A Phenomenological Study on Play in Early Childhood in Korean Early Childhood Education Institutions

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: The purpose of this study was to make a phenomenological research on early childhood play in Korean early childhood education institutions in an effort to explore the phenomenological characteristics of play in early childhood including the ways of looking at and doing it. Methods/Statistical Analysis: The subjects in this study were three teachers and 30 preschoolers who were selected by random sampling from three different kindergartens located in the city of Busan. Data were gathered by making participant observations and having individual interviews with the preschoolers and the teachers from October to early December, 2015, and a qualitative analysis was made to analyze the collected data. Findings: The findings of the study were as follows: First, as for the features of play among the preschoolers in the Korean early childhood education institutions, that was characterized by five: wanting to go outside, finding time to play, wanting to make something without any restraints, moving is the very play, and living in a world different from that of adults. Second, concerning the roles of the teachers and the preschoolers, there were three different groups of teachers and preschoolers according to their ways of looking at and doing play. One was the teachers who viewed everything as play vs. the preschoolers who regarded just part of what they did as play, and another was the teachers who just looked vs. the preschoolers who wanted a loving hand. The third was the teachers who wanted the kids to follow them vs. the preschoolers who disliked to be scolded. Application/Improvements: Allowing communities to play with peers brief is required implications should create a play environment that supports the recovery of social relationships and happiness.

Keywords: Early Childhood Play, Korean Early Childhood Education Institution, Kindergarten, Play, The Phenomenology of Play

1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that play is the word considered most important in educational approaches toward early childhood. Play, which is one of developmental characteristics in early childhood, is thought to be critical in developmental theories, and that is one of practical challenges that need careful attention in all sorts of educational approaches as well. It’s specified in the current Nuri curriculum that a curriculum should be developed in consideration of the developmental characteristics and experiences of preschoolers and by centering around their play\textsuperscript{1}.

\textsuperscript{2} argued that grass, branches or licorice roots, from which one can hear the sound of the seeds, are great things children can play with instead of silver or gold bells, and that it’s important to play and grow in such a natural way in early childhood. After his naturalist view of education was introduced, the importance of play in early childhood education was stressed by Pestalozzi and Frobel in western society. 3,4 found that young children played on the knees of their grandmothers in traditional Korean society. Indeed, the importance of play as part of early childhood life and education has been discussed both in the East and the West, and that is definitely one of major tasks in early childhood education institutions.
Preschoolers who are still vulnerable are able to make cognitive, linguistic, physical and emotional development and to foster their sociability through play. Then is existing educational support sufficient enough to make play, which has been so emphasized, fully take place in early childhood in a manner to embody its substantial characteristics? It’s now needed to find an answer to this question, and what should be done to ensure this kind of support should carefully be discussed.

There has been a steady increase in the number of studies on play in childhood in our country since the 1970s. According to an analysis of research trends in play between studies were implemented from diverse angles by analyzing the relationship between play and development, play and curriculum, play environments, play theories or play therapies. In recent years, a lot of studies examined play in early childhood education involving the types of play awareness and construction of outdoor play and the application of play to curriculum. In fact, however, no research efforts have ever made to investigate how preschoolers perceive play from a phenomenological perspective and how they actually play.

defined play as what can satisfy someone through his or her own inner motivation and as voluntary behavior that may be accompanied by fantasy or imagination. As play is characterized by spontaneity unlike work and also by positivity and freedom of choice, Frost the characteristics of play in early childhood should discreetly be explored in detail. study that analyzed the shifts of early childhood play in different generations in South Korea pointed out that playing by oneself using commercial and merchanized things has gradually been prevailing, whereas it took place among different generations together in nature in the past.

Recent studies of the changing meaning and phenomenological characteristics of play attempted to understand the essential phenomena of play. At this point of time, it’s necessary to investigate the way of playing among preschoolers in Korean early childhood education institutions and the characteristics of it in order to figure out the phenomenological characteristics of the relationship between play and education in early childhood. In addition, whether the environments and characteristics of early childhood play in modern society are good enough to actualize play-centered education should be analyzed as well. This study is expected to suggest some of the right directions for future early childhood education and challenges for research on play.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to make a phenomenological research on play among preschoolers in Korean early childhood education institutions in an effort to explore the way of looking at and doing play in early childhood. Two research questions were posed:

1. What are the features of play among preschoolers in Korean early childhood education institutions?
2. What roles do preschoolers and teachers perform during play in Korean early childhood education institutions?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Subjects

The subjects in this study were a teacher and 10 preschoolers from kindergarten A, a teacher and 10 preschoolers from kindergarten B and a teacher and 10 preschoolers from kindergarten C. The kindergartens were located in the city of Busan, and the subjects were selected by random sampling with the consent of the principals of the kindergartens.

2.2 Instrumentation

2.2.1 Participant Observation

A selected participant observer underwent training for a week in late September, and she made preliminary participant observations in the first week of October to see if there would be any problems with her observation. And then a participant observation was carried out five times each in the kindergartens from the second week of October through late November. In total, 15 participant observations were conducted mainly during morning activities, and some of the observations were done during both morning activities and lunch time when it’s needed. The activities that were observed were videotaped, and daily records were used to record what’s observed. All the data are to be shredded after they remain confidential for three years.

2.2.2 Individual Interviews

The subjects in this study who were the three teachers and the 30 preschoolers were interviewed from October to early December. The teachers and the preschoolers were separately interviewed in the classrooms in the kindergartens and the daycare centers for about an hour each, and follow-up interviews were conducted to gather
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2.3 Procedure

2.3.1 Data Collection

The data were gathered by making participant observations and by interviewing the preschoolers and the teachers from October through early December, 2015.

2.3.2 Data Analysis

According to 19’s management and analysis system of interview data, the interviews were recorded, and the recording materials were transcribed. The transcribed data were compared with the original materials and then analyzed. All the observation and interview data were pieced together, categorized and interpreted. After the data were deciphered, the analysis framework was checked, and the significant areas were specified and analyzed. An overview of the relationships of the areas was offered, and a qualitative analysis was made by interpreting the data, which was followed by writing. In order to ensure the validity of this qualitative study, data source triangulation was carried out by analyzing personal journals, the in-depth interview data and the document data in a synthetic way.

The validity of content analysis was checked by two researchers and an early childhood education expert to perform investigator triangulation to prevent or reduce any possible prejudice or errors. Besides, a phenomenological research was conducted to make a qualitative analysis of the interview and observation data, and the meaning of the experiences of the individuals about a single concept or phenomenon was explored in that course. Specifically, the “play” experiences of the preschoolers were analyzed to find the phenomenological meaning of the experiences. The observation and interview data were classified to discover what’s significant, and what it was about and meant was analyzed.

3. Results

3.1 The Features of Play among the Preschoolers in the Korean Early Childhood Education Institutions

3.1.1 Wanting to Go Outside

The preschoolers who attended the Korean early childhood education institutions told that what they disliked most was to learn using teaching aids in the classroom, whereas they found outdoor play most interesting and wanted to go outside to romp around.

Where do you dislike most as a place to play? In the classroom....

(Han, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

To learn. I write down as well, and I dislike it most.

(Jeong, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

I like to play outdoors because I can romp around there.

(Ha, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

They specifically liked to go down the slide outdoors, and they told sand play was interesting since they could make rice balls, fruit or castles out of sand or make slides with branches and sands.

I go down the slide and make rice balls or fruit out of sand with my friends.

(Moon, five-year-old, November 12, 2015)

I go out, put a triangled thing on the ground and play with it. I play marbles or with sand.... I also make a castle or slide with branches. I put marbles on the slide, and then they roll down....

(Jang, five-year-old, November 17, 2015)

As and placed emphases on the importance of natural play, the preschoolers didn’t just stay indoors. Instead, they went out and played with different things they found in nature such as sand, soil, leaves or branches. This finding corresponds to the finding of 15’s study.
3.1.2 Finding Time to Play

The preschoolers spent time according to the daily teaching plans in the Korean early childhood education institutions. The teachers thought everything they did was to play, but the interview data showed that there were specific times for the young children to play. It's told that the kids were allowed to play after lunch, in outdoor playtime and in P.E. class, but the interview data showed that they could play when they tried to find time to do that.

When I am waiting for an extracurricular activity to start after taking an English class... When I play outdoors....
(Choi, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)
Before I have lunch.... after eating between meals...
(Yang, five-year-old, November 12, 2015)

According to the interview data, the young children ceaselessly kept seeking after play.

3.1.3 Wanting to Make Something without Any Restraints

In the Korean early childhood education institutions, the preschoolers wanted to make anything like robot, car or house out of wooden block, magnet block or Lego. In particular, everybody was fond of carpenter play like Trabeam regardless of gender. According to the interview data, the young children freely made what they wanted to do.

I make a Perth Tram robot out of wooden block, and I also make Gaettom Perth...
(Jang, five-year-old, November 17, 2015)
Trabeam is similar to carpenter play... I’d like to have enough time when I need a lot of time to make a big thing like a desk.
(Jeong, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)
Everybody can make what he or she can make out of Trabeam.... cat, rabbit, little bear.
(Cha, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

What’s more, they made robots in art class using scissors, paper and tape freely, and they also made carnation in their own way, though they didn’t yet know how to fold paper. Indeed, the interview data showed that they wanted to make things without any restraints.

I made a robot in art class using paper and paper streamers. Also, I made another robot out of block in building class.
(Kim, four-year-old, October 20, 2015)
There are a piece of colored paper, a scissor and tape in art class. We make what we want to do. Carnation... I wanted to make carnation but I didn't know how to make it. Today I finally made it in my own way.
(Kwon, five-year-old, November 24, 2015)

What they said suggest that they are able to solve problems by coming up with their own unique ideas, as if they accepted a creative or extended thought, and the fact that they freely made things suggest the importance of play. These findings correspond to the findings of ‘s study.

3.1.4 Movement is the Very Play

According to the interview data, the young children romped about with their friends as much as they pleased in P.E. class and during outdoor play. They played hide-and-seek, zombie or ghost and jumped rope.

In P.E. class... the P.E. teacher got us to warm up and then play a game.
(Cha, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)
I play with my friends outdoors... We play hide-and-seek or zombie. One of us plays the role as a zombie, and the others run away. Someone whom the zombie catches become a new zombie.
(Han, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

We romp about, and the tagger tries to catch one of the others. The one whom he or she catches becomes a new tagger, and the former tagger run away...
(Ha, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

I am most excited when I romp about with my friends and jump rope. (Cha, five-year-old, November 24, 2015)
The interview data with the teachers also showed that the young children looked most elated when they played, moving their bodies a lot.

They look most excited when they played with their bodies, when they went out and when they played outdoors, moving their bodies a lot.
(Teacher Park, November 19, 2015)

As ‘s study found, the kind of play that aims to accelerate the well-rounded development of preschoolers including emotion, sociability and physical growth through plenty of physical movement was found to be quite important.
3.1.5 Living in a World Different from That of Adults

Young children are able to realize something on their own and to come up with countless ideas to solve the given problem. As the interview data showed, the thinking of the preschoolers was different from that of adults, and it seemed like they lived in a world that was different from that of adults. What’s more, they created a new world of their own by playing the roles of adults including father or mother as if they had been little adults.

The fact we changed our shoes must be hidden from our teacher. Because I often wear shoes with pointed toes yet I’m not good at running when I wear them. My friend is very good at running though she wears such shoes. So I lent my shoes to her, and I wore her shoes, instead, and then my teacher found the fact. So I had to get back my own shoes and wear them... There are many many things my teacher told us not to do.

(Cha, five-year-old, November 24, 2015)

The classroom is full of mysteries. There are mysteries about my best friend, and also about other friends who aren’t close to me. Do you solve the mysteries with your friends? No, but there is something mysterious whenever I go to kindergarten.

(Kwon, five-year-old, November 24, 2015)

As the interview data with the preschoolers show, one of them wore shoes with pointed toes and tried not to get caught by her teacher, and the young children’s unknown world that was told to be full of mysteries should be understood and recognized by adults. The preschoolers definitely lived in a world that was different from that of adults.

3.2 The Play-related Roles of the Teachers and the Preschoolers in the Korean Early Childhood Education Institutions

3.2.1 The Teachers who Regarded Everything as Play: The Preschoolers who Regarded Part of What They Did as Play

In the interview, the teachers told that the young children could play before they engaged in large-group activities, and that there was no specific time for play but they could play anytime. Namely, the teachers didn’t discriminate between playtime and times for doing something, and thought all the preschoolers did was play.

Before they started a particular activity.... Yet every hour seems to be a time for play.... Do You think there should be a particular time for play? We teachers think there are separate times for play and doing other things, but that seems not what the kids think. Why do you think so? Because they aren’t yet conscious of study. They just think it’s okay to do what their teacher tell them to do. Unlike adults, they don’t concentrate their attention on it. They keep talking with each other even when they do a particular thing. So they seem to think every hour is a time for play.

(Teacher Kim, October 20, 2015)

In fact, however, the preschoolers knew well when they could play. According to the interview data, they thought they could play after full- day class is over or after lunch. I know well what we can play. I play with Trabeam after having a meal, and I go out while I do that....

(Jeong, five-year-old, November 19, 2015)

Thus, the teachers told all they did was play, whereas the young children told there were specific times for play.

3.2.2 The Teachers who Just Look: The Children who Want a Loving Hand

The teachers scarcely worked with the preschoolers when they played indoors. They stayed out of it or just looked at them. Specifically, they were mainly concerned about safety management because of fear for possible accidents when they played outdoors.

I hardly work with them. Sometimes I go to them and ask what they are doing, and it seems like I mostly look at them while they play each other. (Teacher Kim, October 20, 2015) I often look at the kids when they play. I just encourage some who don’t get along with others to do something together, and then I stay out of it soon. And I hardly work with them on the playground as well, because I have to keep an eye on them to prevent any possible dangers... I watch them outdoors to ensure their safety. In the classroom, I make something with the kids together and soon get out of it...

(Teacher Park, November 19, 2015)

It seems like that I just take a step back and watch them playing as an observer.

(Teacher Shin, December 2, 2015)

The interview data showed that the preschoolers who didn’t play with their teachers didn’t remember what they did or play. Yet they recalled a memory that they
played with student teachers, and they said it was good to play with them outdoors. I haven't played much with my teacher... I didn't play with student teachers outdoors before, either. I just played with sand with one of them, but I played with another student teacher a lot, making firm rice balls.

(Yang, five-year-old, November 12, 2015)

Thus, the teachers only observed and watched the kids as observers, instead of playing with them. But the preschoolers wanted them to play with them, and wished their loving hand.

3.2.3 The Teachers who Want the Preschoolers to Follow: The Preschoolers who Dislike to be Scolded

According to the interview data, the teachers felt the kids were lovely when they run to them and acted charming. Some of them said they were lovely when they tried to do anything.

When they tried to do something on their own or when they run to me and act charming....

(Teacher Kim, October 20, 2015)

When they behave in a charming way. For instance, they played the janggu today, and they looked so adorable when they tried hard though they weren't good at it, and when they tried to do something....

(Teacher Shin, December 2, 2015)

On the other hand, the interview data show that the preschoolers said they disliked it when their teachers got angry, and that they liked it when they hugged them instead of getting angry or took them by the hand, when they complimented them or when they treated them kindly. When she doesn't get angry.... When she is nice to me....

(Yang, five-year-old, December 12, 2015)

When my friends don't listen to the teacher. She has a hard time whenever they don't listen to her.

(Seo, four-year-old, October 20, 2015)

Thus, the preschoolers who listened well to their teachers looked lovely, and they liked it especially when their teachers treated them kindly and hugged them instead of getting angry. According to the interview data, the young children wanted their teachers not to get angry nor to scold them, and some told that the teachers had a hard time when they scolded their friends. The fact implies that the preschoolers disliked to be scolded.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

So far, a phenomenological study was implemented to explore play among the preschoolers in the Korean early childhood education institutions. The findings of the study were as follows:

First, as for the features of play among the preschoolers in the Korean early childhood education institutions, that was characterized by five: wanting to go outside, finding time to play, wanting to freely make something, movement is the very play, and living in a world different from that of adults. As the data released by the Ministry of Education, 1 show, spontaneity is the characteristic of play in early childhood, which is different from those of work, and positivity and freedom of choice were also the characteristics of play in early childhood. As 20–22's study found, the preschoolers wanted to play with their peers outdoors rather than indoors. Namely, they were fond of outdoor communal play.

4's study and 15's study found that in traditional society of the past, young children were educated while they were on the knees of their grandmothers and while they frolicked in the mountains and fields. Likewise, this study found that the preschoolers liked to go outside because they wanted to ceaselessly keep moving their bodies and romping about. Another finding of this study was that as 13's study found, their inner motivation stimulated them to create a world of imagination, which was another world of their own.

Second, as for the play-related roles of the teachers and the preschoolers in the Korean early childhood education institutions, there were three different groups. One was the teachers who regarded everything as play vs. the preschoolers who viewed part of what they did as play. Another was the teachers who just looked vs. the preschoolers who wanted loving care. The third was the teachers who wanted the kids to follow them vs. the preschoolers who disliked to be scolded. The young children expected careful attention and warm loving hand from their teachers, which could be defined as human support that is necessary to dynamize play in early childhood.

The play of the preschoolers depended on their teachers, and as the finding that the way they behaved hinged on how their teachers behaved implies, the actual roles of the teachers were different from what the preschoolers wanted them to do. As 22's study suggests,
the preschoolers wanted their teachers to romp about together and play with them in nature, and expected their warm touch.

The findings of the study suggest that it’s needed to create the kind of play environments in which preschoolers can freely move their bodies and play with their peers using nonstructured, natural things instead of structured toys without any restraints and not in a stereotyped manner to make a well-rounded development, recover their social relationships and feel happy.

5. Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Kosin University of Research Grants 2015.

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