

SERD | Which concepts do teachers teach through play? A study based on pre-service teachers' observation

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Abstract

This study particularly focuses on what pre-school education teachers teach through play activities in their class. Therefore, this study is rather crucial to scrutinize the type of concepts teachers utilize to enhance children's learning in play activities. Convenient sampling was used for the data collection. The research drew its data from 120 play observation reports written by 120 pre-service pre-school education teachers taking "Development of Play in Childhood" course. Content analysis approach described by Berg (2007) was used to analyze the data. The findings show that although Ministry of National Education (MoNE) offers more than 100 concepts, teachers generally choose the same concepts such as colors, geometrical shapes, and simple antonymous concepts. They generally do not prefer to teach alternative concepts like feathery-featherless, sharp-stubby and deep-shallow through play.

Keywords: Play, concept teaching, pre-school education, curriculum

Introduction

The importance of play in pre-school education is not a new idea, as educational theorists such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and Dewey all highlighted the role of play for young children's development and learning. Play in early childhood programs should be increased due to its potential influence on child development. As recent brain research suggests imaginative, multisensory, and playful learning promote children's whole development (Wardle, 2009). The present study is grounded in the research and theory related to play-based learning. The literature on play-based learning emphasized the crucial roles of play on children's development and learning. Countless definition of play can be found in early education textbooks. Play can be defined in its broadest scope as children's efforts of solving a problem they have set within a context, culture, family, and community; exploring and experiencing something that interest, concerns, scares or excites them; and expressing and

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communicating their feelings related to their experiences. In this sense, the play is always purposeful for the children (Smidt, 2011). The play is considered to be a child-initiated activity, while learning is seen as a result of adult-initiated activity (Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). For instance, the child can fill containers in the water tray because s/he has been told to or because s/he has chosen to do so. In the former situation, the child is learning through following an instruction whereas, in the latter, the child is learning through play because s/he is seeking an answer to a question s/he has raised (Smidt, 2011).

Play and learning are used to be separated in early education settings. Circle time, story time, creative artwork, and literacy time are regarded as the origin of learning. However, a play is mostly accepted as leisure time or outdoor activity. Play and learning are being considered two interrelated phenomena recently and the new curriculum emphasizes that teachers are responsible for improving children's learning through play. Early education curriculum across the world state that play is supposed to be of the utmost importance (Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). With the help of a teacher; children can relate play with other experiences from their lifeworld. Teachers should monitor children play and challenge them in different ways. Playful learning stimulates several abilities such as imagination thought, empathy, language and bodily expressions, symbolic thinking, negotiation skills, decision making as well as collaboration and problem-solving (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

Play experiences have a pivotal role in improving children's development thanks to its intellectual, social and physical and aesthetic benefits (Cheng, 2001). Although most teachers displayed a positive attitude towards teaching through play and put more emphasis on play activities in their classes, still, many are unable to integrate play in teaching science (Bulunuz, 2011; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004). Teaching through play is not an easy task to accomplish since it is something that can only be felt by its participants. Improvisation is required in play activities in order to make children reveal their abilities in problem-solving and implementation. It is teachers' responsibility to provide opportunities to help young children learn through play. Children should take the initiatives, have self-managed choices in activities, have the flexibility to pretend and to determine the pace and engage in enjoyable activities (Cheng, 2001). There is a tendency among teachers that a child's thought does not

always reflect their actions (Calderhead, 1991). Consistent with this belief, teachers think that play activities should be stress-free, imaginative, self-chosen, self-directed, and players should always be free to leave the play. However, they usually conduct play activities in a rigid, teacher-directed, mechanical and traditional didactic way. Although teachers' self-image is mostly autonomous, their class practices are authoritarian in practice, which contradicts with the theoretical underpinning of play (Cheng, 2001).

Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is the governing body of pre-school education in Turkey. In order to ensure national standards, MoNE develops a curriculum and implements it in public schools. The first pre-school education curriculum was developed in 1994. After that it was reviewed and reorganized in 2002, 2006, and 2012 correspondingly with the initiation of teachers, faculty members, and professionals in the field of pre-school education. The enriched form of curriculum addressed importance of play more as it offers an exceptional and rich context for teaching and learning (Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Play is the best way for children to learn. They also gain experience about the world, learn to express their emotion and thought, and get critical thinking skills. New curriculum particularly states that plays should be used as a technique or an activity to reach the goals and objectives. Teaching through play is an indispensable part of the new curriculum and pre-school education (MoNE, 2013). Still, teachers accept that they could not implement play activities properly and aware of their inabilities in this area and they need support. Children reported that their teachers work on their files and activities while they are playing. The number of children who stated that the teachers play with them was considerably low. Thus, children's view of play is influenced by the attitudes and behavior of their teachers. This leads children to perceive their teachers to be outside the play (Tuğrul, Aslan, Ertürk, & Altınkaynak, 2014).

Developmentally appropriate practice, which is a main approach about how young children develop and learn, advocates that teachers should also be part of children's play. Even if the play is initiated by children teachers should find a way to support their play as it is pivotal feature of children's development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Teachers' role in children play primarily concentrates on maintaining safety, improving socializing, and encouraging the creativity in play (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). Involving children's play into the classroom is accepted as the best way for teachers to interact with them. In this sense teachers

should not fail to enhance children's play (Saracho, 2012). If teachers do not thoroughly understand the theory of play, it may not be possible for them to contextualize, de-contextualize and re-contextualize the theory in their unique teaching and learning situation (Cheng, 2001). As such, this study particularly focuses on what pre-school education teachers teach through play activities in their classrooms. Therefore, this study is rather crucial to scrutinize the type of concepts teachers use to support children's learning in play activities. In addition, the research depicts how teachers implement pre-school education curriculum. In this sense, investigating play activities in early education setting can offer functional feedback to teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers in their struggles to support to quality pre-school education in Turkey.

Method

In Turkey, pre-school education is either full or half day. Yet, in Van (Eastern Turkey) where this study was carried out, all public schools offer five hours of class throughout the day. Pre-school education curriculum consists of language, art, drama, music, science, mathematics, literacy courses, and field trips activities. It also includes both free play time and additional play time. In a regular half-day program, teachers generally implement free play time and three different activities based on children's development, needs, and background. This study concentrates only on play time which lasts around 30 minutes.

Before collecting the data, all official permissions were taken from the Directorate of National Education. All of the observations were made in the independent kindergartens during the fall semester of the 2015-16 academic year. To take part in this study for both in-service and pre-service teachers were completely voluntary. In order to investigate concepts taught in play activities, 120 pre-school education teachers were observed. 130 pre-service pre-school education teachers were employed to observe play activities in "Development of Play in Childhood" course. After observing activities, preservice teachers were required to analyze the play and write a report based on that play. They were also required to observe every detail of the play activity and discuss their observations based on the corresponding theories. They particularly observed introduction to play, the instruction given by teachers, materials used in

the play, teacher's role in the play, and educational aim and outcome of the play. Since ten students observed the same teachers, their reports were removed from the data log. The primary data for this study are 120 play observation reports written by 120 pre-service pre-school education teachers. Table 1 presents characteristics of teachers and their classrooms. As illustrated in the table, the class sizes range from seven to twenty-two. Eight male and 122 female teachers were observed in this study.

Table 1. Some characteristics of teachers and their classrooms

	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
<i>Years of experience</i>		
0-3	47	39.2
3-6	33	27.5
6-9	14	11.7
9-12	9	7.5
12-15	11	9.2
15+	6	5.0
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	112	93.3
Male	8	6.7
<i>Age</i>		
22-25	38	31.7
25-28	43	35.8
28-31	12	10.0
31-34	7	5.8
34-37	9	7.5
37+	11	9.2
<i>Class Size</i>		
7-10	46	38.3
10-15	40	33.3
15-22	34	28.3

When teachers prepare daily plans, they consider goal and objectives defined in the curriculum. New curriculum offers goals and objectives for three different age groups. Goal and objectives are the behaviors that children are expected to acquire; for instance waiting in

a queue or establishing eye contact while speaking. The important thing is that themes, topics or concepts are just tools to acquire goal and objectives. Yet, this study focuses on concepts instead of goal and objectives since concepts are more observable in play than goals and objectives. In content analysis, it is suggested to support findings with additional data (Metin, 2014). In this study, teachers' lesson plans might have been valuable supporting data but teachers generally do not prepare their own daily plans. They use ready ones which are prepared by publishing companies. They make a few revisions to them according to their target group and then implement it in their classrooms. In this situation, teachers' lesson plans were not considered as a valid source of data.

Berg's (2007) content analysis approach was used to analyze the data as it generally concentrates on written documents or transcription of recorded verbal communications. Content analysis is a very useful way to obtain information that describes an issue or a topic. Therefore, first of all, aims for this particular study were determined. In this case, the purpose was to carefully scrutinize the concepts that were taught by teachers in play activities. Then, terms were defined. Since the study focuses on concepts, *National Pre-school Education Curriculum* concept list was used to define terms. The curriculum list consists of eleven main concept categories and almost a hundred sub-categories. Main concepts are color, geometrical shapes, dimension, quantity, direction-location, numbers, sense, emotion, time, and antonyms. Unit of analysis was clear before the study. Researchers sought these concepts in pre-service teachers' reports. Once the objectives and unit of analysis were identified and the relationship between observation reports and objective became clearer; it was easy to elicit the answers to the questions we seek in the data.

Some plays were not performed to teach concepts. In one play, for instance, children are supposed to change their seats when they hear the instruction "*I have a letter from Ayşe to Orhan*". This play is used to make children aware of instruction, individuals around them and their positions in space. Since it does not involve any concepts, it was not included in the data. The conceptual link to explain how the data are related to objectives is clear even for an uninterested reader as the link between question and content is obvious. While accomplishing these steps, a sampling plan was also developed. Then, researchers moved to coding stage. Coding categories were explicit before collecting the data. As such, a deductive analysis was

conducted to determine the concepts that teachers teach in their play activities. Table 2 presents the concepts described in pre-school education curriculum in Turkey (MoNE, 2013). The plays including these concepts were recorded. In order to ensure credibility as the final step of the content analysis, two researchers were coded 25 reports and the agreement level was 100%. Following equation was utilized to calculate agreement:

$$\text{Reliability of coding} = \text{Number of coding} / \text{Total number of segments coded} \quad (1)$$

Findings

Findings revealed that teachers do not prepare children for play activities. Only 23 teachers out of 120 implemented transition activities before play. Transition activities have a pivotal role in guiding children gently throughout the day and helping children move smoothly from one educational activity to another one. They are effective tools to reduce interruptions and encourage flow from one activity to another with ease (MoNE, 2013). Although MoNE offers more than 100 concepts, teachers generally choose the same concepts such as colors, geometrical shapes, and simple antonymous concepts. In this study, alternative concepts such as feathery-featherless, sharp-stubby and deep-shallow are barely observed. Total frequency of concepts could not reach 120 since some plays did not even involve a concept to teach. Examples are shown on the very right side of Table 2. Frequencies of concepts chosen by teachers are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Teachers' preferences of concepts to teach through play

Main Concepts	Sub-concepts	Examples of Plays
Color	Main color and secondary color	Teacher split the classroom into two groups and played music. Each group was assigned to collect blue material in the classroom until the music stops. The group which collects more blue materials wins the game.
Geometrical shapes	Square, rectangular, ellipse	Teacher draws a/the square, triangle and circle shape on the floor. Then s/he delivered square, triangle and circle shape neckless to children and played music. When the music stops children are required to get in shapes drawing on the floor according to their neckless shape.
Dimension	Thin, thick, narrow, wide	Children go outside and collect tree branches. Teacher hanged thick and thin branches on two buckets. Then s/he split classes into two groups and each group take corresponding branches on the table and put their thin or thick bucket. The group collecting more branches wins the play.
Quantity	Crowded, desolate, equal, half, whole	Teacher delivered circle shape paper to children and asked them to paint those papers. Then teacher divide painted paper into two. Then stick papers on children's collar and turned on the music. Children dance while the music on. When the music stopped they need to find their peer.
Direction-location	Inside, outside, close, far	One of the children goes outside and classmates hide an object in the classroom. A child comes to class and tries to find that object. Her/his classmates help her/him as clapping their hands when s/he gets closed to object.
Numbers	1 to 20, zero, first, last, middle	Children count one by one but they say "BOM" instead of 5 and 10.
Sense	Wet, dry, soft, hard, shiny, dull,	Teacher brings a box full of objects with different texture such as sandpaper, waxed paper, cotton, beans, and macaroni. Each child chose an object from the box without looking and tries to guess the texture of the object.
Emotion	Happy, sad, astonished, frightened	Teacher introduces wheel of emotion to children. Then gives examples of emotion and the time when we feel that way. Each child chooses an emotion from the wheel and explains when s/he feels happy, upset, astonished or afraid.
Time	Yesterday, today, tomorrow, night, day	Children sit in a U-shape. The teacher chooses a child and whispers a task to the child's ear. Then the child animated to that task. Other children try to guess when that task happens. For instance, putting on clothes in morning.
Opposite	Dirty, clean, right, wrong, new, old	Teacher makes some opposite movements and asks children to repeat them. For instance, reach high to the sky and low to the ground, take a big step and a little step, clap your hands loudly and quietly, run fast, then slow, happy face, sad face, sit down, stand up, turn to the right and then left

Table 3. Frequency of concepts

Concepts	Frequency
Color	24
Geometrical shapes	22
Dimension	1
Quantity	7
Direction-location	2
Numbers	37
Sense	3
Emotion	4
Time	1
Opposite	6

Discussion and Conclusion

In an early childhood setting, child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play serves as the primary context for major activities. Such a play developmentally supports young children's learning and therefore it is considered as the best practice in ECE (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Developmentally appropriate practices that embrace curriculum around play should be designed carefully and the arrangement of the physical environment, daily schedule, and adult-child interactions should be taken into consideration. In this way, children's fine and gross motor, emotional, social, cognitive, and language skills develop. In addition, carefully planned play activities may encourage the development of emergent literacy skills (Hanline, 1999).

Teachers in this study chose the most basic concepts to teach through play. This might have detrimental effects not only on their professional development but it also threatens the quality of education they provide because they use repetitive concepts in play activities in a narrow, simplified and mechanical manner. This may be related to the context in which teachers work. Van is located on the border of Iran and most children are bilingual (i.e. they speak both Kurdish and Turkish) and they are coming from low socio-economic status (SES) families. As

such, teachers focus on basic concepts because, in some schools, children cannot speak even Turkish. Therefore, teaching main colors took almost months in these schools. Considering the fact that high school graduate students in Van have had the lowest scores in university entrance exams in Turkey (Öğrenci Seçme Yerleştirme Merkezi, 2013), children should learn more complex concepts before entering primary education. For this reason, attendance to early education should last more than one year and continuity in early education should be increased in Van. The findings suggest the urgent need to support teachers to put theories into practice as they were not able to teach various concepts in play activities. They rather got stuck in a limited number of concepts.

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