

Article

Children's Play—The Educator's Opinion

Ivana Visković * , Esmeralda Sunko  and Branimir Mendeš

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Poljička cesta 35, 21000 Split, Croatia; esunko@ffst.hr (E.S.); bmendes@ffst.hr (B.M.)

* Correspondence: iviskovic@ffst.hr; Tel.: +00-385-91-6613-014

Received: 3 July 2019; Accepted: 30 October 2019; Published: 4 November 2019



Abstract: The educator's personal role in understanding children's play is a key factor in planning organization of educational process in kindergarten. An educator's personal paradigm is assumed to be an experiential and educational construct. This research examines the possible correlation of educators' personal paradigms (N = 291) and contextual factors in the region of Dalmatia (Croatia). A questionnaire Q-EOCP ($\alpha = 0.78$) was designed for this research. Research findings suggest that most educators are reluctant to introduce information and communication technology /ICT into the educational process (M = 2.25; SD = 1.02) or work with children with disabilities (M = 2.03; SD = 1.33). There was a slightly positive correlation between the educator's professional work experience and the view that children with disabilities /CWD should be taught how to play ($r = 0.35$; $p \leq 0.05$). Work experience is slightly negatively correlated with the opinion that natural materials encourage creative play in children more than the didactic toys ($r = -0.29$; $p \leq 0.05$) and with the assessment of daily play in nature ($r = -0.21$; $p \leq 0.05$). The research measured the correlation of assessments of daily play in nature and the educators' level of education ($F = 3.47$; $p \leq 0.05$). Findings suggest that early childhood and preschool educators need additional education on children's play and the possibilities of augmentative technology.

Keywords: children preschool age; educators; founders of kindergarten; professional work experience

1. Introduction

Play is the fundamental activity of early childhood and preschool children, which justifies the interest of numerous interdisciplinary research studies in this phenomenon. From a philosophical point of view, play can be observed through social and cultural development [1]. Global economic and social changes also initiate changes in the context of the play, conditions and conduct of children at play, toys as cultural artifacts, and the role of adults in it, especially in an institutional context. From a pedagogical point of view, play has outstanding educational importance associated with children's development and interactive relationships between children and adults [2–5]. This indicates the importance of the role of parents and educators.

Play is children's self-organized activity. The role of adults is recognizable in creating a stimulating play environment and participation in the play [6]. It is justified to assume the adult's (parents and educators) personal paradigms are the motivators and regulators of their behavior. They affect the development of children's independence, creativity, communication, learning strategies, problem-solving techniques, and distribution of authority. It is still not clear how the extent of formal and informal education and educators' professional work experience relates to their understanding of children's play. This paper therefore examines educators' understanding of children's play and the possible correlation of educators' personal paradigms and contextual conditions.

1.1. Children's Play

Children's play is a phenomenon which can be recognized in a certain form in every society, yet cultural differences and contextual conditions make it difficult to define children's play in an unambiguous and generally applicable manner [7,8]. It occurs in the absence of social coercion and allows for the tension release and (potential) conflict resolution [9]. Intrinsic motivation, interactive relationships with the environment, freedom, and divergence are seen as the general determinants of children's play [10]. At a personal level, children's play is important for the regulation of psychological, physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Armstrong considers it a dynamic, constantly changing, multisensory, interactive, creative, and imaginative process [11].

Mahmutović understands children's play as a way in which children, by imitating adults, create a divergent simulation of imagination and reality, thus solving potential conflicts [12]. The frequency and forms of children's play correlate with social interactions, whose quality is proportional to the quality of the environment (social and spatial-material), children's personality, and adults' understanding of children's play and their personal roles [13].

The cultural community where children are raised, the structure of their time and daily rhythm, norms, and behaviors (recognizable by the power distribution and problem-solving situations) present the reference framework of children's play along with communication as an operational level of relationship. The values of community guide children's play as well as the relationships between children and adults, and relationships among children. At the same time, play can be a means for transferring and internalizing values [14–16].

Children's play is also one of the modalities of learning. Learning through play motivates children while constructively correlating with their engagement, but the very process of playing is primarily entertainment, most often deprived of the pragmatic orientation towards the outcome [17]. Although children (partially) learn from role models [18], their behaviors during the play are often personal and divergent (re)constructions of what has already been experienced. Recent research is therefore focused on the spatial-material and social context of play [9,10,12,13,17]. Bearing in mind the fact that for a large number of years in early childhood and the preschool period, children spend more time being active in an educational institution than with their families [19], it justifies a need to do research in the context of play within institutions. Certain authors [20] interpret children's play as a fundamental means of learning and socialization, guiding other research towards the spatial-material and social context of kindergartens. At the same time, some other authors emphasize and warn that children's play in kindergartens increasingly resembles school teaching [11,21]. Armstrong explains that the educator's direct role, the imposition of the rules in play, control of the course of play and demand for normative outcomes relating to the future process of schooling are the reasons which may restrict children's play detrimentally [11].

Children's play can be analyzed in different ways: in relation to the psychophysical status of children, the social level, areas of development, toys as artifacts, and the connection between children's play and the role of adults. This paper does not primarily explore children's play but the opinion of educators and their assessment of the importance of children's play.

1.2. Outdoor and Risky Play

Once commonplace, children's play in nature and outdoors is increasingly less present in modern society. This can be explained by the (justified) fear for children's safety [22], but also by a certain distrust of children and their abilities [23]. Such behavior of adults limit the holistic approach to children's development, especially the development of motor skills, self-confidence, and creativity, reducing the acquisition of practical experience, and children's ability to focus on their surroundings, not giving them the time for experimentation and the development of independent thinking [24].

Based on research carried out in the context of play, Martensson [25] argues that children's play is more diverse in open, natural, and unstructured spaces. Children's behaviors are unrestricted and focused on the exploration of personal opportunities. It is therefore reasonable to expect that educators create conditions for outdoor play and encourage children's exploration. Some authors

such as Schepers and Liempd [26] believe it is first necessary to encourage adults and develop their trust in children. The educator's confidence in children presents a foundation for the development of childhood independence, initiative, creativity, and self-esteem. Through documenting various childhood activities in nature and outdoors, Mawson [27] points to strong affirmative implications of children's experience of natural environments and experiential learning.

Analyzing children's outdoor and risky play, Constandines [28] argues that children mostly choose functional, mobile games to meet their need for movement, which today, especially in cities, is limited due to living conditions. He estimates children rarely choose symbolic games, which might be linked to the developmental age of the observed children. At the same time, it is possible to assume that passive entertainment, such as exposure to media (television and similar technologies), affect possibilities for play and increase the need for symbolic games [29–31].

In the context of contemporary lifestyles and, relative, limitations of children's play, outdoor and risky play is especially important for the overall development. The educator's opinion about the child's play affects the use of outdoor space opportunities and opportunities for risky play.

1.3. Modern Technologies and Children's Play

Life conditions, primarily remoteness from the natural environment and exposure to new technologies, change the modalities of children's play. Global consumer culture also redefines children's toys, which gradually gain the significance of global artifacts which initiate new games and relationships. New technologies contribute to this as well, especially the use of information and communication media. Consequently, different positive and negative aspects of new technologies and children's games have been identified.

There are conflicting opinions on the current and long-term educational outcomes of a information and communication technology in early years and preschool children's play. Most studies point to long-term negative consequences, such as the correlation between the length of time spent playing video games and an increase in aggressive behaviors [32,33]. There are also controversial studies pointing to the affirmative effects of a information and communication technology in the educational process. From a child's point of view, this can be a new form of socialization and may support the development of specific social skills [34]. The use of new technologies enables research, development, and self-assessment of personal cognitive competences [35–37]. At the same time, the development of cognitive competences can lead to neglect of social and emotional components of child development [33].

Although the long-term effects of information and communication technology (ICT) on children's development are not fully researched, the affirmative possibilities of their application in working with children with disabilities have been recognized [38]. Based on legal guidelines in Croatia, children with special needs include gifted children and children with disabilities. The term "disabilities" is an "umbrella" term which includes children with developmental disabilities, children with difficulties, and disadvantaged children.

The State Pedagogical Standard of Preschool Education [39] recognized both the children with disabilities and gifted children as children with special educational needs. Supporting an inclusive society implies creating conditions for meeting the needs of all children. It is therefore justified to use the advantages of contemporary information and communication technology in working with children. Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) is highly applicable for children with multiple developmental disabilities. It is most commonly used in the educational process with children who are not able to use natural speech, children with autistic spectrum disorders, or children with cerebral palsy, cognitive disabilities, and acute speech apraxia [40–42]. This paper examines augmentative technology only in terms of how to communicate with children with developmental disabilities for the purpose of encouraging and implementing children's play.

1.4. Educator and Children's Play

Kindergartens present, in addition to family, the most important educational community for early and preschool children. It is justified to assume that educators are competent and educated people whose role is crucial in pedagogical aspects of children's play.

Educators study children's play during their formal education. In Croatia, a BA qualification (bachelor) is mandatory for all early and preschool teachers (lasting either two or three years), while further MA study (master's degree) is optional. Additional professional training on a regular basis is legally required, but the contents and training methods have not yet been determined. Professional training is organized by the Education and Teacher Training Agency (ETTA), institutions, and various associations, but only the ETTA trainings are recognized in professional licensing. Educators are responsible for their own professional development and education.

Recognizing the importance of children's play encourages educators to create a stimulating spatial-material and social play environment. Educational policies, care for children's safety, and a focus on academic achievements could limit or inhibit children's play and, in turn, reflect on their psychological and physical status [43,44]. Analyzing the role of adults in children's play, it is possible to differentiate their involvement in the course of children's play and inclusion outside it [2]. Through quality inclusion in the play, with children's consent, adults become teammates, their incentives enriching children's play and the continuation thereof. Involvement of adults outside of the play should be aimed at preparing the play environment, encouraging cooperation, and evaluation. The adult's involvement in children's play can be interpreted as engagement (direct engagement and interaction), accessibility (the time and way in which adults are available to children, but are not in direct interaction), and responsibility [3]. Šagud interprets the role of educators in children's play through the activities of creating and organizing the play environment, encouraging, and coordinating, as well as playing the roles of teammates, facilitators, and evaluators [4]. The range of roles goes from guiding and instructing, through directing and modeling, to retreating and distancing. Šagud recognizes a threat to children's play in the extreme roles of educators at each end of this spectrum—namely in directive behavior and disinterest [5]. Griffiths agrees, warning of different ways in which adults control children's play, especially their outdoor play [43,45]. It is therefore justifiable to investigate how educators see their personal roles in children's play.

Each kindergarten's practice reveals differences in approach, organization, and evaluation of the educational process, which also includes children's play. Education and professional development are not uniform. It is not known to what extent the educators have studied and acquired the necessary knowledge and professional competencies and skills, and the quality of evaluation during their formal education and professional development in designing the play context and encouraging and engaging in children's play.

Earlier research found no evidence of knowledge transfer between formal education and practice [46]. This research found attitudes, motivation, engagement, creativity, and social skills to be better predictors of educator quality than his/her level of education. Recent research recognizes the importance of the social context for the development of professional competences [47]. Quality is recognized as a construct of functional knowledge and social skills adapted to the specific conditions and requirements of the environment [48]. Professional competences, which are the result of the initial education and professional development (lifelong education), are understood as preconditions of quality [49–52]. Some studies emphasize the importance of directing and engaging educators [3,53,54]. At the same time, some authors emphasize the importance of social support and available resources for the sustainability of the educator's engagement [54]. The way the educator understands the play and the importance it attaches to it determines his behavior in the play context.

2. Materials and Methods

This empirical non-experimental research attempted to define educators' opinions on children's play and the usual behaviors of children and educators in the context of play. The assumption is that systematic research about educators' professional engagement can contribute to the holistic understanding of the play process, the development of children's independence, and creativity. The personal opinion of an educator is assumed to be determined by his/her education and experience. Research findings are expected to shed light on areas in which educators may need additional education and professional development opportunities.

According to the findings of previous research and relevant sources, the following hypotheses were set:

Hypotheses 1 (H1). *There is a statistically significant correlation between the assessment of individual aspects of children's play and the educator's self-assessment of their personal behaviors with the educator's age and work experience.*

Hypotheses 2 (H2). *There is a statistically significant difference in the assessment of individual aspects of children's play and the educator's self-assessment of their personal behaviors in relation to the educator's level of education and their place of work.*

Hypotheses 3 (H3). *It is assumed that educators working in rural areas and on islands more often use outdoor space for children's play.*

The research was conducted within the framework of the regular work of the early childhood and preschool education institutions (during teaching staff meetings) with the prior consent of the director of the institution and the guaranteed anonymity of the respondents. The purpose of the research was explained to all potential respondents. Participation in the research was voluntary.

The collected data were processed using the Statistical Program for Social Scientists 20 (SPSS20). For general descriptive purposes, measures of central tendency and scatter were calculated. The key factors were extracted through factor analysis of the scales used. Using the scree test in extraction, the main component method was applied. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to observe the correlation. A one-way variance analysis allowed for a comparison of potential difference between educator's assessment and the level of their education. The Bonferroni procedure was used for the post-hoc analysis.

2.1. Sample

The survey included 291 educators from the Split-Dalmatia County (SDC) (Table 1). The sample includes 25.15% of the total population of educators in this county [55] and is representative in size [56]. Only three male educators were included, making 1% of the sample; therefore, the data obtained are not considered in relation to respondents' sex. According to the available data, in the Republic of Croatia, there are 101 male educators (0.83%) [55], yet the data for a particular region are not available. The average age of respondents is 43.77 years (SD = 11.57) ranging from 23 to 64 years; the mode is 42 and 56 years ($f = 15$, by 5.2% of the sample). The average professional work experience of the respondents is 17.63 years (SD = 10.97) ranging from beginner's level educators to educators with 42 years of professional work experience. The mode is 20 years ($f = 10$; 6.9% of the sample).

Table 1. The sample

Founders	Sample	Population of Educators and Kindergarten in Split-Dalmatia County	
		Educators	Kindergartens
local self-government units (SGU)	244 83.8%	1541 74.4%	178 76.39%
private kindergartens	11 3.8%	453 21.77%	45 19.3%
religious communities	21 7.2%	77 3.71%	10 4.29%

Kindergartens in Croatia are divided into nurseries (1–3 years of age) and early childhood and preschool education (3–6 years of age, i.e., until children start school). Kindergartens are independent educational institutions.

The sample is structurally partially representative—all sub-samples according to their founders are represented, but the ratio is not balanced. Some of the respondents ($f = 15$; 5.2% of the sample) did not provide data on the founder of the kindergarten, possibly because of data protection. The sample covered

132 educators (45.4%) working in city kindergartens and 12 educators (4.1%) working on the islands (which assumes partial distance from the usual practice). Most of the educators in the sample ($N = 147$; 50.5% of the sample) work in remote far places located in Split-Dalmatia County, while the rest work in cities.

According to the data provided by Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS) [55], out of the total number of educators in Croatia (12,162), most of them (87.99%) have a higher level of education (considering that CBS does not differentiate a 2-year program from a 3-year study program) ($N = 10,701$), 6.83% of educators ($N = 831$) have a high level of education (master's degree), and 5.18% have a secondary level of education ($N = 630$). This sample included 7.5% of educators with a high level of education, while the others had a higher level of education. The sample did not include educators with secondary level of education; thus, it was not representative according to the structure of education of the general population. A significant difference of the structure of educational level of educators was determined in relation to the founder of the institution ($\chi^2 = 17.27$; $df = 5$; $p \leq 0.00$).

Most educators in the sample ($N = 168$; 57.7%) judged the working conditions satisfactory, including the kindergarten's outdoor area. A small part of the respondents, 17.2% ($N = 50$), said they did not have an outdoor play area, while 25.1% ($N = 73$) deemed the conditions unsatisfactory.

2.2. Instrument

A questionnaire on the educator's opinions on children's play (Q-EOCP) was the instrument used in this research. It was constructed for the purposes of this research on the basis of relevant literature and a reduction and review of the data collected through working with educators in focus groups. At focus group meetings, we analyzed educators' opinions about children's play, common behaviors of children and educators during the play, educators' views of children's play, the role of adults, and the play of children with disabilities. The research was authorized by the ethics committee of the faculty which carried out the research, based on the presented research idea design. The instrument was piloted on a group of part-time graduate students of early childhood and preschool education as they worked as kindergarten educators. Q-EOCP consisted of four parts: 10 independent variables (demographic characteristics and general working conditions), two assessment scales (behaviors and attitudes), and open-ended questions. The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and amounted to $\alpha = 0.74$ for the whole instrument, which is acceptable for this type of research. The behavior scale had two subscales: children's behavior (CB) (17 particles; $\alpha = 0.73$) and self-assessments of educators' behavior (SAEB) (22 particles; $\alpha = 0.79$). The attitude scale (VE ratio) (12 particles) had the lowest reliability ($\alpha = 0.71$).

Using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's test, it was found that all the scales used were appropriate for the factor analysis ($p \leq 0.00$). The subscale of children's behavior (CB) (approximately $\chi^2 = 1097.15$; $df = 136$) had four factors which together explained 59.26% of the variance. By applying the scree plot and the component matrix analysis, the following factors were extracted: independence, constraints, mediation, and peer co-operation. The subscale of the educator's behavior in this research (EB) (approximately $\chi^2 = 1302.52$; $df = 231$) had five factors which together explained 59.51% of the variance. The following factors were extracted: leadership, engagement, directivity, distancing, and application of ICT in the educational process. The subscale of educators' attitudes (VE) (approximately $\chi^2 = 451.34$; $df = 66$) had four factors which together explained 62.22% of variance. The following factors were extracted: attitudes towards children, attitudes about the adult role, opportunities, and attitudes towards children with disabilities.

3. Results

We analyzed the correlation of subscale scores (the sum of particles) with age and respondent's professional work experience. No correlation was found between the respondent's age and professional work experience and the assessment of the children's behavior in the play, the behavior of children with special needs, behavior self-assessment, attitudes about environmental factors, outdoor play, and developmental status affecting play (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive data and the subscales scores correlations with age and professional work experience of the educators in the sample.

Subscale	Particles	M	SD	Pearson's rho	
				Age	Professional Work Experience
Σ children's behavior	They communicate verbally with each other during the play	4.45	0.78		
	They use the organized play area	4.29	0.61		
	They use ready-made didactic toys	4.16	0.73		
	They organize the game themselves	4.11	0.67		
	They communicate non-verbally with each other during the play	3.86	0.98		
	They determine the rules of the play	3.71	0.93	$r = -0.04$	$r = 0.03$
	They use ecological materials and toys	3.61	0.92	$p = 0.44$	$p = 0.55$
	They structure the play area	3.58	2.48		
	They make toys	3.12	0.96		
	They seek to involve the educator in the game	3.04	0.86		
	They ask educator for help	3.01	0.83		
	They make picture books	2.60	1.01		
Σ gifted children	Gifted children make up new games	3.48	0.98	$r = 0.03$	$r = 0.06$
	Gifted children motivate other children to engage in the common play	3.38	1.03	$p = 0.61$	$p = 0.33$
Σ children with disabilities	Children with developmental disabilities find it harder to engage in the common play	3.35	1.02	$r = 0.08$	$r = 0.05$
	Children with disabilities disturb other children while playing	3.06	1.14	$p = 0.18$	$p = 0.37$
	Children with difficulties caused by cultural factors find it harder to engage in the common play	2.50	1.16	$r = 0.07$ $p = 0.28$	$r = 0.09$ $p = 0.42$
Σ educators' behaviors self-assessment	I praise children's behavior while playing	4.29	0.79		
	I organize play in nature or in the kindergarten's outdoor area daily	4.28	0.85		
	I encourage children to resolve problematic situations while playing on their own	4.24	0.72		
	I encourage children to organize the play on their own	4.21	0.66		
	I encourage children to agree on allowed play behaviors on their own	4.00	0.84		
	During the game, I bring new play materials	3.91	0.82	$r = -0.04$	$r = 0.01$
	I suggest natural materials for playing	3.91	0.85	$p = 0.46$	$p = 0.86$
	I structure play areas	3.91	0.83		
	I encourage children to structure the play area on their own	3.90	0.73		
	I inform children of the possibilities of the play	3.85	0.76		
	I encourage self-assessment of children's behaviors while playing	3.60	0.97		
	I explain the rules of the play	3.58	0.79		
During the game, I send non-verbal messages	3.39	0.86			

Table 2. Cont.

Subscale	Particles	M	SD	Pearson's rho	
				Age	Professional Work Experience
∑ educators' behaviors self-assessment	I ask the children about their play	3.37	0.97	<i>r</i> = −0.04 <i>p</i> = 0.46	<i>r</i> = 0.01 <i>p</i> = 0.86
	I list the rules of the play	3.27	0.83		
	I organize children's play	3.22	0.82		
	I suggest children's play behaviors	3.15	0.98		
	I engage in play only if necessary	3.13	0.96		
	I engage in the play passively	2.90	0.96		
	I correct children's statements during the play	2.42	1.01		
	I apply ICT in children's play	2.21	2.14		
I apply ICT in children's play as a means of communication for children with disabilities	2.03	1.16			
∑ environmental factors	Parents do not spend enough time playing with their children	3.92	0.84	<i>r</i> = −0.04 <i>p</i> = 0.47	<i>r</i> = −0.04 <i>p</i> = 0.44
	At home, children play in an inappropriate way, which reflects on their behavior in kindergarten	3.54	0.91		
	Modern toys limit children's play	3.21	0.94		
	Children with disabilities should be taught/shown how to play	3.15	0.94		
	Today's children do not know how to play; thus, the educators' interventions are necessary	2.69	0.95		
	Children should be shown how to play	2.93	1.07		
	Adults should not be involved in children's play	2.66	1.01		
Including children with developmental disabilities limits children's play	2.31	0.94			
∑ outdoor play developmental status	Children in kindergarten should have a daily chance to play outdoors	4.52	0.69	<i>r</i> = 0.05 <i>p</i> = 0.38	<i>r</i> = −0.03 <i>p</i> = 0.61
	Natural materials (unlike the ready-made materials) encourage creative children's play	4.11	0.84		
	Children play in accordance to their developmental status	3.69	0.91		
	Children in kindergarten should not be encouraged to play because they organize playing themselves	2.85	0.97		

We researched the relationship between educator's formal education and the assessment of children's behavior, as well as with behavior self-assessment and attitudes about children's play. The statistically significant difference ($F = 3.61$; $df = 3$; $p = 0.01$) was determined only for assessing the children's behavior during play. Post-hoc analysis, applying the Bonferroni process, found that educators with a higher level of education (a 5-year study program) more positively assess childhood autonomy in the game than educators with a lower level of education (a 3-year study program). A correlation was not found between the workplace (city, village, island) and the length of stay in the kindergarten (full-time, half-day, shorter stay) and the educator's assessment of either variable. A statistically significant difference ($F = 39.66$; $df = 2$; $p = 0.03$) was observed for educator's assessment about the behavior of children with special needs during play according to the type of kindergarten (regarding the founder of the institution). The post-hoc analysis, applying the Bonferroni process, found that educators working in religious and private kindergartens statistically significantly ($p = 0.03$) more positively assess the behavior of children with disabilities during play than educators in kindergartens whose founders are local self-government units.

4. Discussion

Knowledge, understanding, and respect of the diversity of each child should best predict the responsible educational behavior of educators. At the same time, the educator's confidence in children is a starting point for the development of children's independence, initiative, creativity, and self-esteem. The quality and quantity of adults' involvement in children's play depends on the engagement, availability, and personal motivation of adults [3].

Based on the data obtained in this research, it can be concluded that the educators assessed that in play situations, children express dichotomous behaviors ranging from high autonomy to requests for intervention of the educator/mediator. Educators have assigned noticeable peer co-operation to the age and developmental abilities of children, even though it is unjustifiable to neglect the engagement of educators in this process.

The processed data point to the opposing roles of educators: a high level of directive behavior during children's play and the encouragement of children's independence, which corresponds with other research [4]. This can be interpreted as insufficient educators' competencies and by the insufficient management of real-life situations, but also by children's developmental status. Research [57] shows that children with disabilities, if not encouraged by educators through personalized programs, show less will to play on their own and use symbols less often during the play.

Analyzing individual aspects of children's play, the educators assessed that children equally use structured play areas, express their independence in the restructuring of such areas and in the organization of new play areas. Educators estimated that during play, children use more verbal than non-verbal communication, which can be interpreted in terms of respective children's developmental abilities but also by their experience. Educators assessed praise as an acceptable educational tool and use it often. They claim they enable daily play in nature. At the same time, they estimate that children are more prone to using didactic toys than natural materials, which can be interpreted by the offer created by the educator rather than by the independent children's choices. Using the possibility of open questions, educators expressed their reluctance to take over the risks of children's play in nature and use of natural materials.

The results of this research point to the inadequate flexibility of educators in creating the conditions for successfully satisfying the needs of children with disabilities. Educators employed in institutions founded by religious communities and private individuals are more willing to overcome the common stereotypes and prejudice and accept individual characteristics of children than educators in kindergartens founded by the local SGUs. That may possibly indicate that institutions founded by religious communities and private individuals share the same "charity" model while educating children with disabilities rather than enforce "human rights" model simply in a way of more caring and helping rather than engaging in developing children's capabilities so they can exercise human rights

on their own.. Educators in the sample are reluctant to introduce a information and communication technology into children's play, thus limiting the possibilities of communication and socialization of children with multiple disabilities. It is reasonable to assume that most educators are not familiar with the possibilities offered by ICT in communication with children [58]. As a result of repeated research, authors warn of the need for an individual and individualized approach to children [59]. With the help of educators, children with multiple communication difficulties show more functional and symbolic elements during the play than when interventions are not present [60].

The place where educators live and work (city, village, island, main land) and educational programs (working hours in the kindergarten) are not recognized as significant intervening variables. On the other hand, formal education of the educators was recognized as a significant intervening variable. Educators with a higher level of formal education show more recognition of the importance of the autonomy of children in the play than educators with lower level of formal education.

Finally, H1 is partially confirmed, because a statistically significant correlation between the educator's professional work experience and the assessment of the children's play is determined only for certain aspects. There was no correlation between the assessment of children's play and the educator's age.

H2 is also partly confirmed because a statistically significant difference between the assessment of certain aspects of children's play and the educator's behavior self-assessment was found with respect to the level of education but not the educator's workplace (city or village). H3 is rejected because a more frequent use of outdoor play areas in villages was not found. It is justified to conclude that the conditions of the spatial-material environment (the place where the institution is) are not an intervening variable of the educator's paradigm.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this research are consistent with certain research [61], which emphasizes the importance of educators' formal education as well as the need for their additional education. The analysis of educators' behavioral self-assessment shows that educators with a higher level of education find children's play more important than educators with a lower level of education. This is particularly important in enabling children's play in nature, in building confidence in oneself (in the sense of accepting free and risky play), and in introducing new technologies in play with children with disabilities. The educator's work experience correlates slightly positively with the assessment of the need to teach children how to play. At the same time, professional work experience is slightly negatively correlated with the assessment of the importance of children's stay in nature and the use of natural materials for the play. Educators with a higher level of education recognize the importance of children's autonomy in play and play in nature. There was no correlation between contextual conditions (kindergarten location and working hours) with the educator's personal opinion. Educators working in private kindergartens and kindergartens of religious communities are more open to playing with children with developmental disabilities.

Limitations of this research relate to the sample size and the possible responder's tendency to provide desirable responses. The obligation to implement safety-related measures in kindergartens in Croatia may further limit educators in the use of available means, especially in terms of play in nature and risky play.

The education curriculum in the kindergarten is a common construct of all participants in the process. This emphasizes the need to involve children in planning, organizing, and implementing activities, especially in terms of play. The predictor of such behavior is the personal opinion of educators, primarily the trust in children and the acceptance of their autonomy.

Creation of appropriate physical and material conditions are recognized as the responsibility of educators, but also of other adults—parents and founders of kindergartens. At the same time, this does not exclude children as active participants in the process. Based on the findings of this research, it is reasonable to conclude that the educator's personal opinion are related to their education and work

experience. This emphasizes the importance of educator's professional development as a personal responsibility and responsibility of the institutions. The findings of this research therefore emphasize the importance of researching children's play during formal education for educators and the need for additional professional education as part of professional development.

Author Contributions: I.V. made contributions in Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, writing—original draft, and writing—review & editing. E.S. made contributions in Methodology, Resources, Supervision, writing—review & editing. B.M. made contributions in Resources, Supervision, Writing—review & editing.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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