriately the child can become doubly disabled as a result of dependency and loss of power and control.

Therefore, in many situations the adult should act as a non-participant in the play, yet actively observe and note what children are doing to develop understanding of the child's affective state, intellectual concerns and physical and social skills, friendships and abilities. If adults are directly involved in play, they may inadvertently transmit their values, rules and traditions to children.

A Vygotskian approach would advocate that adults actively engage with children in a sensitive manner, as there are benefits in supportive and responsive interactions. Adams (2015) attributed the impoverished learning environment and a lack of complex play they observed to the lack of interaction from adults. They spent the majority of their time helping children get involved in and facilitating in this play. However, they were less likely to become involved in dramatic play and the quality of the talk between teachers and children was neither rich nor stimulating. These findings are significant, because children are more likely to play where there is an adult present and the quality of talk is an important element of caregiver–child interaction that predicts cognitive and language skills.

The adult does have an active role in challenging in a sensitive, yet fair, way any stereotypical or inappropriate behaviour that arises, both within and without the play situation. Children's self-esteem and identity are fostered through the types of interactions and relationships they have with adults and peers. Adults are role models for children, which they have the power to influence values, attitudes and behaviour (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). For example, if children from some groups are treated differently by adults, their peers will learn to respond in the same way. Children should learn about similarities between groups as well as differences. They should learn that individuals within a group are not necessarily representative of the whole group.

Comments that reflect stereotypes or prejudice should be dealt with through talk, explanations given as to the unacceptability of a comment and the feelings of the children discussed. Correct information should be shared and support given to the children involved, primarily the child who is hurt, but not neglecting the child who has caused the offence, albeit unwittingly.

Bloom, Critten, Johnson, & Wood (2020) highlighted three areas that are important in the social-affective domains:

- Supporting children in expressing and handling their own emotions and others' emotions as well.
- Encouraging in children a recognition of similarities and differences between people and respect for these.
- Building the skills and abilities for creating relationships with others, such as reading the behaviour of others, initiating contact, handling rejection, and negotiation.

When children and adults have authentic conversations with children during their exploration and play, children learn to name objects, describe situations, explain behaviour and phenomena, predict a course of action and express their feelings. Observations of talk between children and teachers reveal that it is the teachers who most frequently initiate the conversations and usually dominate them. Tizard and Hughes (1984), observing children's talk at nursery and at home with parents, reported that the opposite was true when children dialogued with their parents. In the home context, children most often initiated conversations and the adults responded to, and sustained them. Fundamental to these exchanges were the shared experiences of parents and children such as visits to their grandparents and walks in the park. Conversations also

flowed naturally when the adult and child were engaged together in 'real-life' situations, such as dusting and making meals. In other words, authentic conversations occur in real-life contexts that make sense to the child. Conversational exchanges are more likely when adults are genuinely interested in children's thoughts and ideas, give them time to initiate conversations and avoid closed, test questions that are focused on fixed outcomes.

Bloom et al., (2020) suggests that adults' conversations with children tend to focus on the content of their products (whether their drawing or painting is a car, elephant, house or teddy bear) and not the forms (straight lines, circles, diagonal lines and concentric circles). She believes that it is the forms that children are more interested in, and when adults reflect back to children their understanding of this for example by saying 'I see that you have used a lot of circles in your picture' then children understand that they have been understood and that their interests have been valued and respected.

Supporting interactions between peers is another important function of the adult during play. The adult can refer children to one another so that, through talk and social interaction, they can learn about themselves and one another. When children share with others what they have done, or plan to do, they are organising their thoughts, developing communication skills and availing themselves of the insights of others. They begin to understand how and why they do things and consider alternative and more effective courses of action.

The role of the adult is to support and extend learning through skilful open-ended questioning, authentic conversational exchanges and referring children to one another to find solutions to problems. The timing of these interventions is crucial so that they neither

intrude upon nor frustrate or terminate the play. The adult acts as a scaffold, enabling children to move into new areas of understanding and development.

2.9 Challenges to Imaginative Free-Play

There are some challenges and issues that appeared during the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities in preschool. These challenges and issues might degrade or develop negative effects on children's learning and development processes.

2.9.1 The Environment or Space

The environment in which the play takes place is important. They are central to the way in which play is allowed to develop and flourish (Drummond, 2012). These environments include the indoors and outdoors. Adults are responsible for providing safety and appropriate environments and space based on their knowledge of child development and individual children's interests and abilities (Nor Puteh & Ali, 2013).

The outdoor environment should be an extension of the indoor environment. Both the indoor and outdoor environments should be designed similarly so that both environments can foster all aspects of children's development. Notwithstanding, the outdoor environment provides children with unique opportunities to explore nature and test their gross motor skills. Breathnach (2017) recommends that the outdoor play space be zoned to facilitate children's diverse interests. Some zones would facilitate climbing apparatus, others social interaction, yet others sensory or socio-dramatic play.

Dividing space into areas dedicated to specific types of play ensures that noisy or physical play does not intrude into quieter social areas, although children do have flexibility to move equipment and develop their play over several areas. According to Sandseter, Storli,

and Sando (2022) giving children opportunities to engage in different types of play activities benefits their learning and development. Paths, hills, patches to grow flowers and vegetables, and wild areas all enlarge the potential for rich, imaginative, and exploratory play. They also meet children's evolutionary needs of associating with the past, developing creativity and mastery, and positively impacting brain development (Latham & Ewing, 2018; Morrissey et al., 2017).

2.9.2 The Materials

In order to support children's exploration in play, there should be a wide range of materials of different textures, colours, shapes, and sizes. According to Wathu (2016), the quantity of the materials should be enough for all the children to use so that the children can avoid fighting for the materials. There should be materials that are familiar to the child and those that are novel in order to present a challenge (Sandseter et al., 2021). In some settings, the current preponderance of commercial products made from plastic should be mediated by natural materials that provide a richer source of sensory information.

Materials should be accessible to the children so that they can choose the resources that best suit their purposes. The materials that best support children's creativity are open-ended (Ingunn, 2001). Their adaptability and lack of explicit function provoke children's imagination and creativity. Resources chosen for children who are disabled should be developmentally appropriate and flexible in use; for example, they should include things that can be held in the hand or on the feet (Yıldırım and Akamca, 2017).

2.9.3 The Time

Children need time to repeat and practice their play behaviours. Children, therefore, need time to repeat their actions. Cullen's work draws attention to the fact that the management

and organization of timetables can restrict children's opportunities for outdoor play (Ingunn, 2001). This is equally true of indoor play. Adults should ensure that children have time to become engaged in complex play and have some control over how and when this is terminated. Repetition leads to more complex combinations of materials and ideas and higher levels of learning. When adults are confident in their understanding of this, they will not be concerned about repetitious behaviour and consequently avoid the temptation to move children on to gain experience in other areas of learning (Dorsch, 2005).

2.10 Review of Past Studies

The variables of this study are Imaginative Free-Play (IFP) activities as well as creative teaching. IFP activities refer to the development of play, while creative teaching refers to preschool teachers' actions towards the teaching and learning process. The related research consists of national and international research, which only comes from Malaysia, and international research from outside of Malaysia. The researcher realizes that very little study about imaginative play has been done compared to creative teaching. Consequently, the related research below presents the development of play in creative teaching at the national or international level.

2.10.1 National Research

Since the Ministry of Education (MOE) emphasizes play as an essential medium for the holistic development of the child, the Ministry of Education has introduced the Standard National Preschool Curriculum (SNPC), or as it is called in Bahasa, *Kurikulum Standard Pra-sekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK),* in 2011 as a guideline for preschool curriculum to enhance and provide creative and meaningful learning activities (Taha et al., 2020). Play

has become one of the compulsory subjects in all preschools, either in private or government preschools in Malaysia.

Sociodramatic play has been used in research studies on children's social development in Malaysia. A study by Zulkarnaini (2017) focused on identifying popular and unpopular children during sociodramatic play and diagnosing the reasons for children being unpopular while playing in sociodramatic play. In fact, Zulkarnaini (2017) stated that there was extremely limited information about the preschool teachers' roles and their contributions during sociodramatic play with the children. Therefore, there was little information about the preschool teacher's participation in children's sociodramatic play.

Tee (2022) concluded that implementing the creative play approach had a positive effect on preschool children's creativity development. Through this finding, the study stimulated the idea that preschool children's confidence increases by expressing their ideas and making relevant connections between ideas. However, Tee (2022) emphasized that teacher-centred learning and academic mastery are still being implemented in most of the preschools in Malaysia. As a result, the study concluded that preschool children's creativity development was limited due to a lack of time in preschool.

With reference to Hutagalung, Liyan, & Adams (2020), dramatic play plays a major role in children's vocabulary learning. The purpose of this research was to explore the effects of dramatic play on the enhancement of vocabulary learning in pre-schoolers. Thus, the researchers concluded that dramatic play showed a successful and manageable approach for preschool teachers to teach preschool children vocabulary. Additionally, the study stated that there was extremely limited information about the teachers' strategies for conducting dramatic play.

Referring to Yin, Zakaria, Hutagalung, & Mohd Salleh (2014), they examined the messy play that stimulated preschool children's creativity and imagination. The evidence highlighted that both genders showed equal creativity during the messy play, but, according to socioeconomic status, the lower socioeconomic status carried out more creative ideas compared to the higher socioeconomic status. Hence, messy play activities showed positivity towards the development of creativity and imagination in preschool children. However, the research gap for this study was about the role of preschool teachers during the play.

A study by Tee, Mariani, and Leng (2017) affirmed that creative play provided powerful opportunities for preschool children's learning and development. Therefore, the study highlighted the potential of creative play in the children's teaching and learning processes. However, the preschool teacher's contribution to the creative play approach was not mentioned or emphasized in this study, which was more focused on children's developmental needs.

2.10.2 International Research

This study examined the possibility that unstructured play in the outdoors has an impact on children's self-efficacy. It's an effort to fill a gap in the empirical literature on unstructured outdoor play and its effects on child development.

An important common concern from all previous studies about preschool teachers' teaching learning process in imaginative play and free-play is that there is a wider lack of understanding, training, and time for them to conduct and implement the teaching learning process. Children will lose hope and interest if they are given inappropriate guidance during imaginative play. Interestingly, findings from past studies have examined and

shown the positive effects and outcomes of play activities, namely on preschool children's creative play. Thus, it should consequently allow more studies to provide more comprehensive evidence of the teaching and learning process of preschool teachers in imaginative play.

According to the statistics given, many schools in Canada are allotted less time for unstructured imaginative play. This happened because the ministry of education directed the teachers to produce assessments and report cards of the children's academic performance. Thus, this indicated a lack of transferable skills through authentic learning initiatives. Therefore, research has proven that the relationship between imaginative play and creativity in education has shown positive growth in children's development (Dominey, 2021). Similar to the findings from Hornáčková (2019), preschool management was more dominated by controlled activities (academic subjects). Although preschool teachers know the benefits of free-play activities for children's development, they still give less focus to non-controlled activities compared to controlled activities. Moreover, the involvement of teachers and parents in children's play activities was also limited due to their preference for academics. Therefore, it is necessary to point out the advantages of integrating play activities with controlled activities to preschool management as well as to parents.

According to the researchers, they found that the role of culture was a very important factor in understanding imaginative play. This happened due to various cultures developing imaginative play to be expressed and constructed in children's play. Imaginative play is also known as pretend play, creative play, fantasy play, dramatic play, symbolic play, teasing play, and role play, which are differently characterized based on different terms and dimensions of culture (Burghardt, 2011). Bird (2020) concluded that

through educators' provision, educators have recognized and learned how to support children's play with imaginative technologies. However, there is little research around Imaginative Free-Play activities in early childhood settings. Most of the articles on preschool play activities focused on creative play, pretend play, and dramatic play, with only a few publications related to imaginative play. This indicates a knowledge gap in play opportunities, namely, Imaginative Free-Play activities.

There was also some research done on free-play activities, which identified that free-play activities improved children's holistic development and their educational knowledge level (Gkouskou & Dale Tunnicliffe, 2019; Kheioh & Low, 2022). Preschool teachers' involvement in the free-play activities gave more benefits to children's development and their academic understanding due to the preschool teachers' participation and guidance during the activities. However, some preschool teachers were still using the traditional method during the free-play activities, such as setting the place, monitoring, and managing the activities when needed (Åström et al., 2020; Hornáčková, 2019). Therefore, preschool teachers' engagement in free-play activities focuses mostly on task management. From this, it was highlighted that the preschool teachers had dilemmas about managing free-play activities with other academic activities.

Based on the previous study, they have done an investigation on preschool teachers' perceptions of free play. It showed that preschool teachers understand the importance of free play, which promotes children's abstract thinking and stimulates their learning and development (Aras, 2016). Therefore, the involvement of preschool teachers in children's free play has increased, but only for some reasons or purposes. The results showed that preschool teachers were involved in free play when it was necessary, especially when children needed help or had problems during the activities (Aras, 2016). Otherwise, the

preschool teachers focused on planning their daily tasks. From this, it showed that the quality of preschool teachers spending time with the children's free play was not clearly evaluated. Furthermore, the contributions of preschool teachers towards children's free play were not highlighted in this study.

With reference to Rao & Gibson (2021), pretend play is commonly performed in social contexts and can be a window into child development. The aim of this study was to improve positive emotions between individuals and playmates. This showed that children who were involved in pretend play frequently paraded out their positive emotions as well as enhanced their interpersonal skills. Parallel to previous studies, children used more linguistics in non-academic activities compared to academic activities (Markova, 2016). Children were the first to start the conversation during free-play activities because they made their own choices. Moreover, the majority of the children who participated in free-play activities always communicated bilingually (Markova, 2016). However, the research gap has become more evident since the studies neither mention nor highlight the contribution or role of preschool teachers during pretend play and free-play activities.

A study by Scharer (2017) highlighted the importance of sociodramatic play in the development of preschool children who imitate and explore adults' actions and has shown the perceived psychological benefits, namely developing higher mental functions and verbal thinking. Additionally, Scharer had also revealed that preschool teachers introduced effective play-learning environments and curricula. For instance, preschool teachers enhance, support, and scaffold children's play through mediating, coaching, suggesting, modelling, and providing sufficient time for play. Similarly, Barbaro (2022) found that imaginary play improved children's convergent and divergent thinking skills if teachers provided open-ended questions to children during play time.

Play is used to supplement other forms of learning for the betterment of young children's understanding. This is because free-play activities train children to work scientifically and systematically. According to Gkouskou and Tunnicliffe (2020), children encounter the biodiversity of their living environment through play activities. Children immersed the environment into their play activities through the science concepts of observing, exploring, and investigating. The findings showed that free-play activities link to children's literacy, numeracy, and social skills because children relate academic knowledge while they are involved in their play activities. In addition to that, a study of health benefits from imaginative play participation by Göncü & Vadeboncoeur (2017) has also recorded numerous psychological and social benefits for preschool children, most commonly developing self-confidence, becoming critical thinkers, and improving the quality of social interaction. They also concluded that imaginative play has a correlation between an individual and the social and cultural environment that changes preschool children's behaviour, ideas, and style of play.

On the other hand, findings in a study by Neha & Rule (2018) highlight the links that emerged between play and early reading in preschool children. The findings revealed that imaginative play had become a meaning-making tool for children to advance their early reading development. The children understand the content, process, and social significance of reading through the adults who act as mediators during the story-reading session. Therefore, it needs to be considered one of the strategies with the most potential to be implemented in schools.

A study by Devi, Fleer, & Li (2018) was conducted on preschool teachers who were involved in children's imaginative play. They affirmed that teachers spend a minimal amount of time on children's imaginative play. Through this research, the researchers also

found that teachers' beliefs about the role of teachers in children's play focused on the roles of observer, narrator, inquirer, and resource supplier. As a matter of fact, Devi et al. (2018) also added that this type of teacher belief and practice positions in children's play created a boundary between teachers' and children's relationships. Therefore, little was known about the teachers' beliefs and pedagogical positioning of children's play.

The study by Hong, Keith, Moran, & Jennings (2017) investigated the challenges that preschool teachers face when integrating literacy and science in the teaching and learning process. The finding proved that imaginative play can naturally bring children's personal and cultural experiences together and lead to promoting children's academic literacy learning processes and practices. The study by Rajapaksha (2016) investigated the role of teachers in sociodramatic play. The findings revealed that children show less interest in sociodramatic play because it's more teacher-centred and the teacher plays the role of a leader in the play. Furthermore, by scaffolding and attempting to mediate the children's interactions, the teacher acted as a co-player.

2.11 Conceptual Framework of the Study

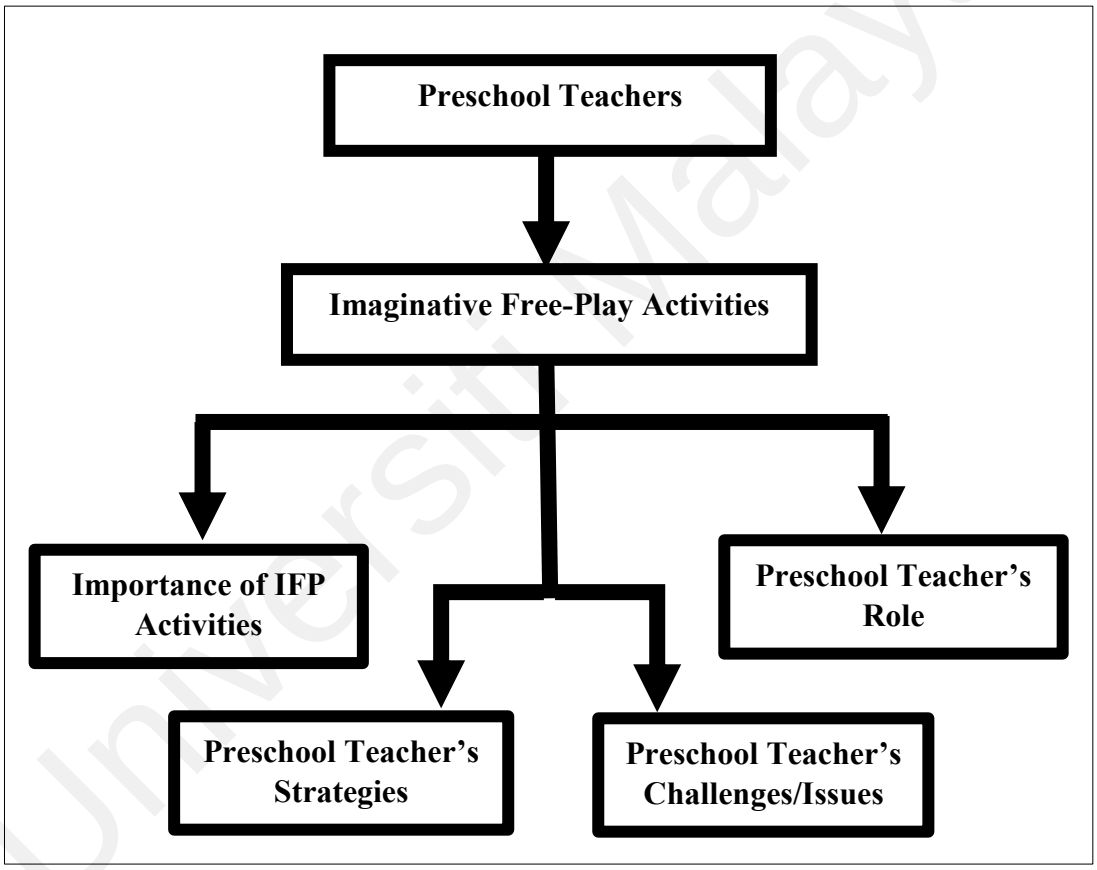
According to Crawford (2019), it emphasizes the conceptual framework as the overall structure that guides and ballasts the study. For further understanding, the conceptual framework helps the researcher become more discerning and selective in terms of methodology and the grounding theories and approaches of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

This conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 2.5, brings benefits to this study as it assists in the identification and construction of the case being explored, consequently leading to an understanding of the importance of IFP activities in children's development.

In this case, it takes a deep look at the teaching and learning process of IFP activities in children's development at preschool. In addition, aspects of preschool teachers' roles, strategies, and challenges were explored with reference to existing theory and research to determine whether the preschool teachers understood the techniques and strategies of implementing IFP activities in the preschool curriculum.

Figure 2.5

Conceptual Framework of the Study



2.12 Summary

Imaginative Free-Play activities make preschool children active physically, enjoy themselves, and develop a creative intellect. In addition to being and staying intellectually creative, replacing sedentary time with physical activity, such as IFP activities, is a beneficial way to achieve health benefits for preschool children.

An appropriate pedagogy for preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play activities for preschool children aims to promote and encourage independence and help integrate preschool children into mainstream society, apart from improving their interaction with their surroundings. In addition to that, preschool teachers guide preschool children to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence, while making new friends through IFP creates a sense of belonging for preschool children. Other aspects of development, including understanding concepts such as fair play and sportsmanship, can also be inculcated through IFP activities. Moreover, preschool teachers provide opportunities for preschool children to learn how to manage time, set goals, stay in control, and show tolerance, respect, and a sense of achievement while participating in IFP activities in preschool.

It is important that preschool teachers use the same effective methods for teaching learning in IFP activities as they do with other academic activities. Based on the literature review, it was found that plays, such as imaginative play, positively influenced and assisted children's creativity and social development. Since IFP activities provide physical, moral, social, and language contributions to preschool children, activities and programs should be continued for the long term and turned into excellent teamwork. Therefore, it leads to a pleasurable way to achieve the goal of the development area.

Preschool children will master their development through exposure to different social environments when preschool teachers motivate preschool children to engage in Imaginative Free-Play activities. Additionally, this will make both preschool teachers and children happy and ensure positive development for both preschool teachers and children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses in depth the flow of the current study. Begin with the introduction of the research design, participants in the study, research instruments, sampling methods, research setting, instruments of the study, validity and reliability of the instruments, procedure of the study, trustworthiness of the data, ethical concerns, preliminary testing, data analysis, and a summary of this chapter.

While it was established in the previous chapter on the opportunities for the development of the imaginative aspect of children through free-play activities, this chapter focuses on what methods of data collection were used to obtain the relevant information for this study. It will first explain the research design and why it is found to be suitable for this study. A sample of the study and the sampling method described in this chapter will demonstrate how participants for this research were selected.

In this chapter, the research setting will explain how the setting for this study was designed and how the decision to ensure an appropriate setting will contribute to the practicality of obtaining the needed data from the respondents. The study's instruments are chosen based on the suitability of each method for paving the way for data collection from research questions. Ethical considerations will also be explored, such as ensuring informed consent was received from all participants. The reliability and validity of this research will also be discussed. Finally, this chapter will consider how the established data was analysed.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative approach is used in this study to gain more experience by closely inspecting one single phenomenon directly in the area of study from a group of people (Flick, 2009). According to Creswell (2008), a characteristic of the qualitative approach is that the participants in the study expose their understanding of their surroundings or place. The qualitative method focuses on the uniqueness and different characters, experiences, and traits of those involved (J. W. Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

To be more specific, the qualitative approach used in this study is beneficial in exploring important descriptions of Imaginative Free-Play activities as well as tracking unique or unexpected roles of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play activities. Moreover, enhancing the experience and interpretation of preschool teachers' strategies during Imaginative Free-Play activities Similarly, according to Cousin (2005), a case study is not intended to analyse cases but rather to describe cases and explore a setting in order to understand it. As the design for investigating phenomena within the context, this qualitative method employs a single case study.

This single-case study design helps the study receive a deep understanding of how preschool teachers apply imaginative development aspects through free-play activities. Moreover, the design of a case study is known as a piece of information in a bounded system where it starts at the wide end (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a result, this case study's element is used because it is explanatory, descriptive, and holistically describes the phenomenon on a specific issue rather than in general. A total of four participants were studied, and they provided the wealth and depth of information needed through this method. According to Yin (2014), it allows researchers to explore individuals or organizations through simple to complex interventions, relationships, communities, or

programs, thus answering questions on "how" and "why" preschool teachers implement imaginative development aspects in free-play activities. Therefore, a single case study is appropriate for this study.

3.3 Sample of the Study

In order to evaluate the preschool teachers who are teaching free-play activities integrated with imaginative development, this study collected four separate samples of preschool teachers who are teaching Imaginative Free-Play activities. The demographic information of the preschool teachers who will be engaged through Imaginative Free-Play is shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Demographic Data of Preschool Teachers

Data Demographic		**T1**	**T2**	**T3**	**T4**
Gender		F	F	F	F
Age		32	34	34	35
Years of teaching		6	6	7	7
Education level		Bachelor of Performing Arts	Bachelor of Education (TESL)	Bachelor of Counselling	Bachelor of Elementary Education
Time of IFP activities		8.45am-9.30am (Wednesday)	8.45am-9.30am (Tuesday)	8.45am-9.30am (Thursday)	8.15am-9.00am (Wednesday)
Age of children teaching		4 years old	5 years old	6 years old	6 years old
Number of children involving	**Half-day**	12	11	15	13
	Full day	3	7	4	5

3.4 Sampling Method

In accordance with Etikan (2016), the purposive sampling technique is also known as judgment sampling, in which the participant owns the qualities based on the participant's premeditated choice. In a common way, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience.

Based on that, a purposive sampling was used as the objective of this single-case study to identify the advantages of Imaginative Free-Play activities. Individuals with maturity and the ability to communicate their experiences and opinions in an understandable, expressive, and thoughtful manner were chosen for this qualitative research because it was intended to explore Imaginative Free-Play activities from individuals who were experienced and knowledgeable with the phenomenon (J. W. Creswell, 2015).

Before embarking on research, all participants will be given a consent letter as the first procedure to be a part of this research voluntarily and sincerely for the convenience of the participants and the researcher. Below are the sample selection criteria for the participants of the study, listed as follows:

- All participants are willingly and voluntarily participating in this research by signing the consent form (Appendix A).
- All participants are teachers who have been experienced in teaching for more than five years.
- All participants are engaged in Imaginative Free-Play activities in the teaching and learning process.

3.5 Research Setting

This study took place in the neighbourhood of Section 17, located in Petaling Jaya. Petaling Jaya is a city in the Petaling district. Preschool A was located in an urban area and was influenced by and surrounded by complete technology and a good educational system. This Preschool A used the 2013 curriculum as the programme guideline as well as paying more attention to creativity as the vision to teach "Guide children through a world of discovery". This school includes many programmes and activities in the curriculum that deliver lots of creative and innovative ways to meet the needs of the community and swiftly change the world. For instance, puppet shows, storytelling, pretend play, drawing, musical percussion, and project creation.

Further, IFP activities were conducted in three different places in Preschool A: the classroom, the indoor activity area, and the outdoor activity area. Firstly, Preschool A consists of 6 classrooms, which are 2 classrooms for 6 year old children, 2 classrooms for 5 year old children, 1 classroom for 4 year old children, and 1 classroom for children below 4 years old. All the classrooms in Preschool A were designed differently according to the space of the room, but each classroom had similar areas or corners. Therefore, the preschool teachers in each classroom can conduct IFP activities by organising mostly simple indoor activities that require less movement.

Figure 3.1

The Floor Plan of the Classroom

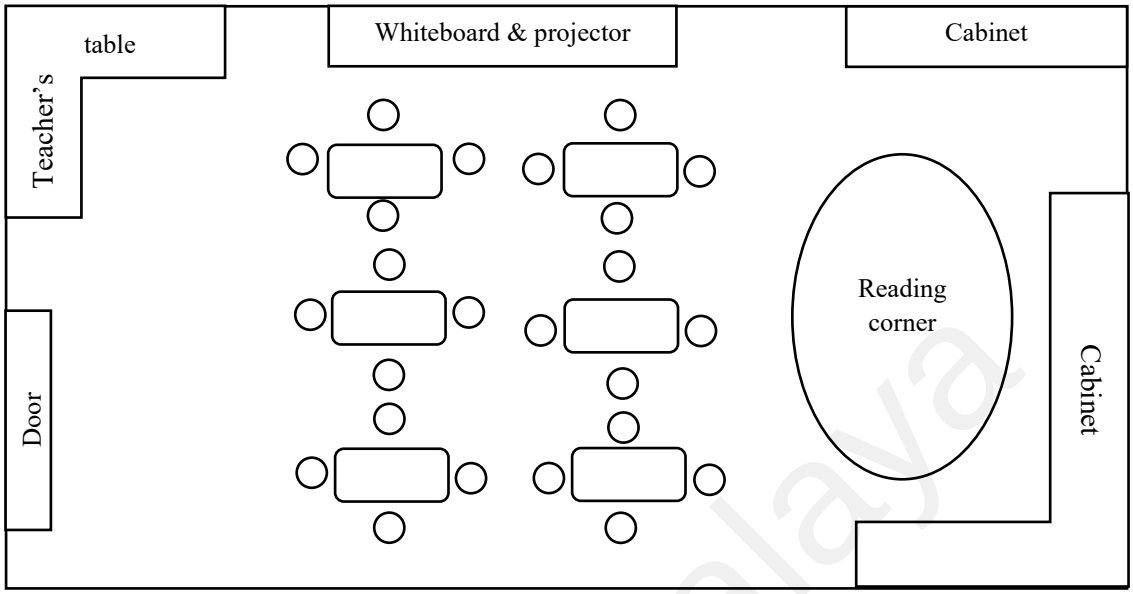


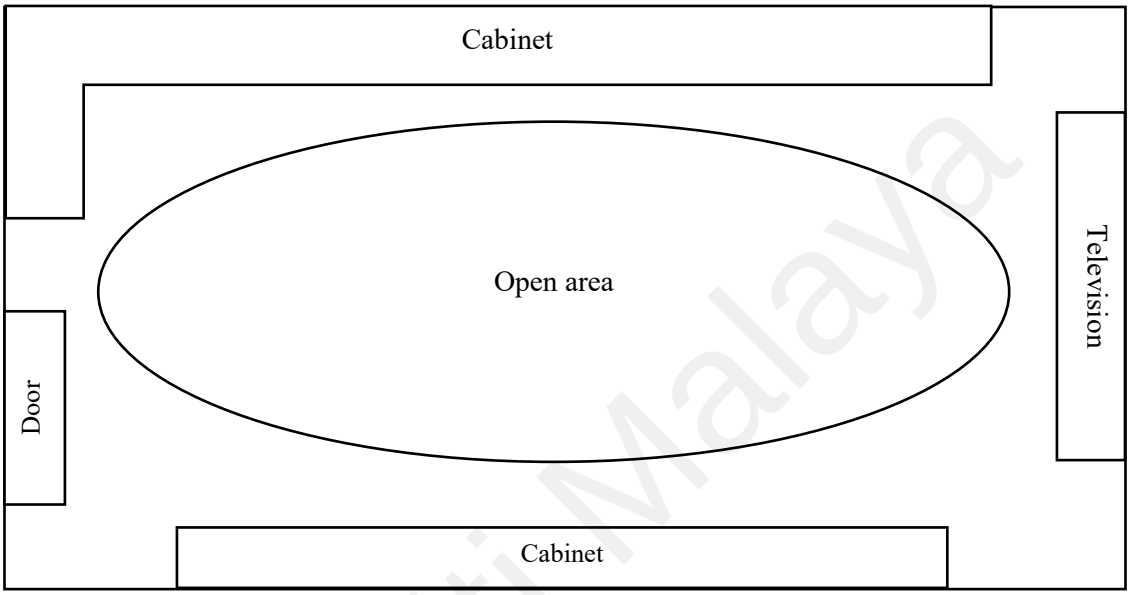
Figure 3.1 above shows the floor plan of one of the classrooms where the researcher does interviews with the preschool teachers. Here, the preschool teachers will conduct academy lessons as well as IFP activities. The types of play activities that were organised by preschool teachers in each classroom were fine motor skills activities such as puzzle games, block games, and art activities. At the reading corner area shown in Figure 3.1, the preschool teachers will narrate a story before beginning the IFP activities with the children. The materials for the activities were neatly organised with labels on the cabinets by the preschool teachers. This is to ensure the children can reach the materials easily.

Secondly, about the indoor activity area, it is a common area where all teachers and children can use and conduct activities. This area is multipurpose for everyone. They not only conducted IFP activities but also other activities like assembly, small events, group discussion, Science experiments, and waiting areas. In this area, the preschool teachers set up the place based on the theme so that the children can engage in role-play activities. Children can also freely use the materials provided in the cabinet for their role-play

activities. The following diagram below (Figure 3.2) shows the floor plan of the indoor activity area:

Figure 3.2

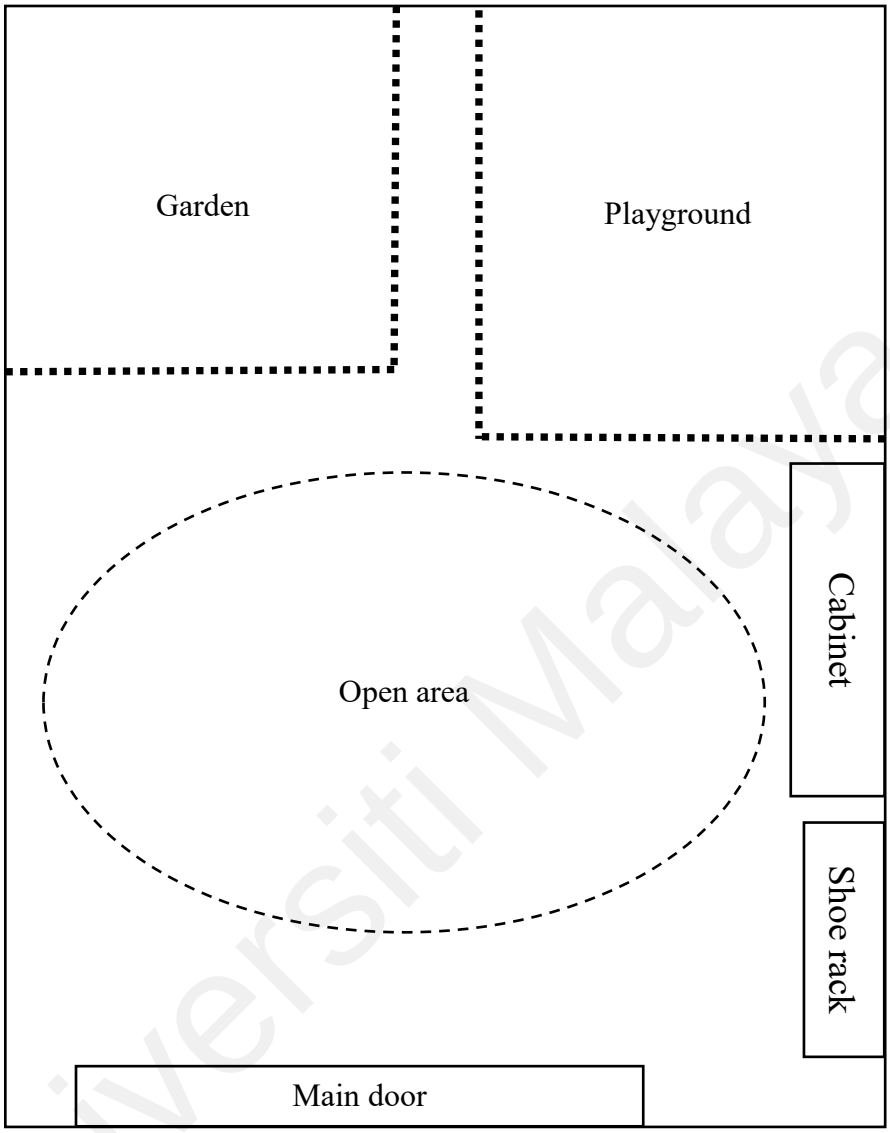
The Floor Plan of the Indoor Activity Area



For the outdoor activity area, there are three main areas that conduct IFP activities: the playground, garden, and open area. The children engage in activities that involve large muscles. The types of IFP activities conducted in these areas are nature play, sensory play, physical play, and water play. Teachers set up the open area according to the theme and provide the necessary materials in the cabinets for the children to use during the activities. The following diagram shows the floor plan of the outdoor activity area, as illustrated below in Figure 3.3:

Figure 3.3

The Floor Plan of the Outdoor Activity Area



3.6 Instruments of the Study

In this section will be described the instruments that were used in this study, which are the checklist, observation protocol, and interview protocol.

3.6.1 Checklist

In this study, the checklist method was used as an instrument to obtain information about the roles and strategies used by preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play activities through observation. Moreover, in this case study, it is all about understanding the

importance of Imaginative Free-Play activities in children's development, which are useful when using the method of observation through a checklist. Taylor-powell and Steele (1996) state that observation methods are useful when there is physical evidence, products, or outcomes that can be seen with the naked eye. Since the purpose of this study is to explore Imaginative Free-Play activities that involve physical activity, this method is appropriate to be used for this study.

In the checklist named Imaginative Free-Play Activities Checklist (Appendix C), there are three main aspects of observation, especially of the children's developmental area: the roles of preschool teachers and the strategies used by preschool teachers during the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities. By measuring the physical movements and involvement of children in Imaginative Free-Play activities, for example, dressing dolls with clothes, researchers will be able to gather data on the children's developmental areas.

On the other hand, the elements of creating scenarios and asking questions during Imaginative Free-Play activities are listed in the checklist. Researchers can measure their ability to display and conduct these elements during Imaginative Free-Play activities. As a result, the researcher allows them to collect data on preschool teachers' strategies.

3.6.2 Observation Protocol

According to W. J. Creswell and Creswell (2018), "observation" is the process of collecting hands-on information or eyewitness evidence by observing people and places in a research setting. A researcher who wants to gather accurate information must have good visual and auditory skills. To avoid inaccuracies, the researcher should have captured and recorded or taken notes of the specific event (Sarfo & Ofori, 2017).

Therefore, observation is not an easy method to collect detailed information. Creswell (2014) highlights the following stages of observation:

1. Selecting the location of the study to be observed.
2. Conducting the observation process initially to confirm the location.
3. Filtering suitable participants as well as the time and location of the observation.
4. Announcing ourselves as the researchers for this study case.
5. Making multiple observations in order to gain an accurate comprehension.
6. Making a recording while being observed (fieldnotes).
7. Looking for information that is consequential or pertinent to the issue while observing.
8. Taking information and reflective fieldnotes.
9. Making our presence felt while remaining unnoticeable.
10. Moving gradually from the observation area.

For this study, researchers will be observing the role of preschool teachers, strategies that preschool teachers apply, and issues or challenges faced by preschool teachers during the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities using the Observation Protocol (Appendix D). The role of preschool teachers during Imagination Free-Play activities includes preparing materials or centres before children arrive, checking on the children who have difficulty during the activity, encouraging the children to be actively involved in the activity, guiding the children to solve problems during the activity, and motivating the children to create or form new things.

On the other hand, the strategies that preschool teachers apply during Imagination Free-Play activities that are going to be observed are to create scenarios, prepare or provide a variety of materials, ask questions, encourage art projects, have a reading routine, and

spend time with nature. While examining the issues or challenges faced by preschool teachers, the researcher will observe aspects of the surrounding environment, namely the spaces during the activities, materials that are used during the activities, time taken before, during, and after the activities, and lastly, the participation or behaviour of children during the activities.

Additionally, aspects of how Imagination Free-Play activities can be developed are also included in the administration of the observation protocol, as they are crucial based on one of the Research Questions that will subsequently gather data on the possibilities to develop Imagination Free-Play activities in order to benefit more preschool children.

For reliability concerns, the researcher is going to be observed on different days. During the observation, the researcher will be using some sticky notes for description and the camera to capture some important or anecdotal moments, which will be very helpful for the researcher. It is also useful for researchers if there are some questions raised in the researcher's mind during the observation; the researcher can keep the questions and ask them after the teaching and learning lesson is over.

3.6.3 Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview establishes a combination of closed and open-ended questions and is followed by how or why questions are commonly asked during the interview session (Raworth et al., 2019). The main goal of a semi-structured interview is to ensure that participants can comfortably raise the critical issue so that they can gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding and information (Adams, 2015).

Referring to this case study, the interview questions were self-conducted by a researcher who focused on the preschool teacher's view and experience of Imagination Free-Play activities and how this activity could affect children's development. According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), the researcher needs to ensure that the interview protocol creates a balanced inquiry with careful conversation by placing appropriate questions. Additionally, the interview questions that are going to be asked will be in accordance with the Research Questions as stated in Chapter 1.

For instance, in order to obtain data on how Imagination Free-Play activities affect the teaching development of preschool teachers during the implementation of Imagination Free-Play activities, a list of questions prepared in the Interview Protocol (Appendix E) focuses on the performance of children's imaginative skills during their participation in Imagination Free-Play activities. In regard to the preliminary study, the researcher conducted interview sessions with two of the preschool teachers. By taking this action, the researcher was able to improvise on the interview questions and witness how the interview protocol functions prior to the actual study.

3.7 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

According to Taherdoost (2018), validity is a matter of trustworthiness based on qualitative methodology. At the same time, reliability measures the consistency, precision, repeatability, and trustworthiness of a research study (Nath, 2013; Sing & Jusoh, 2015). According to Hayashi, Abib, & Hoppen (2019), many qualitative researchers are looking for experts to help them build or strengthen claims about the validity or trustworthiness of their research. Generally, experts have special knowledge and skills in qualitative methodology, so they can provide or implement unbiased

opinions. In this section, the researcher demonstrates how the instruments of the study are established in terms of validity and reliability.

In this case study, the checklist, the observation protocol, and the interview protocol were all self-conducted by the researcher. The researcher built the study's instruments by reading and studying books, articles, and journals about IFP activities in preschool. As well, based on the researcher's experience with the preschool teacher's behaviour, who is currently implementing IFP activities in preschool.

In the first place, it is very important to get consultation and guidance from the supervisor regarding the choice of instruments. Eventually, after receiving confirmation from the supervisor, the researcher submitted the instruments for the study by assigning a panel of three experts. The panel of experts is in the field of early childhood education. The researcher emailed the official letters to all the panellists of experts by attaching the details of the research, such as the title, objectives, operational definition, conceptual framework, participant sampling, and instruments.

The experts reviewed the drafts of the instruments carefully. After that, they sent suggestions on the specific skills to be measured during Imaginative Free-Play activities and some changes to other instruments, such as measuring the strategies of teachers during the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities. The experts also resent the improvements to the instruments proposed. Based on the suggestions, the researcher implemented and carried out the study by effectively reviewing and considering the relevant suggestions. Conclusively, the approval from all the experts was changed, especially in the sets of interview protocols, elements that needed to be observed for the checklist as well as the observation protocol.

3.8 Data Collection Techniques

Selecting the right techniques for data collection can support the researcher in ensuring the study is effectively carried out. This section will elaborate on the techniques applied for the data collection of the study, namely the administration of checklists, observation, and semi-structured interviews.

3.8.1 Administrations of Imaginative Free-Play Activities Checklist

For this study, the researcher will apply non-participant observation during the administration of the Imaginative Free-Play Activities Checklist to gain awareness and understanding of the Imaginative Free-Play activities. The Imaginative Free-Play Activities Checklist implemented understandable and simple instructions stated in the list (Appendix C) to obtain data on the children's developmental areas and the preschool teacher's roles and strategies during the activity lessons. During Imaginative Free-Play activities, the checklists will enable the identification of specific behaviours to be observed.

The process of administering the Imaginative Free-Play Activities Checklist will be done by two observers who are not from the same preschool teacher or parent group to ensure the columns are fairly and neutrally filled up. The students from the University of Malaya were recruited as the assistant observers for this study. Additionally, observers will discover the informal or unplanned activities during the imaginative free-play activities.

Based on the instructions in the checklist, the research assistants who are observers will be given the instructions to fill up the slots of each column on the checklist with either "Yes" for being involved in a specific area or skill and "No" for not being involved in a specific area or skill. Some indicators can be quickly rated compared to others. For

example, place a camera on a tripod in the activity area to make sure the full activity sessions will be completely recorded. At the end of the observation period, the researcher spoke to the selected preschool teachers and asked the teachers to inform the researcher about the developmental areas of the children during the activity.

The researcher also mentioned the process of recording the activity. This is to ensure that children become accustomed to the developmental checklist structures. The process of systematically collecting information is based on the children's level of functioning in various areas and the preschool teacher's roles and strategies during IFP activities. Using evidence from the video and observation checklists, these checklists provide information about how children and preschool teachers develop each specific area or skill during IFP activities.

3.8.2 Observation

The Imaginative Free-Play Activities Observation Protocol, consisting of developmental areas, was constructed and applied for this study by referring to Loebach & Cox (2020). Generally, remarks from the observation protocol will be based on the elements to be observed during Imaginative Free-Play activities, and the items on the form do not need to be completed in order (Appendix B). First, the researcher, as a non-participant, will distribute the forms and explain the guidelines and instructions that need to be observed to the preschool management and preschool teachers. To avoid a biased opinion, an additional two observers will be present who are not from the same preschool teachers and parents. Students from the University of Malaya will be recruited as observers for this study.

Observations will take place by following the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). The setting will be in one of the classrooms or outside the classroom environment at the preschool, depending on the structure of the activity. The schedule will be according to the timetable of the classroom. During the observation session, the observers will be standing and moving around when necessary around the activity area. As long as the observers are able to see the children and teachers without any distractions during the Imaginative Free-Play activities, they should collect detailed information by referring to the observation protocol.

The observers should precisely describe the behaviours without subjective interpretation or labelling during the Imaginative Free-Play activities. The observation should also be accurate and revealing based on the participation and involvement of children and preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play activities. The researcher will also remind the research assistant to spend at least 5-10 minutes adapting to the environment and recognizing the children and preschool teachers before beginning to write the remarks. Likewise, the research assistant should observe and show sensibility during the activity pointed out by the researcher.

The observation protocol addresses the difficulties encountered by teachers during imaginative free-play activities, with observers recording their observations of the difficulties and issues encountered during the activity. Based on the preliminary study, the researcher determined that the observation sessions would be held for two and a half months in order to gather and collect data in a systematic manner according to the listed elements. Moreover, the observation sessions will enable the researcher to gain awareness of the dynamics of the preschool teacher's role, strategies, and challenges faced during the Imaginative Free-Play activities.

3.8.3 Interview

With reference to and adaptation from Dominey (2021), the researcher will carry out the interview sessions by using a discovery-oriented method with each participant. This method will allow deep exploration of the respondent's points of view. The researcher will contact each participant personally after receiving their contact details during the preliminary study. Once the participants agree to participate in the study, an appointment date and time will be set for the interview sessions.

The researcher will send a consent letter to all the participants, outlining the purpose and objectives of the study. The researcher will interview each participant only twice, for approximately 60 minutes each time. Overall, there will be eight interview sessions, which will take place according to the time and date as scheduled. By using prompts, the researcher will facilitate the participants' expressing their thoughts and opinions. Due to the current situation, the interview sessions will take place in one of the classrooms at the preschool by following the rules and regulations in the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

According to Malgorzata & Dariusz (2018), during an interview session, the participant needs to obtain an insider's understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, in this study, the researcher will engage in participant observation during the interview session. Once all the participants had signed their consent forms, the researcher reminded them again of the purpose and objectives of the interview session. The duration of the interview session for each participant is 40 to 60 minutes. Nevertheless, the researcher also allowed the participants to feel comfortable and secure during the interview session. Through this, they could talk freely and express their thoughts about their experiences.

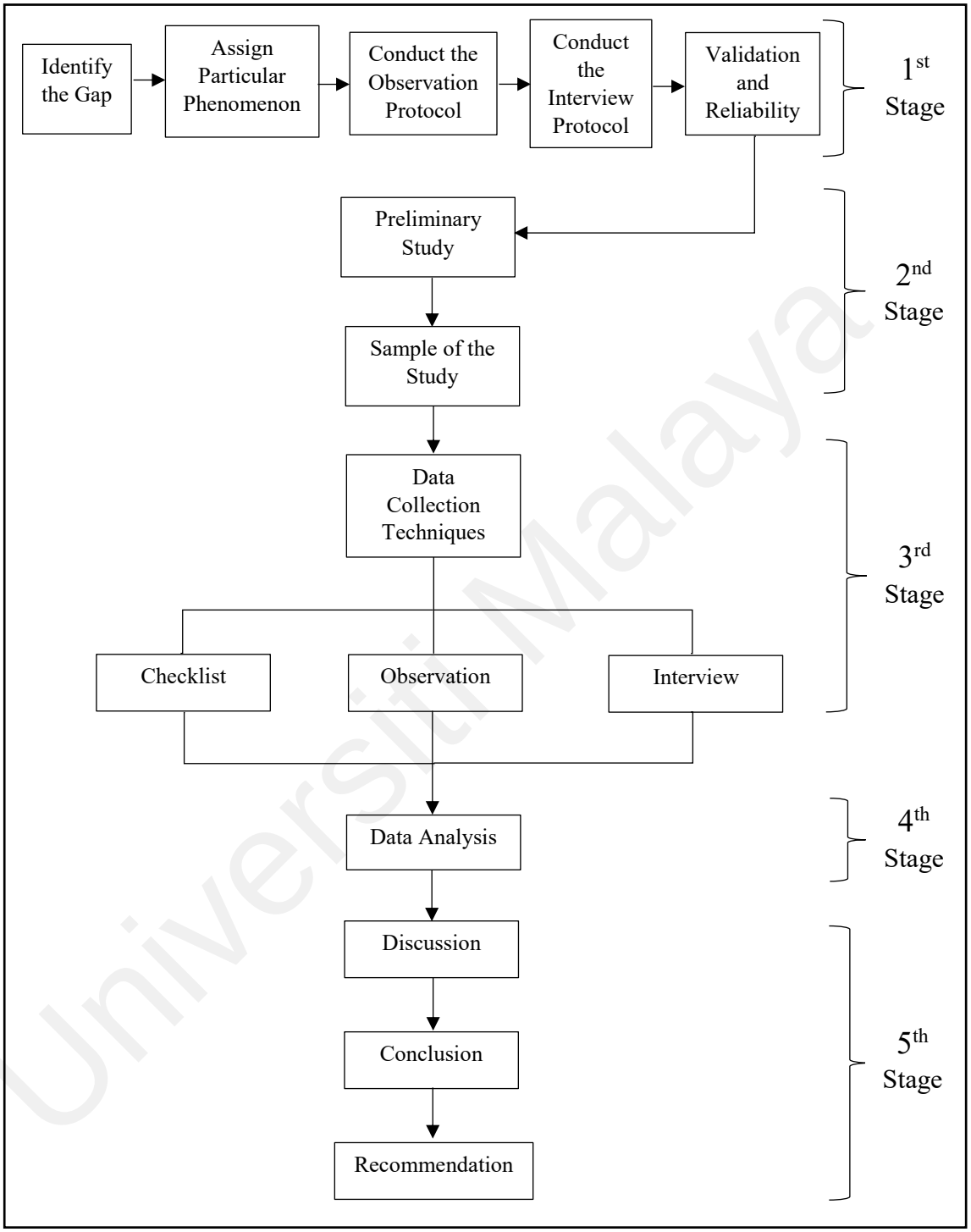
Based on the approval of participants, the interview sessions will be carried out according to the confirmed date and time. Additionally, upon the agreement of the participants, all the interview sessions will be visually and audio-recorded as evidence. The researcher will construct four semi-structured questions (Appendix E) based on elaborating the objective of the study. Concurrently, during the interview, the researcher will also take fieldnotes to further ensure triangulation during data collection. Whenever there are no new ideas to express and repetitions of ideas among the participants, this will be analysed as "data saturation."

3.9 Procedure of the Study

In this study, there are five stages in the procedure of the study, as illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 3.4

Procedure of the Study



At first, the researcher identified the gaps between the current issues. Then, the researcher directly interacted with the principal of the Preschool A. Once they had agreed to give their full support and commitment to this study, the researcher sent a consent letter to the

management of the chosen preschool (the principal), informing them about the proposal of the study. Next, design and conduct the elements in the checklist, the observation protocol, and the interview protocol for this study. For validation and reliability, all the instruments in this study were validated by experts in this field of study.

Referring to the second stage, the researcher conducted the preliminary study by choosing one particular participant to be interviewed with several questions and validated beforehand. These findings helped the researcher construct the appropriate instruments, such as the elements of a checklist, an observation protocol, and an interview protocol. The preliminary study is to prevent misunderstandings among the participants during the actual study. The next step is to select the sample for the study. The researcher decided to choose four preschool teachers based on the selected criteria. They had more than five years of teaching experience in this Preschool A.

Table 3.2

The Selected Sample of the Study

No	Pseudonym	Years of Teaching	Gender
1	T1	6	Female
2	T2	6	Female
3	T4	7	Female
4	T4	7	Female

The third stage is collecting data by using three types of instruments, such as checklists, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. After getting permission from all the participants, the researcher set a date and time to observe and interview the preschool teachers and the children. First, the researcher will proceed with the checklist and the observation by watching, taking notes, talking, and reflecting on the participant's

behaviour. The next day, the researcher will be conducting interview sessions with preschool teachers after the end of teaching and learning lessons. The timing of interview sessions for each participant might be different due to their teaching schedule. After each observation and interview session, all the information obtained by the researcher will be recorded and compiled in a folder titled "Imaginative Free-Play Activities_Checklist_Observation_Interview_Preschool Teachers."

In the fourth stage, the researcher will conduct data analysis from the collected data. The researcher will transcribe and organize all the collected data into different sorts of categories through coding. In this step, the researcher will be analysing the data manually and using a qualitative transcription software called *Nvivo*. The fifth and final stage is discussion. The researcher will be discussing and reporting the findings and the literature review by generating a solid conclusion, its implications, and its recommendations.

3.10 Trustworthiness of the Data

This qualitative research must be trustworthy because it provides accuracy in the study. Therefore, the researcher applied some strategies to value trustworthiness, including triangulation, member checking, and objectivity in writing.

3.10.1 Triangulation

For this study, the researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the data by applying the triangulation method. According to Morgan (2019), triangulation means extending the knowledge related to the research issue. Therefore, triangulation can be used in three modes, including validation strategy and a path to additional knowledge. In this study, the researcher used the administration of checklists, observation, and interviews for the purpose of triangulating the data.

3.10.2 Member Check

In a qualitative study, the trustworthiness of the study during the data collection is a very important step, especially when exploring the credibility of results from the questions that have already been asked by the participants during the actual study (Candela, 2019). Member check is also known as participant or respondent validation, which helped the study to be more accurate, credible, and solid (Birt et al., 2016).

By referring to Carlson (2010), it was stated that members checking designated the participants to provide brief clarification and confirmation of the information that was given to them. In this case study, the researcher will transcribe all the information and outcomes of the participants from the observation and interview processes in the draft papers. Then, the draft paper will be sent back to the participants to check through it again and confirm the content. Besides that, the researcher was also ready to get some extra information from the participants while sitting with them.

3.10.3 Objectivity in Writing

The primary goal of objectivity is to remove as many biases as possible from the study (Javed et al., 2021). Therefore, in this case study, the research assistants will be hired during the checklist, and the observation protocol will collect data without making any judgments. By taking this action, the finding will be unbiased, without any preconceived answers, and will be described in the actual way it is happening. Moreover, the participants of the study will be given the opportunity to review the results from the collection of data in order to ensure the validity of the data and avoid bias in the study.

3.11 Ethical Concerns

For this study, ethical considerations are very important for moral and legal rights. Therefore, the researcher communicates with the participants personally to make sure their privacy is not invaded without their permission. Furthermore, the researcher did not ask the participants any offensive or personal questions. All the information given by the participants was acknowledged and represented meticulously without adding extra words to it. In this study, there are some ethical considerations for the participants.

3.11.1 Confidentiality and Safety

For a confidential purpose in this study, the researcher gave a guarantee to the participants that all the information and the results given by them would be seen only by the researcher's supervisor and a few selected panels. For safety purposes in this study, the researcher stored all the collected data on a laptop by encoding it with a password so that it could only be accessed by the researcher. Besides that, the researcher will also eliminate any risk elements and consistently ensure safety throughout the study, so that it can be convenient for the participants by creating a stronger bond with them. For example, by giving confirmation to the teachers that this study is not harmful for them and certifying the proper use of information.

3.11.2 Autonomy

The researcher will make sure that the involvement of participants in this study is fully voluntary. However, if the participants feel uncomfortable during the research, they may withdraw from it at any time. Once they have decided to withdraw, all the existing data will be removed, and no further data analysis will be carried out.

3.11.3 Dignity and Informed Consent

The researcher shows greater respect to the participants, allowing them to make fully informed decisions on their own. The researcher also ensures that all the participants will receive a consent form (Appendix A) by explaining the purpose of this study and their opinions as participants before the observation and interview sessions start. In addition, the participants will sign a consent form if they agree to participate and understand their participation in the research. Once they agree to participate in the research, they will give the interview questionnaires and a consent form explaining what is required of them. After signing the consent form, the participants will keep the form in a file that will be provided by the researcher.

3.12 Preliminary Testing

Preliminary testing was conducted from January to the middle of March 2020 (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) on a small scale before the actual study. The study was planned two months earlier and observed to explore and understand the targeted sample on how they were implementing IFP activities in the teaching learning lessons. The main purposes of this preliminary test are to sense the real experience during the data collection process by the researcher and also to ensure all the questions are logical and understandable for each participant.

The interview sessions were carried out with preschool teachers during the preliminary study. The semi-structured interview approach was chosen to obtain richer and more in-depth responses from preschool teachers' experiences in the IFP activities and also their perspectives and preferences in the IFP activity setting. During the interview session, the researcher started with demographic questionnaires for each participant, asking about their age, education, and year of teaching experience. Then I continued with research

questionnaires such as those on the roles during IFP activities, the strategies applied in IFP activities, and the challenges encountered during IFP activities (spent almost half a month on these).

Besides interview sessions, the preliminary test for observation sessions also took place for 2 months (as the activity was conducted once a week for each class) based on each classroom schedule. During the observation sessions, the researcher recorded the whole process of IFP activities through photographs and videos, as well as by taking fieldnotes. The researcher particularly observed the developmental areas involved in IFP activities, the roles and strategies used by preschool teachers during IFP activities, and the challenges encountered during IFP activities.

During the preliminary test, the researcher played the role of participant observer by being involved in the activity as one of the members and exploring how the activity was carried out. But after the preliminary test, the researcher decided to become a non-participant observer. By doing so, the researcher can be more focused and understand the behaviour and environment of IFP activities without being one of the participants.

After the preliminary testing, the researcher realized some new ideas from the document analysis and helped create new sets of interview questions for the participants before conducting the actual study. Since the participants answered a few interview questions with similar answers, the researcher decided to modify the questions to be more specific. Through this, the participants will be able to elaborate more deeply and express their feedback freely.

3.13 Data Analysis

This section explains how a researcher analyses the data from observation analysis, checklists, and interview sessions during the implementation of IFP activities at a private preschool. Researchers can improve their understanding of the data analysis from the data collection of the study by referring to Creswell & Guetterman's study (2019). According to Creswell (2008), he proposed some data organisation methods for the qualitative studies, as shown below;

a. Create an account at a source to help with material management.
b. Material organisation could be accomplished through a single or numerous processes.
c. Storing backup data to be saved in case of emergencies.

There are many different types of qualitative data analysis to choose from. For this case study, the researcher used Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis was employed. In general, the data analysis technique consists of three procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as shown below.

3.13.1 Data Reduction

From the data collection process, the researcher has gathered a copious amount of data that is currently being minimised. This step is called the data reduction process. This data reduction process will bring all of the collected data to the point where it can be focused on. By using this process, the researcher will be more concentrated on selecting, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data received through the checklists, observation analysis, or interview analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

One of the elements of the data reduction process is coding. Based on Creswell's (2008, p.251) study regarding the coding process, it stated that *"this procedure will make the text data intelligible by splitting the data into text or image segments, labelling the segments with codes, evaluating duplicate and overlap codes, and integrating these codes into the key themes."* In this study, coding is used as the data reduction process. The coding process operates as an orderly flow for analysing the data using multiple processes, beginning with splitting it away, conceptualising, and merging all of the data together in a new method where the idea of theory is formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Each feature of the data being transferred into a category that sounds consequential allows the researcher to proceed inductively because the purpose of the coding is to discover the common patterns or themes in the data (Springer, 2010). Therefore, some specific terms may appear during coding in order to make data collection more productive. However, sometimes it probably creates other themes based on the current state of the research study. In a qualitative study, the codes can help to generate unique themes according on Creswell's (2008) study. The researcher should choose relevant and important codes in order to develop themes that will be helpful in identifying the research question for a particular qualitative study (Flick, 2009). As a result, the code becomes more precise and easier to separate into categories or sub-categories if it is smaller. The codes that formed through interview transcriptions and observation fieldnotes are transferred into Nvivo10.

Nvivo10 started working immediately once data transcription was completed in this case study. The coding of the transcript data was helpful to convert into the term "node", which is used in Nvivo10. The tree node refers to the group nodes that can be modified by the researcher. Moreover, the nodes were used as a resource for learning the structure of a paragraph. The findings represented the quantity of source and reference for each node

that had previously been allocated. Finally, the researcher could conclude by emphasising that the majority of the code takes the form of a diagram to summarise the results.

3.13.2 Data Display

The next process after data reduction was data display process. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the data display provides "an organised and compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion-drawing and action-taking (p.24)." The data display could be presented in the form of a table, matrix, chart, graphical format, flowchart, or others. Displaying data allows the researcher to discover the relationship between codes in a systematic way. In this second step, the theme may have arisen in the form of words or sentences.

In this study, the data display is in the form of a table matrix of interview transcripts and observation fieldnotes. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), some themes emerged in the form of words from the previous codes that had been formed in data reductions. The researcher re-read the transcript many times for the selective code to confirm the findings during the data display process. As a result of the process, all of the relevant data was covered.

3.13.3 Conclusion Drawing

The final stage in the data analysis of a study is the conclusion drawing. Based on Miles and Huberman (1994), they highlighted that this conclusion-drawing refers to the researcher's increased obsession with the analysed data to answer the research questions and implications. The code should be vertically related to the research question that needs to be double-checked and confirmed once more in order to ensure the accuracy of the findings. This third phase needs to be conducted in certain ways that lead to the legitimacy

of a drawn conclusion that should be trustworthy and defensible. In this study, the conclusion drawing was represented in the form of a theme description. This will be the main response to the question of distributing research questions.

3.14 Summary

In this chapter, it highlights the research design, instruments, and procedures of the study. The researcher hopes the findings of this study will add to our understanding and awareness of the effects of IFP activities on the children's developmental areas. Furthermore, the researcher hopes that the study's findings will pique the interest of preschool teachers, allowing them to organize more activities and opportunities for children to participate in imaginative free-play activities.

In addition, it is also hoped that this study would reveal to stakeholders such as children, preschool teachers, parents, preschools, and organizations in Malaysia the characteristics and difficulties faced by preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities with the limited exposure, resources, and platforms available to them. By doing so, the stakeholders will proactively contribute their part in encouraging more effort by providing more platforms for preschool teachers to organize meaningful IFP activities, whether indoor or outdoor activities. The next chapter demonstrates the findings of the current study. The researcher will discuss the findings based on the research objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The chapter presents a case study analysis and discussion of the findings from different interview protocols, checklist analyses, and observational analysis forms in the case study. The research questions for the study are as follows: (1) What is the importance of Imaginative Free-Play Activities in children's development? (2) What are the roles of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play Activities in class? (3) What are the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing Imaginative Free-Play Activities? (4) What are the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play Activities?

This study not only focused on the roles and strategies of preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities in preschool, but it also focused on the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities. A summary of the data collected from interviews, checklists, and observation analysis was administered to illustrate the importance of IFP activities in children's development, the roles and strategies of preschool teachers implemented during IFP activities, as well as a summary of the data collected from the preschool teachers regarding the challenges and issues faced while conducting IFP activities. The initial findings of the study showed the importance of IFP activities for the children's holistic development.

The plan for the interview's date and participants was based on the special schedule because of the pandemic COVID-19 in Malaysia, prepared by the Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM). The researcher contacted the preschool administrator and

chose the preschool teachers based on sample criteria. The researcher conducted the interview session with the preschool teachers during the COVID-19 epidemic.

4.2 Importance of IFP Activities in Children's Development

The first research question, "What is the importance of Imaginative Free-Play activities in children's development?" has seven sub-questions to investigate how IFP activities contribute to the physical, social, emotional, creative, language, and cognitive development of children. These questions will help us understand the importance of IFP activities when implementing them in preschool curricula for the children's holistic development. In addition to the interview questions based on the research questions, the checklist and observation analysis form will help to see the skills, behaviour, and performance of the children while engaging in IFP activities. There are some initial codes in Chapter 4, as displayed in the following data:

INT refers to Interview

OBS refers to Observation Fieldnotes

CKT refers to Checklist Analysis

T refers to Preschool Teacher

C refers to Children

The outcomes of the checklist were combined with the observation outcomes. The checklist analysis data reported the children's development while engaging in IFP activities. The selected sub-themes were reviewed again and grouped to allocate the appropriate themes in the conclusion-drawing step. Overall, three main themes were described regarding the importance of IFP activities in children's development. The classification of the themes depicted was as shown in the following table:

Table 4.1

Themes and Sub-Themes of IFP Activities for Children's Development

Theme	Sub-Themes	
	Sub-Themes 1	**Sub-Theme 2**
Holistic development	Cognitive development	Focus and concentration
		Learning problem solving skills
		Understand faster
		Build memory power
	Social development	Friendly
		Communication with others
		Sharing and helping others
	Language development	New words and vocabularies
		Talk with clear pronunciation
		Share idea and thought
	Physical development	Gross motor skills
		Eye-hand coordination
	Emotional development	Express different emotions
		Build confident and self-esteem
		Understand and respect others' emotions and feelings
	Creative development	Innovative
		Artistic
Integrate with academic	Understand academic concept	
	Learn mathematic skills	
Broaden knowledge	Discover new information	
	Practice experiment method	
	Sharing information with others	

From the analysis of preschool teachers' data regarding the implementation of IFP activities as one of the creative teaching methods in the preschools, it was clear that IFP activities helped preschool children emphasise positive holistic development. Furthermore, IFP activities assisted children in academic lessons by assisting them in integrating and broadening their knowledge.

4.2.1 Holistic Development

Based on the checklist and observation findings, the results showed that IFP activities helped children develop and improve their cognitive skills, social skills, physical skills, language skills, emotional skills, and creative skills. Correspondingly, based on the results of the reported interview analysis, teachers agreed that IFP activities contribute effectively to the holistic development of children.

4.2.1.1 Cognitive Development

As reported in interviews with the preschool teachers, the checklist analysis and the observation analysis form, IFP activities have positive effects on the cognitive development of children. It can be seen from the findings that IFP activities helped children deepen their focus and concentration levels as well as reinforce their problem-solving skills. Furthermore, IFP activities also helped children understand better and strengthen their memory.

4.2.1.1.1 More Focus and Concentration

Teachers mentioned that children were more interested in engaging in the IFP activities compared to normal academic classroom teaching methods. It encouraged children to search for new information through IFP activities and ultimately improved their concentration skills on new concepts as they became more attracted to them. Based on the checklist outcome, children paid more attention and were more focused when they engaged in new activities (CKT-C-T3 & T4). This fieldnotes from the checklist and observation analysis illustrated how the children of Teacher 3 behaved:

> T3 greets all the children and asks them to sit in their places. The teacher starts by telling a story about "The Swan and the Tortoise." Until the end of the story, the children were very focused on the story.
>
> (OBS-T3)

According to teachers, hands-on activities with a variety of materials attract children's interest in their learning development, as stated by Teacher 2;

> "How IFP helps…Teacher said children are willing to spend more time in IFP activities because they are free to play what they want to. There are no boundaries to stop them, unless they cross the rules…they actually openly expressed all their talent and interest in the play…"
>
> (INT-T2)

Moreover, Teacher 1 also stated that children do not get bored easily, although they spend more time on it. As Teacher 1 said, "I have seen a child who had difficulty constructing a tangram piece by following the shown picture. She almost spent her entire time building it, but she couldn't finish it. So, the next day, she again tries to fix it. Finally, after about one and a half lessons, she completes the tangram exactly as shown in the picture." (INT-T1). This showed that IFP activities helped children be more persistent. So that children can achieve their goals successfully, even if they fail early.

Similarly, Teacher 3 pointed out that some of the children continue doing the same task that they left incomplete in a previous activity. They will move on to another task or activity once the current one has been completed or solved. Through this, the teacher found out that children developed a higher concentration level depending on the activity they engaged in (INT-T3). IFP activities helped children pay more attention to their tasks until they completed them.

4.2.1.1.2 Learn Problem Solving Skills

Teachers commented that through IFP activities, it helped children master their problem-solving skills. Teacher 3 also mentioned that children like to take on challenges during IFP activities. They are not afraid of losing the activity, but they want to complete it, as shown in the following comment below;

> "Whenever I give activities related to puzzles or hidden pictures to the children, most of them enjoy solving them. Because they think it's a challenge for them. So they keep trying it in many ways until they successfully achieve it."
>
> (INT-T3)

Teacher 4 pointed out that children express different and unique ideas during discussion or playtime. Through IFP activities, children are exposed to many things so they can gain more knowledge and information for themselves, as seen in the following comment;

> "…they not only think differently, but they do apply it in their play activities. Then, see whether it worked out or not. Like, they try-and-error with the ideas they got it…"
>
> (INT-T4)

Moreover, based on checklist analysis, it was recorded that children frequently think faster to produce unique products (CKT-C-T3). Similarly, children think of alternative ways to solve problems, as seen from the checklist analysis and fieldnotes observation of children in T2 below;

> "Children play role-play activities in a mini-burger restaurant. A child as a chef who is wearing a chef cap. The cap was too big for him and kept falling, disturbing his play. After a few minutes, he stops the play and goes to the material place to take a string from the beads and string tools. He goes straight to the teacher and asks to tie up the chef's cap with his head using the string. Then he continues to play the chef role."
>
> (OBS-T2)

This has demonstrated that IFP activities assisted children in thinking in new ways and beginning to be persistent in finding solutions to problems they encountered. As a result, IFP activities benefit children's cognitive development in some ways.

4.2.1.1.3 Understand Faster

The teacher agreed that IFP activities promoted the development of children's thinking skills by facilitating faster comprehension. Children boosted their knowledge in a shorter

time due to actively engaging in more physical activities. They interact with people, materials, and the natural environment by using all their physical senses. Therefore, it helped them gain knowledge and understand something better (INT-T4), as commented below by Teacher 4;

> "In this activity, children actually do things by themselves, like experiment or investigate something. As a result, they gather more information and get to know many new things. That information will be useful in children's future lives."
>
> (INT-T4)

According to observation fieldnotes, children of T2 think spontaneously to solve problems while playing role-playing, as illustrated below;

> "A child uses string to keep his chef cap from falling off his head.…"
>
> (OBS-T2)

4.2.1.1.4 Build Memory Power

Furthermore, the results from the interview data illustrated that IFP activities helped children strengthen their memory. Children developed their memory strategies by recreating situations or scenarios that they had experienced or observed before. Similarly, Teacher 1 mentioned that in IFP activities, children imitated some of the actions or situations that they had come across before, as demonstrated in the following comment;

> "Sometimes I have felt surprised as well as shocked while seeing the performances done by children. In role-play activity, they acted out confidently (through a storybook reading session), and the dialogue delivery was almost the same…and yea, of course, they do remember many things in them, like the names of things they used, the names of characters, some of their actions, and so on…."
>
> (INT-T1)

Teacher 2 commented that IFP activities helped children boost their memory power by having them replicate some actions. For example, following and performing the same steps or methods repeatedly while engaging in the activities (INT-T2). Through this, it

facilitated children's transfer of information into their long-term memory. So, children do not forget things faster.

> "I give tangram puzzles to children for the first time during IFP activities. They do not know how to do it. So, I frequently ask children to engage with tangram puzzles during IFP activities. Now, some of them can construct the Tangram puzzle by making many images or models in a short time…"
>
> (INT-T2)

This has confirmed that IFP activities help children strengthen their memory at an earlier stage of development. Children improved their memory capacity by repeating actions and re-enacting scenarios. As a result, they can remember information for longer periods of time.

4.2.1.2 Social Development

Interviews showed that implementing IFP activities in the preschool curriculum improved the social development of children, while teachers could also see some positive effects of IFP activities on social development. Preschool teachers see IFP activities as a promising way to start fostering friendliness and more interaction with others, as well as developing values such as sharing and helping others. In addition, checklists and observational analysis also showed that IFP activities had some positive effects on the social development of the children.

4.2.1.2.1 Friendly

The value of friendship was built in the children while engaging in IFP activities, as they easily made friends with others by responding to one another. Based on checklist analysis, it was illustrated that children physically built strong bonds between them and created positive vibes around them (CKT-C-T1 & T2). As shown in the observation fieldnotes and checklist analysis, almost all the children in the class were playing with their friends

during IFP. It showed that children created a warm environment by playing together without engaging in any physical fighting;

> "Children of T1 play together with friends in a water play activity. Their behaviour towards others created a pleasant atmosphere."
>
> (OBS-T1)

Teacher 1 stated that children always like to play with their partners during IFP activities. Furthermore, they occasionally join another group to participate in activities with them. Each child can easily relate to one another by respecting themselves. Teacher 1 pointed out the following in the following comment;

> "Normally during IFP, children like to mingle with everyone, although they are not so close during lesson time. Example, if they like what other children are doing, they will join the group and play together…The child who wants to join in the play will be asked in an excited and polite way. Most of the time, children form new groups in their play."
>
> (INT -T1)

4.2.1.2.2 Good Communication with Others

From the teachers' point of view, IFP activities were a good way for preschool children to socialize with others. Teacher 1 clearly mentioned that "… almost all the children like to talk during IFP activities, even though sometimes they have some disagreements, but they do solve them by agreeing on one of their opinions…" (INT-T1). According to the checklist analysis, it showed that children regularly communicated with each other and did not depend on any other aspect (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3, & T4). This showed that IFP activities foster the children's ability to have good interactions with others without fighting.

Moreover, the study illustrated that IFP activities helped the children interact with each other. Teacher 2 mentioned that IFP activities helped children cooperate and play in a group. She said, "If one of them doesn't know what to do next, then others are trying to

guide them or figure out together how to solve it." (INT-T2). She also mentioned that by taking this action, it helped her during the class lesson because the children could perform group tasks together without shyness or any conflicts among them. This can be concluded from the preschool teachers' opinion that, through IFP activities, it guides children to build a teamwork spirit together by expanding their interaction skills with others. Teacher 2 also stated that IFP activities helped children communicate with teachers. She stated that during play activities, children tell stories or their experiences to her with fearlessness. (INT-T2).

Based on observational fieldnotes, children interact more with their peers, as seen in the illustration below about children of T4;

> "Play block: children communicate throughout the activity. Child T said, See, this's my ostrich. Child S said, Wow! Child T: What you make? Is this lorry?"

A child made ostrich using lasy blocks

(OBS-T4)

4.2.1.2.3 Sharing and Helping Others

From observational analysis, children like to play with their friends by helping, sharing, cooperating, and interacting. As shown below, this has a positive impact on their social development,

> "Most of the children were actively involved in the water play activity, some followed exactly like their peers."

(OBS-T1)

In the interview session, teachers also mentioned that the children learned how to take turns during the IFP activities. Teacher 3 mentioned that during IFP activities, the children always exchange their role-play characters among themselves. Besides that, during the IFP activities, the children also like to share materials or toys among themselves without any arguments (INT-T3), as seen in the following comment;

> "I have noticed that during IFP activities, children like to exchange the characters they play with their friends. So that his or her friend can have the opportunity to play the character, I have also seen some of them wait for some toys until nobody is using them, or sometimes they ask for the toys from their friend who is having them."
>
> (INT-T3)

In the checklist analysis, it was reported that children always share materials and also wait for their turn to use the materials during activities (CKT-C-T2, T3 & T4). From the checklist and observation fieldnotes analysis, children from Teacher 3 wait for their turn and try to solve it, as demonstrated below;

> "Children did tangram puzzles. These two children do the puzzle together and help each other by rotating the tangram piece to place it in the right position. One-by-one, trying to figure it out."
>
> (OBS-T3)

In addition, Teacher 4 expressed that during IFP activities, the children always liked to play with their friends. Therefore, the tools or materials will be shared among the children (INT-T4). As she said, "The children always give and take during play. For example, a child said, "You play first, then I play". Some limited materials, like kid's scissors, the children used to share." This actually helps the children stop fighting.

Teacher 4 also added that the IFP activities also encouraged the children to help each other by supporting one another to solve problems during the IFP activities. She said, "They normally help one another, like when doing blocks, if one child has difficulty

fixing it, the other child will try to help their friends." Similarly, for puzzle activities or during outdoor activities, they help each other by finding leaves, stones, and so on (INT-T4)

Observation fieldnotes, children of T2 exchange their role-play characters;

> "After about 10-13 minutes, children exchange the role-play characters between them. This time they play a different storyline based on their own imaginary story."
>
> (OBS-T2)

This undoubtedly indicated that IFP activities helped the children learn the value of sharing and helping others from a very early age. During the IFP activities, the children learned how to take turns, share, help others, and give opportunities to others. This showed that IFP activities have positive effects on children's social development.

4.2.1.3 Language Development

According to interviews, checklists and observation analysis form, IFP activities improved the language development of the children. It developed the language skills of children by having them learn new words or vocabularies. Moreover, IFP activities were seen as a good way for children to talk with clear pronunciation as well as share ideas and thoughts with others.

4.2.1.3.1 Learn New Words or Vocabularies

The interviews showed that IFP activities helped children develop their language skills. The teachers' interviews showed that IFP activities helped children learn new words or vocabularies while playing with others. Teacher 2 mentioned that children follow and remember the words because they were used repeatedly during the activities (INT-T2), as indicated in the following comments;

> "Earlier children used to say the word 'scared' in their sentences. Example: 'I'm scared, I'll fall', but now they use the word 'afraid'. Because one of the children used this word during playtime…."
>
> (INT-T2)

The checklist analysis illustrated that children get to learn new words through story-telling sessions and also by interacting with their friends. For instance, Teacher 1 narrated a story with some actions for the children. At one point, Teacher 1 mentioned the word "majestic" and asked the children who knew this word. None of them answered, so Teacher 1 answered that "majestic is extremely beautiful" (CKT-C-T1).

From observation fieldnotes, during role-play activity by children of T2, as illustrated below;

> Conversation between two children before the role-play started….
> Child A: Today, I want to be a hardworking farmer. How about you?
> Child B: Ahh, I'm going to be a cow milk seller.
> Child A: No, you're a milkman.
> Child B: What's milkman?
> Child A: Milkman is milk delivery boy.
>
> (OBS-T2)

4.2.1.3.2 Talk with Clear Pronunciation

The data illustrated that IFP activities were one way to improve children's speech by talking with clear pronunciation. Teachers stated that IFP activities helped children communicate confidently with others. Teacher 1 mentioned that children repeated some of the sentences during IFP activities (INT-T1). She said, "I have noticed that during lessons, some of the children talk clearly and fluently with their friends. Because during IFP activities, they used to repeat some of the words or sentences with their friends. So they get used to it with the sentences."

Correspondingly, Teacher 2 also shared some experiences about children's language development during IFP activities that helped children talk more confidently and louder with others. Teacher 2 said that "…especially during role-play, the children not only imitate the action but also some dialogue that they have heard before. They are not afraid to speak out, although there are sometimes grammatical errors, but they still speak with confidence…" (INT-T2).

Teacher 3 pointed out that during IFP activities, children helped each other use the correct words or sentences. For example, "One of the children said, "I want chocolate milk." The other child immediately said, "No, you have to say like this: "I like to order chocolate milk." (INT-T3). This provides children with more practice and opportunities to use correct sentences or words.

4.2.1.3.3 Share Ideas and Thought

Teachers indicated that IFP activities improved children's language development by allowing them to share ideas and thoughts through communication. As Teacher 3 mentioned, children were able to give ideas and opinions without any anxiety or shyness. She said that "when I asked questions to the children, 'what are you doing?' They tend to explain their ideas positively and excitedly." (INT-T3). This actually increases exposure to children's language skills and vocabulary knowledge.

According to the checklist analysis, children shared their ideas with others throughout IFP activities. A majority of children share ideas when involved in dramatic play, tangram puzzles, and clay activities (CKT-C-T1 & T2).

Children shared their experience by communicating with other children while involved in IFP, as seen below in the interpretation;

> A child shares her experience with a friend. She said, "*Saya nampak banyak ketam kecil di pantai* (I saw a lot of small crabs on the beach)."
>
> (OBS-T1)

Through IFP activities, it also helped children express their interests by interacting with friends. For example, as shown in the following comment, they share what he or she is going to do today during playtime;

> "Today, I'm going to play with a puppet. Yesterday, I showed the Chicken and Fox Puppet Show from YouTube. Do you want to join too? We can play together."
>
> (INT-T4)

4.2.1.4 Physical Development

According to the collected data, IFP activities help children strengthen their physical skills for their physical development. IFP activities not only make the children physically active but also improve their eye-hand coordination.

4.2.1.4.1 Strengthen Gross Motor Skills

Teachers expressed that most of the children learned how to perform drama or pretend play through the IFP activities and imitated some action or character in the play. This showed that children strengthen their large muscles when they are involved in IFP activities. Teacher 2 commented that it was easy for her to conduct dramatic play with the children during concerts, sports, and preschool graduations because children can follow the actions and movements that are shown by teachers or in YouTube videos.

Teacher 2 also mentioned that children performed their own creative physical actions by acting out the actions (INT-T2). Furthermore, Teacher 1 commented that children used to

imitate some behaviours and try to recreate the real experience or situation in their play with friends, as stated in the following comment;

> "The scenario was in a saloon shop, where a child was working as a saloon worker. The body language she used to invite the customer and the services she offered to the customer, like hair colouring, washing, cutting, etc. Finally, she proceeds with the payment session for the customer. The child imitated 70% of the actual experience. Throughout the play, she acts as a saloon worker only."
>
> (INT-T1)

This clearly showed that IFP activities helped the children understand their daily lives and thus helped them develop healthy physical development. Based on the checklist, recorded data showed that children used large muscles throughout the IFP activities such as climbing stairs, jumping, hopping, etc. (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3 & T4).

Similarly, Teacher 3 mentioned that during IFP activities, most of the children rarely play in one place. They like to move around the place by doing various movements (INT T3).

Similarly to this, Teacher 4 responded that the children's bodies became more flexible, as stated in the following comment;

> "I can see children's bodies becoming more flexible, especially when they can roll and bend their bodies easily. They do body-stretching activities, and others also try to follow the actions. For example, the children try to twist, turn, bend, and roll their bodies to make body alphabets."

During making body alphabets

(INT-T4)

This indicated that IFP activities helped children move around freely and strengthened their bodies' flexibility. That means IFP activities helped children be physically active throughout the activity.

4.2.1.4.2 Enhance Eye-Hand Coordination

Teachers agreed that IFP activities helped to evolve children's motor skill development as a result of enhancing eye-hand coordination. The checklist data analysis illustrated that children also used small muscles when engaged in IFP activities. For example, children fix and stack the Lasy Block puzzle, roll clay, do puppet shows, etc. (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3 & T4)

Moreover, playing with blocks and objects to improve finger motor skills of the children. Teacher 1 also mentioned that children used to do simple skills, like arranging toy vegetables in the tray and carrying the tray by balancing it. They balance it with their hands without dropping the toys (INT-T1). Teacher 2 stated that children learn to do simple daily routine activities through the IFP activities, as seen in the following comment;

> "Through IFP activities, the children not only develop their fine motor skills but also get to learn the purpose and how to use certain materials. For example, during gardening, the children used plastic kitchen tongs to pick up objects under the soil and place them on the plates. This shows that children know the purpose of kitchen tongs and how to use them."
>
> (INT-T2)

Teacher 4 stated that some of the children like to play with limited body movement during IFP activities. But they actively participated in the play activities as they used their small muscle skills during IFP activities. As Teacher 4 said that children play with blocks and clay by fixing and rolling them to create something from their imagination (INT-T4).

This clearly proves that IFP activities could enhance children's eye-hand coordination, as they generally do activities that involve small muscle skills.

Children make flower pot using clay with teacher's guide

From the observation fieldnotes, children improve eye-hand coordination while engaging in role-play, as demonstrated below;

> "Children slide the bread using a plastic knife to prepare burger bread."
> (OBS-T2)

4.2.1.5 Emotional Development

The study showed that IFP activities among children help improve children's emotional development. Through IFP activities, the children were able to express different emotions, build confidence and self-esteem, as well as understand and respect others' emotions and feelings. These values help and can be used by children in their daily lives and in their academics.

4.2.1.5.1 Express Different Emotions

Based on interview analysis, almost all the interviewees (teachers) commented that children expressed various emotions throughout IFP activities. Teacher 1 stated that

during IFP activities, the children showed many expressions and emotions, as seen in the following comment;

> "I have seen many emotions the children used to show during IFP activities, like happiness, excitement, jealousy, anger, disappointment, fear, upset, frustration, etc… It doesn't matter whether they play in a group or individually, but they tend to show many emotions. Especially in role-play activity, they act out many expressions spontaneously, which really makes me very impressive…"
>
> (INT-T1)

According to the checklist analysis, it highlighted that children showed many emotions during engaging in IFP activities, such as excitement, happiness, doubt, and many more (CKT-C-T1 & T3).

Children expressed their emotions in many ways. From the observation analysis, children of Teacher 3 express their emotions through hugging and jumping together when they have completed Tangram puzzles;

> "They hug and jump each other happily once they complete the Tangram puzzle."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Likewise, Teacher 2 stated that IFP activities were an activity for children to share and express their feelings and emotions. They may share their frustration when they are unable to solve a puzzle game or their excitement about the topic of the day. As Teacher 2 said, "Whenever I start to explain about the activity, the children become very excited and begin to ask many questions, such as, "Today, what are we going to play? Are we going to play outside?" Sometimes, they also ask critical questions like "Why are leaves green?", "Why are some stones harder and some are not?", "How do worms go into the sand?" etc. (INT-T2). This revealed that during IFP activities, the children became more curious and excited.

From observation fieldnotes, children showed excitement together when they discovered something new, as demonstrated in the following below;

> Children get excited together. During water play, children excitedly shout "Big bubble! Big bubble!"
>
> (OBS-T1)

4.2.1.5.2 Build Confident and Self-Esteem

Teacher 3 mentioned that the children built their confidence and self-esteem through IFP activities. She said that "children keep trying until they can succeed." This showed that IFP activities helped children develop their confidence by increasing their strength, stamina, and skills by using various ways to overcome problems without giving up (INT-T3).

Based on the checklist analysis and observation fieldnotes and the actions of Teacher 3's children during the IFP activity,

> "Children keep trying to do the tangram puzzle until they manage to solve it. Although some children sought help from the teacher and some did it by themselves. They place different pieces one-by-one and try rotating them in different positions."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Moreover, IFP activities also helped children boost their self-esteem. This showed that they develop trust in themselves by believing that they can achieve their goals, although they have difficulties, as indicated in the following comment;

> "A child doesn't know how to fix the Lasy blocks correctly, although he follows the picture as guidance, but he still can't do it. However, after a few days of trying, he can now manage to fix it by himself and knows how to fix it."
>
> (INT-T3)

Similarly, children believed that they could overcome the problem successfully as long as they trusted themselves (CKT-C-T2 & T3). For instance, children trust their ability to complete the tangram puzzle activities as recorded in the checklist analysis.

Next, Teacher 4 commented that IFP activities facilitated most of the children to take praise happily when they successfully completed the activities. As she said, "Especially during art activities or block play, children always praise one another for their final products. In return, the children say thank you or give a hug to them" (INT-T4). This showed that children learned to accept compliments from others because they believed in their capability and strength.

4.2.1.5.3 Understand and Respect Others' Emotions and Feelings

Teachers also mentioned that children begin to understand the feelings of others through involvement in IFP activities. Teacher 4 commented that the children get to know their friends' feelings during IFP activities, as mentioned in the following comment;

> "During an outdoor activity, a child was upset and didn't want to play because he couldn't catch the balls thrown by the friends. So, one of them encourages and teaches the child how to catch the balls, and the other friends also throw the ball slowly so that the child can catch it."
>
> (INT-T4)

Based on the checklist analysis, the researcher identified that most of the children understand other people's feelings, and sometimes they give priority to others as well, especially in role-play and block activities (CKT-C-T4). Similarly, the observational analysis showed that through IFP activities, children get to know others through their actions, feelings, or emotions because they are able to understand what other people are going through.

> "Other friends know that the child is struggling with his chef cap; friends also try to fix it but fail, but finally he manages to find a solution. So others waited for him to return."
>
> (OBS-T2)

Besides, Teacher 2 also stated that IFP activities helped children show respect to other people (INT-T2). As Teacher 2 voiced, "During the IFP activities, the children follow and listen to one another's instructions by sharing their ideas or suggestions and their experiences with others." From this, it was shown that children become good listeners and responders by giving importance to each other.

4.2.1.6 Creative Development

Based on the collected data, IFP activities help children boost their creative development. IFP activities are great opportunities for children to be innovative and artistic. This might help them in their future lives by encouraging them to think creatively while facing problems.

4.2.1.6.1 Innovative

Teachers mentioned that most of the children learned how to discover things around them during IFP activities. Teacher 4 pointed out that children try many ways to explore things around them. They make connections between their ideas in various ways. For instance, children do experiments or try many ways to solve problems during IFP activities (INT-T4), as demonstrated in the following comment;

> During play dough, one of the children was trying to make a 3D house using clay. She can't make it because the clay is soft and starts to bend. She kept adjusting it. I went near her and asked, "What happened?" She said, "clay didn't want to stand straight." What other way can you make clay stand strongly? After a while of thinking, she said, "ice cream sticks." Then, I asked her, "How will you make a house using ice-cream sticks?" She said, "I'm going to cover the sticks with clay so I can make a strong house for my rabbit."
>
> (INT-T4)

According to checklist analysis, the data clarified that children create their own products from their imagination, especially when engaging in clay activities. They produce unique and creative outcomes by themselves (CKT-C-T3 & T4).

Children think out of the box by making different objects from the blocks. They also shared and taught new things to others, as seen during the observation analysis in the following below;

> A conversation between two children during a block play activity;
> Child T: What you do? Is this lorry?
> Child S: NoNoNo! It's a mountain bike.
> Child T: Mountain bike???
> Child S: Ahhmmm, this bike can used to climb mountains.
>
> (OBS-T4)

Teacher 3 stated that during IFP activities, children shared a variety of ideas and opinions about what they were going to do in play and how they were going to do it. The teacher said that "last week, children did cookies decoration activity. When the children saw the ingredients to decorate, one by one, they started to tell what ingredients they were going to use and how they would decorate their cookies. Even one of them gives the idea that she wants to crush the M & M chocolates and nuts, then add them into the dough." (INT-T3) This illustrated that IFP activities helped children develop their innovation skills by thinking in various ways and sharing them with others.

4.2.1.6.2 Artistic

Teacher 3 also mentioned that IFP activities helped children interact with various materials. This can be used to produce a variety of new characters or creatures from their imaginations (INT-T3). She said that "I have seen children love to make different creatures and play with them. They will be very happy and explain how they make it to friends and myself: "Heyy, see what I have made? This is *Bomba* Man (a firefighter)."

Sometimes, they also teach and guide their friend how to make it." Through IFP activities, children learn to think out of the box and develop an interest in creating something new with their imagination. In addition, children create creative recipe books for use during role-play activities.

Recipe book created by children during IFP activities

From checklist and observational fieldnotes, children create and make objects related to the theme given by the teachers. Different themes help children think according to the theme, as demonstrated below;

> "Based on the theme "Jungle", children begin to think about what they might find in the jungle. Then, construct various objects based on their imagination, such as giraffes, trees, ostriches, mountain bikes, lions, etc."

Ostrich

Mountain bike

(OBS-T4)

Not only that, children develop their own screenplay based on the theme while engaging in role-play activities. They spontaneously create the scenarios by sharing ideas among

them (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3 & T4). Teacher 1 also mentioned that, through IFP activities, it helped children engage in different story lines rather than imitate the same scenario every time (INT-T1). Children design their own imaginary incidents or sometimes include their own life experiences in their play. Teacher 1 also added that children created some creative objects using natural things through IFP activities, as seen in the following comment;

> "I bring the children to play outdoors to expose them to nature's environment. By using flowers and short sticks, the children made a few butterflies. They place a short stick in the middle of the flower petals. The petals are represented as wings, and the stick is the body of a butterfly. They were playing the story of butterflies using natural things."
>
> (INT-T1)

Likewise, Teacher 2 also stated the same as other teachers that children create different creatures by using blocks, clay, natural items, and recycled materials during IFP activities. She added one extra point of view that through IFP activities, children represent materials according to their imaginations by using multipurpose ways (INT-T2). She said, "For example, using a hula hoop as a car, skipping rope, home, train, and so on." Children used materials for multipurpose usage during IFP activities based on their own creative and imaginative skills.

The interview given by Teacher 2 demonstrated that IFP activities improved children's development in all areas. She said that "IFP is a platform for children to show, identify, and develop their talent and skills with confidence. I have seen very good progression in children's creative, social, language, physical, emotional, and thinking skills." (INT-T2).

Correspondingly, Teacher 1 also made almost the same point as Teacher 2. She stated that IFP activities are not focused on one specific child's development or skill. However, it has a positive impact on children's multiple developmental areas. According to Teacher 1, this

is because children can explore their surroundings in order to gain information or understand something for themselves;

> "They involve energetically and joy in IFP activities compared to other academic subjects. Because they can do whatever they want to. They freely explore things by using many ways that help improve their developments."
>
> (INT-T1)

4.2.2 Integrate with Academic

Based on the checklist, observation, and interview analysis, IFP activities support children in their academic lessons through integration. It helped children improve their understanding of academic concepts faster by integrating IFP activities into the lessons. Through IFP activities, children were able to master their mathematical skills by applying mathematical techniques and concepts to the activities.

4.2.2.1 Understand Academic Concept

Teachers pointed out that IFP activities lend themselves well to academic approaches. Children who had difficulties understanding any concepts related to academics found that IFP activities actually helped them develop a better understanding of the concepts or topics. This is because during IFP, children engage in an activity based on their own interests, so their minds start to accept all the information. Children are involved physically and mentally in the activities.

Teacher 4 mentioned that IFP activities helped teachers conduct academic lessons easily through integration. The children learned faster through IFP activities because they used to think abstractly and tried the trial-and-error method. These give children many advantages in academics, particularly in science, because they can explore and investigate in many alternative ways.

> "They learn about colour combinations by playing with clay. For example, recently, children were very excitedly combining the different colours of clay and then seeing what colour turned out. From this, the children actually recognized the concept of colour combinations, although I haven't taught the topic yet. So, when I teach the topic of colour combinations later, the children will be able to answer the question correctly…"
>
> (INT-T4)

4.2.2.2 Learn Mathematic Skills

According to the checklist analysis, it illustrated that children implement the mathematical concept into the IFP activities. For example, learn patterns, comparisons, geometry, and so on (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3 & T4).

> "Yesterday, some of them were playing with weighing scales. They role-play as vegetable sellers and customers. They first measure the weight of vegetables before putting them in a plastic bag….In my mind, I was thinking that later, when I teach a topic about measuring, it's going to be easy for me to teach."
>
> (INT-T2)

The dialogue above was commented on by Teacher 2. This meant that through IFP activities, children learned how to measure things and how to read the measure by using a weighing scale. Children's mathematical skills improved as a result of learning about measurements.

Similarly, the observational analysis showed the children of Teacher 2 participate in role-playing activities as a burger restaurant. From this, it was shown that children learn about money by selling and buying burgers. They learn addition and subtraction, as demonstrated below;

> Child A: I give you 5 ringgit.
> Child B: Ookai, thank you, I give you back (counting using fingers…3 ringgit.

Role-play as burger cashier

(OBS-T2)

4.2.3 Broaden Knowledge

According to the reported data from the checklists, observation analysis, and interview analysis, teachers acknowledged that IFP activities encouraged children to broaden their knowledge. IFP activities were seen as excellent activities for children to discover new information by using various techniques. Moreover, children were also able to get involved in experimental practices as well as share information with others. This will be helpful to children in their future lives.

4.2.3.1 Discover New Information

Through IFP activities, children always learn something new by exploring things with a variety of methods. As Teacher 3 declared, children create creative objects based on their imaginations and also discover new information (INT-T3), as established in the following comment below;

> "I agree that IFP can be creative in teaching… Activity: Make bubbles. Children tried using all the soap and detergent that are in the school. They test one by one through mixing with water and then see whether bubbles produce or not..."
>
> (INT-T3)

4.2.3.2 Practice Experiment Method

This showed that children practise a variety of experiments on something, and from there they collect more information. Like the bubble-making activity, children learn new information, such as the fact that not all soaps or detergents can produce bubbles. From the checklist analysis, children get to experience more things by doing hands-on activities and exploring nature environments (CKT-C-T1, T2, T3 & T4).

4.2.3.3 Sharing Information with Others

The results from the checklist and observational analysis showed that children share their knowledge and information by interacting and being exposed to various themes that stimulate their thinking skills, as seen below in illustrations from children in T4;

> Theme is “Jungle”: one of children builds a tall building. Then, his friend guided him by saying, “jungle don’t have buildings, ahhh..hmm… you do giraffe, tall giraffe, ok?”
>
> (OBS-T4)

4.3 Roles of Preschool Teachers during IFP Activities in Class

The section of this chapter refers to an elaboration on preschool teachers’ roles during the implementation of IFP activities in preschool. To answer the second research question, "What are the roles of preschool teachers during Imaginative Free-Play Activities in class?" To answer the second research question, interview data, checklist analysis, and fieldnotes observation data were used and then analysed together.

The preschool teachers who were brilliant at fostering creative ideas surely foster children’s ideas during a learning activity. It might seem different from what happened in the past, when all the ideas and information came from the teachers as the main source. Preschool teachers, on the other hand, are currently expected to be innovative planners, self-reliance facilitators, supportive motivators, and divergent-thinking playmates in order

to encourage children to think and act creatively while also being problem solvers. The themes and descriptions of preschool teachers' roles in implementing IFP activities are explained in the below table:

Table 4.2

Theme and Description of Preschool Teacher's Roles in Implementing IFP Activities with Children

Theme	Description
Innovative Planner	• teacher creates new themes by discussing with other preschool teachers • pre-planned the activities to make sure children experienced the situation • implement a variety of play types by using various materials
Self-Reliance Facilitator	• preschool teachers guided the children who were having difficulties • teachers mediate solutions for the children's conflicts
Supportive Motivator	• teachers used to encourage children to achieve • teachers used to motivate children by speaking supportive words
Divergent-Thinking Playmate	• teachers actively engage in the children's play activities to introduce some new materials • teachers show some technique or skills to make creative objects

4.3.1 Innovative Planner

As reported in the interviews, checklist and observation analysis, preschool teachers' role in implementing IFP activities is referred to as "innovative planner." Preschool teachers mentioned that they design or create the space or environment with various themes to extend children's curiosity. As Teacher 3 mentioned, she creates new themes by discussing them with other preschool teachers and implementing them together while keeping child safety in mind. In addition, Teacher 4 stated, as seen in the following comment;

> "We set up the room based on the week's theme, Plan one week before so it's easier to prepare things. Mostly, we used recycled materials to set up the place. One theme for one whole week, but we do different scenarios. Example: "Water theme and scenarios such as picnics at the beach, gardening, fishing, café..."
>
> (INT-T4)

Preschool teachers come up with various themes every week, as shown in the checklist analysis (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4). Based on the observation analysis reported, preschool teachers pre-planned themes by discussing them with other teachers a week ago. Preschool teachers set up the setting and prepared materials according to the theme. Preschool teachers start the lesson by telling a story related to the theme, which is then discussed among the children. Finally, children engaged with the activities of the day, as seen below by T1;

> "Teacher 1 is telling a story about a dolphin getting lost in the ocean. After storytelling, children share some of their stories with the class. Then, the teacher brings the children outside to do a water play activity. Children play role-play activities in water play as fisherman roles…"

Indoor set up

Outdoor set up

(OBS-T1)

The above comments showed that preschool teachers are not only designing the environment but also preparing the resources for children to use later during IFP activities.

Preschool teachers executed a variety of situations and storylines in the appropriate environment or place based on the theme, like an indoor activity or an outdoor activity. This is to ensure the children have the opportunity to be exposed to different environments as well as real-life experiences. Teacher 2 pointed out that this activity helped children experience real-life situations, although they are too young for it, as commented in the below statement;

> "I get excited too when planning the situation and am eager to wait to see what they are doing… When I tell them the situation, they give me a lot of ideas, and some start to imagine the situation and act as if they were in it… Supermarket: Most children start to make food items; Child X starts making trolleys… I asked Child X, "Why trolley?" and then the child answered, "My mom brings me to the supermarket, and the first thing I do is take the trolley. So, I do trolley."
>
> (INT-T2)

Moreover, preschool teachers used to implement a variety of play types by using various materials in the IFP activities, such as role-play, block play, puzzles, clay, drawing, and so on, as analysed in the checklist data (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4). Similarly, Teacher 1 illustrated that children like to engage in different types of play activities and materials daily, as mentioned in the following comment;

> We always rotate the type of play with other classes. Selection happens during the discussion time about the themes and scenarios, which was after the school lessons. We do share materials and ideas together. Every day children show excitement in the play, and after the play they are also curious to ask about the next day's activities, such as:-
> "Teacher, tomorrow what are we going to play?"
>
> (INT-T1)

4.3.2 Self-Reliance Facilitator

Based on the collected data from the interview, checklist and observation analysis, the role of preschool teachers during IFP activities is known as "self-reliance facilitator." Preschool teachers facilitate children staying in the right place while participating in IFP activities. Teacher 1 stated that teachers always guide the children who have difficulties

during the activities. The teacher guide the children in both a direct and indirect way, as mentioned in the below comment;

> "Most of the time, I help children indirectly by questioning them. Example: puzzle activity: if the children can't do it, they will get frustrated and start to push the puzzle away from them. So normally, what I do is ask them to drink water, and then I start questioning them like, "What happened?", "What other way can you do it?", "Did you see the colour of the puzzle piece?" and so on. But sometimes, I also help them directly by telling or showing the clues, rather than making them more angry and frustrated."
>
> (INT-T1)

In general, self-reliance is important for every preschool teacher, as they have a sense of belonging as professional preschool teachers who are responsible for every action taken. Self-reliance leads the preschool teachers to be self-assured and fearless in conducting, deciding, and becoming responsible for the best activity for children. Thus, teachers are feeling excited and facilitate the children's ideas and transfer them to the children's feelings.

Based on checklist analysis, the data showed that preschool teachers guided the children who were having difficulties (CKT-T2 & T4). During activities, teachers are always aware of each child's behaviour. According to the observational analysis;

> T1 is always around the children and keeps telling them, "Walk slowly", "Sit down and play." Teacher also guides some children who have difficulty catching the toy fish by teaching them the proper way to hold the fishing rod and the technique to catch the toy fish.
>
> (OBS-T1)

Likewise, observation analysis with T3 during children's engagement in tangram puzzle activity, as seen in the following comment below;

> "A child loses hope because he cannot make a swan tangram. He was very sad but tried to rotate the piece again and again. Teacher, sit with him and ask, "Have you seen a swan in real life?" The child said, "No, but I have seen it in the video." The teacher said, "Ok, that's good enough. See, this is the picture of Tangram Swan." She showed the picture of Swan Tangram

> and said, “Look at the picture and your puzzle piece carefully, ok? I know you can do it, ok?” Then, the teacher moves to the other child.”
>
> (OBS-T3)

Similarly, Teacher 4 mentioned that teachers always look at the children’s feelings, emotions, and behaviour throughout the activities. This is illustrated by the following comment below;

> “They become disappointed very fast, especially when engaging in puzzle activity. Some of them are more focused on it until they successfully complete it. So, if other friends went near them, they were yelling, No! No! No! and they occasionally got into arguments. So, I have to help them come down by asking them to focus on the activity.”
>
> (INT-T4)

Moreover, preschool teachers mediate solutions for the children who have conflicts by intervening in their play activities. Teacher 3 said that sometimes children get annoyed when things go against them. This statement is illustrated in more detail in the following comment;

> “Making objects from clay, Child C tries to make some objects, but when the object does turn out as he taught or imagined, he gets annoyed and starts to disturb others. Others get angry too. To avoid this, I join in his play and guide him in the making of his imaginary objects.”
>
> (INT-T3)

Based on the checklist analysis, preschool teachers assisted the children who were losing their emotions during the IFP activities (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4). Therefore, preschool teachers observed and helped the children follow the right pathway during the activities.

4.3.3 Supportive Motivator

According to the collected data, the preschool teacher’s role in implementing IFP activities is shown as supportive motivator. This theme refers to the preschool teacher’s actions regarding giving support, aid, help, and hope to the children during the activity.

In this study, Teacher 1 indicated that she used to encourage children to achieve their aim or goal during IFP activities. As T1 explained her experience as shown below;

> During puzzle activities, children like to divert their minds to other things. I used to say to them, "I know you can do it, keep trying it." This kind of word actually helps them complete their puzzle.
>
> (INT-T1)

Through checklist analysis data, it was shown that all the teachers give encouragement to the children so that they get motivated (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4). Similarly, from observation, T3 encourages children to try to catch more fish during a water play activity, as illustrated below;

> During water play, a child had difficulties catching fish from the soup water. As she kept taking stones from the water using the net. Teacher 1 was saying to the child, "Try some more, you can catch it."
>
> (OBS-T1)

Next, Teacher 2 also mentioned that teachers used to praise their children with encouraging words during IFP activities. The encouragement words that she used not only on one particular incident or situation but throughout the activities. The following comment is illustrated by Teacher 2 below;

> I used words like 'Well done!', 'Wow, it looks cute!', 'Good job!', etc.
>
> (INT-T2)

From observation analysis, Teacher 3 used praise to encourage children, as seen in the following comment below;

> "After that, a child completed the tangram puzzle. The teacher said, "Wow, that's nice. Excellent!", and the teacher took a picture from her mobile phone."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Other than that, Teacher 4 mentioned that she used to motivate children by speaking supportive words to them. This actually builds and restores more energy in them, and they happily involve themselves in the play activity (INT-T4), depicted as follows;

> They're moody and don't want to join in the play. I motivate them by saying, 'I think you should try this', 'it's really fun', or 'come on, let's do this'.
>
> (INT-T4)

Similarly, Teacher 3 also mentioned almost the same thing as the other teachers above that she used to encourage children throughout the IFP activities.

4.3.4 Divergent-Thinking Playmate

The study showed that the role of preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities is referred to as "divergent-thinking playmate." Based on checklist and observation, it was reported that most of the time during IFP activities, preschool teachers were observing the children's play and their behaviour. However, they only engage with the children at the beginning of the lesson by telling them the stories and discussing the topic with them. Moreover, preschool teachers are also always alert and see what children are doing throughout the play so that they can guide and motivate the children.

For the interview analysis, preschool teachers mentioned that teachers actively engage in the children's play activities and stimulate their thinking skills. As Teacher 4 stated, the teacher joins in with the children in their play activities.

> "I mostly join all types of play with them, but the majority of the time I join in role-play activities, or sometimes I guide them only. For example, in a role-play activity (in a hospital situation), I act as an ambulance driver by carrying a big box over my body, which represents an ambulance. While going around, I make an ambulance sound. After being two times an ambulance driver, I changed roles and acted as a patient.
>
> (INT-T4)

Likewise, Teacher 1 mentioned that the teacher is one of the players in the children's play group, as stated in the following comment;

> "I play with children by making different objects using clay. I show some of the techniques or skills on how to make creative objects."
>
> (INT-T1)

According to the checklist data, it was recorded that almost all the preschool teachers actively engaged in IFP activities when it was necessary, such as when children asked to join together, children got annoyed, etc. Otherwise, the preschool teachers remain as observers throughout the IFP activities (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4).

Furthermore, the teacher's role in children's play is to introduce some new props or equipment and show the children how to use them, as stated by Teacher 2 in the following comment below;

> "Usually, when introducing a new theme and also giving them new play materials, I play together with children. For example, when I show a Tangram puzzle for the first time, some children know what it is, but others are confused. I play with them together and teach them how to play."
>
> (INT-T2)

The teacher also stated that teachers should participate in children's play while maintaining control. They did not give a direct solution to the problem that the children were facing. As Teacher 4 stated in the below comments;

> "During solving the Tangram puzzle, I joined together in the play. At one point, the child got stuck and didn't know what to do next. The child was just staring at the puzzle piece. Maybe the child will think that I will make the next move, but I also pretend that I don't know. Then, after a while, I ask the child to use the 'try-and-error' method."
>
> (INT-T4)

4.4 Strategies That Preschool Teachers Apply in Implementing IFP Activities

This section is going to discuss the strategies that preschool teachers use in IFP activities to answer the third research question, which is "What are the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing Imaginative Free-Play Activities?" Data from interviews, checklist and observations made by the participants were analysed.

Teaching strategies are very important for developing children's learning through the techniques and methods used by preschool teachers. Preschool teachers play an important role in selecting appropriate teaching strategies because it affects children's knowledge level and helps them understand the concept of studies as well as their stage of learning development. Effective preschool teachers need to be innovative and creative in their teaching methods, as they need to consider both the concepts of study as well as the needs of children. Therefore, this case study found that there are few strategies applied by preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities. The themes and descriptions are explained in the below table:

Table 4.3

Theme and Description of Strategies Applied By Preschool Teachers during the Implementation of IFP Activities

Theme	Description
Boost Children's Curiosity	• ask open-ended questions to the children • engaging with the natural environment activities
Stimulate Children's Imaginative Thinking	• implement story-reading and story-telling sessions • expose to a lot of information through story-reading • exposing children to a variety of situations
Develop Children's Innovative and Creative Skills	• using different types of materials • used to create creative products • exposed to different types of play activities • setting up various scenarios

4.4.1 Boost Children's Curiosity

According to the data gathered from interview, checklist and observation analysis, the strategy used by preschool teachers when implementing IFP activities is to boost children's curiosity. Preschool teachers boost children's curiosity by using many methods, one of which is questioning the children during IFP activities.

The data from the checklist analysis showed that preschool teachers like to ask open-ended questions to the children (CKT-T1, T2 &T4). Similarly, in observational analysis, the scenario in a burger restaurant was played during children's role-play activities, as demonstrated below;

> "Teacher 3 asked: Why do you need to wear an apron first?, How do you make burgers?, How do you welcome customers?, etc.
> The teacher asked all these questions, and the children tried to answer the questions based on their experience."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Teacher 4 stated that she used to ask children questions based on their actions during the IFP activities. She also adds that the questions she used to ask were more open-ended questions to stimulate their curiosity, as indicated in the following comment;;

> "I mostly ask children many questions during the activity. Example: In a clay activity, I ask questions like, 'Why did you choose blue for this?' 'What other thing can be in blue?' 'Why do you like blue?' and etc. So this makes them more curious to find answers and can also help them develop ideas and thinking skills."
>
> (INT-T4)

Furthermore, preschool teachers expressed that children increase their curiosity by engaging with the nature environment. As Teacher 1 mentioned, the children like to explore nature's things excitedly through hands-on activities and gather more ideas and information, as seen in the following comment below;

> "Children love to play outdoor activities. Whenever they learn that today's activity is an outdoor activity, they get excited and ready to go. During the nature activities, some of them were full-on experiments, like collecting different types of stone colours and making creative images"
>
> (INT-T1)

4.4.2 Stimulate Children's Imaginative Thinking

As reported in the interviews, checklist and observation analysis, the strategy that preschool teachers implement during IFP activities is shown to stimulate children's imaginative thinking skills.

All the preschool teachers begin IFP activities with a short story, as illustrated in the checklist analysis data. Based on a checklist and observational analysis, Teacher 1 starts their lessons by telling stories, as demonstrated below;

> While T1 is telling a story about a dolphin getting lost in the ocean, most of the children express their emotions and feelings differently. For example, they showed a variety of facial expressions, such as a sad face, an excited face, and a scared expression. Furthermore, some children also express them verbally, such as "ahh, I'm so scared." "Aiyaaa, reach home ready!"
>
> (CKT & OBS-T1)

According to Teacher 4, reading stories helps children develop their imaginative thinking skills. As illustrated by the following comments by Teacher 4 below;

> "Through story reading, children create their own imaginary characters or situations. This really helps their imaginative skills. They act out some actions during IFP activity"
>
> (INT-T4)

Aside from that, the preschool teacher mentioned that children are exposed to a lot of information and develop an understanding of their imaginations through story reading sessions. This is shown in the following comment by Teacher 3 below;

> "Children like to listen to different stories every day... Every day, I read a story book to them. But sometimes I also share stories that I read at home. If it is interesting and suitable for children."
>
> (INT-T3)

Furthermore, exposing children to a variety of situations helped them develop their imaginative abilities. Similarly, Teacher 1 mentioned that children develop their imagination level when they are involved in different types of scenarios by improving different ideas.

> "I think different situations or themes help children do many unique things. I have seen, especially in block games, they create many unique objects, and after that, they start to play with the objects. Even their friends join in the play, and they happily play together."
>
> (INT-T1)

From the observational analysis, the children were excited and started asking questions about how to catch fish, as illustrated below;

> Most children do not have experience catching fish, so they were excited to participate in the activity. They do ask many questions, like "How to catch fish?" "Do we go swimming in water?" Another child said, "I can use a stick and a rope." Then, the teacher shows a plastic fishing rod to the children.
>
> (OBS-T1)

4.4.3 Develop Children's Innovative and Creative Skills

The study showed that the strategy that preschool teachers used in implementing IFP activities is referred to develop children's innovative and creative skills. Based on checklist and observation fieldnotes, children innovate various products from their imagination, as demonstrated in this observation report from T4;

> "Children construct a mountain bike using Lasy blocks. He knew that mountain bikes were more suitable for use in jungles, mountains, and forests for tracking purposes"
>
> (OBS-T4)

The reported study from Teacher 2 mentioned that using different types of materials in the activities to promote children's innovative and creative skills. This is illustrated in the following comment below;

> "Children mostly used all the materials that are in this room. They create a lot of creative things like masks, 3D cars, etc…Good for them"
>
> (INT-T2)

From the observation report, children create many shapes of tangram puzzle pictures, as illustrated below from T3;

> "Children make different shapes of tortoises using tangram puzzles, and they explain the picture that they make to their friends."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Likewise, Teacher 4 stated that children used to create their own creative products by using the variety of materials that were provided, as demonstrated in the following comment;

> "In the play dough activity, children make many objects like animals, houses, foods, etc. They do it by themselves, but sometimes they copy their friend's idea and then play together. Sometimes the objects they make look the same as real objects, and I myself get surprised by that."
>
> (INT-T4)

Next, all the preschool teachers let the children be exposed to different types of play activities, as demonstrated in the checklist analysis (CKT-T1, T2, T3 & T4). These strategies will increase children's creative skills because they will be exposed to a variety of play techniques and skills. As shown in the observation analysis, all the preschool teachers provide opportunities for children to engage in different types of play activities, as illustrated below based on the observation data;

> "School management set up a few types of play, such as puzzle games, block games, nature play, role-play, clay activities, as well as drawing and painting activities. Teachers choose based on the suitable theme of the week."
>
> (OBS-T1, T2, T3 & T4)

Other than that, preschool teachers also mentioned that setting up various scenarios and exposing children to many themes helped them be more creative. This is evidence from the statement of Teacher 3 that children create their own creative story from the actual story, as seen in the following comment;

> "During role-play, children change a bit the storyline of the story according to their own interests and act it out very creatively."
>
> (INT-T3)

4.5 Issues and Challenges Faced by Preschool Teachers When Conducting IFP Activities

This section is going to elaborate on the answer to the fourth research question, which is "What are the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting Imaginative Free-Play Activities?" The researcher analysed the findings using interviews and observational analysis.

A further step is the data display, where the selective nodes are described in the matrix table. The findings of the matrix table were categorized into several themes, as depicted in the table below:

Table 4.4

Theme and Description of Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of IFP Activities

Theme	Description
Children's Behaviour	• coming late and missed the IFP activities lesson • extreme emotion, difficult to handle children • children get into fights
Environment	• too compact to move around • share material with other class (limited materials)
Teacher's Behaviour	• showed a lack of interest • mostly be an observer

4.5.1 Children's Behaviour

According to the data gathered from interview and observation analysis, the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting IFP activities are related to children's behaviour. Based on observational analysis, children are very fast at expressing their emotions and feelings, as illustrated by the observational findings from children in T3 as shown below;

> "A child was very upset and sad because he couldn't do the swan tangram. He started to make voices like disturbing others."
>
> (OBS-T3)

All the preschool teachers in this study expressed that some children missed the IFP activities lesson. As reported data by Teacher 1 mentioned, children coming late to school affect other children's play too, as illustrated below;

> "Those who came early were playing, and once the late one came in and wanted to join too, sometimes they allowed it, but sometimes they didn't. AHHHH, there starts the problem; they start to disturb the activity."
>
> (INT-T1)

Other than this, most of the preschool teachers stated that children's moods were also one of the challenges during IFP activities. Based on the observation fieldnotes, when children were in a too-happy mood, it was difficult for preschool teachers to handle them as they were uncontrollable, as seen from the observation finding from T1 below;

> Children are too excited to learn how to catch fish. Therefore, children were shouting, asking questions, moving around, jumping, and so on. To make children calm down, the teacher keeps silent and just looks at them until all of them are calmly sitting in their place. Then, the teacher said, "If you all do not listen to me, I will make you sit on this boat, and you can't catch fish."
>
> (OBS-T1)

In the interview analysis, Teacher 1 said that children's moods play a major role in keeping the activity smooth. Children's moods, whether extremely happy or sad, have an impact on the activity, as demonstrated below;

> "Children's mood is also a problem. Example: Too much happiness and hyperactive actions will disturb the activity. The same thing happens when they are upset, angry, or frustrated; they will start crying, push things, etc."
>
> (INT-T1)

Similarly, the IFP activities get disrupted due to the children's mood swings. According to Teacher 2, she stated that children tend to play alone and avoid sharing materials with others because of their mood swings. With this action, other children also get annoyed and stop engaging in the activities (INT-T2).

Teacher 3 mentioned that children get into fights because of disagreements between them during activities, as illustrated in the following comment;

> …they start to fight over who wants to be what in role-play. Then, I stop them and ask them to play another game…
>
> (INT-T3)

4.5.2 Environment

As reported in the interviews and observation analysis, the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting IFP activities are shown to be environment-related. All the preschool teachers in this study described small spaces for play activities. According to the observation findings, it was reported that during role-play activities, the physical environment for indoor activities was small. Children had difficulty moving freely around.

> "During the role-play activity, they play a few characters like burger makers, waiters, waitresses, a cashier, and customers. The children weren't able to move because the space became smaller as more children were involved in the role-play."
>
> (OBS-T2)

Based on the interview reports, as Teacher 4 reported, the space for children to do physical activity is too limited, as illustrated below:

> "When children play group activities (role-play), the class looks too messy and compact."
>
> (INT-T4)

Furthermore, all the preschool teachers in this study reported on the quantity of materials for each type of play activity. As per Teacher 3, most of the materials for IFP activities need to be shared with other classes, as seen in the following;

> "Normally, we share with other classes so we do like one rotation every week."
>
> (INT-T3)

4.5.3 Teacher's Behaviour

The study showed that the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting IFP activities are related to the teacher's behaviour. According to the observation analysis reported, the preschool teacher showed a lack of interest in the activities. During the IFP activity, T3 seemed to spend more time observing the children's play, as illustrated below;

> "She introduces the theme. After discussion, she provides materials (tangram puzzles) for the children. Children start to play with it. She keeps moving around and looking at the children's actions and what they are doing. After about 10–13 minutes, she sits in one place and observes the children until the end of the lesson, but in between, she guides a child who has difficulty creating a swan using the Tangram puzzle. 10 minutes before the lesson is over, she goes around again and starts asking one by one what they have made."
>
> (OBS-T3)

Similarly, the same behaviour as in Teacher 3 was observed in Teacher 1. During the water play activity conducted in the outdoor area, the teacher was very careful and conscious of the children's safety. So she keeps observing each child's performances. She

was always around the children, and she also helped some of the children who couldn't catch the fish by showing them some techniques (OBS-T1). This showed that the teacher mostly played the role of observer as well as guider during this activity.

The observation analysis for all the preschool teachers showed that teachers prepared creative activities for children to participate in. However, during the activities, teachers spend more time watching the children's activities. In the observation data recorded, Teacher 4 was asking about the outcomes that children make in the activities at the end of the lesson, while in between activities, the teacher gave some ideas and suggestions to the children on how they can construct creative features using Lazy Block (OBS-T4).

4.6 Summary

This chapter interprets the findings of this case study. This chapter starts with a description of the study site and the overall participants' descriptions to get a better understanding of displaying data. Then, it describes the answers to the research questions one by one based on the interpretation of interview and observation data.

Overall, the IFP activities given are beneficial to children's holistic development, help in children's academics, and broaden children's knowledge. During the implementation of IFP activities, the preschool teacher takes on the roles of innovative planner, self-reliance facilitator, supportive motivator, and divergent-thinking playmate. Strategies that preschool teachers used in implementing IFP activities were to boost children's curiosity, stimulate children's imaginative thinking, and develop children's innovation and creative skills. The issues and challenges encountered by preschool teachers during the implementation of IFP activities were discovered to be related to the children's behaviour,

the environment, and the teacher's behaviour. Hence, all research questions have been answered and will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the interpretation of the results. The findings of the research were compared with the literature review. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings and outcomes of the research in relation to the results that have been obtained. Moreover, in the chapter, the findings were summarized and their implications discussed. This chapter includes research ideas for future studies on the importance of implementing IFP activities in preschool towards children's development, teachers' roles and strategies for conducting IFP activities, and challenges encountered during IFP activity implementation in daily classroom routines.

This qualitative case study investigated the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities by preschool teachers in their classrooms. The study focused on the importance of IFP activities for the holistic development of children and how preschool teachers implement IFP activities in preschool. This chapter discusses the previous research on the benefits of IFP activities for children's development, the role and strategies that preschool teachers carry out while conducting IFP activities, challenges faced during IFP activities, and the findings of the current study.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The main purpose of the study was to explore the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities in preschool by preschool teachers with an eye towards the development of children. The study also explored the preschool teachers' role, strategies, and challenges encountered during implementing IFP activities with the children, as they

played a main role in the IFP activities involving the children. The main purpose of the study was to explore the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play activities in preschool by preschool teachers in relation to the development of children. The study also explored the preschool teachers' role, strategies, and challenges encountered during implementing IFP activities with the children. This is because the preschool teachers played a main role in the IFP activities involving the children.

That is why Research Question 1 focused on the importance of IFP activities for the development of children, and Research Question 2 investigated the role of preschool teachers in IFP activities. Meanwhile, Research Question 3 examined the strategies used by preschool teachers during IFP activities, and Research Question 4 explored the challenges faced by preschool teachers during IFP activities. According to the study's overall findings, IFP activities participated in by children had positive effects on their development. In addition, preschool teachers preferred to encourage the children to participate in IFP activities. Also, preschool teachers developed more awareness about the implementation of IFP activities in the preschool curriculum.

RQ 1: What is the importance of IFP Activities in children's development?

The sources of the research illustrated that IFP activities provided positive effects on the holistic development of the children. First of all, in the area of cognitive development, IFP improved children's experiential imagining, like problem-solving skills, by thinking differently, helped children understand faster through exploring and investigating, increased their focus and concentration level (such as longer attention, "never give up" skills, and was more attractive), and strengthened memory power. Furthermore, activities such as group play and role-playing helped to improve the children's social development

by allowing them to easily mingle with friends, interact with others, and develop social skills such as sharing and helping others.

Moreover, interacting with others in IFP activities made lessons easy to teach the language, as children talked with clear pronunciation and confidently, as well as learned new words or vocabulary. IFP activities were a good way for children to share ideas and thoughts. The IFP activities encouraged the children to be physically active, like imitating some action during dramatic play and following the choreographies from teachers or YouTube videos. IFP also improved children's eye-hand coordination as they practiced rolling, pressing, cutting, fixing, etc.

In addition, IFP activities helped children express different emotions with others in their social environment and developed children's self-confidence and self-esteem because they kept trying them. IFP activities were also used by the children as a channel to respect and understand other people's emotions and feelings in their social environment. Other than that, IFP activities had positive effects on the creative development of the children. IFP activities made children innovative by having them brainstorm various ideas and explore things. It also encouraged children to be artistic, such as when they created new play materials, thought outside the box, and used objects for multiple purposes.

IFP activities not only promote children's holistic development, but IFP activities also help children master their academics faster as well as broaden their knowledge by exploring and learning new things.

RQ 2: What are the roles of preschool teachers during IFP Activities in class?

The study showed that preschool teachers played four types of roles by boosting creative ideas during the implementation of IFP activities with children to foster the children's holistic development. The first role that preschool teachers played was as innovative planners. It has been proven that preschool teachers create creative environments with various themes for children during IFP activities. Moreover, they mentioned that different storylines and situations can be created for children to play and experience during role-play activities. During the implementation of IFP activities, the preschool teachers also prepared and provided a variety of appropriate materials for children to use safely. They also gave children exposure to many types of activities that they could engage in, such as indoor as well as outdoor activities.

During the implementation of IFP activities, preschool teachers also played a role as self-reliance facilitator. Based on the collected data, it was found that preschool teachers encouraged children to act ethically while they engaged in IFP activities. Preschool teachers were aware of and understood children's feelings and emotions. They intervene in children's play by mediating a solution for the conflict that arises between the children.

The third role that preschool teachers had was a supportive motivator during the implementation of IFP activities. Preschool teachers used to encourage children to reach their goals successfully. Next, preschool teachers supported children by praising them with encouraging words. Preschool teachers used to motivate children by using encouraging words to lift their spirits and feelings.

During IFP activities, preschool teachers' final role was as a divergent-thinking playmate. Preschool teachers actively engaged in the children's play to stimulate their ideas.

Furthermore, preschool teachers were involved in play activities to guide the children who had difficulties in the activities. Preschool teachers joined the children's activity to ensure that everything ran smoothly. The findings of the study proved that the roles of preschool teachers in IFP activities were helpful for creative teaching process.

RQ 3: What are the strategies that preschool teachers apply in implementing IFP Activities?

The study explored the strategies that preschool teachers used in the implementation of IFP activities. Preschool teachers were found to use three strategies, including increasing children's curiosity, stimulating their imaginative thinking, and developing their innovative and creative skills. To boost children's curiosity, preschool teachers encouraged children to answer more open-ended questions. Next, preschool teachers carried out natural activities with children at the outdoor playground to provide opportunities for exploring the natural environment.

To stimulate children's imaginative thinking, a preschool teacher did storybook reading sessions to improve children's imaginary skills and gain many details. They also prepared and created a variety of situations for children to play in. To develop children's innovative and creative skills, preschool teachers used different types of materials for different types of play activities. Then, the teacher set up various scenarios and themes for the children to explore. The finding revealed that strategies used by preschool teachers have a positive effect on IFP activities for children's learning and development.

RQ 4: What are the issues and challenges faced by preschool teachers when conducting IFP Activities?

The findings of the study illustrated that preschool teachers faced some issues and challenges while conducting the IFP activities. From the findings, we found out that there were three challenges encountered by preschool teachers, such as children's behaviour, the environment, and the teacher's behaviour. For children's behaviour, preschool teachers mentioned that some children tend to miss the activity lesson by coming in late. There was also a problem raised when children's moods went low or high because children started to disturb the environment in the class. Preschool teachers also mentioned that children get into arguments and fight among themselves due to their egocentrism.

Preschool teachers mentioned the limited space for larger group activities in terms of the environment. Next, although the school management provided many types of playing materials and equipment for different play activities, the quantity of materials for each type of play was limited. So, each class had to share the materials by taking turns in rotation. For teachers' behaviour, it was found that preschool teachers show less interest in involving themselves in children's play, although they guide and support the children throughout the activities.

5.3 Discussion

Researchers explored the different studies on the implementation of IFP activities in preschool by preschool teachers and the roles, strategies, and challenges preschool teachers undergo, although there are not enough studies on the implementation of IFP by preschool teachers. Some of the studies (Bird, 2019; Hostettler Scharer, 2017; Hutagalung et al., 2020; Rao & Gibson, 2021; Tee, 2022; Tee et al., 2017; L. C. Yin et al., 2014; Zulkarnaini, 2017) have conducted research on different types of play such as creative

play, sociodramatic play, dramatic play, messy play, and pretend play and found that these types of play had positive effects on the children's development. Meanwhile, some research specifically conducted on imaginative play (Devi et al., 2018; Dominey, 2021; Göncü & Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Hong et al., 2017; Neha & Rule, 2018) showed that it had positive effects on children's learning and development. It is a fact that most preschool teachers play a major role in implementing IFP activities in preschool towards children's learning and development, even though the results of their contribution and its effects are not certain. That is why the literature needs studies on the implementation of IFP activities by preschool teachers

The study investigated the implementation of IFP activities by preschool teachers and their importance towards children's development, as well as the teachers' contributions in Malaysian preschools, although generalizations from a single case study are limited. The findings of the study supported the idea that some of the importance of IFP activities towards preschool teachers' roles and strategies as well as children's development is similar to that of previous studies about the importance and effects of play activities on preschool teachers and children.

5.3.1 Importance of IFP Activities in Children's Development

The study illustrated that the IFP activities improved children's cognitive development. The findings of the research showed that IFP activities provide children with problem-solving skills, fast learning, more focus and concentration, and increased memory power. These findings are merged with the findings by Dorsch (2005) that children developed object awareness through experiential imagining, which helped them understand faster. The previous findings by Barbaro (2022) highlighted that during imaginary play, children engaged with open-ended questions could better understand convergent and divergent

problem solving. Compared to current findings, IFP activities improved children's convergent-thinking, divergent-thinking and problem-solving skills by involving them in practical situations. Depending on the literature, the problem-solving behaviours of children have been improved by correlating their experiences and situations (Rosen, 2020). In comparison with current findings, children are exposed to many problems, and they can find solutions by thinking alternatively with or without guidance. The findings of Dominey (2021) support current research findings that children can think creatively and are exposed to a wide range of experiences. It was proven from the observational analysis that a child used a string to tie on the chef cap that kept falling. Moreover, children interpret and express their play (storyline) in many ways (Neha & Rule, 2018). Compared to the current study's findings, children should act out some of the scenarios from the storybook reading session.

The study found that IFP activities had effects on the social development of the children. It was shown that the social skills of the children improved through group play as they developed friendship values, interpersonal communication skills, and sharing and helping skills. The children participate in IFP activities to improve their social skills with their peers and teachers. Research by Tee (2022) on creative play that enhances children's creativity supports the finding that creative play improves their collaboration and interactions with peers while they are playing in a group or pair. As per current findings, children foster peaceful relationships with their peers, although they had some disagreements among themselves during the activities. It's because they can understand and respect each other's ideas. Similar findings by Hutagalung et al. (2020) as part of current research suggest that children develop their vocabulary and communication skills by engaging in dramatic play. Moreover, research by Zulkarnaini (2017) found that children easily make friends by responding to their peers during sociodramatic play. The

children get opportunities to bond with their peers (Patricia F & Verna, 2014). It also supported a recent study that discovered children participate in other groups to play by asking their friends. They had positive communications among themselves while playing as a group. Scharer (2017) provides evidence that children wait for their turn to speak when they engage in dramatic play with their peers. Meanwhile, the current findings indicate that children give everyone the opportunity to explore and experience everything. For example, during dramatic play, children exchanged their role-play characters among themselves, so all of them had the opportunity to play different characters.

According to the findings of this study, IFP activities improved children's language skills. As indicated in these current findings, children helped each other by responding and correcting some sentences or words throughout the activities. Similarly, the findings of the study by Tee (2022) highlighted that some children responded by answering the question. Like, “a child gives the suggestion to use a magnet to pick up keys as a solution to a problem. The child knows that magnets attract iron materials.” From this, it was shown that children communicate frequently and spontaneously during play activities. Moreover, findings by Hutagalung and colleagues (2020) proved that storybook reading and preschool teachers’ scaffolding enhanced children’s language development in vocabulary and comprehension. In comparison, the current findings showed that children learned new words and vocabulary by communicating during IFP activities with their friends. Correspondingly, the previous findings by Markova (2017) have similar findings as the current results. It highlighted children who engaged in non-academic (free play) activities as being more linguistically involved than academic activities. This is because the non-academic activities encouraged the children to speak by imitating the stories from the books, singing, interacting with peers, etc. Free play activities were one of the best

activities for the language development of children due to the heavier usage of bilingual language by the children during their involvement in the activities.

According to the findings of the study, IFP activities helped children's physical development. The study showed that it was easy for the children to follow the movements on YouTube or their teachers' actions. They learned how to make alphabets through body movements. Moreover, some activities like gardening that involve pushing, pulling, digging, etc. help improve children's gross motor skill development. Compared to previous findings from Tee (2022), children express their creativity through physical movement, such as pretending to be an animal or object during the activity. Furthermore, the current study found that the eye-hand coordination of the children improved as they were able to roll, fix, and arrange by using clay, blocks, toys, a writing tool, etc. in the IFP activities. According to the previous findings of the study by Neha and Rule (2018), children transformed their imaginary character from the storybook into their drawing skills.

In this study, it was found that IFP activities made children feel excited and curious. Likewise, Zulkarnaini (2017) also mentioned that unpopular children often feel left out and express feelings of sadness, boredom, and isolation during sociodramatic play. This has demonstrated that children, whether happy or sad, tend to express all of their emotions through play activities. Contrastively, this current study about IFP activities found that children reveal a variety of emotions through their behaviour, like facial expression and physical actions such as hugging and jumping. The study by Rao and Gibson (2021) on supporting children's development and their wellbeing through pretend play supported the finding that children can control their speech while engaging in pretend play.

Compared to this current study, it was found that children respect and understand others' feelings and emotions through cooperative play in IFP activities.

The study showed that IFP activities improved children's creative development. The results illustrated that children improved their innovative and artistic skills by developing unique things or objects. According to the current study, children who are exposed to a variety of materials could produce a wide range of creative products. Comparatively, the previous findings of the study by Bird (2020) mentioned that children create their own play material while engaging in play activities. In addition, the result of this study supported the findings of Yin and colleagues' (2014) research on developing children's creativity and imagination through messy play. It found that children have the ability to engage in divergent thinking while engaging in messy play. Contrary to this, the findings from this case study showed that children use experimental methods to explore things in various ways to create something new.

The study also found that IFP activities improved children's academic approaches. The analysis data showed that children integrated academic lessons while engaging in IFP activities. For example, the children do money subtraction and addition while playing as burger sellers. Correspondingly, the previous study from Gkouskou & Tunnicliffe (2020) mentioned that free-play activities emerge and teach children to work scientifically, in which children practice concepts of science such as explore, identify, experience, evaluate, and observe things around them. Free-play activities link literacy, numeracy, and social skills to enhance children's potential. However, according to a previous study by Rahmatullah and colleagues (2021), preschool was more concerned with children's academic performance than their skills. Similar to the result shown by Hornáčková (2019), most preschool activities were dominated by controlled activities. This showed

that preschool management and teachers were more focused on children's scoring marks in reading and writing. With this, the beneficial educational outcomes of free play will be risked.

Moreover, the findings from the previous study by Scharer (2017) emphasized the significance of sociodramatic play in young children's development for a smooth transition to primary school learning. Parallel to the current findings of the study, IFP activities helped children develop and broaden their knowledge. From these reported data, children discovered new information by doing hands-on activities and experiencing it in IFP activities. According to Gkouskou & Tunnicliffe (2020), the children encounter and experience the biodiversity of the world by immersing themselves in the natural environment through free-play activities. Not only that, they experience earth science action and physical action (Gkouskou & Dale Tunnicliffe, 2019).

5.3.2 Roles of Preschool Teachers during IFP Activities in Class

These findings elaborated in the previous chapter display the preschool teachers' roles in implementing IFP activities, the elements found in creative teaching such as innovative as planner, self-reliance as facilitator, supportive as motivator and divergent-thinking as playmate. Those mentioned elements of creative teaching are illustrated throughout the IFP activities. All of these creative practices are needed by preschool teachers when conducting IFP activities. Further, it becomes much more important for the younger generation to recognize their own talents and skills through imagination. Similarly, the preschool teachers in this study performed creative teaching, so the children are curious to explore the world.

A comparison is created from the findings that represent IFP activities as creative teaching with the creative practice theory of mind developed by Cremin and colleagues (2009). The comparison table is illustrated below:

Table 5.1

Comparison of Creative Practice Theory of Mind and Data Findings

Creative Practice Theory of Mind *((Cremin et al., 2009)*		IFP Activities as A Creative Teaching
Curiosity & Questioning	⇢	**Innovative**
Ownership	⇢	**Self-Reliance**
Originality	⇢	**Supportive**
Connection making	⇢	**Divergent-Thinking**

The researcher observes that there are no steps or stages in creative teaching, but rather a description of the teacher's actions during teaching and learning activities. Consequently, the above table displays alignment between the study findings and the theory of creative teaching invented by Cremin et al. (2009).

This study found that the preschool teachers were innovative planners during the implementation of IFP activities. This finding was aligned with Dorsch (2005), as it revealed a variety of techniques and skills that preschool teachers and children used to express their imagination skills spontaneously. Compared to the findings of the study by Bennett et al. (1998), adults create a safe environment in both psychological and physical aspects for children's holistic development. Moreover, the current findings of this study indicate that preschool teachers designed the classroom environment with various themes so that it helped children build curiosity and expand their imagination levels. In contrast

to this current finding, Pearly Lim Pei Li and Bahauddin (2017) discovered that physical environments were less conducive to learning through play activities, so the children had difficulty engaging in the activities. Furthermore, the current findings showed that preschool teachers used a range of scenarios and plot lines in the proper setting or location based on the theme, whether indoor or outdoor activities. This is to ensure the children have the opportunity to be exposed to different environments as well as real-life experiences. The previous findings of the Sandseter et al. (2022) study showed that some unusual materials were not suitable for certain play types, which made it difficult for the children to create some products. Compared to the current findings of the study, preschool teachers let children gain more experience with many types of play by using various materials. Preschool teachers distributed materials to the children according to the type of play activity. This is to ensure all the children get the chance to experience different types of play. Implementing different types of play in both indoor and outdoor free play activities made the children more actively involved in the activities (Åström et al., 2020). Through this, the children get to explore and expose themselves to new learning techniques, as well as understand and learn faster by gaining more information. Furthermore, the children will not become bored and lose interest in the activities.

According to the findings of this study, preschool teachers played a role as self-reliance facilitators in the IFP activities. The research by Devi et al. (2018) found that teachers did not actively participate in children's play, but they did guide the children when they had difficulties in play. In contrast to the current findings of the study, preschool teachers guided the children in both direct and indirect ways to avoid children getting frustrated while engaging in the tangram puzzle. From the previous findings by Bennett and colleagues' (1998), it was identified that teachers should have provided a secure environment that made the children feel protected and allowed them to freely engage in

the play activities. Contrastingly, this current study found that preschool teachers observed children's behaviour and actions to understand what was going on inside their minds during IFP activities. This is because children developed aggressive behaviours when they couldn't succeed in the activities. For example, they become dangerous by hurting themselves, their peers, or objects around them. Based on the previous findings by Helena Plocha (2007), children who engaged in imaginative play activities could develop positive social behaviours. Compared with the previous findings, the current findings point out that preschool teachers became mediators for children's conflicts when they were having problems. The preschool teachers mediated a resolution by interfering in their play.

In this study, preschool teachers were also depicted as supportive motivators during the implementation of IFP activities. It could be seen when preschool teachers used to encourage students to keep trying until they succeeded. This encouraged children not to give up on anything easily, and they developed the belief that anything was possible if they tried in a variety of ways. Compared to previous findings by Devi and colleagues (2018), they found out that teachers supported the children in imaginative play, such as helping a child write their own imaginary story. In addition, the results of previous studies by Bodrova & Leong (2007); Kurt (2020) and Leong & Bodrova (2006) showed that teachers' compliments on the children's positive actions could help the children move further. However, the current findings of this case study indicate that preschool teachers used to praise the children for their achievements during the IFP activities. This showed that the supportive words built and restored confidence in them throughout the activities.

This study found that preschool teachers were represented as divergent-thinking playmates in children's play in order to develop activities to carry forward. Based on

previous findings by Rajapaksha (2016), teachers actively scaffold children by acting as leaders and co-players during sociodramatic play. Compared to current findings about IFP activities, it showed that preschool teachers were actively engaged in activities, mostly to introduce new materials to children or when children had difficulties in play activities. According to Wiseman and colleagues (2019), children had opportunities to control the activities during unstructured play. However, this case study demonstrated that preschool teachers maintained silence while engaging in the activities in order for children to lead the play by being child-centred. However, sometimes preschool teachers joined together in the children's play activities when it was necessary.

5.3.3 Strategies That Preschool Teachers Apply in Implementing IFP Activities

The findings of this study reveal that preschool teachers build curiosity in children during IFP activities as one of their strategies. According to Cremin et al. (2009), teachers seemed curious to do an activity with children; they would not just give them the activity and let them play. Sometimes teachers provide questions, starting with "how," "when," and "what if," and show an inner interest in developing children's answers. In contrast to this current study, it was recommended that preschool teachers ask their children more open-ended questions so that they can think creatively and extend their cognitive skills. This current finding supports the previous findings of Åström and her colleagues (2022), which showed that strong interaction between teachers and children as well as with other children has increased children's active engagement in free play and helped them learn through it. This is due to widening their curiosity during interaction with teachers or peers. Moreover, Wiseman et al. (2019) found out from the study that children engaging with the natural environment helped stimulate their imaginative development. Comparatively, this current study found that preschool teachers provided opportunities for children to explore the natural environment by engaging in natural play during IFP activities.

Preschool teachers consider a lot of approaches to developing the children's development, abilities, and skills. It links to the findings that this study came up with a variety of questions and explored the natural environment, which refers to teachers' actions in combining their brilliant ideas into children's activities.

Other strategies used by preschool teachers in this study stimulated imaginative thinking. Based on Barbaro (2022) and Wyant & Bridges-Nieuwenhuyse (2021), they stated that books helped children create ideas as they developed their critical thinking skills. However, this finding of the study pointed out that preschool teachers also used to read storybooks or describe situations for the role-play activity before children involved themselves in IFP activities. This helped children imagine the situation or character of the story. Moreover, the previous study found that different scenarios helped children practise and express different emotions (Plocha, 2007). Compared to this current study, preschool teachers provided and encouraged a variety of situations during IFP activities.

In this case study, the findings about the strategies that preschool teachers used were to develop children's innovative and creative skills. It was developed by providing various types of materials and involving them in different types of play activities. By doing so, the children got to experience and learn about different types of play as well as different materials. It could broaden their knowledge and experience by forcing them to think in new ways. This finding was supported by the previous study from Sandseter and colleagues (2022), which revealed that engaging in various play materials improved children's learning as well as their developmental areas. Meanwhile, a study by Wathu (2016) found that engaging in different types of play improved their social and emotional development.

5.3.4 Issues and Challenges Faced by Preschool Teachers When Conducting IFP Activities

Findings reveal that the challenges encountered are coming from children's behaviour, the environment, and the teacher's behaviour. Children who arrived late to school, children's moods, and children who got into fights or arguments were among the challenges and issues preschool teachers faced. The findings from this study showed that IFP activities get disturbed when children arrive late to school. Children who were late tend to copy what other children did, as they don't use their own ideas during the activities. While they also became confused because they didn't know what to do or how to use the materials, they started to misbehave during the activities. Therefore, preschool teachers need to guide them from the beginning of the lesson. However, a previous study by Helena Plocha (2007) found that children who did not engage in imaginative play on a regular basis exhibited more aggressive behaviour due to a lack of interaction between them. Next, the findings from the current study revealed that children's mood changes were also a challenge faced by preschool teachers. Children who displayed extreme happiness or sadness had an impact on IFP activities. Compared to Thelen (2012), children engaged in disagreements among themselves during pretend play. Therefore, teachers became external mediators to solve the disagreements. Similarly, this current case study showed that children get into arguments about who is going to play first, especially in role-play activities.

In terms of environmental-related issues, this study indicated that there was very limited space for larger group activities. Therefore, there might have been an accident between the children. Based on the findings of Puteh and Ali (2013), it was found that limited and unsuitable space for play activities was affecting the children's developmentally appropriate practises. Furthermore, the findings by Leong & Bodrova (2006) and Wathu

(2016) showed that larger quantities and high-quality materials were important for play activities as well as for children's development. The children had to wait for their turn to use the materials because very limited materials were provided by the school management. In contrast to the current findings of this study, it demonstrated that children must share materials with other children because they have a limited number of materials. As a result, sometimes children had arguments or fights between themselves during the activities.

For the teacher's behaviour, the previous findings of the studies by Devi et al. (2018) and Gaviria-loaiza et al. (2017) revealed that teachers were minimally engaged in children's play activities as they were more focused on observing skills. Similarly, Åström and her colleagues' (2022) finding found that teachers only engaged in children's free play when necessary such as when children faced problems and need adult guide. Otherwise, the teachers stood back from involving and monitoring them (Aras, 2016; Åström et al., 2022) This showed that teachers mainly focused on task management, which made sure the activities kept going with the children. Equivalently, the findings of this current study showed that preschool teachers had minimal interest in children's play activities. During play activities, preschool teachers were more focused on guiding, motivating, and observing children, but they rarely joined in the children's play activities. However, the involvement of preschool teachers in children's play activities has increased by implementing different roles during the activities, compared to previous studies where teachers were mostly observers.

5.4 Implications from the Findings

This study begins with the researcher's curiosity about the implementation of Imaginative Free-Play Activities in preschool curricula. This section comes up with the implications

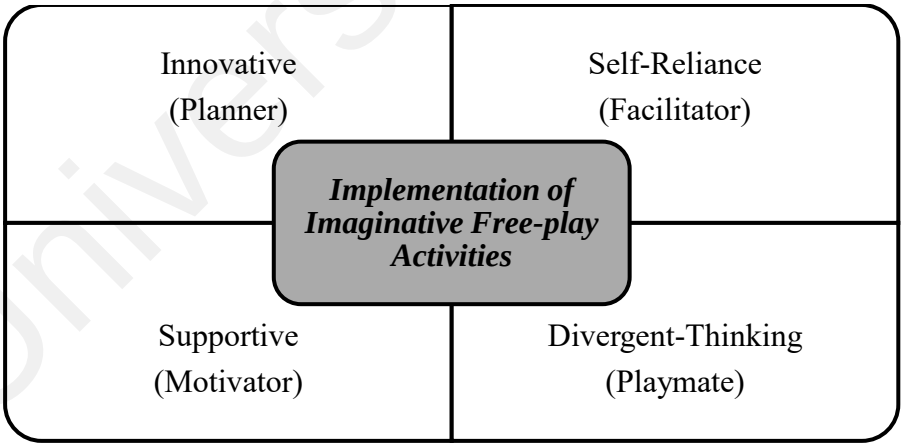
of the study in the education field, either theoretically or practically, particularly in early childhood education, after all the data were collected, analysed, and revealed.

5.4.1 Theoretical Implication

This study explores the preschool teacher's actions in implementing Imaginative Free-Play activities in teaching and learning activities. The preschool teacher's action is an example of creative teaching, as this study revealed that some elements interacted with one another. As depicted before, this creative teaching is especially important for early childhood educators. The findings of this study supported theories of Sociocultural Theory (the Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD) and the Creative State of Mind. The findings are illustrated in the form of a diagram below to make it clearer:

Figure 5.1

The Diagram of the Theoretical Implication of the Implementation of Imaginative Free-Play Activities



Each element in the diagram above is connected to another, but not in the same way that a sequence or stage is. The small white rectangle boxes represent the following elements: self-reliance, innovative, supportive, and divergent-thinking. Thus, the preschool teachers

in this study were successfully applying the elements in the IFP activities as a form of creative teaching.

In 2003, MOE established the National Preschool Curriculum for all preschools, including public and private preschools. The curriculum was based on the National Principles (*Rukun Negara*) and the National Philosophy of Education. It focuses on six cores, which are communication, moral and spiritual, science and technology, human science, physicality and creativity, and socioemotional development (Abu Bakar et al., 2015). Free-play activities are one of the compulsory lessons in all preschools in Malaysia, which was established by the National Preschool Curriculum.

However, the engagement of IFP activities in the preschool is supposedly considered more important since it is part of free-play activities. IFP has a significant impact on children's development because it stimulates their cognitive, social, language, physical, emotional, and creative development. Hence, the implementation of IFP activities is highly recommended in the preschool curriculum in Malaysia.

The results of the study supported Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) under Sociocultural Theory and Creative State of Mind Theory. Although the theories focus on some different settings in children's development processes, the findings showed positive effects towards the theories. The study showed that the roles of preschool teachers in the implementation of IFP activities in preschool have positively affected children's development. Based on Vygotsky's theory, it mentioned that adults' guidance and collaboration could help children in their development and learning process. Similarly, the findings of this study revealed that preschool teachers had many responsibilities in implementing IFP so that they could encourage the children to succeed throughout the

IFP activities. For example, this study showed that preschool teachers engaged in IFP activities by taking on different roles as planner, facilitator, motivator, and playmate.

Moreover, the findings of this study corroborated the creative state of mind theory. According to the Creative State of Mind Theory, teachers should create a creative and active learning environment for children. This was to make sure children could be exposed to and experience a variety of skills and techniques. The theory corresponds with the current findings of this study, which found that preschool teachers used and implemented various play types and materials in IFP activities. This showed that the children got a boost in their curiosity and stimulated creative thinking.

5.4.2 Practical Implication

The elements of creative teaching in IFP activities found in this study could be used by preschool teachers in teaching and learning activities. As shown in the above diagram (Figure 5.1), the actions of preschool teachers during IFP activities were good enough for creative teaching. Furthermore, it is also a good choice for a basic foundation to develop creative learning assessments for children in the early years. There are various types of assessments used in preschools, such as portfolios, projects, crafts, products, etc. Hence, implementation of IFP activities could be put into assessment items to examine children's development. For example, in cognitive development, IFP stimulates problem-solving skills. Hence, the implementation of IFP activities in all preschools in Malaysia could be applied to teaching and learning activities in a form of creative teaching.

5.5 Suggestion from the Study

The findings show that implementing IFP activities in preschool stimulates the children's holistic development, integrates with academics, and broadens knowledge. While IFP

activities have positive effects on children as well as preschool teachers, they also help in learning and teaching skills, as well as being an alternative way in all aspects. That means IFP activities can be used to develop the cognitive, social, language, physical, emotional, and creative development of the children in creative learning and teaching ways. Teachers can combine IFP activities with other subjects such as science and math to provide children with a variety of experiences during the teaching and learning process.

Regarding the preschool teachers' role in implementing IFP activities in preschool, the results show that preschool teachers explore creative teaching during the implementation of IFP activities in preschool. It trains the preschool teachers to play the roles as a planner, facilitator, motivator, and playmate during IFP activities. Those roles are engaged with creative teaching elements such as innovative, self-reliance, supportive, and divergent-thinking. That is, with these creative teaching elements, preschool teachers can give the children more time and expose them to a wider range of activities that benefit their learning and development.

The findings of the study regarding the strategies used by preschool teachers during IFP activities show that they help boost children's curiosity, stimulate children's imaginative thinking, and develop children's innovative and creative skills. The preschool teachers used to question the children frequently; at one point, the children might get annoyed with the questions, and they started to avoid participating in IFP activities. To prevent this, it can be suggested that preschool teachers should make the children ask more questions than the teacher during IFP activities, such as the teacher can give indirect answers, take time to give an answer, give a short explanation, etc. This can be a way to develop creative teaching methods as well as the development of children.

Although the study's findings show that preschool teachers faced some challenges when implementing IFP activities, they managed to bring the activities forward successfully without affecting the children's developmental areas. There are a few challenges that preschool teachers face, such as children's behaviour, the environment, and teachers' behaviour. The result of the findings suggested that for children who frequently come late to preschool, skipping the IFP lesson, the preschool teachers should talk with the children's parents about it, explaining the benefit and importance of the IFP activities for the children's development and learning. In terms of environment, the study supports preschool teachers' suggestions that the preschool management should look forward to the problems and try to solve them. Lastly, regarding teachers' behaviour, preschool teachers should develop interest in and attraction towards the IFP activities.

5.6 Suggestion for Future Research

This section has several suggestions for further research. This study could be conducted as a quantitative study by measuring a child's development as well as preschool teachers' roles and strategies in preparation for the implementation of IFP activities in preschool. This finding surely develops deep understanding by conducting Design and Development Research (DDR). In DDR research, the findings can be used as significant data that needs to be analysed. For future research, the study should focus on one specific area of child development. This is to make sure the researcher can more effectively focus on one particular area of child development and collect accurate data.

This includes visiting the site of the study to observe preschool teachers for the interview and observation sessions before selecting volunteer participants. This is due to the fact that, despite volunteering to participate in the interview, some of the participants may be unfamiliar with the research topic. Moreover, the timing of the observation and interview

sessions should be coordinated not only by the researcher and participants but also by the preschool management in order to create the best time for observation and the best location for interviews in order to collect clear data.

Another suggestion is that the study's sample size be increased in order to obtain more accurate data. Furthermore, for the findings to be more accurate, the participants should have the same educational qualifications as in early childhood education. This is because some participants may be unfamiliar with the child's growth and development, although they may have more experience teaching children. In addition, the further studies should focus on only one specific age group of children. This was due to the difficulty in analysing children's developmental areas because developmentally appropriate practices differed by age group.

5.7 Conclusion

The study shows that preschool teachers' creative teaching plays an important role in the implementation of the IFP activities in preschool as it improves children's holistic development and academic learning approaches. In addition, the teachers are aware of the effects of the IFP activities on children. Therefore, they play a major role in implementing IFP activities in preschool. The teachers develop the best strategies to provide effective IFP activities so that they are beneficial to children's learning development.

As the literature does not have enough studies on IFP activities and teachers' roles and strategies in implementing IFP activities and has more research on free-play activities conducted by children, it can be seen that IFP activities have almost the same effects on children's development as do preschool teachers' roles and strategies. These findings, however, may not be generalizable because a single case study cannot represent the entire population.

It is hoped that preschool teachers will be engaged with more creative teaching elements during the implementation of IFP activities in preschool. Despite some difficulties encountered in this study, participation in IFP activities resulted in significant improvements in children's academic, holistic, and knowledge development. Furthermore, it is hoped that more researchers will study IFP activities in preschool in the future and find more conclusive results. Consequently, IFP activities will help children improve their holistic development, broaden their knowledge, and be helpful in academics.

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