

Places, Toys and Activities Observed in the Course of Children's Free Play in Preschool

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Abstract

The article presents results of 38 observation sessions of 10 groups of children aged 3 to 6 years during the time dedicated to play. The aim of the research was to determine the material and emotional conditions for free play depending on the time of day. The results of the observation showed that preschool-aged children play in different places of the preschool classroom, engage mostly in construction and theme play. They use many more toys in their play in the morning and before noon than they do in the afternoon. Play activity is especially intensive in the morning in comparison to the afternoon.

Keywords: *free play, kindergarten, the Polish core curriculum, preschool education, the conditions of play*

Introduction

Play is an attribute of childhood, and at the same time it is the richest source of the child's learning process. It is the first school of "a person's being in the world; it paves the way from learning to organised action and the other way round" (Waloszek, 2006, p. 254).

The organisation of work with a small child and its supposed effects are determined in Poland by the core curriculum of preschool education (Dziennik Ustaw – Journal of Laws, 2012 item 977). It is mandatory for all state and independent preschool forms of education. The existing regulations determine that a fifth of

the child's preschool day should be spent playing (Regulation of the Minister for National Education of 27 August 2012 (item 977)).

It could be assumed that adopting such priorities is aimed at restoring play to its rightful place in preschool education, a need stressed by Polish researchers (Waloszek, 2006; Muchacka, 1992).

Research Methodology

Numerous studies by academic researchers contain information concerning the importance of play (e.g., Andrews, 2012; Broadhead, Burt, 2007; Bruce, 2011; Clemens, 2004; Moyles, 2010, 2012; Rogers, 2011; Waloszek, 1983, 2006; Whitebread, 2012;), but there are few current studies which have examined children's play by direct observation (Muchacka, 1992; Paprotna, 2001; Hännikäinen, 2004; Górecka-Mostowicz, 2005; Czaja-Chudyba, 2007; Zwiernik, 2009). They voice their objection to the existing phenomenon of marginalising play and opt for re-establishing its proper status in preschool practice.

The aim of this research was to determine the material and emotional conditions for free play of Polish preschoolers and what the course of children's play activities is depending on the time of day. The objects of interest of the study were the following:

- Which places and toys are chosen by children to play during their stay at preschool? Are there any differences in terms of play activity undertaken in the morning and in the afternoon?
- What kind of play is undertaken by children at preschool? Are they varied according to the time of day?
- What are children's social interactions like in the course of free play?
- What is the teacher's role in play?

The main research method was observation with time intervals of approximately one hour and event sampling. In total, 38 observation sessions were carried out in 2015; 238 children aged 3–6, attending 7 urban and 3 rural preschools in Lublin, Poland, participated in them. 26 sessions took place before noon (7 am–12:00), and 12 sessions – from 2 pm to 4 pm. Observation results were noted with the use of an observation sheet, which included the following categories: the places of play, toys, kinds of play, interactions, the role of the teacher.

Research Results

The observation results were formulated into a few conclusions; the data was presented in charts and provided with commentaries.

Conclusion 1. Children play in different places of the preschool room. In the morning and before noon, they are most often present on the carpet and at the tables. As their classmates arrive, play is transferred to special interest corners. In the afternoon, children mostly play on the carpet and in the house corner, while the number of places where they play drops by half.

Table 1. The places where children play according to the time of day

No.	The places of play	Play between 7 am and 12:00		Play between 12:00 and 2 pm	
		N*	% **	N	%***
1.	on the carpet	20	76.9	10	83.3
2.	at the table	17	65.4	1	8.33
3.	artistic creativity corner	6	23.1	1	8.33
4.	book corner	4	15.4	2	16.7
5.	house corner (with a kitchen)	4	15.4	5	41.7
6.	dolls and stuffed animals corner	3	11.5	3	25
7.	hairdresser corner	2	7.69		
8.	cars corner	2	7.69		
9.	musical activity corner	2	7.69		
10.	shopping corner	2	7.69		
11.	playground	2	7.69		
12.	bathroom	1	3.85		
13.	at the blackboard	1	3.85		

*N – the number of events observed

** % calculated from 26 observation sessions before noon

*** % calculated from 12 afternoon sessions

Source: author's own study

The data collected in the course of observation reveal that in the morning the children played in thirteen various areas. Until noon, the children were mostly present in two spaces: on the carpet and at the table. The morning at preschool

(from 7 am to 9 am) is the time of children coming to class, and for that reason play at that time of day is quite peaceful. It was observed that from 7 am to 7.50 am no developed form of play appeared and the children were grouped mostly at the tables, busy solving jigsaw puzzles, doing artistic work or playing educational games. Especially in the early morning, the vast majority of children, who are already in the preschool classroom, do not engage in play. Almost a quarter of the observations revealed that the children could be seen performing artistic activities in the artistic creativity corner. Till 12:00, the children barely used the dolls and stuffed animals corner, the book corner, the house corner, the kitchen corner or the musical activity corner. A detailed analysis of the observation results shows that between 9 am and 12:00 most of the children are at the tables. It results from the fact that didactic activities are carried out after breakfast. These are more or less formalised “lessons,” in the course of which the transfer of knowledge takes place. The situation changes in the afternoon. Observation (over 80% of the cases) indicates that between 12:00 and 2 pm the children were mainly on the carpet. They rested after the meal there or played peacefully. In the afternoon, the number of places and areas of play was considerably smaller. The children were less active in terms of play and therefore less mobile. While in the morning they played in 13 places in the classroom, in the afternoon the number of those places was halved (to 6). No children were observed playing in the cars corners: the musical, the hairdresser, the shop the bathroom or at the preschool blackboard. There was only one instance of play happening outside.

Conclusion 2. Children use many more toys in their play in the morning and before noon than they do in the afternoon.

Table 2. Toys used by preschool-aged children in their play before and after noon

No.	Category and types of toys	Play between 7 am and 12:00		Play between 12:00 and 2 pm	
		N*	% **	N	%***
1.	cars, motorbikes, matchbox cars, tracks, car park	20	71	4	33.3
2.	wooden and plastic blocks, Froebel blocks and Lego	17	65.4	9	75.0
3.	dolls, dollhouse, doll carriage	17	65.4	7	58.3
4.	stuffed animals, teddy bears	10	38.5	3	25.0

No.	Category and types of toys	Play between 7 am and 12:00		Play between 12:00 and 2 pm	
		N*	% **	N	%***
5.	didactic toys: pick-up sticks, board games, jigsaw puzzles	10	38.5	1	8.3
6.	kitchen utensils, plastic dishes, cutlery, cooker	7	26.9	7	16.7
7.	accessories for playing shop (e.g. till, money, shopping cart, plastic fruit and vegetables)	7	26.9	6	
8.	plastic models of animals, such as <i>Kinder Surprise</i> or <i>Little pony</i>	6		2	16.7
9.	books	5	19.2	1	8.3
10.	balls, pins	4	11.5		
11.	art accessories, crayons, paper, colouring books	3	11.5	2	16.7
12.	foam jigsaw puzzles	3	11.5	1	8.3
13.	albums with collecting cards	3	11.5		
14.	hairdressing accessories	2	7.69	1	8.3
15.	theatre accessories, puppets	2	7.69	3	25
16.	gardening accessories, e.g. watering can	1	3.85		
17.	musical instruments	1	3.85		
18.	accessories for playing doctor	1	3.85	1	8.3
19.	materials for manipulating and assembling (sticks, corks)			2	16.6
20.	explorer tools (e.g. magnifying glass)			1	8.3

* N – the number of events observed

** % calculated from 26 observation sessions before noon

*** % calculated from 12 afternoon sessions

Source: author's own study

In the observation of play taking place between 7 am and 12:00, 20 different categories of toys were used. The most popular and most often used in the morning are vehicles and accessories used to play car races or car repairs. The majority (almost 75%) of the morning observations revealed that the children used cars, motorbikes, matchbox cars, tracks, and a car park. Almost three-quarters of the observations showed that other very popular types of toys are various kinds of blocks, usually wooden blocks, including smaller ones, so-called Froebel gifts. Plastic or Lego blocks were also the subject of the children's interest. Other toys,

very popular among the girls and often used by them, are dolls, dollhouses, doll carriages, beds which are used while playing the role of parents or guardians when playing house. The three abovementioned classes of toys (cars, blocks, dolls) are especially popular before noon, while in the afternoon it was more typical of the children to use blocks (in 75% of the cases), dolls (in more than a half of instances) and cars, which came third on the list. The observation showed that the instances of children playing with cars were half as numerous in the afternoon as during the observations conducted between 7 am and 12:00.

Conclusion 3. Preschoolers have free access to various toys, educational materials and props.

Toys in Polish preschools are very varied and sufficient in number. Children tend to use ready-made toys (e.g., cars, dolls, stuffed animals, kitchen sets, blocks) as well as accessories and props intended for theme play (e.g., a market stall, theatre props, mattresses), educational toys (board games, jigsaw puzzles, musical instruments, books), visual aids and, to a lesser extent, partially ready materials intended for construction play (corks, sticks). Preschoolers also enjoy using art materials: cardboard paper, crayons, and colouring books. Children are allowed to bring their own toys from home; it is usually practiced on Fridays. In exceptional cases (two such instances were observed during 38 one-hour sessions) some toys are not available for children. In such groups children have to ask the teacher for permission to use the selected toy or necessary materials. In one case it was noted that there were Froebel blocks in the classroom, but the children did not use them. The reason for that was probably that those toys were hidden out of the children's sight and reach, closed in boxes stacked on top of each other.

Conclusion 4. During the time intended for free play, preschool-aged children engage mostly in construction and theme play. This activity is especially intensive in the morning in comparison to the afternoon in the preschool.

The observation shows that the preschool-aged children engage in the following types of play, according to their frequency: free construction play, theme play, perceptive and manipulative as well as physical play. The most favourite kinds of play in which the children readily engaged irrespective of the time of day were constructing and playing house and family.

Table 3. Types and contents of free play in which preschoolers engage before and after noon

Types of play	Topic	Play between 7 am and 12:00		Play between 12:00 and 2 pm	
		N*	% **	N	%***
theme	home, family in the kitchen	15	57.7	7	58.3
	playing with vehicles (cars, motorcycles, matchbox cars), race tracks	11	42.3	2	16.7
	playing with dolls, doll carriages, stuffed animals, mascots	8	30.8	1	8.3
	shop	4	15.4	1	8.3
	animals, farm	2	7.7	1	8.3
	policemen and thieves, soldiers, knights	2	7.7	1	8.3
	hairdresser's	2	7.7	1	8.3
	other themes, e.g. princesses	2	7.7		
	doctor, vet	1	3.8	2	16.7
	school	1	3.8		
	bank	1	3.8		
	theatre	1	3.8	1	8.3
	"a park with aliens"	1	3.8		
construction	building	20	76.9	8	66.6
physical	playing with a ball	3	11.5		
	playing with cars, excavator	2	7.7		
	crawling on all fours	1	3.8		
	bowling	1	3.8		
perceptive and manipulative	jigsaw puzzle	9	26.9	1	8.3
	browsing or reading books and magazines	7	34.6	2	16.7
	board games	3	11.5	3	25
	playing musical instruments	1	3.8		
	pick-up sticks	2	7.7		

* N – the number of events observed

** % calculated from 26 observation sessions before noon

*** % calculated from 12 afternoon sessions

Source: author's own study

It was observed that before noon the children most often engaged in construction play. They used wooden blocks to build towers, castles, palaces, houses, garages; less frequently Lego and plastic blocks and paper. The second most frequent kind of play was the thematic play of home and family (75% of the observations before noon). For this purpose, the children used dolls, carriages and mascots. In the morning, the children also often (in 1/3 of all the observations) solved jigsaw puzzles, browsed through books and magazines, and played board games. Those activities were of educational character. It is difficult to determine whether they were internally motivated, suggested or imposed on. It was also found that the children were interested in other kinds of theme play, which appeared, however, much less frequently than playing house, but were quite varied – ten different types were observed. The children also enjoyed playing shop, and the most original idea was playing “a park with aliens.” During 26 morning observation sessions, it was noticed that on three occasions the children engaged in complex play which integrated a theme, physical and construction aspect, also with the use of Froebel blocks.

The afternoon observations showed that the studied children played house and family as frequently and constructed as readily as in the morning. However, the instances of such play were significantly fewer in the afternoon, they were less varied and, worryingly, there was not any more complex or typical physical play after lunch, though some elements of physical activity were visible in other kinds of the children’s play. The number of instances of theme play dropped from 13 to 9, and there were much fewer perceptive activities, such as looking at or browsing through books.

Before noon, many children engaged in artistic activities. Half of the morning observations showed the children modelling in plasticine, drawing, painting, singing together, doing do-it-yourself activities, and making mosaics; it was similar in the afternoon. As far as other activities are concerned, it was observed that in the morning the children also engaged in intellectual activities, i.e. talking to other children or the teacher, working with an auxiliary textbook, teaching one another (e.g., new words), playing riddles, and using the computer. In the afternoon only one such activity was noticed in the course of 12 observation sessions.

Conclusion 5. Children assign themselves playing roles on their own. The roles belonging to the first choice categories, as the most liked and often assumed by children are the figures of family members and people from the family circle, as well as professions, especially those connected with wearing a characteristic outfit or uniform, and animals.

The observation showed that children assigned themselves playing roles on their own. When playing house, they assumed the roles of family members: mom/dad, children, neighbours, family friends, colleagues and classmates. Apart from the roles related to playing house, the roles which are liked by children and were frequently observed are those connected with professions, e.g. the figure of a policeman, detective, soldier, Spiderman, pilot or carpenter. Such roles can be described as "uniform-related;" they involve using toys – vehicles or accessories connected with a given profession. The third group of most popular roles are animals. Most frequently, the children assume the role of a dog, cat, horse, monkey or bear. The abovementioned roles are those which the children assumed most frequently.

Less frequently, but still noticeably, the children assume the roles of second preference. These are characters from fairy stories (princess, knight, witch, fairy); the roles related to playing shop or restaurant (customer, shop assistant, shopkeeper, supplier, cleaning lady, waiter, cook, housekeeper) and school (teacher, headmaster, pupil). The third most frequent roles were those of a doctor, builder; the roles connected with playing bank and others less known professions, such as a footballer, actor, painter. In very few cases (two sessions) an exchange of roles was observed.

It was observed that before noon the children gathered in playing groups consisting of two to ten children; on average, there are more than three playing groups of three-four children in a single preschool class. The biggest number of groups formed in a single class was ten, the smallest – one. In the afternoon, the number of groups decreases. It was noticed that in the morning there were a few children (from one to six in a class, usually one or two) who clearly played alone, did something on their own or waited passively; in the afternoon, there were twice as many such children.

Conclusion 6. During children's free play, a large proportion of teachers (as indicated by 50% of the observations) are busy with organisational activities and with completing documentation. It is only rarely (as it was noticed in 30% of the cases) that they conduct purposeful and planned observation during that time, but every second teacher maintains friendly control expressed through communicating their appreciation and approval to the children.

The research showed that half of the observed teachers never joined the children's free play. In 50% of the observation sessions, the teachers were busy with such activities as filling in documents (e.g., completing the missing information

in the class register); preparing didactic classes, individual work with the children, talking to other preschool employees; sending text messages.

The teacher tries to control the children's behaviour during their free play, but at the same time fills in current documentation. It seems they should do that in the teachers' room, certainly not when they are supposed to be taking care of the children. Observing children as they play is not commonly practised in preschools; only half of the studied teachers tend to do so, only a quarter were clearly interested in all groups of the children participating in play, but did not join in. As far as the positive strategies of teacher behaviour are concerned, it was observed that 50% of all the studied persons expressed their approval, praised the way the children played or encouraged them: *You played very nicely; Interesting, creative, ingenious; etc.* It was even observed that one teacher took pictures of the children's creations and assured the preschoolers the photos would be published on the website.

The teachers also attempt to involve the children who do not participate in playing (a quarter of the persons observed). In practice, it is realised in various manners, however; for instance, through neutral encouragement, e.g. *Invite other children to play with you* and asking the passive children *Why aren't you playing with the others?*, but also in a more dictatorial way, e.g. by taking a boy by the hand, leading him to a play group and saying *Come on, play together*. Other communication strategies which are beneficial for play development, but are rarely used by teachers, are: signalling the beginning and the end of the time allotted for playing (10% of the cases), reminding the children about the rules they are to obey and agreements concerning their behaviour during play, e.g. *We do not take toys from one another, everybody has the right to play*, as well as expressing willingness to help in resolving conflicts. It was observed that sometimes (18% of the cases) the teachers suggested a change in the type of play, reconciled quarrelling children, reprimanded them or suggested a change of place if it was inappropriate for safety reasons. It was rare (15% of the instances) that the teacher's interference with the content of play was noticed, as well as a suggestion concerning its course, contents or the children's behaviour. Sporadically (in 8% of the cases), the teachers joined in the children playing without being invited by assuming a role. Conflicts are resolved in various manners; it was noticed that four of the 38 observed teachers "reconciled" quarrelling children by explaining to them their bad behaviour from their own perspective and reminding them about the rules they were to obey during play. They did so unthinkingly, with a mentoring attitude, without listening to the opinions of both sides. In 10% of the cases of providing help in resolving conflicts, the communication strategy of active dialogue was used – there were

questions about the essence of the conflict, the teacher listened to both sides and helped the children to arrive at a constructive solution.

The observations lead to a conclusion that teachers are more communicatively active during free play than the children themselves. Half of the observed teachers watched the children closely and expressed their approval, praise, encouragement. Sometimes (13%) the teachers gave advice or suggested new ideas. Only in two cases (out of 38) the teachers forbade something or made negative comments relating to the children, e.g. *Be quiet, Get off from there*. It was not observed that the teachers reacted with shouting, urged or punished the children. Almost a quarter of the observations showed the children asking the teacher for permission to perform a certain activity, e.g. usually to go to the toilet, take a new sheet of paper, throw a ball or play with it, reach for an object from a shelf, or play musical instruments. In 13% of the observations the children were noticed to often turn to the teacher for advice or help, e.g. in explaining the rules of a game, passing a toy or repairing it.

Discussion

It was noticed that Polish preschool classrooms are well-equipped with toys and play accessories. There are numerous theme play and creativity corners. Children have unlimited access to toys and didactic materials. It is observed that teachers ensure time and conditions for children's free play, but didactic activities continue to be regarded as the central point of the preschool day and teachers tend to focus on them. Strong pressure to prepare the children for school well and "paper teaching" block the propagation of free play, to which more time should be devoted, especially in the afternoon and in the whole preschool area, including the outdoors. The observation leads to a conclusion that in their organisation of work teachers follow the goal of preschool education– preparing children well for their primary school education. It is visible in the thorough monitoring of children doing their overdue homework from the classes they missed, especially noticeable in children's morning activity.

It seems necessary to sensitise teachers to the need for conducting pedagogical observations of children playing, departing from filling in the preschool documents and following children's developmental changes instead, providing preschoolers with a sense of security through friendly presence, helping them, refraining from making the children aware of the ways the world functions and encouraging them to make independent decisions, study and explore on their own.

It is apparent that a new approach to play is developing, expressed through the behaviour of teachers, very few of whom direct play, interfere with it, explain the rules of games to the children or resolve conflicts for them. However, this change is slow in coming and is hindered by the fact that it is required that teachers maintain detailed documentation and ensure that the realisation of the core curriculum is being recorded. Another hindrance is the fact the basic document specifying the work of preschools does not stress the importance of play clearly enough.

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