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Play’s importance in school

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The purpose of this study is to contribute knowledge on and gain an understanding of elementary school teachers’ perspectives on the function of play in children’s learning processes. The study is qualitative with a hermeneutical approach and has George Herbert Mead as a theoretical frame of reference. Interviews have been carried out with seven teachers. The material was interpreted into four main categories: learning, development, teaching, and socialisation. Play used in school results in positive social effects, as pointed out by the teachers. The social and the academic skills that play brought to the children were also made obvious in the study’s findings.

Keywords: play; learning; teaching; development; socialisation

Background and purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge on and an understanding of elementary school teachers’ perspectives on the function of play in children’s learning process.

Play has always been a part of human culture and it is important from many different aspects for both children and adults, according to many researchers. Developing through play and finding one’s own identity through it is one of several important components in the development and socialisation of us as individuals according to George Herbert Mead (1995). This study is based on the meaning of play from a social interaction inspired perspective, which George Herbert Mead’s theories have, since play facilitates children’s socialisation into the norms and values of the society at hand – if not consciously then unconsciously – of which relationships are indispensable parts. Symbolic interactionism is a theory of how human beings’ consciousness arises and develops in interaction with other individuals in the environment. The main basis of symbolic interactionism is thus that all interactions are social interactions and understood through symbols. The individual develops a personality by societal attitudes and language. Symbolic interactionism deals with the relationship between perception and action. It deals with how to understand yourself and what you can do, and suggests that the situation is dependent on the actions of others and that we are strongly influenced by the people of our world. The approach focuses on the dynamic and social activities that occur between people. It states that individuals are active but act and behave for the specific situation in the present (Charon 1998). That individuals are active

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indicates that we are involved in processes that are not static but changing. In order to understand each other we must understand and interpret each other’s behaviour and in order to do that we must mobilise our empathetic ability to bring us into the actions of others. Charon (1998) argues that if we want to understand another person’s feelings, values and experiences we have to study what they do and how they do it, especially in those situations where individuals interact and communicate with other people. It is about creating an ‘awareness of our own awareness’ and that our own perception of ourselves is described as a social, I, through interaction with others produced our identity. It is through reflection that the social situation becomes experience of the individuals involved. By reflecting the individual can adopt other individuals’ attitudes and thus can be aligned to the current situation. Feelings and experiences are linked. Then we place the events in memory, we assume our experiences and organise them based on our Me. Individuals use different sides of their I depending on the situation. For example, we have an I at work while we have another I at home; with acquaintances we are a sort of I, while in other situations we are a different kind of I. We therefore use the side of the self that corresponds to the social situation that we are part of (Mead 1995).

How you as a teacher view play is based on your pedagogical foundation and this reflects the place play is given in the process of socialisation and development. Play is an indispensable part of children’s life and many of their activities are characterised by play. Children aged 5–10 years old experience play as extra important according to studies where the children’s perspectives of play have been emphasised (see for example Sandberg 2002; Vickerius and Sandberg 2005; Sandberg and Tammemä-Orr 2008). It is therefore significant for teachers to reflect on how they relate to play, since this is expressed in teaching. Thus, it is relevant and interesting to examine how teachers describe play, and its importance in school and to learning. Does teachers’ value play an important part in itself? How do teachers define play in school? This is interesting since most educational studies regarding children’s play are made within pre-school and after-school recreation centres and not in schools. We have chosen to examine an area that has not been researched to any greater extent, i.e. play based on the teacher’s perspective in the school world, how play is experienced by teachers working in elementary school.

Play can be defined in as many ways as there are perspectives and theories. Mead (1995) views play from the meaning that it socialises the child by creating a time for testing one’s values, and especially play’s purpose in itself – that it is pleasurable to play and that feelings of joy, passion, and creativity are therefore created in the child. In play, there is also a development of identity, self-esteem, and a self. Mead claimed that play’s spontaneity, as he expressed it, is what makes it essential. He said that space for play has to be made in school but that you are not to leave the children to themselves, but use play in connection with education and also organise play so that the learning aspects can be utilised.

The view of children and childhood has changed during the last few years. Research today has brought light to another child than the previous norm, a child who is competent and has the ability to create meaning in its existence by itself. A child characterised by the society in which we live, which can be likened to a society of information and communication through the increased amount of information we can take part of in this global community. Today, society places more importance on children’s health and education, which has also changed the view of children, and the theories on developmental psychology have been replaced.
by more social constructionistic sociological theories as well as theories on developmental pedagogics within child research (Pramling Samuelsson 2001; Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2003).

Society’s view of play in different contexts changes with time and is reflected by the reasoning in the media. Historically, play has been something that you do when you are finished with more important duties such as work or homework, and play’s value on its own has not really been noticed. Play has been studied as a phenomenon in and of itself and not in relation to learning. Children spend more time in preschools, after-school recreation centres, and school than they have before and the responsibility has shifted to these institutions that are sometimes considered as having the responsibility for socialising, developing, and raising the children. The time at home – where children can play more freely – decreases as the children age, due to school, after-school recreation centres, and other activities (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2003; Sandberg 2003).

Both teachers and friends have important roles when it comes to children’s learning. The interaction and cooperation among them is vital, i.e. individual as well as collective values (Mead 1995; Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2003). Learning should be seen as serious and the teachers now maybe more than ever have social pressure on them to spend more time on specific academic content in teaching, contents such as writing, reading and language exercises (Bodrova and Leong 2003). Research concerning early learning and development has shown that when children are supported in their play it affects the learning in a positive way (Pramling Samuelsson 2001). Within the research that Bodrova and Leong (2003) have conducted, most of the teachers confirm the theory that children learn through play. Research shows strong connections between the quality of play in pre-school years and children’s readiness for school learning (Bodrova and Leong 2003; Malone and Tranter 2003; Russ 2003). In studies, it became apparent that teachers got the best educational results when they focused on supporting the children’s play. The children in these classrooms not only acquired literary skills and concepts of a higher level, but also developed more advanced language and social skills. They also learned to manage their physical and cognitive behaviour. In classrooms where play was not used as consciously, teachers had various problems, such as some students trying to control the classroom and a lack of interest from the students regarding reading and writing. By carefully supporting play without dominating or disrupting it, teachers can support the children’s learning and development (Bodrova and Leong 2003). Malone and Tranter (2003) claim that play is not only a pleasurable activity but also a process through which children learn. Play betters the problem-solving abilities and creates opportunities and situations where the children can experiment and be creative.

This brings us to the following questions. How is play described in connection with learning? How does the teacher, from a pedagogical standpoint, try to bring play into teaching? In what way is the importance of play for the child’s development emphasised? In what way can play affect the child’s socialisation? We will identify the gaps in knowledge especially in connection with elementary school.

**Method**

We have been inspired by a hermeneutical research approach (Ödman 1994) in reviewing the literature, carrying out interviews, processing and interpreting the
sample. We have interpreted the different parts of the sample as a whole by trying to find an internal connection in the sample, through, among other things, interpreting separate statements and comparing these interpretations with interview data and previous research at the interview analysis. The hermeneutical spiral has been a guiding light as the separate parts have been woven together to a whole and an understanding (Ödman 1994; Kvale 1997). The selection of informants in this study was strategic in order to achieve as wide a conception span as possible and increase the possibility to receive detailed and comprehensive descriptions, and also to obtain maximum variation in the sample. Initially, contact was established with principals in one community in Sweden. The preceding sampling procedure, as well as the analysis, was aimed at analytical and not statistical generalisation (Miles and Huberman 1994; Kvale 1997). Qualitative inquiry focuses both in depth and on small samples (Patton 1990). A limited sample was used. Semi-structured interviews with seven teachers in elementary school Grades 1 through 6 participated. They have all worked for about 10 years as teachers in schools and have thus undergone similar teacher education. These informants were collected through their experiences of transition from pre-school to school. Play is also important in school and when the child starts school their interest for play does not decrease. The National Agency for Education (2006) in Sweden calls attention to play as a fundamental component of active learning. Particularly in the elementary schools, play is very important in helping pupils to acquire knowledge. How teachers reflect on play is expressed in their teaching. Another motive for sampling teachers from this grade was that most studies regarding children’s play are not from school environments. We have chosen to investigate an area that has not been researched to any great extent. We chose not to divide the teachers depending on the age group they work with because teachers are working on the same curriculum in elementary schools. We are not looking for a representative sample from the population, but want to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of elementary teachers’ perspectives of the functions of play in children’s learning process.

The reason for having chosen to do semi-structured interviews from a qualitative approach is that the interviewees then have the opportunity to describe their experiences of play in their own words. The teacher also has the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon by describing it from his/her life-world. Through the interview we hope to gain an insight into and understanding of the interviewee’s life-world to be able to interpret how the respondent describes play in connection with learning, development, and socialisation in elementary school. Bryman (2002) points out that qualitative research is often characterised by an emphasis on the context in order to achieve an understanding for the social phenomenon that you intend to study. In relation to the aim, the topics in the interview first addressed experiences of play starting with background information, followed by wide question areas such as the significance of play for children and play in connection with learning. In addition, questions about how educational application for play in teaching and play with the emphasis on the child’s development were included. To get fuller answers in the semi-structured interviews, we have used questions with a higher degree of openness. There were follow-up questions relating to what the respondent had replied earlier and based on what was relevant to the study. Through this we also confirmed what had been said, i.e. confirmed that we had not misinterpreted anything. The interviews were around 45–60 minutes long and were carried out at
the teachers’ places of work. The teachers were informed of the ethical rules in social science research, i.e. demands for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy, and with an accentuation that participation in the study was voluntary (Swedish Research Council 2002).

**The process of analysis and interpretation**

An understanding of the phenomenon of teachers’ experiences is achieved in this study through the hermeneutical interpretation process, which involves studying individual parts (a teacher’s experience/statement) in relation to the whole (all of the teachers’ experiences/statements). However, this study’s results are only yet another part of a larger whole and the results are therefore limited. The results cannot be generalised to be valid for other teachers as well.

An increased understanding for the researcher comes through the study of the whole and its parts. This happens through a constant shifting between the different parts. When the researcher reads the text of the interviews, so-called search questions are put forward and an analysis is made on the differences and similarities in the text. The interpretive work and the approach in the analysis are based on the hermeneutical interpretive process and the social interactionism theory that Mead advocates. Symbolic interactionism is a theory of how human beings’ consciousness arises and develops in interaction with other individuals in the environment. Symbolic interactionism deals with the relationship between perception and action. How to understand yourself and what you can, and that the situation is dependent on the actions of others and that we are strongly influenced by the people of our world. The approach focuses on the dynamic and social activities that occur between people.

An interpretation of meaning has been used in the sense that we, as researchers, have a perspective on what has been examined, and have interpreted the interviews from this perspective – the social interactional perspective. You go beyond the immediately spoken when you interpret, to develop structures and relations that are not obvious in the text. A recontextualisation has been made of what has become apparent in the interviews, i.e. we have seen it from a specific perspective, and have had a certain theoretical standpoint in relation to what is being said through Mead’s theories. Mead’s theory is an influence as a theoretical frame for the interpretations carried out. Interpretations of what is spoken or unspoken are of interest; you can, as a researcher, have a critical view and the meaning might be somewhere else than in the spoken words, according to Kvale (1997).

**Step 1**

A repetitive reading of the interviews was started, where the purpose was to gain an overall picture of and knowledge on what had emerged regarding the teachers’ views on play in elementary school.

**Step 2**

A clarification of the interview data took place by removing superfluous samples, such as repetitions and private examples, inessential to the study’s purpose and its theoretical assumptions. Then ideas of the interviews that are similar and/or
contrasting were summarised and picked up for an overall impression of the main
categories (concerning areas of interest), and subcategories (more specifically
corning what the area consists of) emerged. The different parts of the texts that
felt topical to the purpose were divided into various categories that describe what is
important to the study.

Step 3
Quotes were chosen from the main categories describing what a teacher had said
about that certain theme. The teachers represented various aspects of the notion of
play, for example play as a strengthening of self and play as providing a sense of
security in the classroom. There was also an agreement on other aspects, such as the
importance of social interaction and cooperation in all play situations. When making
categories this was included, and every statement was treated as a part that carries
meaning to clarify the experiences of the teachers that are in focus. In the categories,
statements from the interpretation concerning the same topics were put together.
The categories were then matched to each other to form a structure in the sample.
The statements were also matched to each other and comparisons were made
regarding similarities and differences. During the work with the analysis, meanings in
the interviews were developed, by the respondents’ experiences that give the
researcher new perspectives on the phenomenon (Kvale 1997).

Step 4
Underlying structures in the category system that cannot be directly seen, but which
may be found after interpreting the statements, and experiences regarding a certain
phenomenon were looked for. When the structure was done, the statements were
once again matched to each other to more clearly show how the parts are connected
and to achieve an overall perspective, according to the hermeneutical way of looking
at the relation between the whole and the part (Ödman 1994).

Trustworthiness and authenticity
Lincoln and Guba (2000) claim that qualitative studies should be judged on two
basic criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity. The latter contains different criteria,
as research results should be fair in the sense that they balance the different
standpoints and opinions brought forth in the study. In this study we can see that the
participants describe play from quite different perspectives.

The results should also contribute to an increased awareness in the people
included in the research (ontological and educative authenticity) and to an increased
knowledge of how they might change their social situation (catalytic and tactical
authenticities) (Lincoln and Guba 2000). The results obtained in the study have led
to their increased awareness of play. They can thus change their situation at the
school and take the necessary measures.

In this study, quotations are used not only to enrich and give a concrete form to
the result, but also to show that the result has support in the participants’ statements.
This is a way to confirm the study’s validity. The researchers’ interpretation of
participants’ statements or actions can also, according to Bryman (2002), be
validated by giving participants the opportunity to discuss the results of the study.
with the researcher. In this study, the participants have been given the opportunity to give feedback on the results.

**Findings**

The results are presented in relation to the main categories of learning through play and teaching, with their respective subcategories related to the main category and interview area. The purpose of the quotations included in the results section is to clarify the interpretation; they are written in the way they were spoken by the teachers.

**Learning through play**

**Social area**

Emphasis was placed on the social area when teachers reviewed their experiences of children learning through play. The climate of the classroom changes and students and teachers become closer to each other, which results in a sense of security in the children. This also strengthens the solidarity of the class and the children are more courageous with each other, which strengthens the self-esteem of the children. Being able to use multiple senses when learning facilitates obtaining new information; being able to use multiple sensations makes for more joyful learning in which the children are more active. Mentions were made of the importance of role-playing games, dramatisations and rule games, where empathy and self-esteem were strengthened in a positive way.

The teachers’ opinions of what children can learn through play often centre on the social interaction and cooperation and how one acts, what role one has towards others in one’s surroundings, understanding and empathic ability, norms, values, and attitudes. The teachers believed that children learn all this in the social interaction that play consists of. Preparing oneself for the future and for society are also components involved in play; children gain life experience. This is how a teacher views play’s importance based on development and socialisation:

> It is clearly fundamental and that is what after-school recreation centres are supposed to be. They’re supposed to take care of the social development and stimulate it; that is why we have after-school recreation centres and schools take care of the theoretical. But the social interaction is fundamental, no matter where you are as a person and it is through play you get that, that is the foundation. Today when children have social issues you put them in soccer classes and in different social contexts to let them practise. It affects the learning in other areas, because when you’re happy with yourself and know what you are able to do. But if you fail socially it becomes so noticeable.

The social interaction is seen as fundamental, and through play the children achieve a foundation from which they can learn social interaction in social contexts.

Regarding how teachers might motivate children to learn new things and gain an increased understanding, the teachers agreed that when children understand that they are learning something, that understanding is the best motivation for them to learn even more, since it creates a positive spiral. The teachers felt that they should help the children see how they have developed, for example showing them how their drawings have changed from when they started the grade or which sums they were
able to calculate before and what they have learned later on. Experimenting, to
discover and explore things on your own, is considered playful. A playful and fun
learning situation was also considered to be more motivating than when the teacher
gives a more traditional lecture – the teacher thereby brings playfulness into the
process. Giving children assignments they can handle based on the individual child’s
possibilities was also considered as being important, since when the child sees that
they are capable of doing something, it brings a strong motivational feeling of
wanting to learn more. Having enough demands is viewed as positive, as is
developing in children a creative way of thinking. The teacher also has to take into
consideration the group of children he/she manages, since all children take to
education in different ways, and then try to adjust the lessons according to
this. These are a teacher’s thoughts on play, learning, and creating motivation in
children:

My intuition is to have a very varied education so that every child somewhere is able to
absorb what we want to teach because we’re all different and take to knowledge in
different ways. So that’s why my way of working is to have a varied way of working.
Then it is included, it becomes playful and sometimes just studying but we play through
a lot, start up that way of thinking by being creative.

**Academic area**

Spelling games and word games were also valuable to help understand and learn
new words. It was considered to be easier to have a playful attitude in certain
subjects. A teacher describes learning through play in this way:

I guess I can see that I use quite a lot of play when it comes to learning letters and how
to read when they were young. In first grade, where they did not only write down texts,
but we used movement cards, sometimes we created letters with our bodies. If you count
that as play, then we had it as a natural part of that work and that of course generated
them learning. That you, in the teaching, use several senses and not just sit around and
listen, but work with the body, use vision and hearing and touch a lot ... that’s how I
worked with the younger ones.

Age was also important since learning was experienced as being more theoretical
with the older children. Teachers feel it to be more natural to include play in the
education of the younger children. The teachers experienced this as a negative,
however, as they said that children need to use more than one way of working when
learning.

**Free play and organised play**

Play during breaks is considered as an opportunity for free play, where the children
play and learn social skills. It is an opportunity for children to ‘socialise each other’
by telling each other when something is inappropriate. The teachers had more
trouble coming up with a concrete example of when children’s development was
apparent in play, as several of the teachers felt that they didn’t see the children in
‘play in that way as in pre-school’. In organised play, however, the teachers were able
to take note of to what degree the children were able to handle taking instructions,
waiting their turn, listening to others and showing respect, how well developed the
social competence is, and how well developed the language is.
**Teaching**

The teachers feel that they want to keep up with the developments in society, regarding the view on teaching. They think that they have more space today to control their hours and how they may independently plan them. They experience an increase in their freedom to reach the goals they are supposed to reach, and that they can integrate subjects and thereby use a more playful way of teaching.

**Play as a tool: dramatising**

Through play, the children have the possibility to exist in an imaginary world, where they have the opportunity to become someone else, and thereby experience different situations and feelings. To try out different characters and practise skills when it is ‘only a pretend’ situation can be felt as liberating in a world that puts high demands on children. Play is thought by the teachers to be a process where the children are socialised into life, and where they practise various situations. The teachers felt that dramatisations are most often considered fun, and that it furthers the child group in a positive way, as the joy of working and the sense of a group identity are strengthened, which is important for the classroom situation to work. The teachers describe how they introduce play into teaching by, among other things, dramatising texts they have read in subjects like Swedish, history, or religion. The children might personify images and use body movements to interpret numbers or letters. Various quizzes and competitions are also used in school and are appreciated by the children, since they enjoy competing against each other. The teachers also use different projects with the purpose of strengthening the group and the individual where children practise, for example, cooperation, through exercises concerning values and cooperation as well as movement games. Play in the form of questions of values is seen as valuable for strengthening the self-esteem, reflecting, and discussing, and the children thereby have the opportunity to learn something themselves.

**Play as a tool for fun**

Games like word bingo, computer programs and puzzles are used, as are images, to facilitate learning when dealing with reading and writing difficulties. This is how a teacher views the curriculum’s goals with the expanded view on learning and how it works in practice:

I think that the school’s role has changed, there are so many children today with different needs and abilities so our role as teachers has changed from when the children were supposed to sit quietly and listen . . . It feels natural that it has to be in different ways.

Play is perceived here to be a tool and is seen as invaluable by most teachers – a good tool where you ‘trick in elements’ by making them fun and joyful. Some teachers felt that there was a demand for a certain structure and organisation in play to avoid the classroom becoming too mussed and confused. Other teachers felt that the school world was too structured and wanted to introduce more free play, like children being allowed to go to ‘get their play out in a room’.
Play as a tool when solving problems

Play as a tool when solving problems of different kinds is of current interest according to the teachers. By being able to use several senses and participate in a play process, children are able to learn to what is being taught more easily. If the child is unable to understand something the teacher describes, the teacher feels the need to find another way to help the child understand. The teachers then often turn to play where several senses can be used. When solving conflicts of various kinds, dramatisations are considered to be a good means as they allow conflicts to be processed concretely. The children are also able to use the logical way of thinking and exercises concerning values to solve conflicts. This is how one of the teachers describes how he/she involves play in teaching:

We have done it quite a lot, because I believe in it. Also it is important for the group of children. We have had quite a lot of conflict in the group and it is really a very social thing, play. We usually dramatise in play where you can interpret an image, be statues, just physically. Then we have games like quizzes in school, yes, we do have quite a lot of play in school to make it more fun and as an incentive to work, ourselves.

Play as a tool for movement

The subject of physical education also contains a great deal of play, and the teachers feel that it is important that the children can play with each other before they begin to compete against each other. The teachers try to include play when they prepare their day, and it may involve using movement cards by which the children are instructed to move in a certain way, which the teachers say the children experience as play.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge on and an understanding of elementary school teachers’ perspectives on the function of play in children’s learning process. A result from the study was self-reflection, something that also became clear in the interviews, by interviewees expressing after an interview that they use play for educational purposes to a much higher degree than they themselves thought. Many of the teachers mentioned that they had – prior to the interview – thought about what they had to add to the study regarding the theme of play in elementary school and were themselves surprised by the results. We interpret this as the interviewees reflecting on a partially unconscious behaviour and thereby gaining a greater insight into the subject. This, we believe, is positive since when you are aware of how you think and work, you can affect the results in a more positive way. However, it has been made apparent that the teachers have mixed emotions regarding the notion of play, which might be explained by the fact that it is a notion that might mean a lot of different things depending on the experiences one has with the area (Sandberg 2003). At the same time as the teachers saw play as essential and positive, there was a certain hesitation regarding play in the school world. Play during breaks was one thing, but play used in teaching was not seen as equally natural. Some play was included in the games domain, but we cannot see that as a negative. As Mead (1995) expressed it, the school children are at that stage where the game with its rules is very appealing and it brings much knowledge for the child, who
develops both his/her identity as well as his/her ability to reflect and plan. A reason for games being used to a greater extent in school than pure play might be that it is more objective, as Mead (1995) states, through rules that others can understand and familiarise themselves with, while play is more subjective and might be more difficult for the teacher and the other children to follow. A reason for this could be that, in games, the teacher has more control over events and there is a goal and thinking of means; you have a game or a competition for a specific purpose. Dramatisations and play involving symbols/make-believe are more open for children to participate in. Here you might also use a ‘manuscript’, but it still becomes more open for children to create events and interpretations according to their own abilities and experience. The research discussed raises the issue of value positions on the benefits of play, but it is important to remember that the children should have fun, and that they are motivated by what they find fun and stimulating, just like adults are. Even if the teacher has a purpose with a game, such as getting to know each other in the child group, understanding each other’s perspectives, or learning the alphabet, we feel that play has a purpose from some perspective or context for the child itself. There is so much involved in the world of play, expressed and practised, that it would be too great a loss not to take advantage of it.

How is play described in connection with learning? In the present study, the teachers experience play in an educational context as being conscious and having a purpose, which can be positive in multiple cases, given that Mead (1995) claims that children who are supported in their play are influenced in a positive way in regard to learning (see for example Pramling Samuelsson 2001; Bodrova and Leong 2003). These researchers say that play not only facilitates the development of social competence but also improves the learning of academic skills. In Bodrova and Leong’s (2003) studies, results showed that by teachers supporting the children without dominating them, they can contribute to learning and development among the children.

In research contexts, it has come to light that play contributes to the development of language regarding vocabulary, verbalisation, linguistic ability to understand, attention span, control of oneself, problem-solving ability, and the ability to cooperate and empathise (Bodrova and Leong 2003; Malone and Tranter 2003; Russ 2003). It was also made apparent by the teachers in this study that these abilities were improved by the use of play in educational contexts. By making the education more playful, the children find it to be more fun and are thereby more motivated in doing schoolwork. This results in a positive spiral of learning according to the teachers. They also felt that the children through play learned to control their emotions and desires and learned to be considerate of others in the classroom. Language is a large part of the social interaction and thereby of play contexts, which, to a high degree, consist of social elements.

How does the teacher, from a pedagogical standpoint, try to bring play into teaching? The teachers emphasise the importance of play for children, and its positive effect on, among other things, the social aspects of motivation, security, search for identity, and trying on different roles. At the same time, we experience an ambivalent feeling among the teachers regarding not exactly knowing how to use play in school. However, it became apparent during the study that they discovered that they use play to a greater extent than they thought, which is probably reflected in how you define the notion of play. Play can be used to a much greater extent than is happening today in certain schools, but the teachers
need support and encouragement to work in a more ‘playful way’ in the lower grades. Democratic thinking is important in school, and it is therefore important to listen to the students’ opinions on how the teacher can make the education more motivating. The key is to create new ways of working and new routines. We discovered that the teachers often use a playful and creative way of working. It became clear that if you are going to learn something, it is easier if you handle it in a joyful way for the children, which in its turn helps the children develop in more ways than just academically. A prerequisite for this is that it becomes more acceptable in society to use play, and that teachers inform on how they use play and what it leads to. Play is, after all, so much more that just a way to pass time, and there is a need for a new perspective on play among adults, in society and in our culture as a whole.

In what way is the importance of play for the child’s development emphasised? In what way can play affect the child’s socialisation? In this study, it was pointed out how important the teachers felt play to be for children in order for them to be able to grow and evolve. Also the teachers were positive to the importance of play being described in the curriculum. Play was also considered to be important for the slightly older children since development in society leads to children growing up too fast, and it is not considered as acceptable for the children to play as long. It is important to emphasise the influence of the development of society on the accelerated development of children into ‘small adult individuals’. From an historic perspective, play has been used with the purpose of relaxation, and according to what has been brought to light in this study, the teachers still have something of that view on play. Mead (1995) says that play should be organised by a teacher, with stimuli to enhance learning, but he also says that it should be free and not too controlled by the adults. We assume that one should try to find a balance between supporting and guiding the children and letting them find their own way in the landscape of play.

With this we hope to give deeper knowledge and understanding of play. Adults that work professionally with children contribute to mediate opinions, attitudes and values of different adults’ roles. It is therefore important that professionals are aware of which attitudes they mediate through provision of toys, kinds of play encouraged and by verbal expressions. In play the professionals, the ‘significant and generalizing others’, are important. They need to reflect to a larger extent on the messages that are conveyed through the encouragement or disapproval of play. Hopefully this can generate development of the play environment and further development of this pedagogical activity for children aged 7–12.

References


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