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ABSTRACT

In its 80 years in Iceland, preschool has evolved from caregiving to the first level of schooling in the nation with a national curriculum organized by the Ministry of Education. This study used a cultural psychological perspective to examine whether Icelandic core cultural beliefs such as freedom and independence are evident in the daily practices in two Icelandic preschools and to examine how Icelandic early childhood educators view these practices. Phase 1 of the study involved intensive observations of two preschool teachers over 16 months, 9 interviews with the teachers and 1 with the preschool directors, and collection of documents to explore the connection between the context of the teachers and their pedagogy. Phase 2 involved four focus groups comprised of preschool teachers, directors, and consultants and preschool teacher educators in which the two teachers' pedagogy and beliefs were the basis for group discussion. The findings of this study showed that freedom is an integral concept for both teachers. Both devoted a large portion of the school day to free play and free choice. Both emphasized play and child-initiated activities. One teacher took a more active role with the children than the other teacher. Teachers' interview comments illustrated their different perspectives of the teacher role. Some focus group participants criticized one teacher's practice of allowing children to play without adults present and others highlighted the importance of children having a space where they are trusted to be on their own. Participants also discussed the importance of outdoor play in the preschool setting. (Contains 32 references.) (KB)

Running head: ICELANDIC PRESCHOOLS

MANIFESTATIONS OF CULTURAL BELIEFS IN THE DAILY PRACTICE OF ICELANDIC PRESCHOOLS

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Introduction

Preschool education in Iceland has fewer than eighty years of history. It started as a charity during the beginning of urbanization in the 1920's as a refuge for poor children. The aims of the first preschools were to provide the children with warmth, wholesome nourishment, and hygiene (Þorláksson, 1974). Today the activity of the charity has elevated preschools into educational institutions. According to a 1994 law, preschool education is the first level of schooling in Iceland, and all early childhood programs are called "playschools." Just as the Icelandic preschool has evolved and changed, the staff members working with the children have changed from being caregivers to being preschool teachers with university degrees.

Although early childhood education in Iceland is built on a Scandinavian family welfare model and on the cultural heritage, it has been influenced by foreign ideological issues as well. Preschools are intended for children at the end of their parent's maternity leave (at the age of nine months) until they go to primary school in the fall of the year in which they turn six (Law for preschools, no. 78/1994). Most children start preschool when they are two or three years old. The local authorities supervise the building and running of most preschools and bear the expenses involved. Parents' contributions cover roughly 30% of the costs of the operation. The Ministry of Education formulates an educational policy for the preschools and publishes the Preschool National Curriculum. The National Curriculum is a policy-setting set of guidelines for pedagogical work in preschools and is meant to form a flexible framework (Ministry of Education, 1999).

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Context

Teachers' theories, beliefs, and practices are affected by their experiences, education, the institution, and culture. Several authors have suggested that culture is important in shaping teachers beliefs about how children learn and how teachers should teach. Social-cultural theories emphasize people's social nature and the behaviors, beliefs and interaction of individuals within cultural and historical contexts. Bruner (1986) has proposed that culture is important in shaping human life and the human mind. He argues that our life is understandable to us and to others only by understanding the virtue of cultural systems. Bruner (1986, 1990, 1996) also stated that all cultures have as one of their most powerful constitutive instruments a folk psychology – the underlying beliefs in a culture about human tendencies and how minds work. Folk psychology is a culture's account of what makes human beings tick. Bruner and Olson (1996) discussed the notion of folk psychology and folk pedagogy. They suggest that teachers' folk psychology is reflected in their teaching. Teachers' folk pedagogy reflects their folk psychology. In trying to change practices or introduce innovations, we have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk pedagogies that guide both teachers and students.

Cultural psychology studies human beings as members of social systems and locates them historically and culturally. Cultural psychology builds on the assumption that the human mind "can only be realized through some situated or local process of 'minding' which is always bounded, conditional, or relative to something: shared meanings, goals, stimulus domain, available resources, local artifacts, cognitive assistants, and so on." (Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 1998 p. 90). Different variations in childhood worlds across human populations, and differing

beliefs about child rearing and interpersonal relationships in different cultures throughout the world have been identified (Kagitchibasi, 1996; Kitayama & Markus, 1999; Shweder, et al., 1998;). It can be assumed that beliefs and actions of teachers have their roots in cultural beliefs and the values of the larger culture. Studies on early childhood teachers in different cultures support this (Carlson, 1997; Cuffaro, 1997; Einarsdóttir, 1998, 2000; Lee & Walsh, 2001; Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989).

Assessing Culture

Attempts have been made to assess culture (Kuchinke, 2001). Hofstede (1997) has, for instance, developed four dimensions of cultures, based on a large body of survey data about the values of people in 53 countries and regions around the world. His categorization of cultures identifies four main cultural value dimensions: power-distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Data was not collected from Iceland, but it can be assumed that Icelandic culture ranks similarly compared to the other Scandinavian cultures.

When measured against Hofstede's (1997) cultural value dimensions, the Scandinavian countries rank high on individualism, which means that identity is based in the individual and children learn to speak their minds and think in terms of "I". The Scandinavian countries are considered feminine cultures because gender roles are less polarized, and both boys and girls learn to be non-ambitious and modest, and the average student is the norm. The Scandinavian countries also have low power distance scores, meaning that people interact more on an equal basis; teachers are, for instance, supposed to treat students as equals and expect to be treated as equals by the students. In small power distance situations, children are more or less treated as equals quite early, and

children treat parents as equals. Sweden and Denmark also have low uncertainty avoidance scores, which means that people in these countries do not feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.

The Icelandic Cultural Context.

The history of Iceland begins with a group of independent people who left Norway in the 9th century because of the oppressive conduct of the dominance of king Harald the Fair-Haired, who unified Norway, and the taxation that he forced on his subjects. They sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in open boats and settled in a country where it seemed almost impossible to live.

The first settlers in Iceland were farmers, fishing was a sideline, and the country was predominantly rural until the beginning of the 20th century. Children had responsibilities to contribute to the work of the family, but they were also allowed to play freely in nature. The industrial revolution arrived late in Iceland, and the changes it created were unusually sharp and sudden as the society was transformed from predominantly rural to urban and industrialized in only a few decades. The Icelandic economy also changed dramatically in a very short time, from being one of the poorest nations in Europe at the turn of the century, to being ranked as one of the highest in prosperity and standard of living today (Ólafsson, 1996). More than 90% of the people live in urban areas now, and approximately 62% of the nation lives in the Reykjavík metropolitan area: an urban area with most of the advantages and disadvantages of urban life (City of Reykjavík, 2001).

The physical environment has played an important part in shaping the life and fate of the Icelandic people. The location of the country and the magnificent landscape has

molded the nation through the ages. Iceland is situated in the middle of the North Atlantic where the Gulf Stream meets the ice floes of the Arctic. Thanks to the Gulf Stream, Iceland's climate is milder and experiences less radical changes between winter and summer than would a continent at the same latitude. Given the location of the country, it is no wonder that it long remained undiscovered – and probably was the last country in Europe to be inhabited (Rosenblad & Rosenblad, 1993). Icelanders are proud of having survived the weather and history. Research show that they are prouder of their country than are other Europeans and they form strong bounds to their land (Jónsson & Ólafsson, 1991).

Freedom. The Scandinavian countries have weak uncertainty avoidance according to Hofstede's (1997) cultural value dimension. That means that uncertainty is a normal feature of life, and each day is accepted as it comes. There are lenient rules for children on what is dirty and taboo, and there are no more rules than are strictly necessary. In her ethnographic study on Icelandic culture, the American sociologist Terry Lacy (1998) observed that Icelanders do not want their freedom curtailed in any way, neither theirs personally nor the nation's. "There can be no understanding of either official policy or public support of an issue without understanding that fact. Discussions and decisions about major topics such as the NATO base, fishing limits, whether to hunt whales, and whether to join the EC revolve around maintaining freedom" (p. 4).

Children in Iceland are given much freedom and are often left much to themselves. Both parents often work outside the home, and children are often left unsupervised during the day. Frequently, these children at a young age take care of their younger siblings. Likewise, young children are allowed to play freely outdoors for hours

without adult guidance. As a consequence, accidents involving children are common (Georgsdóttir, 1994). Concerned Icelanders say that Icelanders today still do not know how to live in a city. They claim that they raise their children as though they were still living on farms, but without the adults' supervision which was provided when the parents' work was in the home.

Icelanders equivocate over the idea of freedom for children in Iceland. On one hand, the Icelanders want their children to be able to be free and unsupervised in their daily activities, but on the other hand, they worry that they are leaving the children with too little supervision. Icelanders value freedom, and they find it an important part of growing up to be able to play and explore the environment without adult supervision. Kistjánsson (1991) in his study on the accidents of preschool children found that Icelandic children enjoy little adult supervision in their everyday environment and that Icelandic parents feel that children should be free and allowed to learn on their own by meeting the challenges that the environment offers.

Individualism. Closely connected to the issue of freedom are independence and self-reliance. In Hofstede's (1997) system, the Scandinavian countries ranked high on the individual dimension. In individualist cultures there is emphasis on individual freedom, and everyone is expected to have a private opinion. Education and child rearing aims to prepare the individual for a place in society of other individuals.

In many commentaries the Icelanders are pictured as particularly independent, freedom-loving individualists (Ólafsson, 1989). This value is seen revealing traces of Iceland's historical past, to the people who fled Norway to become independent, and to the fact that Icelanders were independent farmers for centuries, only dependent on

themselves and nature. Lacy (1998) concluded her analysis on "What is an Icelander?" by saying: "Above all else, Icelanders remain rampant individualists" (p. 11).

Foreigners living and conducting research in Iceland have noticed that, for Icelanders, maintaining individuality also means taking responsibility (Cuffaro, 1997; Lacy, 1998). From earlier times, the values of self-reliance and individualism were coupled with an emphasis on working together. Icelanders express a high level of caring and invest a great deal of energy in helping others. There are many charitable institutions in the country in which Icelanders actively participate. In a survey of the values of life in modern societies (Jónsson & Ólafsson, 1991), participants were asked to choose among values that emphasized freedom of the individual on one hand and equality on the other hand. Icelanders rated equality slightly higher than individual freedom, different from the other Scandinavian countries and the United States. In spite of this, Icelanders were much more in favor of private enterprise than public enterprise in the workforce, and they had a stronger belief of hard-work leading to success than did the other Scandinavian nations. In this respect they resembled the United States more.

The purpose of the present study was twofold. First, it aimed to discover if Icelandic core cultural beliefs such as freedom and independence are evident the daily practice in two Icelandic preschools. Secondly, it aimed to examine how Icelandic early childhood educators view these practices.

Methods of the Study

The First Phase

This study has two phases. In the first phase two preschool teachers in Reykjavík, Helga and Kristin, were studied in great detail over a period of 16 months. Data gathering

included intensive observation, interviews with the preschool teachers and the preschool directors, and collection of documents. An emphasis was placed on exploring the connection between the context of the preschool teachers and their pedagogical work.

I began the study with observations in the two preschools. I observed the teachers in their classrooms, the dressing rooms, the hallways, the teachers' lounges and on the playgrounds. In order to observe the various activities taking place in each preschool, I made observations at different times on different days of the week. Observations varied in length from an hour to half a day. Altogether I visited, observed, and interviewed Kristin 38 times and Helga 40 times. I acted mostly in the role of the observer as participant in the preschools (Spradley, 1980). I also conducted nine formal semi-structured interviews with each of the preschool teachers, and I also interviewed the preschool directors. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and returned to the participants for their comments. In addition to these formal interviews, I was also involved in frequent informal interviews and conversations with the teachers and the directors. I also collected various documents in the preschools, such as letters to parents, the year plans for the preschools, guidelines and planning sheets, pictures, etc.

The Second Phase.

In the second phase of the study, I interviewed four focus groups. I presented the pedagogical work and beliefs of Helga and Kristin to the groups, and it became the foundation for group discussion. Using a focus group enables a group discussion, which resembles a lively conversation, in order to find out the group members' attitudes, opinions, and perspectives. The goal is not to have the group reach consensus. Instead, attention is placed on understanding the feelings, comments, and thought processes of

participants as they discuss the issue (Kruger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1998). I selected participants who I believed had relevant information and opinions about Icelandic preschools and preschool teachers' pedagogical practices. In each group the members had as a commonality that they were holding similar positions. They were (1) preschool teachers, (2) preschool directors, (3) preschool consultants, and (4) educators of preschool teachers. Each group consisted of five participants. Data was analyzed using strategies of qualitative inquiry outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Graue and Walsh (1998).

Results

The results of the study on Helga and Kristin show that freedom is an integral concept for both. A large proportion of the school day in both preschools is devoted to free play and free choice, that is, activities which the children choose themselves. The children have a play period when they arrive in the preschool in the morning. After breakfast they usually have choice time and outdoor play, except for one or two groups which have group work for approximately one hour. After lunch and rest they have outdoor play and choice time, except for a group that has group work for an hour. After snack time in the afternoon there is choice time, and the day ends with story reading and free play. Thus, most of the children's time is spent on play and child-initiated activities.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how the school day is divided according to types of activities. That is, how much time is devoted to activities that are planned and chosen by the children, such as free play, outside or inside play, and free choice. Additionally these figures contain the amount of time for preplanned small group activities and how much time is devoted to routine activities such as lunch, rest, and group time. The figures show

that in both preschools, approximately 50% of the day is devoted to activities that the children choose themselves. Approximately three and one half hours a day (35%) is devoted to routine activities where the whole class meets or the class is divided into two groups. Only a small part of the day is devoted to preplanned activities or group work (approximately 15%).

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

The findings illustrate that play and child-initiated activities characterize the preschool teachers' pedagogical work. Both preschool teachers emphasize play, and they both provide a supportive environment for play, allowing enough space, time, materials and equipment. The two teachers' roles when the children are playing were nevertheless somewhat different. Helga was more actively involved with the children, and she was always present when the children were playing. Helga said that the educational personnel in her preschool have agreed that it was important to be present when the children are playing in order to observe and follow the development of the play, to prevent noise and bad manners, and also to interfere if the play is going nowhere or in the wrong direction.

In Kristin's classroom the children were allowed to play alone in a closed room that is adjoined to the main classroom, and in centers that are located in the preschool hallway. While the children were playing, Kristin was communicating with other adults, preparing material, being in the vicinity, and providing help to the children when they asked for it.

Kristin emphasized that the children have freedom to play undisturbed by adults, if the play is going well. She said:

> We find it important that the children have freedom when they are playing and are not disturbed by the adults. That they can play alone in the small room without the adults disturbing them.

When I asked Kristin how she saw her role and the role of other adults when the children were playing, she said:

> I think that we should be present but not too much in the play. Let them play on their own premises, but always be there in proximity, stay in the main room and be able to go into the small room. This class is very independent; they want to play by themselves, and without hesitation, they send us out of the room if they want to be there by themselves. If there is some abnormal noise from the room, some disagreement which we can hear that they cannot resolve, then we intervene. However, we do not intervene right away when we see that two children disagree. First we look and listen, and if we see that they cannot handle it we intervene. Also when we notice that the children are not engaged in the play; for example, if someone is always coming out of the room complaining about something, then we go in and discuss with them. Also when some individuals have chosen to be in there that we know have had problems playing together, we keep an eye on the group. So it depends on the individuals playing how much we leave them by themselves.

In both preschools the children play freely on the playground, usually for two one to two hour periods a day. The children go outside to play in any type of weather. The two preschool teachers feel that outdoor play is important as an outlet for children's energy. Helga said:

> I am in favor of outdoor play...It is our fault if the children do not get enough movement. In the playground the children run, climb and exercise the most. They also feel better after they have been outdoors, they eat better, and they rest better.

Both Helga and Kristin feel that the children should be allowed to be free from adults' involvement and interference when they are outside. The educational personnel on

the playground most frequently stick together when they are on the playground, and they leave the children to themselves unless they need some assistance.

When the children in Kristin's preschool go outdoors to play on the playground, they play freely without much adult interference, even when what they are doing could be considered dangerous. I observed several such incidents. Once I saw a little girl sitting on a seesaw and another girl wanted to play with her. She climbed from the end that was on the ground, and step by step she walked to the other end that was up in the air. There she turned around and sat down. Kristin watched her from a distance and did not interfere; neither did the four other adults on the playground. When I told Kristin that I had the feeling that the children had much freedom to choose what they wanted to do in her classroom and relatively little time in which they were required to do something particular, she answered:

> We find free play so important, the play where the children can choose friends to play with, material to play with and what they want to play, we all [the staff] find it very important and agree to have it this way. We find that there is a tendency to cut down the free play and organize too much. The children are then in an overly rigid program and free play is neglected. Many of us have experienced this in some other places that we have worked.

Helga also finds it important that the children are free, but there is always an adult from each classroom on the playground, and they interfere if the play is not good. She said that the children want to be free when they play outside, and she thinks that is good for them, especially for the oldest children.

In the second phase of the study I presented the results from the interviews and observations in Helga and Kristin's classrooms, to the four focus groups. The participants discussed the commonalities and differences of the two teachers' work. The discussion

centered on the small dramatic play-rooms that are common in many Icelandic preschools where children are allowed to play without the presence of adults and the role of the preschool teachers in children's play was disputed. The preschool teachers and most of the preschool directors criticized the practice in Kristin's preschool where the children are allowed to play without adults present. They argued instead that some children play better when there are adults present. They also pointed out that if children are acting out difficult experiences in their play, it is important that adults are present. They mentioned the danger of mobbing when there were no adults present and also if someone got hurt, you would have problems explaining to parents what had happened. One of them said:

> Of course you should not live life expecting the worst things to happen. That is just boring and unexciting. But it has shaped my view that things have happened in closed rooms. You know, I am just afraid.

Others, on the other hand, mentioned the importance of the children having a space of their own. This would be a place where the children can play without adults, a place where they are trusted to be on their own. One of the preschool directors said:

> The situation in my preschool is that we have one excellent playroom where three children can play together. We control which children are in there together and there are closed doors, and they enjoy it. .... They are always happy in there and find it just fantastic to be allowed to be in there by themselves. And like I say, we trust them and give them much responsibility.

The preschool consultants and the educators of preschool teachers did not reach consensus on this matter but rather speculated and reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of adult interference and participation in children's play. They said that in the last few years the educational personnel had been encouraged to participate, but in the old days the preschool personnel had just walked around to see if everything was ok. One of them talked about these changes saying:

> You would allow several children to play alone in a room. Then you were not allowed to do that at all and everyone became guilty about it. If someone came in you would hurry to open the door. Then you start to think when this safety and lack of safety starts to be in the way. I am not talking about having the children alone for hours, but when do you know the group well enough to know that these two or three can be alone. Or can they never?

The preschool consultants also discussed that interference in children's play was a delicate balance and the preschool teachers would have to think and assess carefully if they were hindering the children's independence and initiative. They also mentioned that when the educational personnel was participating and interfering in the children's play, they often did that from their own point of view. One preschool consultant gave an example, saying that if there were for instance noises from the playroom there could be perfectly normal reasons for that.

> What are the reasons for the loudness? Are they sounds that are part of the play? You have to observe and participate in the play to understand why all the noise is. Perhaps they are in the jungle and the elephants are making noise.

The preschool consultants and the educators of preschool teachers discussed the importance of having faith in the children and trusting them, but being there for them, and offering them assistance. They felt that children should be trusted to play alone but they should know that the educational personnel are in the vicinity ready to assist and support them if they ask for it.

The participants in the focus groups discussed outdoor play in the preschool. Most of the participant were in favor of outdoor play, saying that it was becoming even more important as children were coming by car to the preschool and some did not have the opportunity to play outdoors at home. One preschool director said:

> I think outdoor play is becoming more important than before... Many parents are asking if the children are going outdoors to play. They see it a favorable thing that the children play outdoors in the preschool

> because some places in the city it is not possible for the children to play outside.

The participants had, on the other hand, somewhat different views on whether you should require all children to go outdoors every day. Some said that they found that the children should choose if they wanted to play outdoors or stay indoors and play. They also talked about that the children should be able to choose how long they would stay outside.

Discussion

The findings illustrate that play and child-initiated activities characterize the preschool teachers' pedagogical work. Most of the preschool day is devoted to activities that the children can choose themselves. The two teachers both underscore the importance of play and the idea that children learn through play. Nevertheless, they had different views on the role of the educational personnel in children's play. In Helga's preschools there was always an adult present or in the vicinity when the children were playing, but in Kristin's classroom the children played alone in a closed room. Both preschool teachers felt that when the children were playing outside, they should be free of adults' interference.

The participants in the focus groups speculated in their discussion about the role of the preschool teachers in children's learning and play. Some emphasized the importance of having faith and trust in the children, while others felt that children needed adult guidance and assistance. They agreed that the preschool teachers should provide space, materials, and situations for the children to play, learn, and explore new possibilities. Their role in assisting the children was, on the other hand, more blurred and unclear. Many of them were facing certain dilemmas trying to find a balance between indifference

and domineering or controlling as they found it important to trust the children and give them responsibility without leaving them uncared for.

In an earlier study on the role of the educational personnel in Icelandic preschools in children's play I found that for approximately 38% of the observed time, the adults were outside the room where the children were playing (Einarsdóttir, 1998). The findings indicated that preschool practitioners in Icelandic preschools have a rather passive or reserved role in children's dramatic play and that they are reluctant to participate in the play unless the initiative comes from the children. However, when asked about their view of adult's participation in children's play, there were some inconsistencies with those observations, as many of the participants answered that they found preschool personnel should influence and participate in the play. Thus, the results show some discrepancy in their attitudes and behavior concerning play. Studies on Scandinavian preschool teachers also reveal that they believe that children should be allowed to play and experiment on their own (Åm, 1984; Ivarson, 1996; Knudsdottir-Olofsson, 1991).

Consistent with Bruner (1986, 1990, 1996) and Bruner and Olson (1996) the results of the study suggest that Icelandic cultural beliefs about children and childrearing affect the pedagogical practice of the preschools. Helga and Kristin's goals, values, and beliefs are consistent with the underlying beliefs and values of the Icelandic culture and the society's view of children and childrearing, where freedom is seen as an intrinsic part of childhood. These cultural beliefs have recently been confronted by a more international perspective, one where adults are expected to be in more control of children's lives, and the freedom of children is more restricted. In recent years there has been public debate and concern that Icelandic children are left too much to take care of themselves and there

is not enough discipline in schools and the society. These concerns are also evident in the educators' views on the preschool practices as can be noticed in the discussion in the focus group.

The world today is characterized by increasing globalization and fewer boundaries among nations. Iceland's location in the North Atlantic, midway between Europe and North America, allows it to easily experience cultural influences from both continents. Transportation to and from the country is becoming more convenient every day, and many Icelandic academics study abroad at some point and bring back with them foreign influences. Icelandic students of early childhood education read textbooks coming from the United States in which new ideas and thinking about the role of teachers are introduced. This has resulted in international influences confronting cultural beliefs about children, childrearing and education of young children in Iceland.

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Figure 1. Proportion of free play, free choice, group work, and daily routine at Kristin's Preschool.

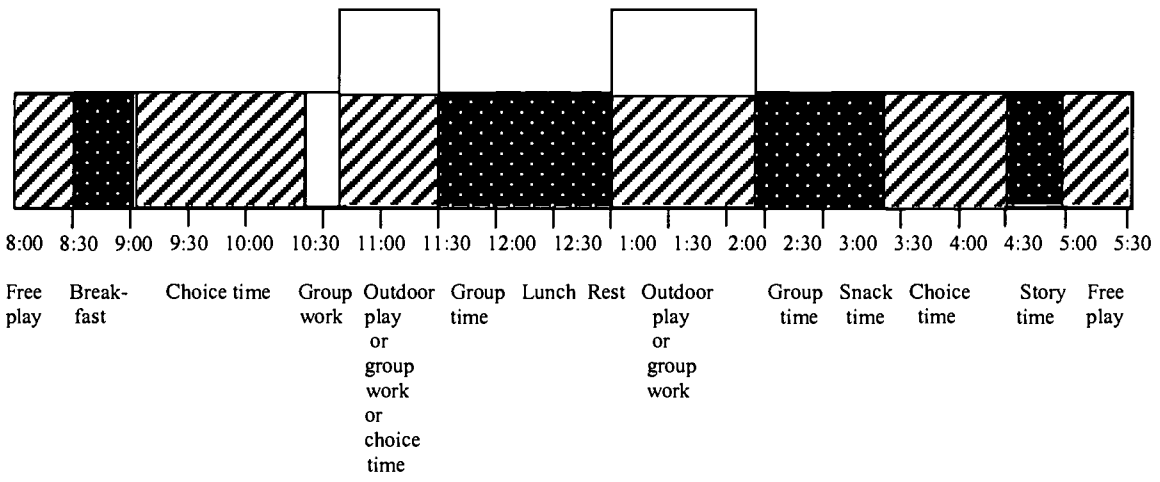
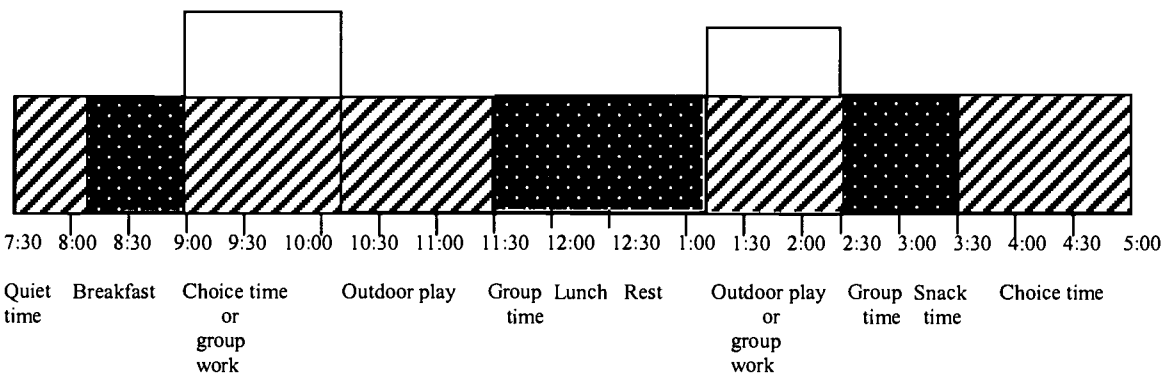
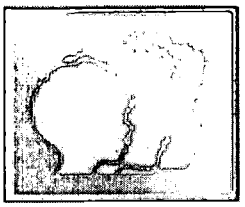


Figure 2 . Proportion of free play, free choice, group work, and daily routine at Helga's Preschool.





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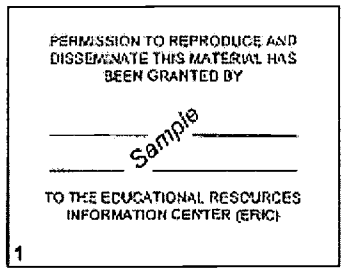	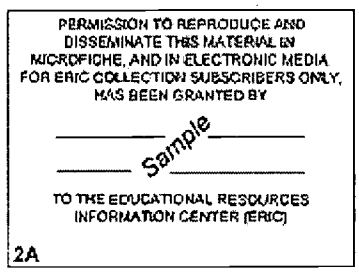	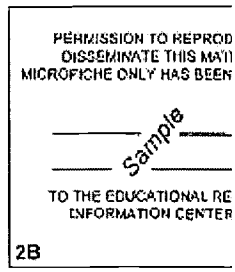
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