

Play Support Strategies of Preschool Teachers with Different Perspectives on Play and Its Role in Child's Development

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The recognition of play importance does not always lead to the creation of good conditions for its development. An attempt to turn play into classes, to use it for teaching, leads to the disappearance of spontaneous play from kindergartens. There is a gap between the declared pedagogical aim and real practice. This may be due to understanding the key features of play and its role in child's development. The purpose of the study is to study what criteria teachers use to distinguish between play and a pseudo-play, how the understanding of play is related to the strategy of its support. Structured interviews, including commentary on 2 videos, were conducted with 34 preschool teachers. The assessment of the conditions for play development was carried out using the scale "Play Environmental Rating Scale" in 28 preschool classrooms (13 kindergartens). The average total score is 3,35 (sd=1,31; med=3,43), which corresponds to the minimal quality level of conditions for play. Key deficits are the participation of the teacher in joint play with children, the provision of conditions for multi-age interaction. Significant differences are revealed in the strategy of play support among teachers with a contrasting understanding of the pseudo-play video. Teachers who distinguish between play and pseudo-play and emphasize the developmental value of spontaneous children's play create a multifunctional play environment and more often participate in joint play as partners. Teachers who do not distinguish between a play and a pseudo-play are more often too didactic or outsiders, they create a realistic play environment. The results of the study can be used in elaboration of programs for teacher's professional development.

Keywords: preschool age, play, quality assessment, play support, play environment.

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Стратегии сопровождения игры у дошкольных педагогов с разным пониманием игры и ее развивающей ценности

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Признание педагогами важности игры не всегда приводит к созданию условий для ее развития. Попытки превратить игру в занятия влекут за собой исчезновение спонтанной игры из детских са-

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дов. Происходит разрыв между заявляемой педагогической задачей и реальной практикой. Это может быть связано с непониманием ключевых особенностей игры и ее роли в развитии ребенка. Цель исследования — изучить, какими критериями педагоги пользуются для различения игры и псевдоигры, чем отличаются стратегии сопровождения игры у педагогов с разным пониманием. Интервью, включающее комментирование двух видео, были проведены с 34 дошкольными педагогами. Оценка условий для развития игры проводилась с использованием шкалы «Поддержка детской игры» в 28 дошкольных группах (13 образовательных организаций). Средний балл составил 3,35 (sd = 1,31; med = 3,43), что соответствует минимальному уровню условий для игры. Ключевые дефициты: участие педагога в совместной игре с детьми, обеспечение условий для разновозрастного взаимодействия. Выявлены значимые различия в стратегии сопровождения игры у педагогов с контрастным пониманием видео псевдоигры. Педагоги, различающие игру и псевдоигру и подчеркивающие развивающую ценность спонтанной детской игры, создают полифункциональную игровую среду, чаще включаются в совместную игру как партнеры. Для педагогов, не различающих игру и псевдоигру, характерны отстраненная и дидактическая позиции, реалистичная игровая среда. Результаты исследования могут быть использованы для разработки программ профессионального развития педагогов.

Ключевые слова: дошкольный возраст, игра, оценка качества, сопровождение игры, игровая среда.

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Introduction

In preschool practice, a contradiction is becoming more and more apparent: the Federal State Educational Standard defines play development as a target, teachers recognize its value [14], at the same time, the turn towards the predominance of organized school-like activity over free activity continues [3; 12]. Directive pedagogy, over-organization of the life of preschoolers, a shift in focus from the development of universal abilities to knowledge acquisition cause the replacement of spontaneous play by pseudo-play and have a negative impact on child development [10; 16; 20]. At the same time, organization of play environment is very popular issue among teachers: new manuals are published, teachers share the results of their work on the network, and they spend a lot of effort on creating realistic play attributes and thematic play corners. However, all this works both against the child and against the teacher, taking time and effort, strengthening the illusion of the existence of play practice. An attempt to turn children's play into adult-led activities, to exploit it for learning, leads to the primitivization of children's play [4; 11; 21]. This may be due to the adults' distorted understanding of play development and teachers' role in its support. The more primitive play the teacher observes in the group, the more he/she wants to complicate and enrich it (that is, to perform the traditional role of the teacher). There is a gap between the declared pedagogical task and real practice, the development of spontaneous play can be blocked. To overcome it, it is necessary to study how teachers understand children's play and pseudo-play, the value of play for children's development, as well as the conditions for play development that are created in kindergartens. In a survey conducted 6 years ago, teachers were asked to assess three videos in terms of the adequacy of the play

setting to key features of child development and comment on their choice [13]. Most of the Teachers assessed the pseudo-play highly, with single high ratings for videos of spontaneous play. The existing problems with play support in preschool can be associated precisely with a undervaluation of play, a shift in priorities to the secondary educational tasks in relation to play itself. However, this study did not analyze the real conditions for the play development in classrooms and the sample was not controlled.

Our recent study [14] showed that teachers recognize the value of play, but understand it differently, while the conditions for play support in two clusters of teachers with different views on play did not differ significantly (preschool classrooms were contrasting in terms of the quality of play support). Recognition of the value of play may underlie opposing strategies to its support or, conversely, an outwardly similar strategy (outsider position). This may be due to the fact that teachers recognize the importance of play, but imbue different meanings into its definition.

In this study, we focused on the criteria teachers use to distinguish play from pseudo-play, as well as understanding the role of play in child development and its relation to the quality of play support.

Understanding of play

We consider the imaginary situation as the criterion of play. An imaginary situation is a divergence between the semantic and real fields [1; 4]. The key characteristic of play is double-subjectivity, that is, the ability of the player to be both "inside" and "outside" of play (to play and control the play course). By a pseudo-play we mean an activity that resembles play only in its external

form, but in fact is not play. The key features of a pseudo-play are external goals, a ready-made scenario, directive interaction and the lack of children's own subjectivity (agency). Unlike a scenario, an imaginary situation belongs to the child him/herself, is created by him/her, and is not imposed from outside. Spontaneous play does not require to be spectacular, artistic, or completed. Spontaneous play is a movement in the semantic field of the child, the process of playing is crucial, and not the final result, which is mandatory in the case of pseudo-play.

Play support may be indirect or involve an adult participating in joint play. The teacher can take different positions in joint play: outsider, didactic organizer, supporter (or partner) [9; 15; 17; 21]. The ability to take a partner position implies a balance of child-adult initiatives in play (two-sided interaction), respect for the child's play ideas, improvisation, a good level of adult play. Partner position constitutes teacher's play competence and contributes to play development [8; 9; 21; 22]. At the same time, this is the most difficult position for a teacher, especially if the didactic position is more familiar to her/him [15; 18]. It is necessary to study the factors that maintain the sustainability of changes in the pedagogical position (from didactic to partner) and allow teachers reflect on their strategies on play support.

We consider play support strategy as the conditions that the teacher creates for play development. The educational environment of the preschool classroom (space and materials for play, play-time and transitions, support of peer interaction and adult-child interaction) does not arise by itself, but is created by the teacher on the basis of his/her perspectives on children's play. Play support strategy can be associated with distinguishing between play and pseudo-play and understanding its value for child development.

The research aim is to study how teachers understand play and what criteria they use to distinguish between play and pseudo-play, how the play support strategies differ among teachers with different perspectives on play.

Research hypotheses:

1. Teachers with different perspectives on play (including different criteria for distinguishing play and pseudo-play) use different play support strategies. Teachers who distinguish between play and pseudo-play, who highly appreciate the developmental potential of play, create conditions of higher quality for the play development in their preschools. They more often participate in joint play and take a partner position.

2. Spatial and material aspects of play environment as well as time for play will show less deficits than the indirect play support and adult's participation in joint play.

Methods

The study was conducted in 2022. The quality of educational environment was assessed with the «Play

Environment Rating Scale. ECERS-3 extension (PERS)» [6; 7]. Trained experts conducted a three-hour structured non-participant observation (5 experts participated in the study, interrater agreement – more than 80%). The scale was elaborated on the basis of the principles of developing quality assessment with the focus on the conditions for the development of a mature play, the complex play support, in which the playing adult is a mediator in the transfer of play culture and a partner. The scale assumes a 7-point quality score: 1.00–2.99 mean inadequate quality level (serious risks for play development); 3.00–4.99 – the minimal level of quality (no serious risks, but teacher doesn't pay special attention to the play development, the conditions for play are provided according to the "residual principle" or accidentally appear); 5.00–6.99 – good quality level (regular complex play support); 7.00 – excellent level (expansion of opportunities for mature play development).

The structured interview included the analysis of two contrasting videos. The videos were selected with the participation of 5 experts, who simultaneously evaluated the initially proposed 4 videos as play or pseudo-play (the criterion of play is an imaginary situation). For the study, 2 videos were selected, unanimously rated by experts as play (Video 1) and pseudo-play (Video 2). The duration of both videos is approximately the same (no more than 2 minutes 30 seconds), they were filmed in a «

The interviewer sequentially showed both videos to the teacher. Videos were presented without titles and additional comments. After watching each video, the teacher was asked to answer the question «Do you think this is play? Why? ». After watching two videos, the question «How do these activities in the videos contribute to child's development? » was asked.

The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed. The study participants gave their voluntary consent to the quality assessment and interview, at any time they could refuse to participate in the study. All data has been anonymized.

Sample

The study was conducted in 13 educational organizations in Moscow. In order to ensure sample variability, 8 state organizations from different administrative districts and 5 non-state organizations were selected (among them, an extra-budgetary preschool group is represented in equal proportions – a resource center at the university, a commercial organization, a charitable organization, an autonomous non-profit organization, a family center).

Play support quality assessment was carried out in 28 preschool classrooms (of which 3 mixed-age classrooms) implementing various educational programs: 16 of them work according to the program 'Ot rozhdeniya

do shkoly' [From Birth to School] (4 according to the traditional version, 12 according to the innovative version, in which the emphasis is declared on the value of free activities of children in the structure of the day), 3 under the program "PRODETEY" [ABOUTCHILDREN], 9 implement author's programs developed by teachers (2 of them are aimed at developing creative thinking with attention to play as a leading activity in which it can develop, 2 – on approach "Play pedagogy" with the integration of children with disabilities into groups of normotypical children, 5 – with the priority of free activity for the formation of child subjectivity and the development of play). The ratio of programs can be considered typical in relation to a cluster with an unknown quality of conditions for the play development and predictable in relation to a cluster with an assumed higher quality of conditions in relation to the previously identified quality of conditions [14]. The number of children from 3 to 7 years old on the list in classrooms varies from 9 to 37, the average value is 27 (median 28.5). An average of 14 children were present during the examination (range 3 to 30, median 13). The number of children with disabilities is from 0 to 7 (median 0).

Interviews were conducted with the participation of 34 teachers working in the preschool classrooms from our sample. The majority of teachers (41.2%) have working experience from 3 to 10 years; 26.5% – from 11 to 25 years; 14.7% – less than 3 years; 5.8% – over 26 years old. The majority of teachers have higher education (67.6%): 29.4% are qualified in psychology and pedagogy, 11.8% have a master's degree in pedagogy or educational psychology. The rest of the teachers have secondary vocational or incomplete higher education. 11.8% of teachers attended advanced training courses, in-service trainings and seminars on play support.

Results

The table shows the results of play support quality assessment.

Most items, except for 5 and 7, are at the minimal quality level, the range of scores is quite large (from 1

to 6 and even 7). In the first four items, the median indicates that at least half of the sample got no more than 4 scores, which, although it demonstrates the minimal level of quality, indicates the presence of signs of the good quality level. The spatio-temporal component and the teacher's help to children in organizing space and materials for play, supporting interaction between the players are generally more favorable in the sample than the last three aspects – adult's participation in play (at least half of the sample does not exceed the score of 2.5), peer interaction in play (the middle of the ordered series of values accounts for 3 points) and mixed-age play and interaction (the lowest score of the median is 2 – in at least half of the classrooms conditions are critically insufficient for play development).

Upon a more detailed examination of the results, it is noted that the items "Adult's participation in play" and "Mixed-age play and interaction" are deficient (the mean score for them is below 3 points). An analysis of the scale items reveals the presence of the following deficits: the adult does not give enough time for the children to unfold their play ideas, does not play as a partner from the role, and imposes his didactic tasks on the playing children. Also, a group of indicators of item 5 makes it possible to distinguish each of the positions of an adult's play support: 1.1 and 3.1 – an outsider position; 1.4 and 3.3 – didactic position, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 – partner position. An analysis of the sample data shows that an outsider position is the most popular. In a quarter of the classrooms, a didactic position was observed, in half of the groups – two-sided interaction between an adult and children in a joint play, which characterizes a partner position.

Interestingly, even in groups with a higher quality of conditions for the development of play, there are typical deficits associated with the level of play development of the adult him/herself (no metacommunication and change of positioning in play (inside and outside of play), low level of role play). There was also a lack of evidence that children have the opportunity to communicate and play with children of a different age in terms of the conditions for mixed-age interaction and play.

The strengths of most groups are that children have space available for their play, at least a minimum

Table

The results of play support quality assessment (Play Environment Rating Scale. ECERS-3 extension (PERS))

PERS items	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Minimal score	Maximal score
Total score	3,35	1,31	3,43	1,29	6,00
1. Space and equipment for play	3,75	1,51	4	1	6
2. Time for play and transitions between play and other activities (starting/ending play)	3,64	1,73	4	1	7
3. Play materials	3,32	1,79	4	1	7
4. Indirect play support	3,68	1,36	4	1	6
5. Adult's participation in joint play	2,86	1,82	2,5	1	7
6. Peer interaction in play	3,61	1,5	3	1	7
7. Mixed-age play and interaction	2,57	1,55	2	1	6

amount of time for play (at least 25 minutes in total) in the morning (first half of the day) when they are most active, and some materials for play, including a small number of unstructured materials. Higher quality groups (with a total score of 4 or higher) are characterized by a greater variety of unstructured materials and materials for transforming space indoors and outdoors, large and continuous uninterrupted periods of time (1 hour or more) for play, as well as flexible planning of the day, taking into account interests of playing children. In classrooms of higher quality, the adult more often joined play from a partner position, developed two-sided interaction with the children.

The analysis of two contrasting videos made it possible to reveal the peculiarities in distinguishing between the genuine play and the pseudo-play by preschool teachers. Video 1 was categorized by most (except two) teachers as genuine play, using criteria such as child involvement, enjoyment, and activity. However, ratings for this video varied. Some of the teachers in their assessments relied on the importance of the children's emotional experiences (*perezhivanie*), their own play ideas. These teachers also mentioned the children's idea, imagination as criteria. For example, T13 (T – teacher) noted: “Here you can see that this is play. The idea belongs to children, they are involved, emotions, everything is so genuine, a live play, children are interested, involved. They live through their own play.” These teachers emphasized the developmental value of spontaneous play and noted that it is in such play that children develop their imagination, emotions, communication with other children, and self-regulation. Another part of the teachers, noting that there was play on Video 1, nevertheless rated it as pampering or a low level of play. For example, T22: “For children, probably, it’s a play, it’s rather pampering. Well, it’s a play, because they seem to be swimming, looking, this is ... There is a moment of play, and there is a moment of entertainment. Of course, children need to move and jump<...> They don’t save anyone, they just stupidly indulge with rope. Again, teacher shouldn’t stop it, sometimes children need such pampering”.

Strong differences between teachers appeared in the evaluation of Video 2. The answers of teachers can be divided into two clusters. Teachers from cluster 1 (n=19) pointed out that in video 2 there was no play, but theatricalization, a scenario played out, actions according to an adult's instructions. As criteria, they pointed to the constraint of children, orientation to an adult, a sense of a pre-prepared scenario, excessive realism of play attributes and children's actions with them. It is important to note that all teachers in this cluster rated Video 1 as a spontaneous play valuable in terms of child development.

At the same time, teachers from cluster 2 (n=15) emphasized that Video 2 also has play, but even more developed and complex than play in Video 1. As criteria, they used the plot, the presence of play attributes,

and artistry. Let's quote T23's comment on Video 2: “Play, of course. Another level of play. A play in which there is already knowledge about, let's say, a cafe, what kind of pizza exists, how a waiter behaves in a cafe, that is, such a different level of play”. That is, they, unlike the teachers of cluster 1, did not contrast the two videos, but compared them with each other in terms of the level of development of play and educational opportunities. In their opinion, Video 2 has a relatively large developmental potential: in Video 1, the motor sphere develops, children relax, have fun, and in Video 2, children gain knowledge about cafes, pizza recipes, professions, they learn rules of behavior in public places, politeness, vocabulary, artistry; sociability and self-regulation develop.

Next, a statistical analysis of differences in play support strategies among teachers of two selected clusters was carried out based on the Video 2 score (the Welch's t-test and the Mann–Whitney U-test). Significant differences (at the level of $p < 0.001$) were revealed in the play support strategy among teachers with a contrasting understanding of Video 2 and its developmental value for children, both in terms of the total PERS score and in each item's score (see Fig.).

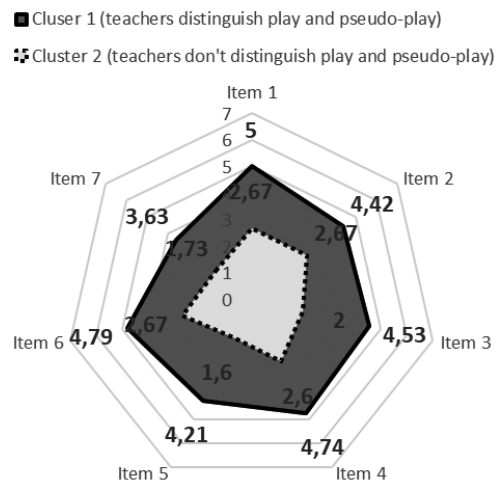


Fig. Comparative diagram of the average scores of two clusters by PERS items (Item1 – Space and equipment for play, Item 2 – Time and transitions between play and other activities, Item 3 – Materials for play, Item 4 – Indirect play support, Item 5 – Adult's participation in joint play, Item 6 – Peer-interaction in play, Item 7 – Mixed-age play and interaction)

Preschool teachers who distinguish between play and pseudo-play and emphasize the developmental value of spontaneous children's play create more conditions for play development in their preschool classrooms: there is more time for play, unstructured materials and materials for space transformation are available, they support the use and transformation of space for play according to children's own play ideas, they more often participate in joint play as partners and support the interaction of children, including those of different ages, even in single age classrooms.

Discussion

The analysis allows us to conclude that the first hypothesis is confirmed and the second one is partially confirmed. Play support strategies among teachers with different perspectives on play are different.

Teachers who distinguish between play and pseudo-play (they use more play-specific criteria: children's own play ideas, imagination), create a more loose, multifunctional play environment that helps the child act in the semantic field, provide more uninterrupted time for play. These teachers more often participate in joint play and take a partner position. Moreover, among these teachers there were those who consciously join play, and those who play only after all the classes, according to the residual principle, doubting the correctness of their pedagogical actions. The common deficit of teachers in this cluster is the low level of their own play development: teachers provide two-sided play interaction, but so far rarely act as mediators of play culture transfer.

Teachers who emphasize the developmental value of pseudo-play and do not distinguish between play and pseudo-play (they use broad criteria: pleasure, activity, involvement) create a realistic environment that leaves the child in a real field. Spontaneous children's play is perceived by them rather as entertainment, pampering, a low level of play, which is reflected in the structuring of the program: in these groups, the time for play is too fragmented (short breaks between classes) and does not exceed 25 minutes. In play support they often took an outsider or didactic position. This highlights the need to develop programs for teachers' methodological support, including training in reflective play observation; creating conditions for pedagogical reflection and development of adult's play [4; 15].

Interestingly, it was the video of the pseudo-play that was assessed differently by the teachers with different play support strategies. Most teachers correctly assessed the video of spontaneous play (the criteria they used varied). Unlike the results of earlier studies [13], we cannot argue that the majority of teachers highly appreciate the developmental value of pseudo-play. In our sample, one of the cluster was characterized by an emphasis on the developmental value of spontaneous play and a clear distinction between play and pseudo-play. The differences between clusters in play support strategies may be associated with a widespread mistake in understanding play. L.S. Vygotsky pointed out that play is a creative transformation of experienced impressions, and not their recollection or direct reproduction [1]. If a child's play is understood by a teacher as copying reality, then this may also be reflected in what ideal form of play he/she will strive to convey to the child [2]. In this case, the ideal form of play is distorted, it is replaced by a certain external standard, ready-made sample, which destroys child's spontaneous play [4]. As a sign of a developed play,

teachers begin to consider an increasingly accurate reproduction of reality. The teacher falls into the trap described by S.L. Novoselova and E.V. Zvorygina [5]: they exploit play to enrich the experience, and does not enrich the experience of children to develop play. In our study, this revealed in adult's didactic, too realistic play environment, as well as in the answers of teachers about the high developmental value of pseudo-play. They emphasized secondary aspects, academic knowledge acquisition as developmental potential of play. These answers did not reflect the unique value of play itself for child development. And vice versa, when the teacher considers play as a creative transformation, he/she recognizes the subjectivity of the playing child, the importance of his/her ideas. In this case, the ideal form is understood by the teacher as a developed play, which is based on the child's own experiences and meanings. And this perspective on play is reflected in the conditions that are created in the preschool classroom. Notably the differences that have emerged can also be related to the quality of the teacher's personal play experience (the more often they play, the more they understand and appreciate play). This assumption needs additional verification and it is a direction for further research.

In general, for the entire sample, the level of quality of play environment according to PERS items 1–3 (space, materials and time for play) turned out to be higher than the level of quality of joint adult-child play (item 5) and support for children's interaction, including mixed-age interaction (items 6–7). This is consistent with the results of other studies showing the difficulty of mastering the partner position for the teacher and the high prevalence of the outsider position [15; 17; 19]. The quality of indirect play support turned out to be of a higher level than expected. Moreover, a higher level is typical for cluster 1. This may indicate that teachers who value spontaneous play and distinguish it from pseudo-play, place more emphasis on indirect support in their practice.

The entire sample is characterized by a lack of conditions for mixed-age interaction and play. Perhaps this is due to a lack of understanding of the significance of this condition for play development or the presence of organizational difficulties (prohibition of mixing groups), a lack of methodological support.

The number of teachers in the sample highly appreciating pseudo-play videos turned out to be less than expected. On the one hand, this may indicate an insufficient representativeness of the sample and the need to conduct research on a larger sample of teachers. On the other hand, this may be evidence of changes taking place in preschool practice, the "renaissance of play" [11]. In order to increase the sustainability of changes, it is necessary to create and develop a community of playing teachers, in which they could receive the support of colleagues and experts, and make their play practice more visible.

Conclusion

Conditions for play development in most preschool classrooms remain at a minimal level. At the same time, classrooms with a good quality of play environment were also identified. The play support strategies differ significantly among teachers with different understanding of the criteria for distinguishing between play

and pseudo-play and the value of play for child development.

As areas for further research, we can point out the study of the influence of teachers' play experience on their perspective on the value of children's play, the study of the level of play development of modern preschoolers, taking into account the quality of the educational environment in their classrooms.

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