

Full Length Research Paper

Conceptualizing the play policies in preschool curriculums

Tülin ŞENER

Ankara University, Educational Sciences Faculty, 06590, Cebeci-Ankara, Turkey.

Accepted 3 June, 2013

This research attempted to describe the play policies in preschool institutions in Ankara, Turkey. The aim of this study is to determine the approaches of the preschools to the children's play. "Play Policy Questionnaire" administered to all directors and teachers of 20 public preschools and 20 private preschools. Play policy of each preschool was obtained and compared. The data was analyzed by frequencies, percentages and chi-squares. Chi-square analyses showed significant differences in some of the items such as the duration of the play, the budget for the play materials, play environment. The results indicate that we cannot talk about a play policy in preschools in Ankara. The Minister of Education in Turkish Republic has a curriculum for preschool institutions but the institutions and the teachers are following their own programs and making their own choices especially for play.

Key words: Play-policy, children's play, kindergarten, preschool education, Turkish children.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been known that play has an important role on children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. The child learns the roles and the rules of adult world during play, on the other hand have the opportunity to try to expand his/her cognitive capacity. As play is so important in child development, researchers must distinguish the characteristics of play from other behaviours. Also they must place it in the educational programs not only in kindergartens, in elementary schools as well. A basic understanding in early childhood development is that young children learn through play and that play has value for development (Jackson and Angelino, 1974). Accordingly, a rationale is provided for preschool programs to include some form of free-play period during their own activities among various available options. Education is the main aim of preschools beyond the physical safeguarding for the children of full-time employed parents. In placing play at the centre of the curriculum, researchers focus on some competencies that are appropriate to early childhood education (Hoorn

et al., 1993; Walsh, 1989).

Although it is said that the most important function of preschools is to help children in their social development, teaching children is the major issue (Lester and Russell, 2008). Increasingly, children are starting to school with prior school experiences, and kindergarten is essentially becoming a universal experience. Because of these realities and the seepage of academic kindergarten curricula look like (Nielson and Monson, 1996). The curriculum, environments and teaching practices in kindergarten have been influenced by a teacher's philosophy about the nature of child development and learning, as well as by policies regarding the role of public school (Bryant et al., 1991). In literature about the construction of a kindergarten environment and curriculum, there are two notions. They are often referred as *the developmental versus academic*, or *the child-centered versus content-centered* (Spodek, 1988, 1991). Ideologically, the field of early childhood education today is embroiled in controversy, with disagreement being

voiced on the educative value of play and the role that should be ascribed to it in the curriculum of the preschool (Chafel, 1987). Elkind (2008) claims the role of play in physical and psychological well-being has been 'overlooked' in many areas. He states that the school especially goal oriented administrators and teachers transmit the message that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it. It should be pointed out that early childhood teachers are not all proponents of developmentally appropriate practices. Because their professional training and qualifications so varies and, in some cases, even unsuitable, they sometimes contribute to the problem of fostering inappropriate practices. This is a complicating factor that should be acknowledged.

The results of a study (Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002) on how children's time was spent in pre-school education in Northern Ireland suggest that although free play and child-centred activities were most common in nurseries and playgroups, adults tends to direct activities in reception classes. Fisher (1992) reported that research findings showed that only six per cent of the time in classes is spent on play. In the play literature, it is strongly mentioned that the mainstream of learning is achieved through adult-lead activities, despite evidence that supports play as an effective learning method (Burrell and Riley, 2005; Guimaraes and McSherry, 2002) and according to the reports of children the teachers do not like to play (Dockett, 2002).

In Turkish educational system, the importance and place of the preschool education are getting more understood each day. In fact it is still not very popular, especially through low-income families. In Turkey, there are two types of preschools; the first is the public schools that belong to governmental institutions with a low fee for attending. The second is the private schools and they are more expensive than the others and offer many other activities such as horse-riding, swimming, ice-skating, ballet, etc. As a result, low income parents have difficulties with sending their children to preschool institutions as the private preschools are very expensive to pay and the public ones are crowded. Although the curriculum are the same for both of the preschool types, the environmental standards, educational materials, toys and the teaching staff may varied.

The Ministry of Education in Turkish Republic has 3 different programs for preschool institutions; kindergartens for 37 to 66 months old and preschools for 48 to 66 months old and also implementation schools for 37 to 66 month old in which students of the teacher training associations work as tenures.¹ The first one is a regular nursery and the latter is a preschool where children are

getting prepared for the elementary school and the program differs in terms of academic and literacy preparations. In 2012 the Ministry of National Education has gone through a big revision at the Primary Education System in which the children should begin compulsory education at the age of 66 months old. So the new curriculum does not apply to those between 0 to 36 and 61 to 72 months as mentioned in the previous regulation. This age group is now considered as the elementary school level. The new education law requires the children who are 66-months-old to begin to the compulsory education at the elementary school level. The children who are between 60-66 months old can continue to the preschool education according to their parents consent. On the other hand, the parents are allowed to get a "health report" to attest that their children are not ready mentally, physically or emotionally to begin to elementary school. This is why the number of students at the classrooms both at the elementary and the kindergarten schools were chaotic and the age groups were mixed during 2012-2013 education year. It was the first year of the implementations of the new law. In the new curriculum for the kindergarten level, it is strongly mentioned that play has a special role in the preschool education. Although the new regulations underline the play activities as the core of the curriculum; it is easy to see the "free play hours" are inadequate. For example, 37 to 66 months' preschools that have full-time education, there seems to be only 15 min in the morning hours when the children show up and wait for their associates before the daily schedule begins. While the schedule is set up with a lot of activities in which the children learn through play the only free-activity time in the school system is the morning hours between 08.30-9.00 a.m. when the children come to the school. These hours are also for cleaning, health control, and waiting for friends and becoming prepared for the classes. No truly, there is any time left for free-activity time for children. The Turkish Educational Ministry accepts if any preschool makes minor change in the curriculum, if needed. Although there are play sessions in the curriculum, it does not give us an exact idea about the kinds of play, the time allotted to free-play, and the materials that should be used. Thus, each teacher and the director of a preschool follow his/her own way and approach in play sessions.

This research attempts to determine the play policies in preschools in Turkey. This helps to increase the understanding of the appreciation of children's play rights. It is widely known by educators and psychologists (Lester & Russell, 2010) one of the most important items of UN Child's Right Convention is that children have the right to play. In preparation to formal education the best way to teach children is by play. Play does not only have the effect of teaching in preschool programs, it should have the effect of a joyful free-time activity. Thus, preschool programs should include free-play sessions.

¹During the implementation of the study, the previous version of the regulations were effective, so the age groups of the study groups differ. The previous regulation consist the preschool ages in 3groups as 0 to 36 months, 37 to 60 months and 61 to 72 months.

Table 1. The distribution of teachers and directors to the preschools.

Staff	Preschool		Private		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Teachers	118	84.8	76	79.2	188	82.46
Directors	20	15.2	20	20.8	40	17.54
Total	132	100.0	96	100.0	228	100.00

These sessions will help children to create their own world in terms of imagination. The purpose of this study is to determine the approaches of the preschools to the children's play. The differences between public preschools' and private preschools' play approaches were noted.

METHOD

Subjects

According to the purpose of this research, teachers and directors of 20 public and 20 private preschools were taken as samples. In the research only the 37 to 66 months' preschools were being involved. All teachers and directors in these preschools were administered a questionnaire. The total number of sample is 228 (Table 1). From public schools 118 teachers (84.8%) and 20 directors (15.2%) and from private schools 76 teachers (79.2%) and 20 directors (20.8%) were involved in the study. All the sessions were implemented by the researcher herself at the schools during the sleep/rest time of the children. The schools were selected randomly and all the schools were in Ankara Municipality. All the teachers and the directors who have taken the questionnaires gave informed consent to fill in the questionnaires.

The Instrument

The data were collected with "Play Policy Questionnaire" developed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire includes 35 items in order to determine the views of the teachers and directors about the play policies such as the duration of play sessions, kinds of play, kinds of play materials, budget for the play materials, etc. 12 judges evaluated the questionnaire; 6 were testing and measurement and 6 were child development specialists in terms of the language, content and the structure. The instrument had been found to have face validity. The instrument was administered to 5 private and 5 public preschools for the pilot study before the implementations and some of the items were changed according to the feedbacks from the teachers and directors.

FINDINGS

In this section, the findings obtained in this study are presented. Play policy of each preschool (private and public preschools) was obtained and compared. The data were analyzed by frequencies and percentages and chi-squares.

Public preschools mostly give full-time education (94.7%) while most of the private preschools (55.9%) give both full-time and part-time education. No significant

relationship exist ($p > 0.05$) between the answers of the preschools on *whether they have a free-activity time or not*. Both schools have a free-activity time (98.5% in public preschools and 99.0% in private preschools) in which the children can choose what to do. The free-activities consist of similar activities such as craft, drawing, reading/story-telling and games with songs and dances in both public and private preschools. In both preschools, the first most liked free-activity is craft with public preschools (34.1%) and private preschools (31.9%). This may be due to the preschools mostly having craft materials as play dough, paper, scissors, etc. Games with songs and dances seem more in public schools (28.5%), than in private schools (9.6%).

There is a significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 15.27458$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$) between the preschools regarding if there is a teacher-directory in free-activity hours ($C = 0.25161$). Most of the subjects said "to some extent" both in public and private preschools. The teachers' and directors' opinions to why a child should play are similar in public and private preschools. Both preschools consider the amusement, development, and learning purposes of play but they do not consider the leisure purpose. This may be due to the fact that a leisure activity is considered as doing nothing by the teachers so they did not want to mark that item for social desirability reason.

There is a significant relationship between the preschools regarding the duration of the "merely play" hours in daily education ($\chi^2 = 18.54825$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$). However, this relationship is low ($C = 0.27428$). Private schools give quite more time for "merely play" than public schools (more than 4 h is 3.8% in public preschools and 14.6% in private preschools and between 3 to 4 h is 17.4% in public preschools and 29.2% in private preschools). On the other hand, there is not a significant relationship between the answers of the preschools whether they have a free-play time or not. Both schools have free-play time. There is a significant but a low relationship ($C = 0.20250$) between the preschools regarding the duration of the free-play ($\chi^2 = 8.63724$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$). Private schools give more time for "free-play" than public schools (more than 4 h is 1.7% in public preschools and 2.4% in private preschools and between 3 to 4 h is 8.4% in public preschools and 22.9% in private preschools). On the contrary between 1 to 2 h and less than 1 h is seen more in public schools than private schools (60.5% in public and 50.6% in private schools).

Table 2. The distribution of the kinds of toys to the preschools

Kinds of toys	Public		Private	
	N	%	n	%
Dolls/toy animals/soft toys	131	99,2	93	96,9
Miniature items	118	89,4	93	96,9
Manipulative toys	127	96,2	93	96,9
Electronic toys	39	29,5	41	42,7
Art and craft toys	129	97,7	95	99,0
Educational items	112	84,8	89	92,7
Table games	75	56,8	74	77,1
Musical items	87	65,9	73	76,0
Movement toys	48	36,4	59	61,5
Play items	83	62,9	81	84,4
Fiction characters	9	6,8	13	13,7
Toy weapons	17	12,9	2	2,1
Models	50	37,9	47	49,0
Other	-	-	-	-

and 29.4% in public and 24.1% in private schools respectively). The teachers and directors of both public and private preschools' consider the constructive play as the most-liked play kind. The second most-liked play is responded as dramatic play and the third most-liked play is responded as games with rules by both public and private preschools. As seen in Table 2, preschools have many kinds of toys that were in the list of the questionnaire. The private preschools seem having more toys than public preschools. If we compare the percentages, the electronic toys, table games, musical items, movement toys, play items and models are more at private preschools. On the other hand, toy weapons are more often responded in public preschools (12.9%) than private preschools (2.1%).

The distribution of the answers of the teachers and directors to the question of "what are the characteristics that preschools consider when they buy toys?" show that most of the teachers' and directors' consideration when they buy toys are appropriateness of children's developmental level (97.7% in public and 97.9% in private preschools), safety and security of toy (93.2% in public and 97.9% in private preschools), and solidity of toy (88.6% in public and 89.6% in private preschools).

The distribution of the answers of the teachers to the question of "what is your approach if children want to play during other activities?" show that most of the teachers (93.9% in public and 91.7% in private preschools) continue the present activity but the children are told that they may play after the activity. Punishment was not a choice. There is a significant but low ($C=0.14060$) relationship ($\chi^2=4.49738$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$) between the preschools regarding whether there's an outdoor place that children can play. They both have outdoor playgrounds (80.3% in public preschools and 90.6% in private preschools). The difference between the

preschools is significant regarding if there is a toy-day implementation ($\chi^2=33.90281$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). This relationship is moderate ($C=0.36048$). Most of the subjects responded as "yes" in both preschools (61.1% in public and 94.8% in private schools) while 38.9% responded as "no" in public preschools, only 5.2% responded as "no" in private preschools. This relationship indicates that toy-day practice is more common in private preschools. In the curriculum for preschools in Turkey, there is not a toy-day practice item but as it is seen in this table almost all teachers and directors in private preschools have an agreement in toy-day practice.

There is a significant relationship ($\chi^2=30.40117$, $df=2$, $p<0.05$) between the preschools regarding if there are field trips for play. The private preschools responded more "yes" than public preschools (55.8% in public preschools and 90.2% in private preschools) while the public preschools answered more "sometimes" than private preschools (36.4% in public preschools and 7.6% in private preschools). This result may be due to the fact that the budgets of the preschools differ. To make a trip should require some amount of money such as the transportation or entrance fee. And also public schools have to inform the institution which they belong to and get permission and as a result because of some bureaucratic reasons they sometimes have difficulties getting the permission. So there are less field trips in public preschools than in private preschools. There is also a significant relationship between the preschools regarding answers of the question of the ratio of the yearly income spent for toy-buying ($\chi^2=48.81417$, $df=5$, $p<0.05$) and this relationship seems moderate ($C=0.46088$). The ratio of the yearly income spent for toy-buying is more in private preschools than public preschools (between 51 to 75% is 3.7% in public preschools and 19.4% in private preschools and between 26 to 50% is 13.8% in public

preschools and 38.9% in private preschools). On the contrary, more than 75% and less than 5% is seen more in public schools than private schools (2.8% in public and 1.4% in private schools and 28.4% in public and 5.6% in private schools respectively). One important point in this Table as seen, 25.7% of the subjects responded to the choice of “no spent” in public preschools, while 2.8% of the subjects responded to the same item in private preschools. This result is derived from the public preschools shows that no constant yearly income is given to the preschool by the institution which they belong to. Some of the public preschools are given some amount of money just for toy-buying in the beginning of each year by the institution while some of them are not given any money but the parents are gathering the money for toy-buying.

There is a significant relationship ($\chi^2=23.12520$, $df=2$, $p<0.05$) between the preschools regarding whether the budget for toy buying is sufficient or not. The relationship is moderate ($C=0.33254$). Most of the subjects responded as “no” in public preschools (40.0%) while most of the subjects responded as “yes” in private preschools (62.0%). This result shows us the fact that in public preschools the institution does not have sufficient budget to buy toys.

The teachers and directors were asked to write down the program/directory/regulation of the school, but most of the subjects did not write anything or could not write similar activities with the teachers whom they work with. This result indicates that there is not a regular program/directory/regulation for play that all the teachers follow.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to determine the play policies in preschools in Ankara. Play policy of each preschool (public and private preschools) was obtained and compared. The data was analyzed by frequencies and chi-squares. The analyses showed some significant differences between public and private preschools' play implementations.

In literature there seems a diversity between two notions of constructing a curriculum as *the child-centered versus content-centered* (Spodek, 1988). The child-centered approach considers children's developmental level more and tries to place play activities at the center of the curriculum and give children time to play freely. Content-centered preschools usually deal with the academic issues and even play activities according to this notion takes place as a subject. In this research, we see that private preschools seem to ignore the first notion and the public preschools seem to ignore the latter. This result is not only derived from the duration of the free-play, but from the budget for the play materials, from the outdoor play environments and from field trips as well. Nevertheless, it should be noted that because private

preschools are more expensive than public ones, they can offer more charming services and spend more money in buying imported toys, arrange their physical conditions more into play, spend more time with field trips and so on. The public preschools, on the contrary, have very limited physical and social conditions. Not all of them but mostly, they are situated in or near the building of the governmental institution which they are consisted in and have small indoor places. They usually do not have an outdoor play environment. The budget is directed by the governmental institution itself and it is much less than the private preschools' budget; they have to inform the institution whatever they do and get permission when it comes to spending money. If their institutions confirms, then they can spend money. Despite all these competencies of private preschools, the social desirability effect and the necessity to make advertisements is a very complicating factor that should be again acknowledged.

Considering the distribution of teachers and directors in public and private preschools, the number of teachers of public preschools is more than the number of teachers of private preschools. This is why public preschools are crowded and most of the full-time employed parents require physical guarding for their children in spite of education as they have no one to leave their children when they go work. Therefore, parents of the public preschools have lower expectations about the educational setting of the preschool. In addition, because the teachers' and directors' are not very well qualified and their professional training may vary (Baykan and Ömerođlu, 1993), the classes are full enough to be influenced by so many different factors. This fact supports the idea of Bryant et al. (1991) that the curriculum, environment and teaching practices in preschools are affected by teachers' philosophy about the nature of child development and by policies regarding the role of the school. Spodek (2004) also argues that the teacher training programs should be well structured underlying the importance of play. At the other hand, although teachers' and directors' opinions do not differ between public and private preschools and they both argue that there is not a teacher-direction during free-play hours. The fact is that teachers inappropriately seek to organize the structure. Besides, teachers occupy children's play on behalf of their own educational, vocational and socialization backgrounds. This way play becomes captured when it is under the control of *some forces* beyond the child's innate playfulness (Garberino and Manly, 1996). Although children may spend their time in a number of different settings, research suggests that children's own definition of 'free time' involves time spent away from adult supervision and control (Mayall, 2000). As mentioned earlier, children's right to play is strongly emphasized in the UN Declaration of Children's Rights and play is taken as one of the major educational influences with helping children to acquire the technical knowledge, the roles and the values that will be required

in adult life and with helping them to have fun.

The results of this research simplify to conceive that the play approaches in preschools in Turkey should be revised both in minds and in curriculums. The play hours are as limited as 15 min in the morning hours that children cannot organize what they are going to play. In the programs of the different types of preschool institutions in Turkey, play is identified as a means in teaching the academic stuff. As Stegelin (2005) argues, the exploratory and open-ended nature as well as the intrinsic, evolutionary, synergistic nature of play and also the developmental aspects should be considered in the curriculums of preschools.

In conclusion, talking about the play policies of preschools in Turkey, this study attempt to clarify the approaches to play and practices of play in terms of the duration of play, teachers' trends, physical conditions of the schools, etc. At the beginning of this research, it was aimed in determining the policies and thereby to give a picture of the appearance of the play practices, however, it is seen that in spite of talking about a policy or policies, talking about a non-policy is better to conceptualize. The results indicate that although the Minister of National Education in Turkish Republic has a curriculum strongly underlying that play is important for a child's life, the institutions and the teachers are following their own "programs" and making their own choices for play. These results show us that it is necessary to prepare a "play policy" that should be used strictly at the all levels of preschool system.

REFERENCES

- Baykan S, Ömerođlu E (1993). Türkiye'de okulöncesi kurumların durum tespiti araştırması sonuçları. MEB Okulöncesi Eğitim Genel Müdürlüğü Yayınları, Ankara.
- Bryant DM, Clifford RM, Peisner ES (1991). Best practices for beginners: Developmental appropriateness in kindergarten. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* 28(4):783-803.
- Burrell A, Riley J (2005). *Promoting Children's Well-Being in the Primary Years: The Right from the Start Handbook*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.
- Chafel JA (1987). Developmental processes and policy implications. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 20(2):115-132.
- Dockett S (2002). Teachers don't play! Children's views of play at schools. *Play Folklore* 42:9-12.
- Elkind D (2008). The Power of play: Learning what comes naturally. *Am. J. Play*, (1)1:1-6.
- Fisher EP (1992). The impact of play on development: A meta-analysis. *Play and Culture*, 5(2):159-181.
- Garberino J, Manly JT (1996). Free play and captured play: releasing the healing power. *Inter. Play J.* 4(2):123-132.
- Guimaraes S, McSherry K (2002). The curriculum experiences of preschool children in Northern Ireland: Classroom practice in terms of child-initiated play and adult directed activities. *Inter. J. Early Yrs. Educ.* (10)2:85-94.
- Hoorn JV, Nourrot PM, Scales B, Alward KR (1993). *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*. Toronto: Maxwell MacMillan.
- Johnson JE, Ershler J, Bell C (1980). Play behavior in discovery-based and a formal education preschool program. *Child Develop.* 51:271-274.
- Lester S, Russell W (2008). *Play for a Change. Play Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*. London: NCB and Play England.
- Lester S, Russell W (2010). *Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Mayall B (2000). The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights. *The International J. Children Rights*, (8)3:243-59.
- Nielson DC, Monson DL (1996). Effects of literacy environment on literacy development of kindergarten children. *J. Educ. Res.* 89(5):259-271.
- Spodek B (1988). Conceptualizing today's kindergarten curriculum. *Element. Sch. J.* 89(2):203-211.
- Spodek B (1991). Reconceptualizing early childhood education: A commentary. *Early Educ. Develop.* 2:161-167.
- Spodek B, Saracho ON (2004). Teachers' preparation and the quality of early childhood programs. *International J. Early Childhood Educ.* 10(1):7-28.
- Stegelin DA (2005). Making the case for play policy: Research-based reasons to support play-based environments, *Young Children*, (60)2:76-85.
- Walsh DJ (1989). Changes in kindergarten: Why here? Why now? *Early Childhood Res. Quart.* 4:377-391.