

Preschool Teachers' Attitudes towards Play

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Abstract

The review of contemporary theoretical and empirical papers about play indicates contradictory conceptualisations of play in general, and especially of the roles of preschool teachers in play. The roles of adults in play in institutional early childhood context are considered on a continuum, from regulation to support of adults, i.e. child participation. This paper presents preliminary research results about preschool teachers' attitudes towards play and their roles in it. The results indicate that preschool teachers have contradictory attitudes towards play in institutional context. We presume that the results of this research could be useful for preschool teachers and theorists dealing with play.

Key words: *institutional early childhood education; preschool teachers' roles; regulation; support.*

Introduction

One of the characteristics of early childhood in contemporaneity is institutionalisation. In institutional conditions, such as nurseries and kindergartens, visible and measurable outcomes of preschool programmes are gaining more and more prominence. In these conditions it is important to think about play, i. e. think about how play is conceptualised and positioned. In literature, play is considered as a tool of the mind, i. e. authentic child's play or as an educational tool, i. e. an activity in the kindergarten. This paper considers dominant discourses of preschool teachers' roles in play in the institutional context of early childhood education. The paper is a result of an insight into the reality and research results of play in kindergarten, which actuated the necessity of researching the relationship between implicit theories and practice of play in institutional early childhood educational context. Following the aforementioned

reasons, this paper presents the results of a preliminary research on preschool teachers' attitudes towards play, as an attempt to gain insight into the conceptualisation of play from the perspective of preschool teachers.

Authors dealing with play differentiate between child's authentic play and play as an educational tool. In other words, although various authors consider play as intrinsically motivated, expressive, self-regulated (Babić, Irović, 2004), transformative, process-oriented (Johnson, Christie, Yawkey, 1999), free and independent (Gleave, 2009), at the same time "learning through play" is also a dominant phrase. Authors claim that playing and learning are intertwined. For example, Michnick Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, Singer (2006) and Perry (2001) claim that children learn by constructing knowledge through playing. In this discourse learning derives from the nature of play. Contrary to this, Christie (2006), Smilansky (as cited in Perry, 2001), Wilkinson (2008), and Wyse and Bradford (2008) claim that play is a teaching strategy for children. This implies the conceptualisation of play as a tool, as a means for learning placed in the context of play. The review of literature indicates that, although play is recognised as an authentic children's tool of the mind, this is only a phrase and play is more often viewed as a tool, a context for learning. In these conceptualisations the dominant perspective is that of adults, in which the child is viewed as passive and immature, as the one who needs to be guided towards the predetermined goal of becoming an adult.

Two positions of preschool teachers can be identified from the literature with regards to play as an educational tool: an active, involved position and a passive position, outside of play, next to play (Han, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999).

The involvement of preschool teachers in play is not an issue in the reviewed literature. Various authors claim that the involvement of adults in play is necessary, with corresponding roles at different levels. The argument for this involvement lies in the studies (Bodrova, Leong, 2003; Christie, Enz, as cited in Han, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999) that identified the relationship between preschool teachers' involvement and child's learning and development. For example, Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1999) name the advantages of preschool teachers' involvement in play: letting children know that play is valuable, attachment of children and adults who play with them, longer attention span, more peer interaction, longer and more elaborate play episodes. The reviewed literature indicates that authors discuss the way preschool teachers are involved in play rather than whether they should get involved in play (Babić & Irović, 2004; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Miller & Almon, 2009).

According to a preschool teacher's position, s/he chooses a role. Roles can be defined as a set of inherent ways of behaviour, experience and action that are expected of a person and which s/he realises at a certain position in the social structure (Petz, as cited in Babić, 2006). The following sections examine the roles of preschool teachers' in play as an educational tool. Two dominant discourses about the roles in which preschool teachers are involved in play can be distinguished from the literature:

guidance, i. e. regulation and support of play. Regulation of play refers to play that is initiated, guided and directed by the preschool teacher, and support of play refers to child-initiated play that is supported by the preschool teacher.

Jones (as cited in Han, 2009) defines regulated play as the one in which the preschool teacher dominates play and uses “inappropriate interventions”, such as “demanding too much”, “directing play”, “interfering too much”. Furthermore, regulated play includes preschool teachers “who do not know how to pretend” and who always play the same way with the same material (Han, 2009, p. 704). Similarly, Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (2009) define regulated play as being overly structured with less opportunities for children’s exploration, critical thinking and peer interaction. Regulated play is a play that is often interrupted in order to teach specific academic skills and knowledge. Play regulation is characterised by a redirection of children’s behaviour, such as direct suggestions, veiled orders and direct physical involvement, e.g. physical relocation (Babić & Irović, 2004). Gleave (2009) claims that play, regulated by preschool teachers, does not require the same level of skills, initiative and decision-making, and therefore does not offer the same learning experience. Similarly, Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1999) claim that regulated play results in less constructive play, more non-play time, repetitive pretend behaviour, and a negative effect on the social dimension of play. Play regulation assumes that the adult is the more competent member, but adults can also be thought of as the ones who have “forgotten” how to play.

Support of play is defined as a subtle presence of the preschool teacher, who builds on children’s interests (Miller & Almon, 2009). Perry (2001) also mentions an unobtrusive presence of the preschool teacher, while Bodrova and Leong (2003) write about the active presence of the preschool teacher who supports the planning of play. They also state that the specific role preschool teachers take depends on the age and play stage of the child, as well as the abilities of other children (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). Babić and Irović (2004) claim that the indicators of a context in which the preschool teacher supports play might be children’s competence and participation.

There are specific roles preschool teachers take when they are involved in play, identified by various authors, such as: co-player (Reynolds & Jones, as cited in Perry, 2001), stage-manager, play leader (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999), collaborator, model, mediator, responsive preschool teacher (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997), and a preschool teacher who settles disputes and verbalises what is happening (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). The roles can be considered within the discourse of regulation and/or support, depending on the conceptualisation of play by the preschool teacher who takes the role.

The passive position of the preschool teacher in relation to play is exemplified by the roles of the observer who reflects, builds theses and plans (Reynolds and Jones, as cited in Perry, 2001), preschool teacher as a provider of materials, time, space and experience (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1999), preschool teacher as a planner and monitor of children’s safety (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997), preschool teacher as the one

who encourages children and provides experiences that inspire children (Bodrova & Leong, 2006).

From the perspective of children, is it more appropriate to talk about direct and indirect involvement of preschool teachers, instead of their active and passive position? The strategies preschool teachers apply outside of play, such as organizing the setting and selecting materials, reflect on play, so even this kind of indirect involvement can be thought of within the discourse of regulation or support of play. In this sense, it is necessary to think about the intentions of preschool teachers, which depend on the preschool teacher's view of children, play, education, i. e. her/his implicit pedagogy.

If the components of a role are social norms, personality and behaviour, then reality cannot be considered without taking into consideration the environmental expectations from the role, personal conceptualisation and acceptance of the role and performing the role (Babić, 2006). In other words, in order to understand the roles preschool teachers take in play in institutional early childhood educational context, it is necessary to think about the socio-cultural context, implicit pedagogies of preschool teachers and other employees of the kindergarten, and the practice of the classroom (classroom reality). In this paper, implicit pedagogy is considered as the "pivotal value orientation, which refers to all forms of social behaviour (individual – individual, individual – group, and individual – society), including upbringing and education of children and youth" (Babić, Irović, & Krstović, 1997, p. 556). More specifically, the authors define implicit pedagogy in relation to the child, childhood and education as a system of values about the needs, possibilities and factors of child's development and goals of education and educational strategies. Similarly, Bennett, Wood and Rogers (1997) write about implicit frames through which preschool teachers perceive and process information, and base that on the assumption that the preschool teachers' cognitive and pedagogical behaviours are guided by their personal system of beliefs, values and principles. The importance of considering implicit pedagogies is visible in their relationship with process and structural characteristics of the institutional setting of early childhood education. Therefore, without insight into attitudes of preschool teachers towards play and their role in it, we cannot consider the practice of play in institutional early childhood education.

The review of recent research also indicates the dominance of the research on the roles of preschool teachers in play as an educational tool. Wilcox-Herzog and Ward (2004) investigated the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and intentions about the importance of interaction between the preschool teacher and the child. The results indicate that beliefs are the predictors of intentions. The authors emphasize the importance of researching preschool teachers' beliefs, as a first step towards the construction of quality early childhood education. Einarsdóttir (1998) investigated the roles of preschool teachers in children's role play and concluded that preschool teachers think they should guide play in the right direction and participate when they think it is necessary. Results indicate that preschool teachers have a passive and reserved role in

children's role play and that they are indecisive as to whether they should participate in play if their participation is not children-initiated (Einarsdóttir, 2005). Researching the roles of preschool teachers in outdoor play, Davis (1997) concluded that preschool teachers believe that children should be supervised, but also given freedom to engage in activities of their own choice, without interventions by the preschool teacher. They see their own role in setting the environment, observing and supervising with interventions and redirections only when children "act inappropriately" (Davis, 1997, p. 10). In other words, preschool teachers are balancing between direct and indirect involvement and between regulation and support.

Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003), studying how preschool teachers remember their childhood play and how they perceive children's play today, identify two perspectives from the obtained results: idealised and pragmatic. The idealised perspective, which is the more common one, refers to play as a reflection of the child's inherent need for expression through play, within which preschool teachers use their own childhood play as a norm for what "should be seen as natural" (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). Within the pragmatic perspective, preschool teachers believe that play today is not different from their own childhood play. They see play as an expression of culture which varies depending on the historical and cultural context. The authors have determined that there are two themes in comparing the role of their childhood play and children's play today: time for play and the role of media in play (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). Babić and Irović (2005) investigated play in preschool teachers' implicit theories and educational practices. The results obtained by surveying and observing designed play situations indicate that there is a considerable influence of preschool teachers' childhood, kindergarten, school and professional play experiences on their beliefs. The authors conclude that in educational reality, preschool teachers have a tendency to directly or indirectly regulate children's behaviour and use play as a means of direct instruction (Babić & Irović, 2005).

Other research studies into early childhood education reality (Babić & Irović, 2004; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Ginsberg, 2007; Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003; Han, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999) indicate that preschool teachers do not get sufficiently involved in play, or get involved in a way that regulates or corrects play. Possible reasons include pressure for measurable outcomes (academic readiness); organisational, programme burdens; preschool teachers' not being able to follow the logic of children's play and preschool teachers' implicit theory about play. Babić and Irović (2004) claim that the position of play in educational practice is questionable, despite its potentials and declarative recognition by preschool teachers. The authors point out preschool teachers' tendency towards formal tasks and social function of play and a discrepancy between preschool teachers' implicit theory and their practices. It can be concluded that empirical research suggests that non-involvement of preschool teachers or involvement in terms of regulation is more dominant in the reality of institutional early childhood education, which indicates the importance of researching preschool teachers' attitudes towards play.

Methods

Aims of the Research

The aim of the research was to gain insight into preschool teachers' attitudes towards their childhood play, children's play today, authentic child's play, play as an educational tool, and personal practices of play in institutional early childhood education settings.

Methodology

This preliminary research was conducted on an intentional sample of 30 preschool teachers, all of whom were female, with a similar educational experience, with at least a B.A. in preschool education, and with at least 5 years of preschool work experience. The youngest preschool teacher who participated in the research was 30 years old, and the oldest one was 61 years old (average age 49.4). Twenty-seven of them are preschool teachers, 2 have been promoted to mentor preschool teachers, and 1 is a counsellor preschool teacher. The questionnaire used in the research was an adapted version of a questionnaire used in the research conducted by Babić and Irović (2005). Given the size of the sample and the fact that this is only a preliminary research, the results are presented in frequencies, instead of percentages, in order for the results to be methodologically exact. The data that is qualitative in its nature (answers to open-ended questions and further explanations of some answers) were systematised using qualitative analysis, i. e. initial and axial coding. The rest of the paper presents preliminary results of the research concerning preschool teachers' attitudes towards play, as a part of a broader research on play from the perspective of adults and from the perspective of children.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the results indicate that preschool teachers have contradictory attitudes and practices of play. Most preschool teachers (24 of them) think that the ability to play is something one does not lose as one grows up, i. e. they see play as a generic attribute of human beings while 6 preschool teachers think that one loses the ability to play as one grows up.

Seventeen preschool teachers think that, during their own childhoods, children had more time to play than children today, while 13 preschool teachers think that the amount of time for playing today is similar to the amount of time they had for playing when they were children. The most common explanation for the difference in the amount of time children have for playing today in comparison to preschool teachers' childhood are the media, especially television and computers; parent expectations from children, for example, activities into which parents enrol their children, such as gymnastics, ballet, swimming, choirs, foreign language learning. Also, preschool teachers think that "playrooms in shopping malls" are one of the "burdens" for children today. Another way preschool teachers explained the difference in the amount of time for play were "parents' obligations and working hours". These results are consistent with the results obtained in Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003), and Babić

and Irović (2005), in terms of media and children's obligations as reasons for the decrease in the amount of time for play today. The difference in the results of the aforementioned research and this preliminary research is visible in preschool teachers' naming "playrooms in shopping malls" as one of the burdens for children today, which can be explained with the change of the organised activities offered to children, developed by adults in this specific socio-cultural context.

This similar tendency is visible in relation to preschool teachers' attitudes about imaginativeness and diversity of play in their own childhoods, and children's play today. Most preschool teachers (21 of them) think that children today play in a less imaginative and less diverse way than they used to when they were children. Eight preschool teachers think that there are no differences in play, in terms of imaginativeness and diversity between the two contexts, whereas only 1 preschool teacher thinks that children today play in a more imaginative and more diverse way, than did children in her own childhood.

Preschool teachers state that during their own childhood they mostly played the following traditional games: *žmire, gumi-gumi, pošla majka s kolodvora*. Preschool teachers emphasise the "openness" of these games and they also emphasise "being outdoors" as one of the characteristics of their childhood play. Preschool teachers state that children today mostly play computer games and play "completed", "closed" games. They also emphasise that children today spend a lot more time "inside" and "play alone", much more than they did when they were children. The idealistic perspective, identified by Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003), is visible from these results. Preschool teachers use their personal play experience as a norm for comparison with children's play today. Therefore, when they were supposed to name the games they played when they were children and games that children play today, preschool teachers used phrases that could be interpreted as value judgements, i. e. the characteristics of children's play today were the opposite of the characteristics that are considered developmentally beneficial, if play is considered an educational means.

Most preschool teachers, 17 of them, think that their view of children and their professional behaviour in play situations were mostly influenced by their own professional experience with children in the kindergarten; 6 of them think that their own play experience was the most influential; 4 preschool teachers think that their knowledge about play was the most influential, and 2 of them think that their beliefs about play were the most influential. These findings differ from the findings presented by Babić and Irović (2005). In their research most preschool teachers (22 out of 50) claimed to have been most influenced by their own play experience in their childhood. Both results indicate a perceived predominance of preschool teachers' attitudes and personal experience over their knowledge. Eighteen preschool teachers think that adult involvement in play is necessary, and most of them explain this by stating that it is important to advance play by proposing a theme for play. Some of them think it is important to get involved in order to advance play by supervising the

following of rules, and a few preschool teachers think that involvement is important in order for the adult to teach children new games or help children in case of disputes. Ten preschool teachers¹ think that children themselves know how to play best and that adult involvement ruins play. Answers to this question are contradictory to the aforementioned dominant conceptualisation of play as a generic attribute of human beings. At the same time, the consistency with the aforementioned conceptualisation of play as a generic attribute of human beings is visible in the question concerning the need to teach and regulate play: 16 preschool teachers think that children do not need to be “taught how to play”, i. e. they think that children naturally know how to play, and 10 preschool teachers² think that guidance and encouragement are necessary for the development of children’s play. Preschool teachers think that the most important developmental effect of play is its efficiency as a way children learn and expand their knowledge (23 preschool teachers³).

When stating how much time they “ensure” for play in their daily schedules, 18 preschool teachers claim that in their classrooms children play as much as they want, 3 preschool teachers claim that children play as much as they want, but add a note that it depends on planned activities and the assessment of the “quality” of play by the preschool teacher. 3 preschool teachers also “ensure” as much time as children want but note that “everything is play if we want it to be and present it that way” and because “that is the way we live through the activities”. Four preschool teachers claim that in their classrooms children play one to two hours daily, 2 preschool teachers claim that in their classrooms children play two to three hours and three to four hours respectively. These findings indicate the inconsistency of preschool teachers’ conceptualisation and positioning of play. On the one hand, play is conceptualised as authentically the child’s, and on the other, play is an educational means in which the adult guides and regulates children. Even when preschool teachers declaratively admit the importance of play, “ensuring” as much time for it in their daily schedules as children want, it is visible from the elaborations of their answers that they use play to “mask” planned activities and that the adult is the dominant one, the one who estimates the developmental potentials of play from her/his own perspective. Similar to the results obtained by Babić and Irović (2005), there are similarities in explanations of different or even contradictory attitudes towards play. Preschool teachers’ balancing between what they know and what they apply in practice is a possible explanation for this, and several other research studies confirmed this assumption (Babić & Irović, 2004; Davis, 1997; Einarsdóttir, 1998). These results show that contradictory conceptualisations of play in theory are visible in preschool teachers’ attitudes towards play.

¹ 2 preschool teachers did not answer this question.

² 4 preschool teachers did not answer this question.

³ 2 preschool teachers think that the most important developmental effect of play is the development of children’s imagination, and 5 preschool teachers think that the most important developmental effect of play is: learning to regulate emotions, development of exploratory behaviour, development of self-esteem and independence, learning to cooperate and resolve conflicts and the development of children’s creativity, respectively.

The preschool teachers who participated in the research are balancing between the active or involved and passive position in play. Half of them (15 preschool teachers) think that the best way to gain insight into play is to observe children on a daily basis, 10 preschool teachers think that the best way is to participate in play and 5 of them think that the best way to gain insight into play is to research play yourself or study the results of play research. Twelve preschool teachers claim that in play they most often take on the role of a co-player, and explain that children “love that”, and that it is a way in which they can find out things about children and their interests. Seven preschool teachers most often take on the role of observers, and claim that it enables them to gain insight into play, the purpose being creating guidelines for further work. Four preschool teachers mostly take on the role of organisers of material and spatial needs, and 2 preschool teachers⁴ mostly act as models because they believe that “children learn by imitating”. The explanations of different roles are here again inconsistent, from the explanation of their choice of the role of co-player: “Sometimes children need to be guided, rules need to be set and conflicts resolved” to the explanation of their choice of the role of observer: “While observing I gain insight about whether I should join or provide certain guidelines”. Preschool teachers claim that the reasons they chose a certain role are: because the children asked them (12 preschool teachers); to provide support, i. e. when the play is losing its direction (7 preschool teachers) and when disputes arise (4 preschool teachers) or to carry out a certain activity that “fits well into the play at hand” (5 preschool teachers⁵).

Next, preschool teachers estimated the value of the strategies they use in order to encourage play. 20 preschool teachers think that it is very valuable to ensure diverse resources for play, 10 preschool teachers think that it is very valuable to ensure enough time for play and 10 preschool teachers think that it is very valuable to structure area for play. Only 3 preschool teachers think that it is very valuable to participate in play as a co-player, despite the fact that most preschool teachers most often act as co-players in play.

Twenty-eight preschool teachers claim that they appreciate and use more often spontaneous play which is freely chosen by the child, while only 2 preschool teachers claim that they value and use more often guided play in which they offer the theme and direct children. “Letting children take the initiative” is explained by the preschool teachers in terms of developmental outcomes (creativity, imagination, independence, spontaneity, self-regulation – 16 preschool teachers) and this is a way of learning about children’s interests (6 preschool teachers⁶). Preschool teachers think that adult interventions in play are appropriate when there is no play (12 preschool teachers), when children have difficulties (8 preschool teachers), when children abandon

⁴ 5 preschool teachers claim that they take on all the offered roles, “depending on the situation”.

⁵ 2 preschool teachers gave an incomplete answer to this question.

⁶ 5 preschool teachers did not provide an explanation, or gave a vague explanation; in their explanations 3 preschool teachers again focused on “letting children choose” what to play.

play they were engaged in (5 preschool teachers), or when they transform the play that was predetermined (2 preschool teachers⁷). This places play in the function of development from the perspective of adults and children's agency and playfulness in the background.

Conclusions

The results of this research indicate that, alongside contradictory conceptualisations of play in theory, preschool teachers have contradictory attitudes towards play, and this has implications for practice, i. e. reality of early childhood education. The findings suggest that the perspective of preschool teachers is characterised by balancing between the conceptualisation of play as authentically the child's, and accentuating acquisition of specific knowledge and skills, development and use of play as an educational means, governed by adults, in which the child's agency (the ability to act independently) and playfulness are in the background. One might question whether the advocacy of play as important is only declarative, if in the institutions of early childhood education play is only an educational tool. Relevant literature (Babić & Irović, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kernan, 2007; Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2005; Stamatoglou, 2004) and preliminary results of this research call for research into play from the perspective of children as active participants in the construction of their own social lives and the society they live in.

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Stavovi predškolskih odgojiteljica o igri

Sažetak

Uvidom u suvremene teorijske i empirijske radove o igri, utvrđena su proturječna tumačenja o igri općenito, a posebno o ulogama predškolskih odgojiteljica u igri. Uloge odraslih u igri u institucionalnom predškolskom kontekstu razmatraju se u rasponu od regulacije do podrške odraslih, odnosno participacije djece. U radu se prezentiraju preliminarni rezultati istraživanja o stavovima predškolskih odgojiteljica o igri i vlastitim ulogama u njoj. Rezultati ukazuju na proturječne stavove predškolskih odgojiteljica o igri u institucionalnom kontekstu. Pretpostavlja se da rezultati ovog istraživanja mogu biti korisni teoretičarima i praktičarima koji se bave igrom.

Ključne riječi: *institucionalni rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje; podrška; regulacija; uloge predškolskih odgojiteljica.*