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‘Απόψεις και πρακτικές νηπιαγωγών όσον αφορά το ελεύθερο παιχνίδι σε εξωτερικούς χώρους και την ανάπτυξη των κοινωνικών δεξιοτήτων μέσω αυτού’

‘Nursery teachers’ perceptions and practices regarding the role of free outdoor play and the development of children’s social skills through it’

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Περίληψη

Το παιχνίδι και η ανάπτυξη των παιδιών είναι δύο βασικά θέματα τα οποία απασχολούν εκπαιδευτικούς που εργάζονται με παιδιά νηπιακής ηλικίας. Το ελεύθερο παιχνίδι στην ύπαιθρο αποτελεί ένα σημαντικό μέσο ανάπτυξης των κοινωνικών δεξιοτήτων των παιδιών. Σκοπός της έρευνας ήταν η διερεύνηση των απόψεων και των πρακτικών των εκπαιδευτικών ως προς τον ρόλο του ελεύθερου εξωτερικού παιχνιδιού στην ανάπτυξη των κοινωνικών δεξιοτήτων των παιδιών ηλικίας 4-6 ετών. Στην παρούσα έρευνα συμμετείχαν 7 εκπαιδευτικοί, πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης της Αττικής και της Μυτιλήνης. Η μέθοδος συλλογής δεδομένων ήταν η συνέντευξη και συγκεκριμένα ερωτήθηκαν 10 ερωτήσεις ανοιχτού τύπου. Η ανάλυση των δεδομένων έγινε με ποιοτικό τρόπο, μέσω θεματικής ανάλυσης. Τα αποτελέσματα έδειξαν ότι οι νηπιαγωγοί γνωρίζουν ότι το ελεύθερο παιχνίδι στην ύπαιθρο έχει θετικές επιδράσεις στην ολόπλευρη ανάπτυξη των παιδιών και συγκεκριμένα στην κοινωνική τους ανάπτυξη. Συγκεκριμένα, μέσω του ελεύθερου και υπαίθριου παιχνιδιού τα παιδιά αναπτύσσουν κοινωνικές ικανότητες όπως η συνεργασία, η ομαδικότητα, η ομαδοποίηση, η αλληλοβοήθεια, η ικανότητα ανταλλαγής και διαπραγμάτευσης, η υπομονή, η συμμόρφωση, η ικανότητα διαχείρισης της απόρριψης και της επικοινωνίας. Επιπλέον η έρευνα επικεντρώθηκε και πάνω στις δυσκολίες που αντιμετωπίζουν οι νηπιαγωγοί, σχετικά με το υπαίθριο παιχνίδι. Επισημαίνεται η ανάγκη για περαιτέρω επιμόρφωση των εκπαιδευτικών ως προς τις μεθόδους και τις πρακτικές που μπορούν να υιοθετήσουν σε σχέση με το παιχνίδι σε υπαίθριους χώρους με σκοπό την ανάπτυξη των κοινωνικών δεξιοτήτων των παιδιών, όπως επίσης και η σωστή διαρρύθμιση κατάλληλων εξωτερικών χώρων.

Λέξεις-Κλειδιά: Ελεύθερο παιχνίδι, υπαίθριο παιχνίδι, κοινωνική ανάπτυξη, νηπιαγωγείο.

Abstract

Play and children's development are the two basic themes central to the early years' educator's world. It is generally agreed that free outdoor play is important for children, for their wellbeing, as well as the development of their social skills. The aim of this study is to explore Greek nursery teachers' perceptions and practices about the role of free outdoor play for the development of children's social skills ages between 4 to 6 years old. In this qualitative research 7 early years teachers from Attica and Mytilene were interviewed. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results suggest that educators are informed about the positive effects of free outdoor play in children's holistic development and more specifically, in children's social development. The social skills that children develop through free outdoor play, as recognised by educators, are collaboration, teamwork, clustering, mutual assistance, exchange and the ability to negotiate, patience, compliance, management of rejection and communication. This study also focused on the barriers that educators face in order to provide opportunities for free outdoor play, including lack of space and education on the topic. There is a need for educators' further professional development on methods and techniques that educators can use in children's free outdoor play in order to promote children's social skills. Finally the need for suitable outdoor spaces is highlighted.

Keywords: Free play, outdoor play, social development, preschool.

Introduction

Many writers have attempted to define play. According to Garvey (1990, p. 27) play is the activity which can be characterised as 'a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment'. It is voluntary, enjoyable, active and no directed (NCCA, n.d.; Meckley, 2002; Andrews, 2012). Some writers consider that extrinsically motivated play is not play, as children are not in control of when and how it happens. More specifically, Wood (2010) stated that truly free play is open-ended and unpredictable and it is controlled and directed by the players. Santrock (1996) stated that play is pleasurable activity that is engaged in for its own sake. On the other hand, Dworetzky (1993) said that play has never been defined precisely because it is used to describe such diverse behaviors.

From 1950 in British school outdoor spaces which were black-topped empty spaces children had a lot of time to play, without educator's supervision (Moyles, 2009). Maudsley and Smith (2005) stated that nowadays outdoor play is relatively uncommon. In the U.K., the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework emphasizes the need for children to play outdoors and free outdoor play should be part of the daily routine (DfES, 2006). OfSTED (2006) said that all children should experience the advantages of outdoor education. Andrews (2012) mentioned that there is a range of outdoor occasions for play for early year's age children. Shackell and their colleagues (2008) recommended some key pointers for successful outdoor places. More

specifically, they said that outdoors are the better places for social interactions and allow children to handle natural and fabricated materials through stimulating the five senses. However, Learning Through Landscapes (2005) found that outdoor spaces are used to only 30% of their potential. More specifically, Malaguzzi (1996) claims that nursery educators often fail to estimate environment's role as the third teacher.

Many studies have been conducted in order to state the effects of free outdoor play in children's development (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000; Ginsburg & Kingery, 2007; Youell, 2008). The importance of outdoor play for child's holistic development and child's educational experience is indisputable (Johnson et al., 2005). First of all, it offers opportunities for physical activity and promotes a sense of well-being. Children develop motor skills, movement and freedom (Bartlett, 1999; Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000; Youell, 2008). Secondly, play connects children with the natural world and gives them unique and important experiences, such as immediate contact with the seasons and the weather (Thigpen, 2007). Moreover, learning and playing outside the classroom promotes awareness of the environment and helps them to realize and respect the interdependence of people, plants and animals (CLOC, 2009). Furthermore, outdoor play promotes and develops children's imagination, creativity, inventiveness, resourcefulness and perception by solving problems (Sylva, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Frost, 1997; CLOC, 2009).

Play outside the classroom also offers places to explore, discover, experiment, be active and healthy, and develops physical capabilities. In addition, outdoor environmental play is helpful and important for those students who learn best through active movement (CLOC, 2009). Children in their early years learn through physical experiences and through their senses (Frost et al., 2001). Also, play in the natural environment for many children in nursery may give favorable circumstances to play freely and safety while they learn to evaluate risk and support developmentally the skills to accomplish new circumstances (EHSNRC, 2013). The Department for Education (2012) states that through play, children build their confidence, as they learn to explore.

Many researchers suggest that play promotes children's social and emotional development and more specifically it develops children's social and emotional relationships (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2000; Essa, 2010; Gordon & Browne, 2010). As children grow older, they progress from solitary play to more cooperative play. Andrews (2012) stated that children develop social skills through social play, in which children play and interact with others. During outdoor play, children learn to solve problems and develop social skills when they related to others (DfE, 2012). Lynch and Simpson (2010) mentioned that every child needs to learn suitable social skills. They defined social skills as 'behaviors that promote positive interaction with others and the environment' (Lynch & Simpson, 2010, p. 3). Some of these skills involve showing empathy, helpfulness, generosity, participation in group activities, solve problems, communicating with others and negotiating. Play develops children's communication and socialization and makes them more interactive (Garvey, 1990). Many studies found that outdoor play promotes social and emotional relationships, imagination and creativity (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2000; Essa, 2010; Gordon & Browne, 2010). According to Andrews (2012) complex social relationships can be worked out through playful activity.

Children learn and improve their social skills through play (Barbakoff & Yo, 2002). Play gives opportunities for social interactions and skill development. Children have the chance to apply social skills that have been learned through free play (Lynch & Simpson, 2010). The UK Department for Children, Schools and Families also emphasises that babies and young children learn, grow and have fun through play. It develops them socially and emotionally and helps them to understand the world (DCSF, 2008b). Moreover, through play children learn how to make friends (Andrews, 2012). A combination between outdoor and indoor learning and playing makes the most effective use of resources and builds on enthusiasms and interests. Every educator who teaches students outside the classroom realises the sense of wonder and enjoyment which children feel (CLOC, 2009). Finally, it is important to note that children learn by both leading their own play and by taking part in play which is guided by educators (DfE, 2012). It is important to have a balance of both these activities in every day routines.

The educator's role during play is to observe children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles in order to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations (DfE, 2012). Teachers should then use these observations and assessments to identify learning priorities and plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each child. Finally, educators should match their observations to the expectations of the early learning goals (DCSF, 2008a).

Beyond educators' role in observation, they sometimes should intervene in children's play. The importance of educator's involvement in toddlers' and young children's outdoor play is indisputable (Johnson et al., 2005). First of all, the adult should provide a safe base for toddlers to play and investigate outdoors. Secondly, the educator provides opportunities for toddlers to endure, manipulate and transport materials. Thirdly, the teacher can make changes to the environment and the changes are different according to the child's age (this contains supplies and materials at different levels such as steps, curves, etc.). Moreover, the adult can recommend that toddlers investigate the variety of types of play. Furthermore, he/she promotes working in pairs and cooperates with each other and can be actively involved in playful, adventurous interactions with toddlers, for example active, physical play with them on the floor (NCCA, n.d.; Pica, 2011).

On the other hand, the role of the educator is a little bit different when it comes to young children. When it comes to young children (age2-5), the adult offers a safe base and stimulate active investigation outdoors. The teacher also gives chances for young children to participate in a variety of play activities. Another role for the adult in outdoor play can be to provide materials and elements to create dens and hidey holes. Furthermore, the adults can support children in joining in to play, creating new play scenarios and 'translate' children's emotions, therefore promoting emotional literacy. Finally, by communicating and playing with children, the adult exercises good judgment so that adult involvement does not threaten child autonomy or harm the 'flow' of the play (NCCA, n.d.; Pica, 2011).

It is worth mentioning that there are some methods and techniques which educators use in order to promote children's social development and to develop children's social skills. Some of these methods involve setting up the environment to improve social interaction, providing play opportunities and advocate social functioning and teaching social skills. Educators use various techniques in order to

teach social skills to children, containing direct guiding and learning from the other children and prevention of problem behaviors (Lynch & Simpson, 2010). Children learn social behaviors and skills from both the educators and children in the environment (Ladd, 2005). For this reason, educators should be a 'good model' for children in order to enhance children's social development.

Many nursery educators are more able to use approaches that include setting up environments to advocate social growth and intervene whenever it is important. Other educators adopt a more direct instructional approach in order to teach children's social skills. The first group of preschool teachers arranges the environment to promote positive social skills. They structure the environment in order to lead children to social communication and interaction (McEvoy, 1990). They also put limits in the learning environment. More specifically, they create a large learning environment in order for the children to play together, but small enough so the children can have social interaction (Lynch & Simpson, 2010). Moreover, they organize outdoor activities that promote social skills such as helpfulness, cooperation and generosity (Honig & Wittmer, 1996). Finally, they always have available the toys that promote cooperative play in the classroom in order to facilitate social skill development.

The second group of preschool teachers uses direct instruction teaching children particular social skills and behaviors such as sharing, asking for a toy and or taking turns. Educators often use direct instruction during the circle time (Lynch & Simpson, 2010). They often use this kind of method when they refer to children with problem behaviors. Many researchers have found that social skills instruction which based on children's needs with social difficulties such as aggression is more effectively method than others because improve child's social relationships (Mize & Ladd, 1990; Ladd, 2005).

Based on the literature outlined above, this investigation aimed to explore the following areas:

1. the beliefs that educators hold regarding free outdoor play
2. the social skills that educators believe are promoted by free outdoor play
3. the methods and techniques that educators use to promote social skills through play and
4. the barriers and difficulties faced by educators with regards to free outdoor play as a daily routine.

Method

Participants and procedure

The participants were 7 nursery teachers who work in private and public nurseries with children between 4 to 6 years old. The research was conducted in Athens and Mytilene between January and March of 2017.

Instrument

For this qualitative piece of research personal and semi-structured interviews were conducted. They consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The interview lasted about 15-20 minutes and the researcher recorded the discussion by using a digital voice

recorder. Participants were asked to answer all the questions according to their own personal beliefs, since there was no right or wrong answer.

Data analysis

The researcher, after collecting the data, used thematic analysis, following the 6 phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mantzoukas, 2007). Initially, the data were transcribed, re-read and initial ideas were noted. Following that interesting features were coded and the data relevant to each code were collated. In the third phase, the researcher collated codes into potential themes and gathered all data relevant to each potential theme. The review of themes included checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts and to the entire dataset, reviewing data to search for additional themes and generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. In the phase of defining and naming themes, the researcher made on-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells and generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the researcher selected vivid compelling extract samples, made final analysis of selected extracts and related the analysis back to the research question, objectives and literature reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The following themes were identified: Practitioners' perception with regards to free outdoor play, the importance of free outdoor play and social development, the practitioner's role, common practices and barriers to using outdoor play.

All participants agree that free outdoor play is play that takes part in an outdoor environment and the majority of them claim that is play where educators do not intervene. All participants agree that free outdoor play is important and necessary for children's development. Six participants believe that it promotes children's social development. All participants agree that children develop social skills through free outdoor play and the majority of them compare outdoor with indoor and conclude that outdoor is a better environment for the development of social skills. More participants stated that the role of the educator in free outdoor play is to supervise, observe, reinforce, encourage, organize the environment and intervene. From the analysis of fourth theme the majority of participants' agree that children learn social skills through free outdoor play in contrast to one participant who disagrees. Two participants encourage and reinforce children to play in groups. Finally, another interviewer states that it is free; so does not do anything. For the final theme six participants state that they face difficulties, while one claims that she does not see any barriers to outdoor play.

Analysis and discussion

Practitioners' perceptions

All participants' agree that free outdoor play is a play that takes part in an outdoor environment. Five participants claim that free outdoor play is a play that educator do not intervene in children's play because it is free. Participant 6 stated that "*Is a play on which you do not give instructions*". Another participant characterized it as "not directed". Participant 1 claims that "*Is a play that it not directed by educators*". This

is supported by Wood (2010) who noted that truly free play is open-ended and unpredictable and it is controlled and directed by the players. However, one participant added that educator does not intervene in children's play but without implying that its presence is not necessary. Participant 7 mentioned that "*The part of freedom has to do with the fact that it is preferable to include non-organized activities from the educator without implying that its presence is not necessary*".

The importance of free outdoor play and social development

All participants agree that free outdoor play promotes children's social development. Five participants claim that it develops children's cooperation and teamwork as a social skill. Participant 1 said that "*The skills that children develop are: cooperation, teamwork, self-esteem, patience, compliancy, the ability to retreat, the ability to handle a loss and rejection*". Two participants agree that children should be grouped together through play. Participant 2 stated that "*They learn to operate in a group, assume roles and collaborate*".

The same number of participants' stated that children develop their ability of exchange and sharing. Participant 5 said "*Teamwork, cooperation, ability of exchange and sharing and getting acquired with other children*". Finally, two participants claim that children develop communication through play. Participant 7 stated that "*The two more important social skills that children develop through free outdoor play are communication and cooperation*". This is supported by Lynch and Simpson (2010) who noted that play develops children's social skills such as communicating with others and negotiating and solving problems.

It is important to mention that four participants compare outdoor and indoor environment and conclude that outdoor gives more possibilities for children's interaction and as a result, is a best environment for the development of social skills. Three of them agree that in free outdoor play children come into contact with other children from other classrooms. Participant 3 said that "*Older children help younger and younger imitate either the good or the bad behaviors of the older ones*". Finally, two participants agree that children develop cooperation and teamwork skills through free outdoor play because they feel more comfortable and freely in outdoors than indoors.

The practitioner's role

Five participants claim that educator's role is to supervise, observe and intervene in order to ensure children's safety. Participant 1 said that "*I believe that the role of the teacher is to make specific that there are not creating frictions and problems between children. Educator's role is to supervise and not to intervene. On the other hand, educator must have the ability of observation in order to verify that*". Participant 2 agreed with the above and stated that "*Educator must have his/her eyes four hundred*".

Two participants said that educators should intervene in children's free outdoor play when a child faces difficulties to incorporate in play. Participant 2 said that "*There are some children which are more close characters and they prefer to play alone in a corner of school yard. In this situation, the role of the teacher is to take child from her/his hand and help them to socialize*". This supported by NCCA (n.d.)

and Pica (2011). They stated that the adult promotes working in pairs and cooperates with each other. Participant 7 added that "*The role of the educator is to create a space that reinforces children's free outdoor play*".

Three participants claim that educators can collect important information about children through observation. Participant 6 said that "*The educator's role is to observe how children move and play and the groups that children create in order to play. Educator can take important information's about children through leaving children free*". This is supported by research. Educator's role through play is to observe children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles in order to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations (DfE, 2012). Finally, one of them mentioned that educators should observe children's play in order to verify behaviors and as result, reinforce children's desirable behavior. Participant 4 said that "*Children play free. However, we can help in organization. If something goes good we reinforce it without our intervention being apparent*". Researchers have stated that by communicating and playing with children, exercising good judgment so that adult involvement does not threaten child autonomy or harm the 'flow' of the play (NCCA, n.d.; Pica, 2011).

Common practices

The majority of participants' agree that children learn social skills through free outdoor play. Participant 7 stated that "*One piece that I try to reinforce to children through communication groups is the suitable social skills in order to promote them with not being my role to organize play. Children learn social skills through play and similar experimental experiences. At the beginning of the year, I involve a lot in children's play and give them ideas. As the time passes, I leave children more freely to play*". This is supported by the literature, with Lynch and Simpson (2010) noting that there are some methods and techniques which educators use in order to promote children's social development and to develop children's social skills. Some of these methods involve setting up the environment to improve social development, supplying play opportunities to advocate social functioning and teaching social skills as soon as possible teachers could.

Two participants claimed that they take some action in order to promote children's social skills through play. Participant 2 said that "*I encourage children to run and play individually and in groups. I make activities in group. I discuss with children and urge them to cooperate and help each other through groups*". This is supported by Honig and Wittmer (1996) who noted that educators organize outdoor activities that promote social skills such as helpfulness, cooperation and generosity. Participant 6 stated that "*I believe that you should put all children in groups in order to have all children a group to play, without a child isolated*". This is supported by McEvoy (1990) who mentions that educators are more able to use approaches that include setting up environments to advocate social growth and intervene whenever it is important. On the other hand, participant 5 mentioned that "*Play is free so I do not do anything specific*". Finally, participant 1 disagrees with all participants and research studies and stated that "*I believe that educator cannot teach social skills to children. For me, educator's role is not to press situations, create friendships or create children's social skills*".

Barriers

Six participants face difficulties that related to children's safety. Three of the above mentioned on difficulties that related to children's injuries. Participant 2 stated that "*Children are freer and run uncontrolled and as result, a child can stumble, fall and injure*". Four out of six interviewers' agreed that they face difficulties that related to children's conflicts. Three participants claim that face difficulties that concern to the part of socialization. Participant 7 said that "*Children face difficulties to get involved in play*". One participant mentioned on the inappropriate infrastructure and more specifically, participant 5 stated that "*Difficulties related to the space and to the lack of appropriate outdoor toys*". Finally, one participant disagrees and claims that she/he does not face difficulties through children's free outdoor play. Participant 6 said that "*I have no problem or some difficulty*".

Discussion

These results should be interpreted with caution because the size sample was rather small, even though the results were significant. More research is needed to examine the same research questions in quantitative way in order to have more generalisable data. A mixed methods investigation of data collection will probably be a good step for future research. Moreover, further research should incorporate some personal information such as educators' experience or level of education, age and if nursery is private or not in order to have more specific results and also can compare these indicators.

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