

A Case Study on the Impact of Preschool Teachers' Habits on Children's Opportunities for Outdoor Learning

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore, through John Dewey's concept of habit, the potentialities and limitations of outdoor activities for children's learning. Previous research has shown that being outdoors is beneficial for children's wellbeing and learning. It has also stressed teachers' attitudes and believes to be important for how beneficial outdoor activity can be. The study was designed as a case study and was conducted with a toddler group of 12 children and three preschool teachers. Data were collected through video filming and field notes. Episodes involving preschool teachers and children during sand play were chosen for in-depth analysis. The main finding shows that the preschool teachers express similar habits among children during sand play, approaching it mainly as baking. This result has implications for preschool teacher students and educators of young children, who are invited to reflect on how shared habits at the local preschool might affect children's learning outdoors, and thus the realisation of the curriculum.

Keywords: Preschool teachers; Dewey; habits; sand play; outdoor learning; children.

Introduction

In 1998, the Swedish preschool became a part of the education system. In 2010, it became a school form of its own. In the same year, the national curriculum for preschools was revised (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010/2016). The shift resulted in a stronger emphasis on learning and three different learning areas are expanded: Literacy, Mathematics Sciences and Technology. Although the curriculum does not define the content of different areas in a detailed manner, it is a binding document. The preschool professionals do have the freedom to decide how to work to achieve the goals that are outlined in the curriculum.

There are goals in each area to strive for but there are no demands on individual children to achieve these goals. Rather, it is the preschool that has to attain the

curriculum goals actively and with awareness. The emphasis on a thematic approach and a holistic view of learning, where children's own experiences and curiosity are regarded as important, is maintained, as well as a strong focus on wellbeing and development for the individual child (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010).

The majority of children between the ages of 1 and 5 are attending a preschool setting, with an increased enrolment of children in the 1-3 age group. Preschool settings for the youngest children, between 1 and 3 years old, are traditionally more care oriented although during the last few years the preschool as a whole has gradually changed from being mainly a "care project", inscribed in the Swedish family policy, to be a more pronounced "educational project", having learning goals in the curriculum as a predominant space (Persson, 2008). Thus it is important to investigate preschools as educational sites for the youngest children.

Like other Nordic countries, being outdoors is considered important in Swedish preschools. It is stressed in the curriculum that outdoor and indoor activities should have an equal role:

Children should be able to switch activities during the course of the day. Preschool should provide scope for the child's own plans, imagination and creativity in play, and learning, both indoors and outdoors. Time spent outdoors should provide opportunities for play and other activities, both in planned and natural environments. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010/2016, p. 7)

Being outdoors some time of the day is therefore seen as a common practice and considered as important both for wellbeing and learning. How the outdoor activities are conceived and carried out is thus significant regarding children's opportunities to make sense of the world and of different phenomena.

In this article, the focus is on daily outdoor activities as they are shaped by preschool teachers, offering both possibilities and constraints for children to make meaning of different phenomena. Hence, the aim of the study is to shed light on how daily activities at a studied preschool can be understood in relation to shared habits among preschool teachers. Accordingly, the questions this study addresses are: (a) what kind of shared habits are expressed by the preschool teachers during sand play? And (b) how do preschool teachers' shared habits affect the realisation of the curriculum in terms of possibilities and limitations?

Literature review

As mentioned in the introduction, it is common in Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, to spend part of the day at preschool being outdoors. In this section focus is mainly on how outdoors as a practice is conceived.

An underpinning idea in the Nordic countries is that nature and outdoors are associated with learning, freedom and the image of the good childhood (Borge, Nordhagen & Lie, 2003; Bergnéhr, 2009; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sandberg, 2017). The outdoor activities are believed to provide children with the opportunity to

explore and learn about nature, science, mathematical concepts and technology, environmental issues as well as developing imagination and social skills (Borge et al., 2003). Preschool teachers seem to think of outdoor activities as offering many opportunities for learning through play, thus as a place for realisation of the curriculum (Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sandberg, 2017).

The importance of the design of the outdoor environment for supporting learning experiences is considered valuable: variation and richness of the environment can provide children with the opportunity of initiating interactions with the adults based on their own interests and ideas rather than those of the adults (Waters & Maynard, 2010). Moser and Martinsen (2010), focusing for instance on how the spatiality and materiality of the outdoor environment offers different kinds of affordances for children's activities, claim that although being outdoors offers many possibilities for children's exploration, it is not a guarantee for the realisation of different areas of the curriculum to be dealt with. Lately, it is also stressed that the affordances in the environment are mediated by the cultural context in which the activities take place (see Waters, 2017).

The benefits for learning in outdoor activities stressed in previous studies are balanced with the awareness that these are connected to many dimensions, such as attitudes, assumptions and tensions between different approaches (Maynard & Waters, 2007; Ouvry, 2003; Klaar & Öhman, 2014a).

For children to benefit from the time spent outdoors, the role of the teacher and the teacher's perception of their role during outdoor activities are important. If the teacher's perception of their role in the outdoor environment is mainly that of supervision, with an underpinning belief that children develop naturally, adult intervention is confined mostly when conflicts arise, while playing with children or being active as a teacher is rather rare (Davies, 1997). Teachers' beliefs and practices do have a strong impact on how the value of outdoor activities is perceived by educators. If the potential for learning in outdoor activities is not fully understood, the role of the teachers is often limited to supervision (McClintic & Petty, 2015). According to Norling and Sandberg (2015), the outdoor environment provides a great potentiality for language learning. But the study also claims that preschool teachers tend not to make use of this potentiality, thus underestimating the importance of supporting children's language learning in an outdoor environment.

On the other hand teachers can have a main role in supporting children's exploration in the outdoor environment, creating major opportunities for learning by seeing themselves as co-learners (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011). Teachers with a positive attitude to outdoor activities can potentially provide learning opportunities, although not always making use of it (Maynard, Waters & Clement, 2011).

Aasen, Grindheim and Waters (2009) suggest that practitioners' "taken for granted views" (p. 11) of outdoor activities have a great influence on outdoor learning. Therefore, they advocate a reflective attitude towards beliefs and ideas that might restrict children's opportunities. Klaar and Öhman (2014a) show that outdoor activities offer many opportunities for children to make their own

discoveries, with the preschool teachers supporting and encouraging them. However, the preschool teachers did not support the development of a scientific understanding of children's own findings during self-chosen activities. On the contrary, the preschool teachers in their study tend to use ordinary language to describe the activity under problem-solving.

Berkhuizen (2014) has studied the interaction possibilities between children and preschool teachers outdoors and found the sandpit to be an important place for children's interactions, both with peers and with preschool teachers. The sandpit is a place where children can easily gather around and it offers seating possibilities for both children and adults, while also offering the opportunity for communication and exploration. The study shows that rules concerning the proper way to use sand can have an impact on interactions between children and preschool staff.

Jarret, French-Lee, Bulunuz & Bulunuz (2011) stress that playing outdoors in sand is an open ended play medium. But they point out as well that sand play mostly involves scooping and dumping and to a lower degree pretending play or constructing play. The addition of new materials, besides the most traditional ones, tended to increase the complexity of play. Niklasson and Sandberg (2010) reach the conclusion that mouldable materials, such as sand, provided a high degree of both perceived and used affordances.

As the above review shows, a number of important contributions have been made for deepening the understanding of the outdoor environment as a learning site. Both the materiality of the outdoor environment (and the affordances it might offer) as well as the attitudes and positions of preschool teachers have been taken into account.

However, few studies have dealt with how shared habits have an impact on what kind of meanings are more likely to arise during outdoor activities. For instance, Klaar and Öhman (2014a) have studied habits and customs expressed both in children's and in teachers' actions. These have been studied at the connection between a national level (national customs) and a local one (local customs), one of the findings indicates that teachers support children's ideas but to a lesser extent expand their explorations. Inspired by their research, we aim to study how local customs (shared habits) are expressed by preschool teachers at the studied preschool. In using this perspective, our intention is to make a further contribution to the understanding of elements influencing the way outdoor activities are framed.

Theoretical framework

The present study is inspired by John Dewey's pragmatism (1859-1952). His concepts of habit and custom are of especial interest. The study addresses the need to reflect on what kind of impact teachers' habits have on children's opportunities to learn and make meaning of their daily environment. John Dewey's concept of habit is hereby used both as a theoretical concept and as an analytical tool. While using Dewey's concept of habit, this study aims to shed light on how practice is constituted and consolidated by those who inhabit it.

Habits and customs

In Dewey's philosophy, habits constitute what can be called our "second nature" (Dewey, 2012). Human beings are cultural and social beings, who acquire habits from their social context (Garrison, 2002) through their transactions with their environment. Transaction is a concept that Dewey developed later on and which underlines the mutuality between the living organism and the environment (Brinkman, 2011). The environment is not conceived as something fixed and separated from the subject. In a world that is unfinished, we are both transformed as well as we change our environment through the continuous transactions we are engaged in. Our experiences are a result of our *trying* and *undergoing* (Dewey, 1997) during our transactions. They are always situated in a context where they acquire their meaning (Brinkman, 2011).

The learning process takes place as a result of our trying and undergoing, and new habits can be established, supporting our further transactions. In fact, habits and intelligent habits resulting from our learning experiences can make us proceed smoothly. Those habits that are at the bottom of our habitual way of acting (transacting) are seen as a pre-reflective way of knowing things. We need to establish new habits when those we have do not help us anymore to proceed smoothly. Reflection is often part of the process of establishing new habits (Miettinen, Paavola & Pohjola, 2012). Thus reflection contains a potential for transformation and is linked to the concept of inquiry, which always starts with the disruption of no longer functional habits (Miettinen et al., 2012).

Habits also play a central role in the way we can perceive our environment. Thus, through habits we acquire what Dewey (2012) describes as sensitiveness to certain stimuli. Habits also determine the environment we are going to act upon in the future, because while being sensitive to some things we are going to be rather insensitive to others. They are not to be viewed as some kind of dull routine but mainly as a predisposition to act through an acquired sensitiveness to the environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). The formation of a habit thus means the developing of a predisposition to act in a certain way as a result of learning. They are socially and culturally developed during the course of our lives.

Dewey's (2012) concept of habit is thus strongly linked with the concept of meaning, being the meaning of something not to be conceived as a property of the things but the way we interpret it (Garrison, 2002). How we make meaning in a given situation is filtered by habits "they rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity" (2012, p.7). Dewey, therefore, conceived habits in a double way: both as a medium that filters perceptions and as a predisposition to act under certain circumstances. Customs can be defined as a collective predisposition to act in certain ways, hence collective habits (Dewey, 2012).

In the educational context, habits are to be seen as playing a central role in the ongoing meaning-making, shaping our predispositions. In this study, the attention given to the preschool teachers and the shared habits they express in daily activities follows Dewey's reasoning of the importance of the educator as well as Dewey's (2012) notion of habit as crucial for meaning-making. Their

formation also includes the establishment of values individuals are socialised into (Almqvist et al., 2008) as well as the privileging of some content upon others (Almqvist, 2014). In this study, shared habits are considered as a medium canalising the way preschool teachers create a learning environment, which includes both opportunities and constraints for further growth.

Method

The study has been designed as a case study (Merriam, 1994). In a case study, the researcher tries to understand and interpret a unit in terms of its actors. The case study provides a unique example of actors in real situations and investigates the interactions of those involved. The strength of a case study is that it allows attention to actions taken for granted. In our study, we focus on actions that have turned into habits. The weakness of a case study is that the study cannot be replicated and that the result cannot always be generalizable. However, in observing the characteristic of a specific preschool our purpose is to establish generalisations, which could be applied to preschool practices in general (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This can also be expressed through the concept of transferability as developed by Lincoln and Guba (2009), which requires a certain degree of similarities between the contexts. As in this case, we can expect similarities between different preschools. In our study, the case involves a bounded context, consisting of a preschool group for younger children between 1 and 3 years old and their three preschool teachers, all of them being experienced teachers who have been working for several years. The preschool setting is placed in a suburban area of a Swedish municipality.

Data collection in this study is based on both field notes and video observations. Field notes were carried out especially in the initial part of the study, being less intrusive than video (Heat, Hindmarsch & Luff 2010). Video observations produced approximately 10 hours of video while field notes produced approximately 153 A5 pages of handwritten observations. Observations were carried out both indoors and outdoors during different times of the day. The focus during observations was on child-adult interactions during different activities and different times of the day, both indoors and outdoors. The stance adopted during the observations was that of a more passive observer, that is to say no attempt was made to participate during the preschool daily activities (see Kawulich, 2005).

Both field notes and videos were repeatedly read/watched. The aim was to identify if and to which extent preschool teachers had similar ways of engaging in outdoor activities during their interactions with children. Different situations that have been observed during different days and with different preschool teachers were zoomed in. This made it possible to choose between a variety of activities and to do a deep study of some of those. For this article, we have chosen sand play activities observed outdoors.

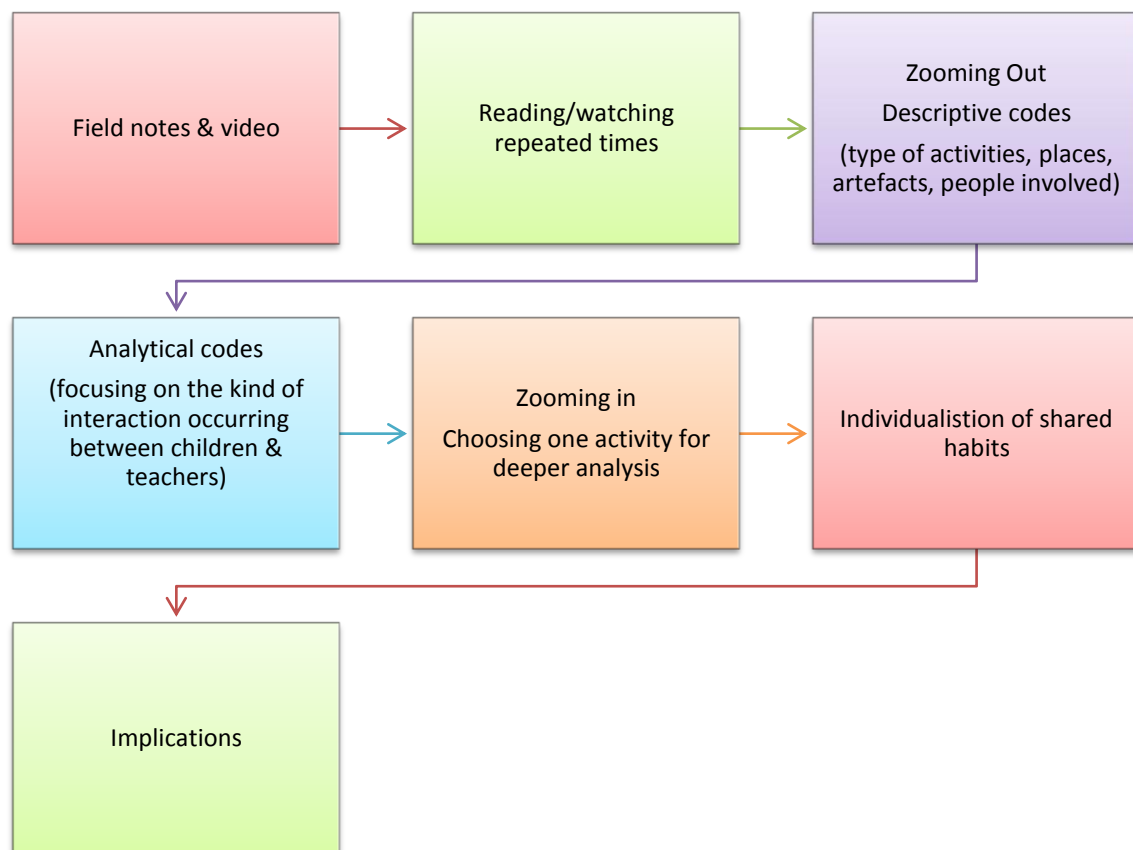


Figure 1: Analytical process

Analytical codes

As a way to order the empirical data, the way preschool teachers seem to interact with children during different activities was labelled, aiming to find recurring patterns (Stake, 1995).

The analytical codes label what teachers' actions are aimed towards while interacting with children during outdoor activities. The codes are inspired by previous studies. For instance, in previous research inspired by pragmatism, an analytical approach has been used, looking to the interplay between teachers' actions and children's reactions to these. This approach has made it possible to study learning in situ, considering both teachers' moves and how children become affected by these (Klaar & Öhman, 2014b). In our study, we have not taken into consideration what children do as a consequence of teachers' actions, verbal and bodily actions, in the situation analysed, although in the vast majority of the situations observed it was possible to observe children's reactions, which have not been in focus here.

The approach used in this study then, although using similar labelling, does not follow the analytical steps that are developed in previous studies (cf. Klaar & Öhman, 2014b). However, we share similar assumptions, such as research done in the same theoretical framework (Klaar & Öhman, 2014a); individual actions

that are carried out without being questioned and with a degree of certainty can be seen as expressing habits. When these are shared in a particular group, they can be seen as customs or local habits. The relationship between the individual habits and those that are shared in a group have to be seen as reciprocal (see Dewey, 2012).

After identifying different strategies preschool teachers use while being outdoors with children, we move towards a specific situation, namely playing with sand. In this specific situation, we aim to shed light on teachers' shared habits pointing at how the situation is framed by the teachers. In the same situation, teachers were able to switch between different strategies and use a combination of these. The analytical codes are identified as follow:

Confirm: Preschool teachers confirm that the children have chosen a good activity.

Explain: Preschool teachers draw children's attention to aspects or dimensions that are important for the activity, often giving some explanation.

Emphasise rules: Preschool teachers remind children of rules or accepted behaviour. Showing accepted behaviour often contains a form of care for the individual child or for the group.

Encourage: Preschool teachers encourage children to overcome obstacles by managing them by themselves.

Facilitate: Preschool teachers provide materials and places to help children start or carry on activities.

Help/care: Preschool teachers help children that are struggling with something. They take care of children's physical and emotional needs.

Suggest: Preschool teachers suggest activities to do while being outdoors.

Show how to do things: Preschool teachers show how to accomplish or do something.

Rationales in choosing sand play as a significant event

Although different activities took place in the outdoor environment, we decided to focus on one of them. At the overall level, outdoor activities followed a daily morning routine which included spending some time outdoors.

Zooming in on these different activities, we found out that playing with sand met criteria that were compatible with our research question:

- It involved the presence of at least one preschool teacher.
- It involved all of the three preschool teachers during different times.
- It was a regular activity which all the children participate in at sometime.

In meeting these criteria, we reasoned that this activity could be studied in depth, looking for shared habits among the teachers to emerge. Shared habits can be defined as local customs (Klaar & Öhman, 2014a) that preschool teachers

share with one another. Local customs can be seen as a significant factor for shaping the pedagogical environment and have an impact on the everyday meaning-making.

Ethical considerations

Although the study did not involve the collection of sensitive data and therefore did not need the review and approval by the Swedish Ethical Board, it faced several ethical issues, due both to filming as a data-collection method as well as young children participating in the study (the Swedish Research Council, 2017).

Gaining access to the field through the informed consent of the participants (because of the young age of the children, it is the legal guardians who give legal consent) cannot be considered as the final consent once obtained. For instance, many researchers (Flewitt, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Coady, 2010) discuss the need to negotiate the consent continually during the field work, being sensitive and respectful of what the children expressed (both verbally and with body expressions).

After an initial contact with the principal, one of the researchers personally met the preschool teachers. The aim of the study was then presented orally and with a written information sheet, encouraging the staff to ask further questions if needed. Written information about the project was distributed to all the [children's] legal guardians. One of the researchers was also personally available during one day, giving the legal guardians a chance to ask questions or discuss concerns. Availability was assured as well through email and mobile contact.

After the information meeting, a letter of consent was distributed to both legal guardians and preschool teachers. In this, the possibility to withdraw their consent at any time was clearly stated. The method of data collection, involving video filming, was also described. A description about measures to keep data safe was given. Video data were stored in the University laptop and were accessible only through a password. An extra copy of video data was stored in an external hard disk and locked at the faculty office, likewise field notes.

During the study the presence of the researcher in the field was negotiated during the whole period of data collection, both with preschool teachers and with preschool children. Attention was given to the children's expressions of unwillingness or distress. Situations involving children being sad, angry or afraid for some reason were avoided completely in the data collection. Care was also given to the physical position of the researcher filming with the camera, avoiding intruding or interfering in their daily activities. For this reason, the researcher did not get too close but adjusted to a middle position, ensuring an acceptable quality of picture and sound.

The filming was carried out without a tripod. This was also a result of negotiations with one of the preschool teachers who expressed distress at being filmed with this technique.

Context

Most of the days, the children played outside for at least one hour, mainly during the morning. The activities took place mostly as a whole group activity.

The preschool playground consisted of a smaller fenced area, accessing directly to the preschool group indoor environment and a bigger area, which was used by the entire preschool including other age groups. The smaller playground contained a sandpit, asphalted ground, a bench with a table (adult size), a bench with a table (children's size) placed in the sandpit, an older wooden oven, placed just outside the sandpit and a smaller plastic pipe which was tied to the fence. On one side of the smaller playground, there were some smaller bushes and plants. The bigger playground was L-shaped, consisting of some asphalted roads, a smaller wooded area, a tree house placed in the wooded area, a wooden deck with steps, of the same length as the wooded area (giving access to it), a little space consisting of a wooden carved table and, placed on an area consisting of a mixture of mud and sand, and finally at the end of the playground, on the right-hand side, a bigger sandpit. A storage for tricycles and other equipment was placed in this area.

The two areas were separated by a gate. Usually the outdoor activities started and finished in the smaller playground area. The access to the bigger playground was supervised by the preschool teachers. The recurring pattern was that of leaving the smaller area for the bigger one when all the children and at least two of the preschool teachers were outside.

The artefacts provided in the smaller playground area were gathered in a big textile bag, stored at the inside entrance. Every day, when the outdoor activities began, one of the teachers took the bag outside and children could pick up a toy, choosing freely among buckets, plastic shovels, plastic trucks and cars, plastic moulds and recycled materials, such as ketchup bottles or bigger containers that have been used for food storage.

Result

The aim of the study was to shed light on how daily activities at a studied preschool can be understood in relation to shared habits among preschool teachers. We also asked what kinds of shared habits are expressed by the teachers during sand play. The main findings are presented in the following.

Our findings indicate that all of the three teachers participating in the study approached sand play mainly as bakery play. All the participants' names are anonymized.

Excerpt 1:

Trisha is digging in the sandpit using a larger spade. She gets up and turns with her spade towards a bucket. She puts the sand she collected in the bucket. The preschool teacher comments on her action: "Oh, are you going to dig? That's going to be a nice cake".

Excerpt 2:

Some children are gathered around a small table, placed in the middle of the sandpit. Sand is on the table and the children are using both spades and sand moulds of different shapes as well as an old plastic ketchup bottle. The preschool teacher looks at them and comments "Oh, how much we're baking here!"

Data commentary excerpts 1 and 2

In excerpt 1 and 2 the preschool teacher seems to use mainly a confirmative strategy, using positive words to describe the action the child/children seems to be involved in. The preschool teacher is as well suggesting that the digging is an activity aimed to make cakes, a proper activity to choose.

Excerpt 3:

Preschool teacher: "Would you like to have a shovel Elly? I'd like to have a cake! Where did the nice cake disappear to?" Elly looks towards a plastic mould she was previously filling with sand. She hands it to the preschool teacher. The teacher takes the mould and looks in it. Then she says "It's empty! You have to fill it with sand! With plenty of sand!" Elly bends down on her knees and fills the mould with some sand. She hands the mould again to the teacher. The teacher takes it and pretends to taste it "Is it a chocolate cake?" Elly confirms this.

Excerpt 4:

Daniel asks for the teacher's attention "Beatrix, look!" Daniel points with his hand towards a pile of sand on a table. The teacher says "Mm, you know what. Take the dark sand, the wet sand here if you have to make cakes. Then it gets much better!"

Data commentary excerpts 3 and 4

The preschool teacher is indirectly suggesting Elly to use a shovel in order to make a cake. Following the preschool teacher's suggestion, Elly hand a plastic mould to the preschool teacher. At this point the preschool teacher explains that, in order to make a cake, Elly should fill the mould with sand. Elly follows the explanation and fill the mould. When handled the mould with sand the preschool teachers asks if this cake is a chocolate one which Elly give confirmation to. Daniel is pointing to a pile of sand and requires the preschool teacher's attention. The preschool teacher interprets Daniel's efforts as he needs help in how to make cakes. Then she explains that the dark sand is more suitable for this aim.

Excerpt 5:

Lise (one of the youngest pre-schoolers) is sitting in the sandpit, near one of the preschool teachers. She puts some sand in her mouth and tastes it. After a while the teacher becomes aware of this. The teacher shakes her head and says "No, it

doesn't taste good! (...) Ugh!" while at the same time she wipes Lisa's mouth and tongue.

Excerpt 6:

Max is holding a larger shovel in his hands, standing just outside the sandpit. The teacher asks him what he is going to do with the sand. Max makes an upward movement, throwing the sand in the air. The teacher says "No, the sand has to be in the sandpit!"

Data commentary excerpts 5 and 6

In both excerpt 5 and 6 the preschool teacher is emphasising the proper way to use sand. Although baking cakes, one should not taste sand for real, because sand does not taste good. A shovel is useful for gathering sand (often in order to make cakes) but should not be used to throw sand in the air. Additionally, sand should not be moved to other places but rather stay in the sandpit.

Conclusions

Teachers' shared habits provide sand with a specific meaning that is to say as a medium to bake and make cakes. The meaning of sand as a medium to bake provides children with different opportunities to experience or engage with sand and to make meanings to it. Playing with sand is something enjoyable with aesthetical connotations; sand cakes are considered as something "nice" or with a distinct flavour, such as a chocolate cake. It can require proper techniques, experiencing the differences between wet and dry sand as well as what quantity is needed to make a cake. Playing with sand also involves being confident with the rules which apply to it. Otherwise, the preschool teacher gives a reminder on how sand is supposed to be used.

These differences show that playing with sand could have slightly different dimensions for the preschool teachers involved, varying from an approved activity to a joint task, thus giving the children a chance to experience different learning appropriate contents, such as mathematical and science related concepts as well as accepted behaviour .

Common to all the preschool teachers was to associate sand mainly with baking or food preparation. During the time of observation, sand was seldom used for other games or exploration besides "baking". For instance, on some occasions children were encouraged to use plastic cars in combination with sand. Nevertheless, approaching sand as a "baking play" was predominant.

What is argued here is that, through their shared habits, the preschool teachers at the studied preschool tend to restrict the meaning of sand play to one activity. The exploration of sand as a medium is thus limited, although as we have seen in excerpts 3 and 4, when the teacher joins the activity and draws the children's attention to important features, the opportunity for further exploration is likely to arise.

Discussion

We recognise our findings as being limited to one site (a preschool group), producing a relatively small sample of data. Nevertheless, the strength of the case study designed is that of allowing analogies with other similar sites, where findings and conclusions can be significant (Lincon & Guba, 2009).

The aim of the study was to shed light on how daily activities at a studied preschool can be understood in relation to shared habits among preschool teachers. The data collected during the study shows a certain degree of similarities in the way the three preschool teachers approached outdoor activities at the overall level - those were mainly conceived as a time for free play, with a low degree of planning. A strong focus was given to both physical activities, such as climbing rocks, walking, riding cycles, and playing ball, as well as having each child involved in some kind of activity.

The sandpit offered the opportunity for the teachers to encourage children to start or to carry on their activities, especially regarding the youngest. The interaction between children and preschool teachers was then shaped by shared habits. The answer to the first research question is that the kinds of shared habits that are expressed by the teachers during sand play are mainly conceived as "baking". Although individual preschool teachers could make use of different strategies in approaching sand play, playing with sand was mainly conceived as an opportunity to bake cakes or prepare other kinds of food to offer to other children or to the preschool teacher. All of them encouraged or reinforced this meaning.

Shared habits contribute in creating a common horizon where some kinds of actions are more likely to be performed or privileged. Based on our results, we argue that preschool teachers' shared habits affect the realisation of the curriculum in terms of possibilities and limitations, by restricting some potentiality and privileging others, a result comparable with Almqvist (2014). While this is somehow inevitable in an educational context. We argue nevertheless that it would be meaningful to address what is taken for granted in other practices. We argue that shared habits are also an important issue to discuss in preschool teacher education. For example, preschool teacher students could be more aware of how shared habits can play a role on the realisation of the curriculum in terms of possibilities and limitations.

As in Blanchet-Cohen and Elliot (2011), we could observe the preschool teacher having a potential impact on children's learning, especially when they shared focus with a child in an attentive and temporally consistent way. However, in line with McClintic and Petty (2015), we observed supervision as being a quite common practice. As in the Klaar & Öhman study (2014a), children were encouraged to actively make their own choices and to use the available materials to freely engage in different activities. Consistent with their result, we found that preschool teachers to a lesser extent supported discoveries of a natural material such as sand. Nevertheless we found that on some occasions preschool teachers both showed and explained important features of the material used, giving

children an opportunity to explore those differences while playing. However, preschool teachers did not engage in guided explorations to a great extent.

The finding of this study is similar to Aasen, Grindheim and Waters (2009), our study suggesting that preschool teachers “taken for granted” have an impact on the opportunities of learning outdoors. Although conceptualising this as shared habits, it provides an opportunity to both look at commonalities among the preschool teachers as well as to deepen the understanding of such commonalities, as attitudes connected to habits, thus creating a common horizon for transactions with the environment.

The Swedish preschool is facing new challenges. An ongoing international trend is placing a higher focus on preschools and their importance for future economic and academic achievement. Changes in the curriculum have already been made, stressing areas of learning content to work towards as well as emphasising the role of preschool teachers in teaching (Catucci, 2017). Discussions are being held on the topic, both among researchers and professionals, raising concerns about a schoolification process (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010) harming the core of preschool pedagogy in many countries (mostly based on unstructured play and child-based tradition). Nevertheless, the position of the Swedish preschool, as the first stage in the education system and as a school form of its own, places a great responsibility at many levels.

The results showed that during outdoor activities socialisation in values that are held as important was predominant. If socialisation is the prime content during outdoor activities it can be one of the reasons for teachers to engage to a lesser extent in the exploration of other areas. While analysing sand play in depth, it was observed that the shared habit of defining it as a bakery play, especially during suggested or confirmed activities, functions mainly as a way of socialising children regarding the importance of engaging in an activity as well as choosing a positive activity and being acknowledged with the rules that come with it. Sand play is thus to a slighter degree conceived as an opportunity to experience other areas of the curriculum. In this way, we argue that preschool teachers might restrict the opportunity to explore sand in other ways, giving a chance to experience other dimensions of sand play. Although Jarret et al. (2011) define sand as an open-ended medium, we rather found sand to be confined to one meaning by the teachers.

In general, our result can be used for preschool teachers and preschool teacher students to reflect on the impact of shared habits in preschool practices and thereby on the learning environment that children can have access to. Having the goal to introduce variety and richness into everyday activities can thus be considered as one of the main tasks teachers have.

Directions for future research

Our study was a small-scale study. Although a lot can be learned from minor study, we suggest further research in different sites, using different methodologies as well such as in interviews and surveys as well as a more targeted observation. Further research is needed in order to gain knowledge about how the curriculum is realized outdoors; being simply outdoors is not a

guarantee of its realization (Moser & Martinsen, 2010). How different content areas come to expression outdoors through the habits of the teachers remains as a fruitful area to study further.

There are relatively few studies on sandpits and on what kind of learning is taking place there, although sandpits are one of the most common features to be found in preschool outdoors. Further studies could analyze closer the learning opportunities that are offered there, also illuminating as well possible gender and age issues. How open-ended materials are handled, what features open-ended materials have in contrast with not open-ended materials and teachers' views on the matter should also be studied further. In our study we found that sand, although defined in other studies as an open-ended material, was not used accordingly.

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