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**SPONTANEOUS PLAY AS AN INDICATOR OF CHILDREN'S
SCHOOL READINESS IN SOCIAL SKILLS**

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Abstract

Starting compulsory education represents a key milestone in children's lives. A successful start in the system of compulsory education is affected by the level of children's school maturity and readiness. This is influenced especially by the family but also by preschool education in which teachers systematically focus on children's development in the cognitive, psychomotoric and social skills. Between 2009 and 2013, a research team at the Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, performed a research study aimed at school maturity with an emphasis on cognitive maturity. This research was followed by another study aimed at children's readiness in the area of social skills. The research is of a quantitative-qualitative nature; the principal research method was observation and interview. The purpose of the paper is to present the partial results of an analysis of video-studies aimed at children's spontaneous play in the kindergarten. The authors analysed and assessed the main areas and indicators of children's play with a focus on social skills. In the context of the preschool curriculum, the authors formulated conclusions and recommendations not only in terms of further research but also for preschool education.

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Keywords: Preschool child, play, education, social skills.



1. Introduction

With the introduction of the last obligatory year of preschool education in the Czech Republic starting in 2018, systematic preparation of children with the aim to make them able to start compulsory schooling is becoming more important. This fact is directly linked to a greater emphasis on pedagogical diagnosis by means of which the teacher assesses the current state of children's development and, in direct relationship, develops step by step the children's competencies. For the purposes of pedagogical diagnostics, teachers mostly use controlled activities. Our current research shows that play, especially spontaneous one, is only used by teachers a little as a means of pedagogical diagnostics. Although observation is the main method of pedagogical diagnostics, we realize that it is a very demanding method that requires the ability to observe, analyze and draw conclusions. It is often less graspable for teachers than an analysis of a work assignment for example, where the teacher can clearly decide whether or not a child has managed a task. We do not want to underestimate the pedagogical diagnostics of managed activities in any way; what we want to draw attention to are the opportunities offered by the analysis of children's play. It should not be forgotten though that children are absolutely spontaneous in terms of their emotional, social, cognitive and psychomotoric skills. One part of the research we have been carrying out since 2017 is to create and validate a tool for pedagogical diagnostics of school preparedness based on the method of spontaneous game observation. The aim of our contribution is to make public the results of our research in which we verified the tool for pedagogical diagnostics of school preparedness with a focus on children's social skills in the frame of spontaneous games.

1.1. Play as children's most natural activity

The children's development is affected by both internal and external factors. By external factors, we mean the closest neighborhood in which the child learns, imitates, takes on patterns of behaviour, has new experiences, satisfies his/her own needs (physical, mental and social), etc. In the environment the child lives in, he/she interacts with other people, the most important ones being the family, i.e. the mother, father, brothers or sisters, grandparents. Gradually, this circle extends to children of the same age, teachers and other people. Play is an essential and very important activity in a child's life, in particular an individual game in which an adult is the game partner but also a play in a group of children of the same age. The game is based on the needs of the child where his/her inner motivation plays an important role rather than external stimuli. Spontaneity is one of the basic characteristics of children's play. The child does not follow personal goals in the game. The game is also characterized by symbolism when a child brings into the game his/her own experiences, the ideas he/she draws from his/her surroundings. (Šmelová, 2014) The conditions of the game, into which we count not only the quality of material equipment but also people, significantly influence the overall development of children's personality which also means the social skills that are the subject of our research.

1.2. Curriculum for preschool education

The curriculum document called "The Framework Educational Program for Preschool Education" (hereinafter referred to as RVP PV) is currently in force in the Czech Republic, starting in 2018. This

document is binding for all kindergartens registered in the registry of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic. It represents a generally valid framework under which kindergartens perform preschool education. It includes framework objectives, key competences, educational content as well as educational conditions. It also contains and recommends appropriate educational means, methods and organizational forms suitable for preschool education. Key competences are sets of supposed skills, knowledge, attitudes and habits that a child who completes preschool education is generally able to achieve. These competences represent the outputs of preschool education which is directly followed by primary school education. Monitoring of the level of key competencies constitutes one of everyday diagnostic activities of the teachers. The level of these can be monitored in all the activities of the child during the day. The curriculum focuses quite considerably on social skills. It defines communicative, problem solving, social and personal, activity-related and civic competencies. All competencies are interconnected and linked to one another. (RVP PV, 2018)

2. Problem Statement

At present, the most up-to-date topics include the already mentioned preparation of children to start compulsory schooling and improving its quality. The necessity of finding the solution is related not only to the persistent high percentage of postponement of compulsory school attendance (approx. 15 %) in the Czech Republic, but also to the introduction of the final compulsory year of preschool education and its alternative to individual preschool education. As shown by our research (Šmelová et al., 2008 till present day), as well as by the results of the surveys carried out by the Czech School Inspection Bureau, kindergartens are devoted to preparing children to enter primary schools but they often prepare them with low efficiency. In this context, problems have been identified in the area of pedagogical diagnostics and the use of a properly defined diagnosis aimed at achieving the key competencies of the child that are necessary for the successful start of compulsory schooling.

For the purposes of our research, we have identified a basic topic (problem), i.e. pedagogical diagnostics of selected social skills of children in spontaneous games in kindergartens before starting compulsory schooling.

3. Research Questions

The research questions are determined in the context of the topic being researched. The first research question relates to the identification of social skills in terms of school preparedness in the context of a preschool curriculum, focusing on self-discipline within imaginative games. The second research question was determined in the context of the expected outcomes, i.e. the criteria of school preparedness focusing on social skills.

RQ1: Are children able to conform to the rules of others, to give up their projections of something for the benefit of other children when playing spontaneous games?

Partial questions:

- How does children's self-discipline in the analyzed games manifest itself? Are children able to adopt a different role in the game in order to maintain cooperation?
- What kinds occur within the analyzed spontaneous games?

RQ2: Can selected social skills based on established criteria be diagnosed within analyzed spontaneous games of children aged 5–7?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was

- to describe and characterize a child's game in the environment of a kindergarten by means of an analysis of video recordings
- to analyze and evaluate the main areas as well as indicators of children's play with a focus on their social skills.
- to identify and evaluate the children's social skills in relation to their readiness to start compulsory school attendance

5. Research Methods

Methods of data collection: indirect observation by means of a video taken in selected kindergartens, evaluation by means of created record sheets with pre-defined criteria of school preparedness.

Method of selecting participants of the research: criteria-based selection (criteria: kindergarten located within the city of Olomouc, child 5–7 years old, consent of the parents of the child, the child's attendance in the kindergarten taking place in early morning hours.)

Video capture period: April – June 2018.

Explored participants: 5 girls and 5 boys aged 5–7

6. Findings

Social competences represent an important area of school preparedness. Preschool education should provide a variety of situations for their development. It is spontaneous play that has a great potential and that we are focusing on in our research.

6.1. Evaluation of Research Question No. 1

RQ1: Are children able to conform to the rules of others, to give up their projections of something for the benefit of other children when playing spontaneous games?

Partial questions:

- What kinds occur within the analyzed spontaneous games?
- How does children's self-discipline in the analyzed games manifest itself? Are children able to adopt a different role in the game in order to maintain cooperation?

The games observed in the analyzed videos can be divided into two groups, namely table games and carpet games. When playing table games, children drew, painted, used constructive games, did jigsaw puzzles. Most often, these were individual games. There only were two exceptions, two girls who cooperated in painting the subject defined by the teacher and then boys who played with dice. The second group consisted of children playing games on the carpet. The most common were social games, namely household life, transport, soldiers. The second most common type of games were the constructive ones when children “built” houses, roads or means of transport. To a lesser extent, motion games were recorded using rhythmic instruments. Children most often played in pairs, with rarely appearing groups of 3 to 5 children. According to Millar (1978), children aged 5 are able to play for a longer period in a group of four to five children. This fact is confirmed by our analysis, too. As far as the choice of a game partner is concerned, most of the monitored time, children played with the same friend, even when they started playing a different game. Furthermore, our research corresponds to Millar’s statement that brothers and sisters pay attention to each other and are able to cooperate much earlier, as evidenced by the analysis of the play of two pairs of siblings (2-3, 6-7 years old). Self-discipline is an important part of social skills. In this context, we observed the children in order to find out whether a particular child is able to comply with the rules or take on a different role within the games, based on their internal motivation. It is possible to note that girls in particular managed to agree on something with one another. When there was a mixed group of both girls and boys, the girls were more proactive in giving proposals and promoting these. Problems with cooperation were more common in boys. If they were not happy with the game, they broke it down (for example, they broke a construction being built) or switched to another game. More frequent minor conflicts were also found more often in boys, especially in the case of toy disputes. The teachers’ interventions into observed games were minimal and rather aiming to make the children follow the discipline or in order to make a game finish and simultaneously motivate the children to go on to play another game. It was obvious that children are used to playing without the support of teachers because we did not notice that children would ever require their help. Bruner (1980) reports the results of a preschool research project having taken place in Oxford (Oxford preschool research project), in which it was found out that the higher the ratio of the number of adults to the number of children in the group, the higher the likelihood of a game to be more sophisticated. (In Bruce, 1996, p. 53) If we evaluate the extent of the sophisticated character of games in terms of their contents, we may note that the games were poorly developed, which usually led to their end after quite a short time. It was evident that the children “did not know” how to proceed in the game. Teachers entered the games in the role of a game partner minimally. The level of observed games supports the findings of the above research. All that we have mentioned so far shows that teachers do not give enough estimation to their role of game partners through which they might be able to approach children closer, to understand the children’s world but also to encourage their play with the goals of developing the children’s potential.

6.2. Evaluation of Research Question No. 2

RQ2: Can selected social skills based on established criteria be diagnosed within analyzed spontaneous games (in children 5–7 years of age)?

Table 01. Characteristics of the analyzed group of children

	Age	Postponement of school attendance	Length in minutes
Girl No. 1	6 years and 7 months	No	50
Girl No. 2	5 years and 6 months	No	55
Girl No. 3	5 years and 9 months	No	30
Girl No. 4	5 years and 10 months	No	75
Girl No. 5	7 years and 6 months	Yes	63
Boy No. 1	6 years and 10 months	Yes	41
Boy No. 2	5 years and 11 months	Yes	40
Boy No. 3	6 years and 7 months	Yes	30
Boy No. 4	5 years and 2 months	No	69
Boy No. 5	7 years and 4 months	Yes	70

Followed criteria in social skills

In connection with this research question, we formulated some criteria in accordance with the RVP PV curriculum document. We verified the criteria we had determined using the methodologies chosen.

The criteria were assessed using a three-point scale. Each child was evaluated separately, the data was recorded in record sheets and commented on. By means of a content analysis of the transcribed text, we consequently draw conclusions.

Table 02. Social skills

Observed criteria	Yes	Partly	No
Listens to the others			
Controls his/her emotions			
Communicates with other children without any scruples			
Communicates with his/her teacher without any scruples			
Respects the teacher			
Respects the needs and behaviour of others			
Is emphatic			
Applies his/her needs with respect to the others			
Cooperates with the other children			
Respects the basic rules of social behaviour (i.e. is able to thank or ask for something)			
Is able to come to a common solution in cooperation with other children			
Is active in contacts with other children			
Makes decisions concerning his/her own activities			
Expresses agreement or disagreement in situations that require this			
Rejects communication or participation in a game that is unpleasant to him/her			
Treats toys and aids gently			
Adheres to the game rules, acts fairly			

Table 03. [Evaluation of the observed criteria for the examined sample group

	Notes
Girl No. 1	<p>She is communicative, dominant and able to manage her own activities as well as those of other children, which is not always in conformity with their needs. This could be seen particularly in the games played with children younger than herself. Her behaviour to other children is nice and empathic, she often explains to them what they are supposed to do. Organizing the others in this way, she follows her own interests. She rejects to play with a boy of the same age as he does not want to obey her rules.</p> <p>She snaps at other children in situations when a particular game does not develop according to her own projections. She shows a certain lack of social maturity skills as it is much easier for her to play with other children who obey and respect her own will rather than to play with the game partner of the same maturity level.</p>
Girl No. 2	<p>The girl is calm and silent. She does not manifest herself too much when in the group with other children. The other children do not try to make her a partner for the game. She has difficulty to entertain herself, she turns to a teacher asking for some activity. She is rather passive. Her behaviour shows that she does not know how to join the games played by the other children. She tends to observe the games played by the others. She showed attempts to establish a contact with two girls, praising their construction made of cubes. This effort remained without a strong response from the girls who were addressed by her. She is primarily concerned with individual activities. In a situation where another child assumes the initiative in the game, the girl tends to withdraw from the centre of the game and is in a subordinate position. She speaks slowly and comprehensibly.</p>
Girl No. 3	<p>The girl is very popular with the children in her group. She seeks rather the company of girls of the same age but she is also able to cooperate with boys. She actively communicates with children, arranges solutions with the others and does not need to force her own opinion. If she is not successful in her activity, she controls her emotions very well. In games, he adheres to the rules, does not interrupt the others when they speak and is able to bring a game to a successful end.</p>
Girl No. 4	<p>This girl is friendly and communicative. She is not afraid to talk to others and be at the wheel of the game. More children, mostly younger, were gradually enrolled by her into the game, but she behaved dominantly to them. She determines their role in the game. Generally, she behaves to children empathically.</p>
Girl No. 5	<p>This girl is able to organize her own game, she is willing to make another child participate in it. She is communicative, listens to others. In a smaller team, she is able to assert herself, to propose a solution and progress in the game. In a larger group of children, the girl is not so active and gets more into the position of an observer of others at play.</p>
Boy No. 1	<p>He is popular in the group of children and children kept coming to him and asking him what construction he was about to build. He was not much communicative, probably because of the deep focus on his activity. When his construction stopped being at the focus of other children's attention, he stopped being interested in other children and he went on to play on his own again, not interested in what the others were saying. Even when the other children borrowed the cubes he was playing with without asking him, he did not mind. In his activities, he was focused on toys rather than on searching for contacts with other children.</p>
Boy No. 2	<p>He does not have trouble playing and cooperating with other children. He is looking rather for smaller groups of children where it is easier for him to make his point of view accepted by the others. He is interested in things and people around him. When playing, he often asks: "Why?" He is popular in the group, the children kept on coming to see him during the game and asking him what he was reading. He likes to play on his own but he also looks for contact with children of the same age. When playing, he respects the attitudes of others and is able to work with them and adapt himself to them. In communication with other children, he is calm and does not cause disputes.</p>

Boy No. 3	In this area, the child shows a very good level. It is clear from the way he plays that he prefers playing on his own rather than in a group of children. He looks for rather small groups or for individuals of both sexes. He develops a debate with them and joins their games rather as an observer. He does not seem to be the group leader who needs to command the whole group of children. In the play, he does not have any problems to express his opinion but he also respects the opinion of other children, he himself asks, "What do you think about that?" He is calm and balanced, there is no aggression towards people or objects in his play.
Boy No. 4	In games, the boy does not show dominance. He is able to adapt himself and join other children's ongoing games. He is not afraid to communicate his points of view and his own suggestions. He communicates with other children without any scruples, brings new impulses into the game and wants to be a fully-fledged part of the game team. He listens carefully to what the other children tell him. There were also some situations in which he rather had a tendency to only observe the play of other children. The boy keeps his cuddly toy with him at all times, not trying to make it a part of a game but still keeping it nearby.
Boy No. 5	At the monitored points of the social skills, the boy proves having reached an adequate level of a child terminating his preschool education. The boy is communicative, he takes other children into the game, listens to them, and tries to find solutions together. He is empathetic and helps younger children (when playing, he noticed the height difference of a girl and he moved the cards on the board downwards in order for her to be able to reach for them). He joins the other children's games, fully respecting the rules of their ongoing game. He negotiates about the following stages of the game. He is active, communicative, able to organize and manage the game but not at the expense of other children's needs.

Partial conclusions:

In girls, some problems have appeared with listening to others, collaborating with them and respecting their needs. We find the findings in Girl No. 1 particularly interesting. The dominant tendencies were identified with this girl, especially when playing with younger children. Her manipulation with them showed clearly that this girl satisfied her needs regardless of those of the other children. Nevertheless, she was kind and nice to them. Potential problems may arise after the girl enters the first year of the primary school, as the whole class will be the same age. When analyzing the criteria for Girl No. 2, there was a risk of early entry into the primary school starting with the beginning of the following school year. As shown in the specialited literature (Čížková et al., 1999; Šmelová, Petrová, Suralová et al., 2012), the girl shows signs of lack of preparedness. She does not join group activities and if she does, then rather in a subordinate role. It was obvious that he was not a sought-after partner for the other children. Her behaviour showed lower self-confidence, lower self-esteem and inability to establish communication with other children. The girl therefore devoted herself to individual activities or looked for the teacher's company. It may be noted that the postponement of compulsory school attendance would be a benefit for this girl. Admission to the first year of the primary school is a major change in the child's life also in the social sphere. As a result of her lack of preparedness to change the school group, to start the role of a schoolchild, etc., the girl may fall behind in other areas such as cognitive or biological development, too.

The analysis of the boys' play showed no significant problem. There were a few of situations in which the boys had to agree on something in order to solve the situation, which they eventually managed doing without much difficulty. The boys did not show any dominant or aggressive behaviour to themselves or others. They were able to join the other children's games as well as to lead the game, they showed

empathy. The boy No. 4 who kept having his favourite cuddly toy nearby most of the day is worth mentioning. For boys, the presence of their toy may constitute an assuring element and remind them of their home. At this age, we do not consider this fact as negative.

In order to compare the two groups, we may note we have observed a potential risk of early entrance of the primary school education in Girl No. 2 and Girl No. 1 where we have seen a certain lack of social maturity in the context of playing with younger children. In girls, we noted a higher number of games linked to family life, e.g. playing a game imitating everyday household life, which is definitely linked to their future feminine roles. On the other hand, we have noted no potential risk of early entrance of the primary school education in boys. It is likely that this finding is related to the fact that most boys observed have been granted a postponement of their compulsory schooling last year. Therefore, they had plenty of time to mature in their skills, including the social ones.

Summary of RQ2: In the frame of the spontaneous game of children, we were able to capture and evaluate the defined criteria being in line with the RVP PV as indicators of school preparedness in the area of the children's social skills. Spontaneous game analysis is an exceptional opportunity for pedagogical diagnosis of children's readiness to enter the primary school. The fact that the child is authentic and relaxed in spontaneous games is a big plus, the level of his/her skills in all aspects of his/her development being reflected in the game. We believe that teachers should pay more attention to the observation of spontaneous play of children. Thus, they are able to get valuable information for pedagogical diagnostics and, at the same time, they can systematically develop the child by means of appropriate playful activities.

7. Conclusion

If an adult (a teacher in our case) is supposed to understand children, to know their individual possibilities and needs and to apply an appropriate educational strategy, they have to master the basic method of pedagogical diagnostics, i.e. observation, and supplement this with other methods of pedagogical diagnostics. A spontaneous game is an activity where the teacher can monitor the progress of children and simultaneously use the game as a means of preparing children to start primary education schooling by creating a stimulating environment. The kindergarten teacher should perform the pedagogical diagnostics systematically throughout the day, i.e. in controlled and spontaneous activities.

Reinforcement of the pedagogical diagnostics in the context of preschool pedagogy and developmental psychology proves to be essential both in undergraduate training of future kindergarten teachers and in further professional training of this professional group.

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