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Preschool teachers' strategies to enhance social interaction skills of children during playtime

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how preschool teachers organize free play activities and what kind of strategies they use for enhancing peer related social interactions among 6-year-old children. The study was conducted in Ankara by interviewing with teachers to obtain their views and experiences on peer related social interaction during playtime and by observing them to learn their actions to facilitate peer interactions. Findings of this study are thought to highlight the importance of the teachers' role in the development of social skills and peer relationships in early years.

Keywords: Free playtime, peer relations, social skills, early childhood.

1. Introduction

Children in early childhood period, learn through social interaction with their peers, siblings, parents, and teachers (Henderson & Atencio, 2007). Peer relationships become apparent with the use of play in early years. Especially free play times are the most appropriate times for detecting peer related social interactions (Gulay, 2010). Designing the environment and play activities in a way that provide best conditions for the developmental necessities of children and also supporting social skills and peer relationships of young children are crucial (Gulay, 2010; Henderson & Atencio, 2007; Turner & Small, 1985). Teachers have capacity to understand children's problems with peers, understand children's viewpoints, decide on the necessary strategies for facilitating healthier peer relationship and have the power that enable children to develop their peer relationship in a great extend (Moon, 2001). Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that teachers hold the power for getting the benefit of play for the sake of children's peer related social interactions. The aim of the present study is to reveal and describe early childhood teachers' experiences in organization of free playtime and the strategies they use for enhancing peer related social interactions in the preschool classroom environment.

1.1. Theoretical Background

Children can spontaneously form playgroups in the direction of their desires and this form of free play considered as child-directed play (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003). In this type of play, teachers play a facilitator role. By creating a kind of interest in children, teachers foster children to form playgroups. It is the teachers' role to facilitate playgroups, encourage passive children to join playgroups and create a spontaneous free play environment

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(Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003). In child-centered programs, children's play is observed and facilitated when necessary (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). Different than the child- directed play, teacher directed play refers to the traditional teaching methods in which teacher hold the dominant role in determining children's activities (Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003).

The development of peer related social interaction may be enriched by an adult who monitors the needs of children in social context, understands the capabilities of children in peer relations and makes the necessary intervention (Kemple & Hartle, 1997). Since free play times have the risk to pose a chaotic environment, teachers have a great role in teaching children both freedom and responsibility and enabling them to balance between the activities they want to engage in and the way they behave throughout activities (Yang, 2000). On the contrary, the interactions with adults in means of getting directives from the teacher, may also prevent children to form social interactions with their peers (Harper & McCluskey, 2003). Therefore, the level or amount of teachers' support, facilitation, and engagement in children's peer related social activities hold a critical value in means of both facilitating and also inhibiting peer interactions.

In the direction of all the literature investigated inductively, a theoretical framework was emerged and Vygotsky's theory- Zone of proximal development (ZPD) is thought to be a guide for the present study. ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). With adult guidance, children may learn the things by active involvement and through time they may achieve the task on their own (Yang, 2000). Therefore, classroom environment should be a place that social interactions are encouraged through the assistance of the teacher (Gnadinger, 2008). The theoretical framework of Vygotsky is thought to provide a kind of perspective to guide the present study by investigating the essence of experiences of teachers as a means of facilitating peer related social interactions among children.

2.Method

2.1. Design

The study employed a qualitative approach and a phenomenology that describes different ways in which experiences of individuals were investigated (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Core experiences of people related with the phenomenon studied may be called phenomenological research (Creswell, 2003). Since the present study aimed to describe early childhood teachers' experiences of a phenomenon; that is, peer related social interactions in free playtime, qualitative- phenomenological research was found more appropriate strategy to use. Before conducting the study, pilot interviews with two early childhood teachers were conducted and then questions were revised. After pilot study, some kind of target behaviors was listed and observation protocol was created for both taking descriptive and reflective notes. Observation protocol includes the place teacher stay during free play time, teacher initiated activities, child initiated activities, teacher scaffolding behaviors, clues on peer relations from children, teacher strategies for peer relations, demographic information about the time place and the date of the observation field setting, etc.

2.2. Context and Participants

The participants of this study were three female early childhood teachers who are employed in a private kindergarten in Ankara. Applying free playtime was set as a criterion for selecting the school context. The crucial criterion in determining participants in phenomenological research is to select individuals experiencing the studied phenomenon and sharing the phenomenon's nature and meaning in the study being investigated (Gall et al., 2003). Therefore, teachers that are experiencing the same phenomenon, applying free playtime at least two times throughout their daily plans were selected mainly. Teachers hold a four-year university degree. None of them had any course specifically related with peer relationships in early childhood period, strategies for supporting social interactions and dealing with peer rejections among children.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The observations were conducted before the interview in order to prevent teachers to get the idea behind the study, give desirable answers related with strategies they use and tend to perform desirable practices

accordingly. The semi-structured interviews were audio- recorded following the verbatim transcriptions. Inductive process of open coding to analyse data was conducted. Moreover, lived experiences of individuals were discovered through extracting specific themes and patterns from the data, categorising them and finding explanation to them. Data analysis of the observation notes were open coded by the researcher independently first. Then, the researcher and the second observer studied together to understand the emerging codes.

2.4. Trustworthiness

Triangulation, identification of personal interest (researcher's previous studies and interest related with peer relationships), comparing outcome with the theory, identifying the theoretical assumption and framework (Vygotsky), peer examination, member checking (Creswell, 2003), were all considered for assuring the validity and reliability in the present study.

3. Findings

Organization of free play time for facilitating peer related social interactions were found to be conducted by teachers through using the following strategies: asking questions, making suggestions, encouraging, observing, giving solutions, arranging activities, giving assistance, giving directives, praising, participating in play, arranging physical environment. These emerging codes for observation were collected in two categories: Teacher-centered peer-related social interactions and child-centered peer-related social interactions. Codes have the function of organizing segments related with the particular construct or theme (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.1.Teacher-centered peer-related social interactions (TCPSI)

Types of methods applied by teachers such as asking questions, giving directives, offering solutions, arranging activities and making suggestions were considered as teacher-centered strategies and examples were given below by stating quotations from teachers. In the observation, it was found that, teachers make physical design arrangement of the free play area by creating either clearly defined distinct interest corners or activity tables on which specific materials were placed by teacher. In this category, children are not allowed to play in the areas other than the offered ones. TCPSI category reflects the use of individualized direct strategies of teachers for supporting peer relations in free playtime.

Teacher (T2): "Look, there is Ezgi, don't you want to call her into your play table?" (Suggesting)

T3: "Play your wooden blocks with your friend Begum"

(Giving directives)

T2: "Berk come and join with your friends' activity"

(Giving Directives)

T1: "We don't take the toys without asking permission"

(Giving Directives, Correcting use of social skills)

T3: "Today, I arranged three activities for you; three of you are going to the first table"

(Arranging Activities, Giving Directives)

3.2.Child centered peer related social interaction (CCPSI)

Child's choice to create groups, intrinsic motivation to play in groups, observing children's play, encouraging, praising, participating in children's play, environmental arrangement were considered as child-centered strategies and examples are given below by stating quotations from teachers. In the observation, contrary to teachers' views, it was seen that, teachers make physical arrangement of the free play area by creating limited choices for children to participate in instead of enabling children to choose between various choices according to their interests and needs. In this category, children are not allowed to play in the areas other than the offered ones. Although observation of free play revealed mostly teacher-centered connections, reported experiences of teachers were including both of them.

T2: "In which activity do you want to engage in today's free time?"

(Child's choice to create groups)

T1: "Children in the blocks area are playing nicely with each other".

(Praising, Encouraging, Motivating)

T3: "Begum and Arda's group is behaving nice to each other"
(Praising, Encouraging, Motivating)

3.3. Views of teachers on the organization of free play time activities with peer related social interactions

The following codes were driven from the interviews in means of views on organization: benefits of free play both for children and teachers and strategies of the organization of free play with peer related social interactions.

3.3.1. Benefits of free play both for children and teachers

It was stated by teachers that organization of free play times are crucial both for teachers and children. Those times enable children to express themselves freely, learn to share, learn appropriate social ways (requesting, giving and taking), socializing, learning to accept, developing preference and problem solving ability. Moreover, besides children's gaining, teachers also stated some benefits for themselves. They are experiencing a kind of monitoring children's personalities. Moreover, they also reported that, through the use of free play times, they apply some kind of indirect arrangements and enable positive social interactions among children. Benefits are exemplified with quotations gathered from the reported experiences of teachers:

T1: "Free play times are the only times in which children can get rid of the authority of the teacher and can express themselves freely…"

T2: "In free play times children do not know what the teacher wants, what is the directive…So child can behave naturally which enables teacher to observe, and shift children's development to a higher level with the help of free play"

3.3.2. Strategies for organization of free play with peer related social interactions

They expressed that, teacher should involve in children's play in order to motivate them and teach them to form social interaction by being a role model, should take notes about children's peer groupings and relations, social interactions patterns, correcting the use of social skills and even intervene, solving peer conflicts and directing them to solve on their own, incorporating some neglected children into already formed peer groups, asking questions about the use of social skills and proper peer relations. Strategies for organization of free play times are exemplified with quotations gathered from the reported experiences of teachers:

T1: "If two child are experiencing a kind of problem, I ask other children in the classroom whether they can solve this problem or not. I think, this way of behaving can direct children to think whether they can really solve it or not. I believe that, this teaches children to be self confident and solve the problems they will face with their peers"

T2: "Teacher should join the groups of children in free play times in order to motivate them to be in a group, to share and feel them relax. Through this way, teacher can observe indirectly which child is behaving well socially, behaving appropriate towards peers, etc. Teacher should observe, detect and correct them by explaining the required way of behaving…"

3.4. Consistency of teacher's views and practices

When asked about their views and experiences, teachers mostly stated child-centered strategies like, making suggestions, arranging activities, making observations, encouraging, praising, etc. However, although they stated they did not expect children to behave in some ways in free play times, they had some rules and regulations in free play times. Moreover, in the observation of one of the teacher's free play times, she required children to engage in specific behaviors rather than giving choice to children to select the activity they want. She generally decided on activity instead of children and gave them the directive to engage in. Although those practices that are considered as teacher-centered were observed in free play times, in the interview, teacher reported that, they were experiencing a free play time in the direction of children's needs. She stressed that; activities were planned due to the children's developmental necessities and stated that she was offering options to their children in means of selecting activities. Therefore, a kind of inconsistency was observed in views and practices of some teachers.

4. **Discussion & Implications**

As interview based data suggested, free play times are important in means of both teachers and children's well beings. It is stressed in the literature that, some amount of free play, which is especially child-directed, is beneficial and required for the development of young children (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Beside the importance of

giving place to the free play times in the daily plans, the guidance of the teacher in means of structuring free play is critical. As Nicolopoulou (2010) pointed, in preschool environment, it is important to integrate play into the preschool curriculum for facilitating children's learning and development. Although inconsistency between teacher's views and practices was observed, all of the teachers stated that, the physical design of the classroom constitutes a kind of obstacle for them for designing better-structured free play times. Due to the small class sizes they were limited to specific activities. The arrangement of the classroom, the quality of materials, and designing of interest corners have an effect on the peer interactions among children (Kemple & Hartle, 1997; Gmitrova & Gmitrov, 2003: Yang, 2000). Therefore, we can infer that, although teachers might have child-centered approach, they may behave teacher-centered. Similarly, although teachers might want to support peer related social interactions among children in free playtime, due to limitations in physical designs of their classrooms, their practices might differ from their views.

In the direction of the findings of this study some implications may be offered to preschool teachers, school administrators and curriculum developers. By knowing the crucial effects of peer relations on the whole development of children, peer relations should be encouraged and paid attention by teachers, schools and parents. Education of teachers for supporting social interactions of children is important. It seems to be needed to enrich the content of the related courses to emphasize social developments of children, the importance of peer relationships and resultant overall well-being of young children. Moreover, education of the early childhood teachers should include specific courses related with children's social skills development, peer relationships and related teaching strategies for enhancing learning and development.

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