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Evaluation of play from private and public pre-school children's point of view

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Abstract

Play is an activity that has different formats during childhood and adulthood. Therefore, it is investigated in different ways by those who are responsible for transforming children into individuals ready for the society, such as researchers, teacher or families. Finding out a child's perception of play as someone who actively engages in it would provide important source of data for families, teachers and researchers. The purpose of this study is to evaluate pre-school children's views on play. The sample consists of 40 pre-school children between the ages of 5-6 attending a preschool educational institution. Structured interviews were conducted to obtain children's views on play. The most significant finding from the qualitative analysis of children's statements was that lack of play was perceived as a negative emotional state by children. In addition, it is worth noting that children stated to play more at school than at home.

Keywords: point of view, preschool, children, play

1. Introduction

Being an ever-present activity since the beginning of humanity, play starts with birth and evolves throughout life; it always keeps its significance as the most satisfying source of different interests and needs.

Play is an enriched, natural, and sometimes structured learning environment as well as the most valuable developmental opportunity and a natural part of childhood (Spodek&Saracho, 2003). Children try to make sense of the world through play (Saracho, 2003), render the moment efficient, make the foundations of future knowledge, skills and habits, and express their feelings (anger, happiness, sadness, etc.) through their natural language of communication, which is play (Landreth, Homeyer&Morrison, 2006). Play improves, teaches and guarantees healthy growth.

There seems to be consensus in the literature on the role of play in child education among philosophers such as Froebel, Montessori, Dewey and Piaget who contributed to the theoretical foundations of preschool education (Morrison, 2007). Play has been included in preschool curricula ever since Froebel. Montessori also integrated play with early childhood curriculum (Saracho&Spodek, 1998). There are many studies on the definition and qualities of early childhood play. A common point of these is that play is fun and enjoyable. At the same time, there has been a debate whether play is children's work or whether children also perceive play and work as separate (Bergen, 2003).

Even though many efforts have been made by experts to define play, studies on how children perceive play have been rather rare. A review of the literature shows that many studies in which play was evaluated by preschool children asked these children to categorize situations captured in photos as ‘play’ or ‘non-play’ (Howard, Jenvey&Hill, 2006). These studies showed that children perceived photos that had their peers but not a teacher as play (Howard, Jenvey&Hill, 2006), and distinguished between play and non-play and between learning/work/activity and play (Wong, Wang&Cheng, 2011; Howard, 2002; Ceglowski, 1997; Yan, Yuejuan&Hongfen, 2005). A previous study conducted in Iceland also showed that even playschool goes distinguished between play and non-play. The criteria that children used revealed that they referred to fun activities they engaged in and directed as play, and those that the teacher engaged in as activity, learning or work (Einarsdottir, 2005).

There are many factors that affect the focus of children’s play, its content, process and roles (Oden, 2006). The qualities of the physical environment constitute one such factor (Hughes, 2003). Children play at home, school or play areas. Playing in these environments offers children various opportunities such as meeting other children, establishing friendships, forming friend groups, and making playmates (Oden, 2006). The public and private preschools in Turkey differ from each other with respect to their play materials, school personnel and activities. These factors are thought to affect children’s play perceptions and behaviors. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether the views of preschool children about play vary with respect to the type of school (public or private).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 40 children aged between 60-72 months who were attending public and private preschools located in the Asian side of Istanbul, Turkey. Twenty of these children were attending public preschools and 20 were attending private ones.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

As the study aimed to reveal the play-related thoughts of 60-72 month-old children and they could not read or write, interviews were chosen as the data collection method. Interviewing is the best technique to collect data on other people’s views and perceptions, and reveal the variation and differences in points of view (Patton, 2002). In the study, the structured interview technique was used with 5 questions. That means all interviewees were asked the same questions so as to enable comparisons among the responses.

2.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The interview data were analyzed by using the qualitative data analysis strategy of inductive descriptive analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994; Patton, 2002). Children’s responses were grouped.

3. Findings

In the interviews, children were firstly asked **“what does play mean to you, how would you describe play to me?”**. When the responses were grouped, it was found that almost half of both public and private preschoolers (public n=12, private n=10) defined play as ‘having fun-having fun with friends’. Other responses may be grouped as ‘being happy’, ‘what I do with my friends-playing with friends-friendship’, ‘playing-playing with toys’, ‘not having fights’.

Sample responses to this question included:

(C 1 - G): “It means being happy, everyone loves it”

(C 2 - B): “Children play, that is called play”

(C 3 - G): “It means spending time with toys”

(C 4 - B): “It is to play, it is done with friends”

(C 5 - G): “It’s an exciting, fun thing”

Even though their response could be guessed, the children were asked **“do you like to play?”**, and all children responded affirmatively. On follow-up, children were then asked **“why do you like to play?”**. When the responses were grouped, approximately half of both public and private preschoolers (public n=12, private n=11) responded as ‘because it is fun’. Other responses may be grouped as follows: ‘because it is beautiful’, ‘it makes me happy’,

‘because I’m with friends-because we are together’, ‘there is no reason, I just love it’, ‘because I win them’, ‘because it involves toys’.

Sample responses were as follows:

- (C 1 - G): “Because my friends play very well with me”
- (C 2 - B): “Because I get bored when I don’t play”
- (C 3 - G): “Because I have fun, it’s enjoyable to play with toys”
- (C 4 - B): “Because we are together”
- (C 5 - G): “Because I’m very happy when I play”

The fourth question in the interviews was **“what would happen if you never played games?”** The responses were grouped and it was found that approximately half of both public and private preschoolers (public n=12, private n=11) responded as ‘I’d get bored’. Other responses may be grouped as ‘I’d be sad’, ‘I’d be angry’, ‘my friends would go away-I wouldn’t have any friends’ and ‘we couldn’t do anything’.

Sample responses to this question:

- (C 1 - G): “I’d be angry, I’d watch TV”
- (C 2 - B): “My friends wouldn’t invite me to play, they’d move away from me”
- (C 3 - G): “I’d be sad, I wouldn’t be happy”
- (C 4 - B): “I’d be sad, I’d be unhappy and I wouldn’t have any fun”
- (C 5 - G): “We’d get very bored”

The fifth question was **“do you do other things than play at school?”**. The responses were grouped and it was found that almost all public and private preschoolers (public n=18, private n=20) responded as ‘we do activities’ or named the names of these activities (we watch cartoons, we do classes, we tidy up the classroom, we dance, we sing, we eat).

Sample responses by children to this question included:

- (C 1 - G): “We watch cartoons, we dance altogether, we sing”
- (C 2 - B): “We draw, we learn how to cut things using scissors”
- (C 3 - G): “We tidy up the classroom, we draw”
- (C 4 - B): “We dance, we make magazines”
- (C 5 - G): “Our teacher tells us stories and we sing”

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to ask children how they define play, which is generally defined from the perspective of adults, and what they think about it. To this end, 40 children attending public and private preschools were asked five questions in a structured interview, and their responses were grouped.

The first question in the interview asked “what does play mean to you, how would you describe play to me?” an analysis of the responses showed that approximately half of both public and private preschoolers said ‘having fun-having fun with my friends’. Other responses were grouped as ‘being happy’, ‘what I do with my friends-playing with friends-friendship’. The second question in the interview was “why do you like to play?” Approximately half of both public and private preschoolers responded as ‘because it is fun’; and other responses were grouped as ‘because it is beautiful’, ‘it makes me happy’, ‘because I’m with friends-because we are together’.

Responses to the two questions showed that the majority of the children saw play as ‘fun’. Most of the definitions and qualities of play stated by experts emphasize that play is ‘enjoyable’ for children. The responses of the children in this study are thus in accordance with those cited in the literature. A study on child views of play therapy asked children their feelings at the end of therapy. One child responded: ‘I’m happy because I had a good time; I’m sad because I don’t want good times to end’. When the therapist inquired about the meaning of play, most children stated that they only see play as ‘fun’ (Carrol, 2001). The second response group that emerged in both questions was ‘having fun with my friends-something I do with friends-because I’m with my friends’. This emphasizes the social side of child play, reveals that 60-72 month old children enjoy playing with friends and that they value them.

Almost half of the children in both public and private preschools responded to the question “what would happen if you never played games?” as ‘I’d get bored’ and ‘I’d be sad’. This may suggest that not playing evokes negative feelings in children. The response ‘my friends would go away-I wouldn’t have any friends’ given by a few children may also be taken as another indicator of the value attached to friends.

The responses to the question “do you do other things than play at school?” show that approximately all public and private preschool goers distinguished between certain school activities and play. Two of the children attending public preschools responded by saying ‘no, we don’t’ and one by saying ‘we eat’. Although this may suggest that these children accept all school activities as play, the findings revealed that preschool children separate between play and non-play.

Chapparo and Hooper (2002) aimed to establish six-year-old children’s categorization of listening and self-care activities as work and play. They found that two children responded as “everything at school is work” while one stated “no, we play here and play is not work”. Similarly, one child categorized computer activities by saying “if you’re playing games it’s play, if you’re typing it’s work”. It was found that children considered the physical environment when classifying school activities as work or play. For instance, while they defined classroom singing activity as work, they defined singing in the playground as play.

In another study conducted in Istanbul, 307 teachers working at preschools and 48 children aged 5-6 in these preschools were asked the same question. Neither teachers nor children were found to accept certain school activities (such as project work, handcrafts, nature work, art, singing, or storytelling) as play (Ramazan, Zembat and Unutkan, 2006).

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