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Play as seen by children and pre-school teachers in Turkey

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Abstract

This study extends upon previous research conducted by Howard (2002) and aims to understand the perceptions of play from the perspective of both children and their teachers within Turkish culture. This current study was carried out at two private kindergarten schools in Kusadası, Aydın, Turkey. Sixty-one children aged between 3 and 6 years, and ten kindergarten teachers were recruited for this study. A modified 'Activity Apperception Story Procedure' (AASP) task was used to investigate the perceptions of play. Results suggest that both teachers and children have very similar perceptions of play, and that in children, these perceptions are primarily developed as a result of their experiences, a finding consistent with Howard (2002). Results also suggest age differences in the perceptions of play, with the younger children (aged 3-4 years) making more 'play' judgements when presented with the AASP task than the older children (aged 5 to 6 years). Finally, results also show that the location of the activity depicted (on a table or on the floor) significantly influences the perception of play in both children and adults, with increased 'play' judgements for activities taking place on the floor.

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1. Introduction

Play is defined across disciplines in terms of its importance for children's social, emotional and cognitive development (Muys, Rodger, & Bundy, 2006). However given these extremely broad definitions, few, if any of these disciplines are able to offer explanations of play that can truly fully encompass it (Hughes, 1991 cited in Bennett et al, 1997). Taking the overall aims of this paper into consideration, appropriate definitions of play would

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be those offered by Sheridan (1977), Krasnor and Pepler (1980), and Groos, (1901). Sheridan (1977) defines play as the “eager engagement in pleasurable physical and mental effort to obtain emotional satisfaction”, while Krasnor and Pepler (1980) discussed similar features of play such as gaining pleasure and having fun. In the pre-exercise theory (Groos, 1901), it is suggested that children learn through play by practicing those roles that they will likely undertake in their adult life. For example, Burris & Tsao, (2012) suggest that toys are symbolic representations of the real world, and that through using such representations, children make connections between their play and the real world.

However, with respect to the aims of this current research, there are important points at which each of these definitions fall short. Firstly, none of these definitions sees play from the perspective of both the child, and the adult (parents or teacher). Secondly, there are few definitions that detail how play is developed within social contexts and culture and how individuals within that culture understand play (Fromberg and Bergen, 1998). It is important to highlight that children’s experiences forms their perceptions of play and also leads to improvements in their skills based on the physical and emotional atmosphere around them.

As children grow, they spend their most important years at kindergartens, pre-schools, nurseries and other early years institutions. It is for this reason that the curriculum style& content, and the quality of teachers’ education is so important. Many curricula implementations suffer from a lack of clear understanding of the expectations of the curriculum, the lack of appropriately qualified teachers and a lack of available resource (for example, simple equipment such as pens and paper, to a shortage of classrooms). Professionals are often confused as to how to implement play, how much they need to use play in the classroom and what the benefits are for children’s development.

For this current research, the perceptions of play in early-years teachers and children in Turkey are investigated. Understanding a child’s own view of play will help to develop a better education for children’s learning (Howard, 2002). Once a more effective curriculum is developed, children will be more successful in learning (Howard, 2002). This study is a partial replication of both Howard, 2002; 2004 and of McInnes et al, 2009), both of which investigated the perceptions of play in both children and their teachers.

There are three main points to explore in this research; the characteristics children use to categorise play vs. non play activities, the characteristics teachers use to categories play vs. non play activities, and finally, the value given by teachers to learning through play in Turkey.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Sixty-one nursery-school children were chosen from two nursery-schools in the Kuşadası region of Aydın in Turkey. The children’s ages ranged from three to six years old, with a mean age of 4.3 years. Thirty-two children were female and twenty-nine were male. Ten teachers participated in this study. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-nine, with a mean age of twenty-two and with an average working experience of 3.6 years. Each teacher was working with children of specific ages.

2.2 Nurseries

Both nursery schools were located in the outskirts of Aydın and had large outdoor play areas for the children to play. Both nurseries were independent of any primary school, but their curriculum is maintained by the Turkish Ministry of Education, called the Pre-school Education program for children aged between 36-72 months of age (2002).

2.3 Ethical Procedure

All nursery staff were informed of the content of the study and procedures prior to commencement. All parents of those children chosen to participate were informed of the study one-week prior to the agreed study start date and were advised that they could withdraw their child from this study at any time before, during or following the study

start date. All parents gave full informed consent in writing to both the nursery and to the researcher. After the parental consent forms were signed and returned, the researcher spent one week with children for ‘familiarisation’.

3.Design

For the data analysis both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The Activity Apperception Procedure was given to the children, with the subsequent data being subjected to a quantitative analysis in the form of a t-test on the ‘play’ or ‘not play’ judgements of the children. For the interviews of the teachers, the interviews were transcribed and subject to a thematic analysis consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006). Finally, during the AASP, any justifications given for a particular choice were transcribed and categorically organized (e.g. responses relating to teacher presence or activities being fun).

4. Materials

For the purpose of this current study, the modified Activity Apperception Story Procedure (AASP) task was utilised. This simple tool allows children to express their opinions regarding the differentiation of play, work and learning aspects through photographs (Howard, Jenvey & Hill, 2006). The original AASP contained 24 photographic stimuli, however, for the purpose of this study, a modified version was used comprising 12 stimuli. Each stimulus shows a number of pre-school environment scenarios either with an adult present or absent. Each photograph depicts a number of activities, such as painting or role-play activities (for example parent, doctor or nurse and such like), with either a single child or a number of children engaging in parallel or cooperative activities. Each of these activities is shown either on the floor or a table (Howard et al, 2006). A semi-structured interview was used to understand the teacher’s ideas relating to play in more detail. The Interview questions were designed in terms of the teachers’ role, their understanding of play, their opinions regarding the curriculum, their education level in child development, and play-planning. All interviews were recorded for later transcription.

5. Procedure

The same modified AASP task was used for both the children and the adults. Two empty letter boxes, 12 photos (reverse side showing so the children could not see the pictures), consent forms and audio recording equipment were positioned at the centre of a table with two chairs located next to one another. Each photograph was numbered from one to twelve on the reverse.

Each child was taken into the class one at a time and made to feel comfortable prior to the interview by talking to them and asking general questions. When the researcher felt that the children were comfortable, each photograph was randomly presented one at a time. Each child was given the same instructions, read by the researcher from a cue card. During testing, there was no time limit imposed on the children, and the researcher waited until the child made a response.

The same procedure as detailed above was adopted for the teachers, and all teachers were shown the same AASP stimuli as used for the children and the responses of the teachers recorded in the same way. Following the AASP, the teachers were interviewed in an attempt to identify more details relating to their thoughts and opinions regarding play.

6.Results

In the original research, Howard (2002) carried out research on 111 children aged between three and six years using the AASP. Results from that showed that children basically reported two types of activities; play and work. For children, play involves outside activities, for example construction, sand pit or role play. Work activities included writing, reading and using paper. In general, according to Howard (2002) children saw play as “not learning”, and work as learning, with these perceptions of play, work and learning being developed through experiences.

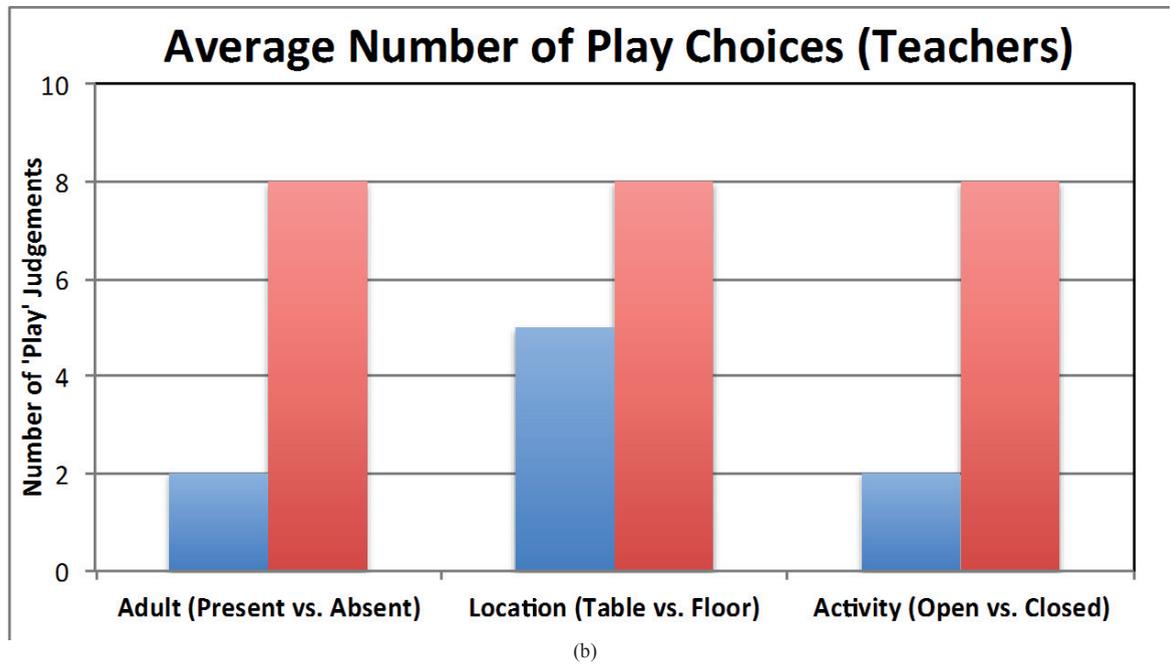
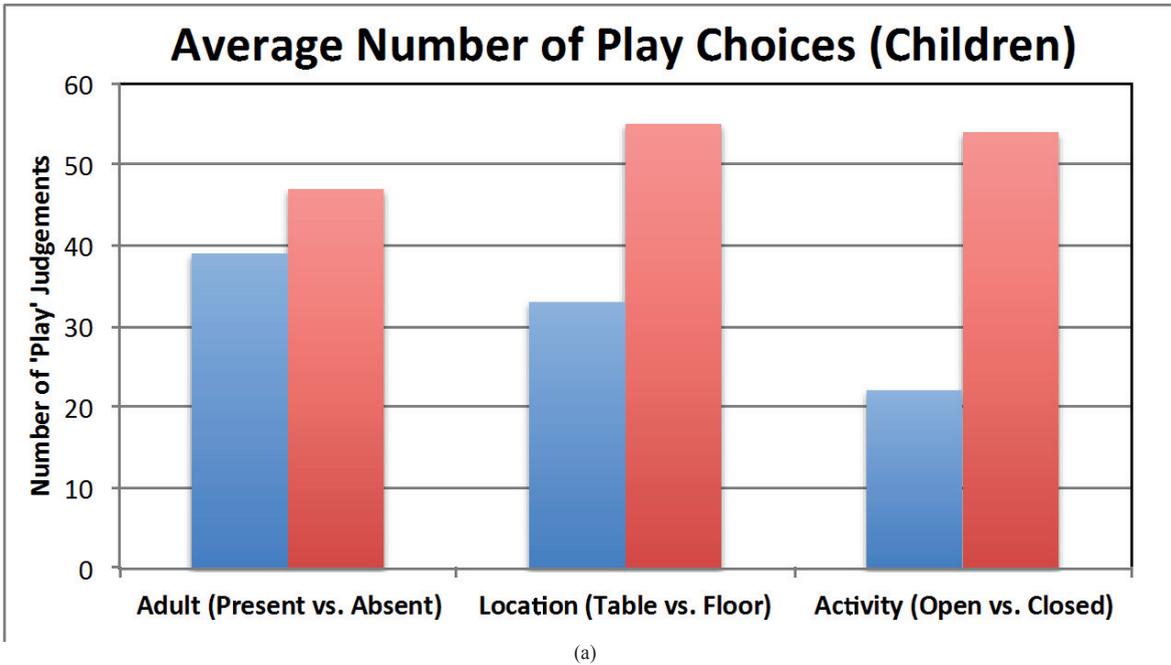


Figure 1: Average number of 'play' judgements as made by children (a) and teachers (b) following presentation of the AASP stimuli

In this current research, the perceptions of play of ten kindergarten teachers and sixty-one children were been investigated. Results show that both children and teachers have clear ideas about what is considered play and what is considered work, a finding that is consistent with previous findings (Howard, 2002; Howard, 2006,McInnes et al, 2009). Figure 1 below shows the number of 'play' judgements made for the AASP task by children and teachers

respectively in terms of AASP card content (adult, location, activity). Consistent with Howard (2002), both activity type and location reported reliable differences, with both teachers and children judging a depicted activity as play in the absence of an adult, and when done on the floor. However, interestingly, there are differences in terms of the effects of the presence of an adult between teachers and children. Children generally commented that the presence of an adult's has little influence on their judgments of 'play' in the AASP task, while teachers felt that their presence influences children's play.

7. Conclusion

This current study presented a group of kindergarten children and their teachers a modified AASP task, based on Howards (2002). Participants were presented with a series of 12 cards, each of which depicted a child engaged in an activity. These activities were either on the floor or on the table, in the presence of an adult (usually a teacher) of in the absence of an adult, and either a closed or an open activity. Following the AASP task, each of the teachers were also interviewed to find out more about their thoughts and perceptions of play, and its importance to the development of children. Data from this study shows differences in the perceptions of play between children's and their teachers. Children reported that the presence of an adult in the AASP stimuli has no influence on their play choices, whereas teachers believed that the presence of an adult influences the types of play engaged in by children. Both children and teachers reported similar judgements of 'play' for the play type (open & close) and location (table & floor). These findings are somewhat in contrast to earlier work using AASP (Howard 2002, 2004; McInnes, 2009), which showed that children reported fewer 'play' judgements when an adult was shown in the AASP stimuli. The reasons for these differences are not immediately clear, however given that this current research was a replication of McInnes et al (2011) using children based in Turkey, it is possible that there are important cultural differences that can explain these differences, and as such, further work on this phenomenon is needed.

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