

Play in Poland. Promoting play in Gedania 1922 Preschool and CreoGedania alternative school

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Abstract: This paper presents five years of introducing free play into Gedania 1922 preschool, based in Gdańsk (Poland). Attention is also drawn to the presence of play in Polish schools and the necessity of conducting changes in education, which would involve the introduction of free play in schools and increased emphasis on building soft skills in children. These skills could also be supported through free play.

Keywords: free play, well-being, early years education

1. Introduction

Play is a fundamental element of a child's life. Researchers dealing with the subject of play suggest that play is the core of children's life, their way of engaging with the world. Play contributes to the development of such abilities as regulating emotions, developing the stress response system, and openness to learning (Massey et al., 2018). Also, it provides vitality and pleasure, which are undoubtedly significant contributions to the child's life. It brings satisfaction and joy of life, at the same time ensuring harmonious development. Children who have sufficient time and space to play are happier, more rooted, and more involved in different aspects of school life. Play can continue if the conditions are favourable, but frequent restrictions on the children's ability to move around the school grounds without adult supervision, excessive control of the child's life and paying too much attention to school achievements (grades) mean that there is less and less 'free time' for children, which could be spent on playing (Burton et al., 2019).

1.1. Importance of play

This section contains basic information about the role of play in education, which will help the reader understand better its foundations and assumptions. Traditional and dominant ways of understanding the benefits of play focus on its relationship with children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Studies have shown positive correlations between play and:

- the scope of cognitive skills (for example, attention, concentration, knowledge building, understanding, communication of ideas, creativity, imagination, flexibility, divergent thinking, problem solving) (Wood, Attfield, 2005);
- tendencies and mood states (for example, curiosity and openness to learning, enthusiasm, perseverance, interdependence, resilience, and self-efficacy);
- social skills (for example, relationships with peers and adults, emotion regulation, empathy, emotional well-being) and motor skills (for example, large and small motor skills, proprioception, coordination, spatial orientation, trust, mental health, and well-being) (Massey et al., 2018).

Additionally:

- playing with other children contributes to the development of mutual relations, language skills, adaptation skills, physical skills and more (Baines, Blatchford, 2011);
- playing at school allows children to engage in physical activity (especially if there is an external space available), they counteract excessive inactivity and obesity, which can be achieved through cultural changes and other interventions (Hyndman et al., 2014);
- children's ability to concentrate improves after playing, which means that removing breaks between lessons to focus on more intensive work can be ineffective, especially for children who have difficulty in concentrating, and as a consequence, it may be destructive to them (Hyndman et al., 2014).

Experimental data and long-term research provide strong support for the role of the break in the primary school curriculum. Unstructured breaks in performances demanding cognitive tasks seem to facilitate learning at school, as well as facilitate adaptation to school conditions and raising social competences (Pellegrini, Bjorklund, 1997).

1.2. Evaluation of play

There are many ways to evaluate play. As adults, we often feel the need to impose a rational goal on something that seems pointless to give seriousness to it, trying to get away from the element of frivolity and the lack of framework. However, if adults perceive play as a way to acquire specific skills and want to direct children's play to these skills, they ironically transform it into something other than fun. There is much evidence in the literature that the benefits of play result from its self-organisation, unpredictability, sudden appearance, carelessness, flexibility, and vanity (Lester et al., 2008).

Children, on the other hand, can perceive recess as a break in learning, where they can temporarily escape the organisation of time and space created by adults. During this time, they can devote themselves to co-creating other worlds in which the rational laws of the 'real' world do not have to apply – but in the feelings of a child, they are not far away and ensure their safety. During play, children take aspects of everyday life

and turn them upside down in a way that makes life less scary or simply less boring (Sutton-Smith et al., 1997).

The laws of physics tell us that we cannot fly – but when a child puts a coat on their shoulders and makes it a superhero cape, then they start to run down the hill and make the right sounds for it, believing, of course, that they are flying – maybe even saving the world through it. These are the moments when children feel the vitality of life (Massey et al., 2018). Being able to play is more than a luxury. Along with other affective aspects, play contributes to the development of flexible abilities such as emotional regulation, coping with stress, a sense of attachment, and openness to learning. Children who have time and space for self-organising fun are much happier, more involved, and associated with the school environment. However, it should be noted that for some children playtime is a time of stress, conflict, and harassment – that is why the play-friendly school has to do incomparably more than just provide time to play during the school day (Massey et al., 2018).

2. Gedania 1922 Preschool and CreoGedania alternative school

The article describes the five-year process of introducing free play into the Gedania 1922 preschool and the alternative school CreoGedania, both based in Gdańsk (Poland).

The Gedania 1922 preschool is an innovative educational facility, based on a verified model of education, focused on emotional intelligence and introducing ICT tools and elements of science in the form of free play. It aims at preparing children for functioning in the world of the future. Children of the future should be able to diagnose emotions and express them in a way that does not offend peers' feelings, they should broaden intellectual horizons based on a skillful selection of data, and, above all, they should naturally perceive science as 'great fun'. Most of the time spent in kindergarten is based on free play. During this time a foreign language is served as a tool of communication between the educator and the children whereas scientific stimuli are part of creative activities for children (Hofman, 2018).

2.1. Objectives and assumptions of the facilities

The main assumption is to arouse a natural passion for science as well as searching for answers and asking questions. The Gedania 1922 kindergarten is the first preschool project in Poland to introduce concepts from astronomy to microbiology into two-month, real-science based education for children: 2,5- to 6-year-olds. Most of the time spent in kindergarten is based on free play and creative science tasks. The priority is not skill and knowledge transfer but promoting the intellectual autonomy of young people as well as the creative and scientific use of ICT tools. What is important, computer-based activities do not exceed 10% of classes.

Children use many recycling materials to create their art projects and toys. Most of the time children spend in the Gedania preschool is devoted to practice and free play. They also learn chemistry and physics. Science laws are presented in series of classes, which include twelve sections every year: acoustics, optics, materials science, action-reaction, i.e. forces, magnetism, electrostatics, electromagnetism, electricity, air and pressure, hydro-riddles, the world of temperatures and physical tricks.

The preschool, covering 1200 square metres, has six big classrooms, a chemical classroom, and a hydro-classroom designed solely for water activities. The classrooms have backlit ceilings to display multimedia. Classroom equipment includes tablets with digital projectors that can display large-format pictures on the ceiling (a surface of approximately 20 square metres). Among didactic aids, there are only LEGO® models and robots as well as ‘recycling’ kits for designing toys, such as yogurt and plastic bottles, toilet paper rolls, etc. There is also a classroom for science experiments, which serves for conducting physicochemical workshops. A 600-square-meter building is meant for no more than 75 children divided into subgroups of approximately 13 students. They will use tablets and watch scientific materials on a multimedia projector for a limited amount of time (Hofman, 2018).

2.2. Presenting the first play area to the children

In May 2016 we opened our own Playpod, which is based on our experience with free play during classes and ideas from abroad – mostly the

United Kingdom, Canada, and Japan. During playtime, children can use an area of around 500 square metres. The area is partly covered so the use of this place does not depend on the weather – but it is worth noting that children love to play outside during rainy days so it is up to them if they want to hide under the Playpod’s roof or not. All of the pupils in Gedania preschool are equipped with wellingtons and rubber raincoats and they go outside for play for at least two hours a day (free play, play-ground, sports activities, etc.).

The covered area is around 100 square metres. The roof is supported by wooden pillars. This structure does not have any walls so pupils can access it from every side. Under the roof, children can find selected scrap materials, segregated in boxes. Each box has a nameplate with the name of the element that needs to be returned to this box when the playtime is over. It is one of the rules that our pupils need to follow to go back to the Playpod next day – all of the scrap materials need to go back to their places.

The time on the Playpod is limited (from 30 minutes to 1 hour per each group) but groups can enjoy this place together – we need to mingle children from different age groups. This teaches them cooperation, empathy, and builds social skills. The Playpod has been a massive success, gladly visited by children of all ages. Many times they demanded to stay in this area for much longer than an hour – it was a signal for us that they enjoyed spending time there and we started to think about ways to improve their free playtime.

When the Playpod was opened in 2016 it contained scrap materials such as tires, bubble wrap, plastic tubes, pieces of wood, clothes, etc. Our pupils loved the idea of creating their projects in a limited time (30 minutes of play) so we decided to expand our Playpod and add new materials. As a way to introduce the children’s parents to the idea of free play, we invited them to the process of upgrading the Playpod. The parents were willing to help us, making this place even more attractive. New materials began to appear on the Playpod, such as plastic crates, metal cans, pots, pans, plastic boxes, ropes, and large format materials. During free play, our teachers were not actively participating in the children’s play and they interceded only when there was a conflict situation between the pupils.

2.3. Erasmus+ cooperation

In November 2017, Gedania 1922 Association in cooperation with partners from five European Union countries (the United Kingdom, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria) started working on an EU Erasmus+ project called Children's Access to Play in Schools (short: CAPS). This project aims to help the school become a more play-friendly facility, one that acknowledges the value of play in early child development, supports play in every aspect (e.g. using playful pedagogies) and constantly redevelops ways to fit free play into the school schedule (Maciaszek, 2019).

The main goal of this project is to develop the Play-Friendly Quality Criteria/Label for Central Europe. In this project, partners use the UK experience in developing such criteria, but the CAPS project also includes the experience of the OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) Programme, which is a mentor-supported school improvement program. It addresses all of the areas schools must plan for if they want to strategically and sustainably improve the quality of play.

To have the criteria as transparent and adaptable as possible, partners of the project conducted a series of studies in each country and set up the National Adaptation Plan. One of the tasks included in creating the Plan was to conduct numerous interviews with local authorities and people involved in alternative education in the Pomerania region. Responders were asked questions about how they see free play, the value of play, challenges for play, and the possibilities to implement free play into the school's schedule. Respondents paid particular attention to the development of children's imagination and freedom of thinking. They claimed that skills acquired during play could help the children prevent or resolve conflicts. The participants also paid attention to building independence in children – both in action and organising games with other children, which has a direct impact on building ties and integrating children of all ages. Building communication skills as well as getting to know oneself and solving personal problems were also deemed important. According to the respondents, play can also be a good way to relieve the need for physical activity and freedom of movement. Play strengthens the children's self-confidence and socialises them in a group – through playing a child experiences social behaviour, learning to resolve conflicts, make arrangements, be ready to help, show solidarity, partnership, and

integration, and take responsibility for their actions. Play makes children aware of the consequences of certain actions they undertake. The child learns the conditions in which the toy works and realizes that the result of its operation depends on them (Maciaszek, 2019). They realize the effects of the action by stating the type of transformation that the object has undergone. The child tries to reflect on the methods used by adults to achieve the right result. During the activity, the child learns about their desires and motives as well as the level of abilities and the ability to solve tasks (Burton, 2019).

The most crucial finding from the interviews is that the children's natural curiosity, empathy, collaboration, and open-mindedness are treasures in perceiving our reality from new vantage points. To cherish and retain these traits by learning through play – with patience, perseverance, and inquiry – will be rewarded with an array of wondrous questions and innovative insights. 21st-century skills will play a crucial role in the future children's success and well-being. Therefore, if we want to improve the quality of life, introduce programs for maintaining mental health, work on communication – free play is crucial (Maciaszek, 2019).

2.4. Introduction of GratoSfera

The preschool and the alternative school cover an area of over 7 hectares, which includes 8 football fields and a massive park with old oak trees and a multiplicity of bushes. In November 2018 we opened the first GratoSfera inside the park – another Playpod kind area for kids to enjoy free play. In Polish 'Grato' means 'loose parts/lumber' and 'Sfera' means 'space'. So the name contains two dominant elements of free play – various loose parts and outdoor areas.

GratoSfera includes massive, 12-meter ship containers, opened only for limited playtime daily. Inside the containers, children can find various kinds of scrap materials like tires, plastic boxes, plastic pipes, ropes, nets, plastic buckets, used pans and pots, clothes, different large-scale materials, used electronic equipment like old keyboards, PC mice, cash registers, shopping carts, wheelbarrows, and trash containers. All of the plastic elements of GratoSfera are made of hard plastic, very difficult to break. Scrap materials are segregated into boxes. Each box has a nameplate with the name of the element. There is also a distinction between 'wet' and

‘dry’ loose parts. ‘Wet’ loose parts are the ones that children can use all the time, regardless of the weather. ‘Dry’ loose parts can be used during dry days – basically, when the sun is up and there is no sign of rain. Before playtime, our Educators inform children which elements they can use on a given day. When collecting the loose parts for GratoSfera, we asked our children’s parents to get involved again.

One of my tasks as the Play-Leader of Gedania 1922 preschool and CreoGedania alternative school was to design GratoSfera and the surrounding area. The area around the container consists of a paved part (concrete slabs) and a soft part (forest litter, made of crushed tree remnants). The idea of GratoSfera came to my mind after visiting six different ground schools in the United Kingdom in February 2018. All of the schools were part of the OPAL Programme, which is a mentor-supported school improvement programme, assisting schools in introducing free play. It addresses all of the areas schools must plan if they want to sustainably improve the quality of play (Burton et al., 2019).

During the programme, OPAL works with the school for over 18 months to support the entire cultural and practical transformation of the way in which play is thought about, planned for, resourced, and staffed (Maciaszek, 2019).

2.5. GratoSfera in Gdańsk (Poland)

GratoSfera attracted the attention of stakeholders and politicians in Gdańsk as they decided to introduce it to schools as a pilot project, starting in September 2019. To properly select schools for the pilot project, we created preliminary guidelines that the facility must meet to enable the implementation of free play solutions. The main requirement is that each school needs a football pitch (natural or artificial) or a green field with an area of no less than 200 square metres. Most schools in Poland have such areas, which makes it possible to introduce free play to them. After the selection of schools, Kamil Maciaszek and Agata Hofman (both leaders of the CAPS project) trained teachers (potential Play-Leaders) from nine ground schools from Gdańsk using CAPS-created tools. The preparation of the area for the implementation of GratoSfera, in consultation with the Play-Leader and the headmaster of the facility, is being taken care of by Kamil Maciaszek. Experience gained in working with young

people, a modern approach to teaching, and willingness to change allow us to individually adjust the school space to the needs of a given institution and its pupils.

The City Council and The Department of Social Development strongly support the idea of GratoSfera as they see the need to introduce free play in schools. The project aims to make Gdańsk the first city in the world in which every child has access to an hour of free play every day (Maciaszek, 2019).

3. Play in Polish schools

Although it could easily be said that there is no special room for play in the Polish educational system, such a statement would be an excessive simplification. Many schools face problems to include certain elements of play as educational tools. This is usually the case during lessons, but play is not supported by the school in the free time. A significant part of Polish schools do not organise children's time during breaks, and activities involving going outdoors and playing freely outside the school building are not organized with constant regularity. It is worth noting, however, that at many universities educating future pedagogues elements of 'playful pedagogies' or 'educational pedagogies' are introduced. Students are presented with modern methods of preparing and conducting classes, focusing on an informal learning model that is concentrated on the development of children's interests. While young graduate teachers experience these interesting solutions, the teaching staff who have been working in public schools for many years do not. What is to be blamed for such a state of affairs is a significant overload of school programmes that are not adapted to the requirements of the modern world, and the information that students have to assimilate is mostly theoretical. Teachers are also burdened with a huge amount of paperwork, which means that many of them lose motivation to work and do not want to develop their skills further. Also noteworthy is the way teachers in Poland have been treated for decades (since the end of ww2) by the governments which have arrogantly referred to their attempts to improve their situation and regain due respect and social status of their profession, resulting in

numerous strikes (the latest of which took place in 2019, gathering tens of thousands of schools across Poland). (Maciaszek, 2019).

3.1. Supporting play in Polish schools

The presence of play and the use of its elements as activating methods are visible in the lower classes of primary schools, while their gradual application decreases at higher levels of education. As mentioned above, the element of play and the creative approach to teaching are increasingly becoming a standard part of university education for prospective teachers, though not everyone uses them in practice (or they are used to a low extent). This depends on the personality of the teacher, their style of work, and the approach of the entire institution to creative teaching methods.

The school environment and the teacher's style of work with students have a big impact on the use of methods with play elements. Schools that consider play as a part of children's development are more likely to use innovative methods and an alternative approach in education.

The time during breaks between classes and extracurricular activities is important for children in terms of their play experience. Approaches to using it differ from the strict, conservative approach, which perceives breaks primarily as a time to prepare for the next lesson, to a creative approach, actively creating conditions for rest, fun, and the social activity of pupils. Therefore, some schools have relaxation areas for pupils. They often have longer lunch breaks, during which students can stay outside, e.g. in the schoolyard or playground. During this time, they can relax or use sports equipment. Schools also organise additional sports activities for pupils after classes – for which parents have to pay extra fees (Maciaszek, 2019).

Poland does not have a history of supporting play and does not recognize its huge impact on the child's development. In society, there remains a popular conviction that play does not facilitate learning and operates only as a distractor, so play time should be devoted to learning instead or remain only a rewarding measure after school work. Such an approach is unfortunately erroneous because in scientific research it has been proven that play significantly raises students' competences, teaches them to solve problems, develops interpersonal competences, gives relaxation

and releases stress, and has been present throughout the child's life since their birth (Pellegrini, Bjorklund, 1997).

It is, therefore, necessary to change the approach to play – on the part of parents, but also teachers and educational authorities, so that play could come to school and be treated seriously. Presenting to parents the range of development opportunities offered by play can help change this attitude.

3.2. Challenges for play in Poland

The main challenge for schools will be to change the parents' attitudes to play, convincing them that it is right to implement it in the school life. Much work will be needed for the parents to realize that a certain amount of time in school shall be devoted to play and that it will have a positive impact on children's development. Some of the parents are in favour of the new model of education but some others would like to stay with the old one and a significant minority considers play should be nothing more than a reward for learning. The CAPS project can change this approach. There was also a noticeable desire to change the education programme. Private school programmes more and more often contain elements of casual play. The national programme does not support play in any way. Increased priority should be focused on creating cooperation with parents and changing their attitude – they often raise an argument concerning the safety of children, possible injuries and colds, chaos in play, and violence. Successful introduction of play in school life will require the cooperation of groups including parents, teachers, management, and playleaders (Maciaszek, 2019).

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Zabawa w Polsce. Wspieranie zabawy w Przedszkolu Gedania 1922 i alternatywnej szkole CreoGedania

Abstrakt: W artykule przedstawiono pięcioletni proces wprowadzania swobodnej zabawy w placówkach znajdujących się na terenie Klubu Sportowego Gedania 1922 – Przedszkola Gedania 1922 i alternatywnej szkoły

CreoGedania, z siedzibą w Gdańsku (Polska). Zwrócono również uwagę na obecność zabawy w polskich szkołach i konieczność prowadzenia zmian w edukacji, które miałyby na celu zwiększenie dostępu dzieci do swobodnej zabawy w szkołach oraz stawianie większego nacisku na kompetencje miękkie. Kompetencje te również mogłyby być budowane w trakcie swobodnej zabawy.

Słowa kluczowe: swobodna zabawa, dobrostan psychiczny, wczesna edukacja
