



Free and Structured Play Possibilities in Vilnius Kindergartens



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Method

Participants. 96 Kindergarten teachers from at least 43 different Vilnius kindergartens, both state and private, participated in the study. **Teacher characteristics.** All the teachers participating in the study were female, their experience of teaching kindergarten ranged from less than a year to more than 40 years (M = 13.99 years, SD = 11.78). Of the respondents, 24% had master degree, 44.8% had bachelor degree, 20.8% had non-university higher education and 10.5% had secondary education. **Class characteristics.** Each teacher participating in the study taught a different kindergarten classroom, hence their responses represent 96 different classrooms in Vilnius kindergartens. Reported classroom sizes ranged from 9 to 30 children in class; average reported classroom size was 18.98 children (SD = 3.88, N=90). 59.6% of the respondents taught mixed-age classrooms and 40.4% taught single-age classrooms. 8.3% of classrooms consisted of one and/or two year olds exclusively, while all the other classrooms included children from three to seven; the most prevalent children's age was three (59.4%) and five (54.2%). **Kindergarten characteristics.** 18.8% of the teachers reported working in the kindergarten, that follows state developed preschool education program, 17.7% worked in Waldorf education kindergartens, 10.4% - in outdoor or ethnographic kindergartens, 4.2% - Montessori education kindergartens. Others did not report any educational system the kindergarten is working upon, claiming the kindergarten works according to the unique self-developed program, does not follow any educational system or adopt the eclectic approach.

Measures and procedure. An online survey has been developed by the authors of this study to explore the schedules of kindergarten classes and to assess the priorities kindergarten teachers give to various play forms and other activities. The link to the survey was sent by e-mail to the administrations of all state kindergartens and many private kindergartens in Vilnius.

Background

Unstructured free play is considered critical for the successful development of preschool children and smooth transit from preschool to school years (Vygotsky, 1962; Gray, 2011). Kindergarten classrooms have all possibilities to provide the opportunities for children to develop elaborated, imaginative play, as children of similar ages spend a lot of time together. However, there is a rising concern that various structured activities organized by adults, such as learning and structured play, are taking up most of the schedule and children are not left enough free time to develop and elaborate their own creative play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Lynch M., 2015). Research shows that kindergarten teachers hold differing views on the role of various play forms in child development and these views are related to actual play experiences children have in their classrooms (Spidel, 1988).

Anecdotal data suggests that children are increasingly being taught academic skills in Vilnius kindergartens, however no empiric data on the relative prevalence of free and structured play has been published yet.

Hence, **the objectives of this study** were to explore the schedules of kindergarten classes in order to compare amount of time and opportunities given to free and structured play and to assess the priorities kindergarten teachers give to various play types and other activities children typically engage in during their day at preschool.

References

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Results

In order to evaluate the possibilities for free and structured play in the kindergarten groups, the schedule was split into half an hour intervals (N = 23, from 7AM to 7PM) and teachers were asked to indicate at which time intervals children have opportunity to engage in each of these play types. The number of time intervals was then used as outcome variable representing opportunities for free, self-initiated play and adult-organized play in the kindergarted groups. A Wilcoxon signed-ranks test indicated that on average children have more opportunities to engage in free play than in adult-organized play (table 1).

Interestingly, correlational analysis shows that the relation between free play and structured play opportunities is positive, that is teachers who provide more free play opportunities also provide more structured play opportunities ($r_s = 0.304$, $p = .003$). It should be noted that teachers often reported the same time intervals as providing possibility for both free and structured play, so the latter result may reflect the common practice when at play times teachers organize some sort of activities, but children may choose not to participate in them and engage in their own play instead.

Table 1. Comparison of mean number of half an hour time intervals at which children have possibility for free and structured play

Type of play	Min.	Max.	M (SD)	Z	p
Free, self-initiated play	1	15	8.45 (3.46)	-5.396	.000
Adult-organized play	0	15	5.72 (3.88)		

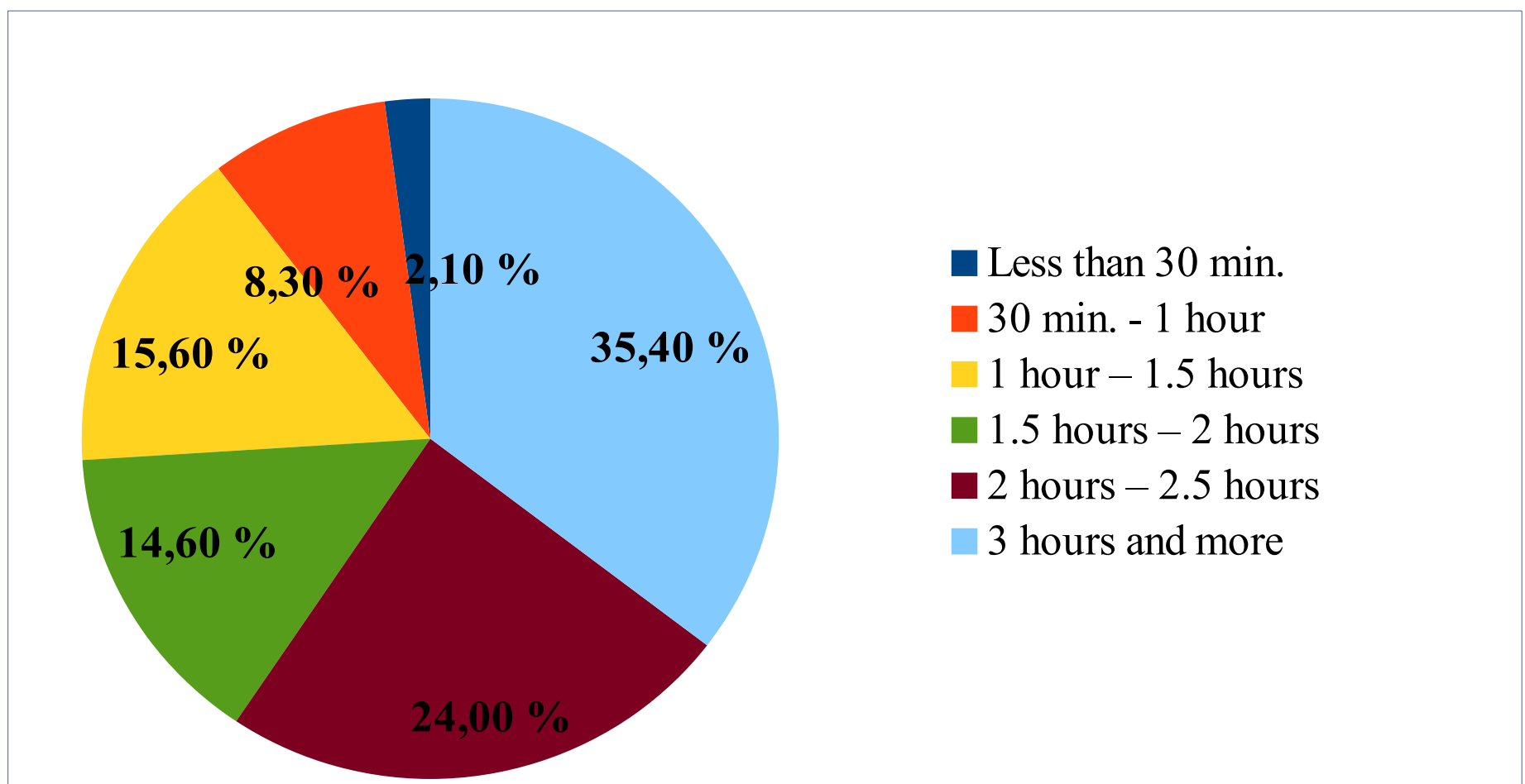


Figure 1. The distribution of classrooms according to the amount of free, unstructured time given to children (N = 96)

Figure 1 shows the distribution of classrooms according to the free, unstructured time that children are given during their day at kindergarten. Although more than one-third of the respondents reported, that children have three hours and more of free time during the day in their classrooms, more than ten percent of teachers reported 1 hour or less.

Teachers were also asked which type of play – self-initiated or adult-organized is being played more often by the children in their classrooms. The proportion of teachers claiming that children's free play is more prevalent in their classroom than adult-organized play was significantly greater than the proportion of teachers claiming the opposite (86.3% and 13.7% respectively, $\chi^2 = 50.12$, $p = .000$, $N = 95$).

The greatest proportion of our respondents claim that they give priority to pretend play in comparison to other play forms, as well as the bigger proportion of teachers believe that free imaginative play is the most important preschool activity. On the other hand, almost one quarter of teachers participating in the survey do not include imaginative play among 5 kindergarten activities, most important for children's education (figures 2 and 3)

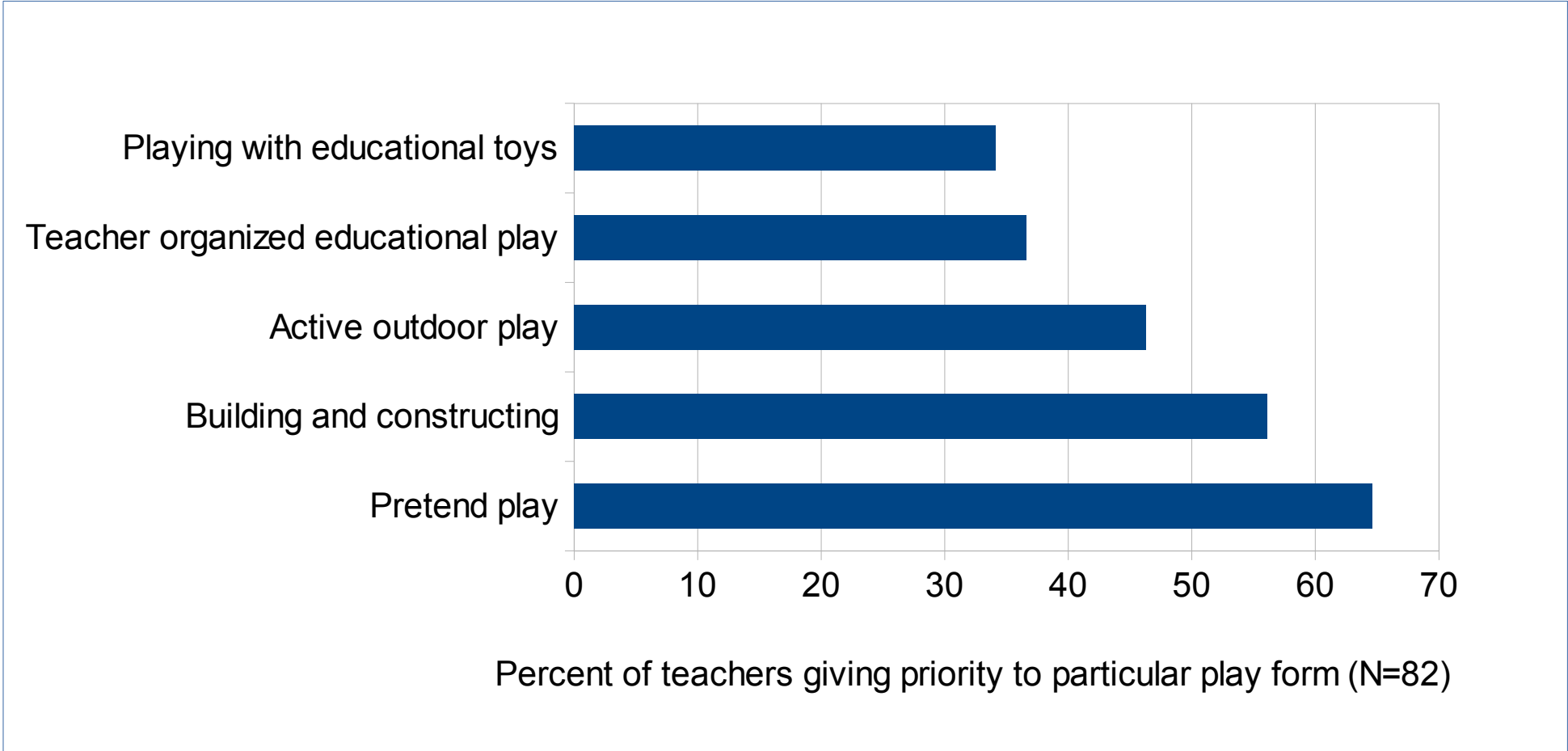


Figure 2. Top five play types: percent of teachers, who listed particular play types among the three most desirable ones (N = 82)

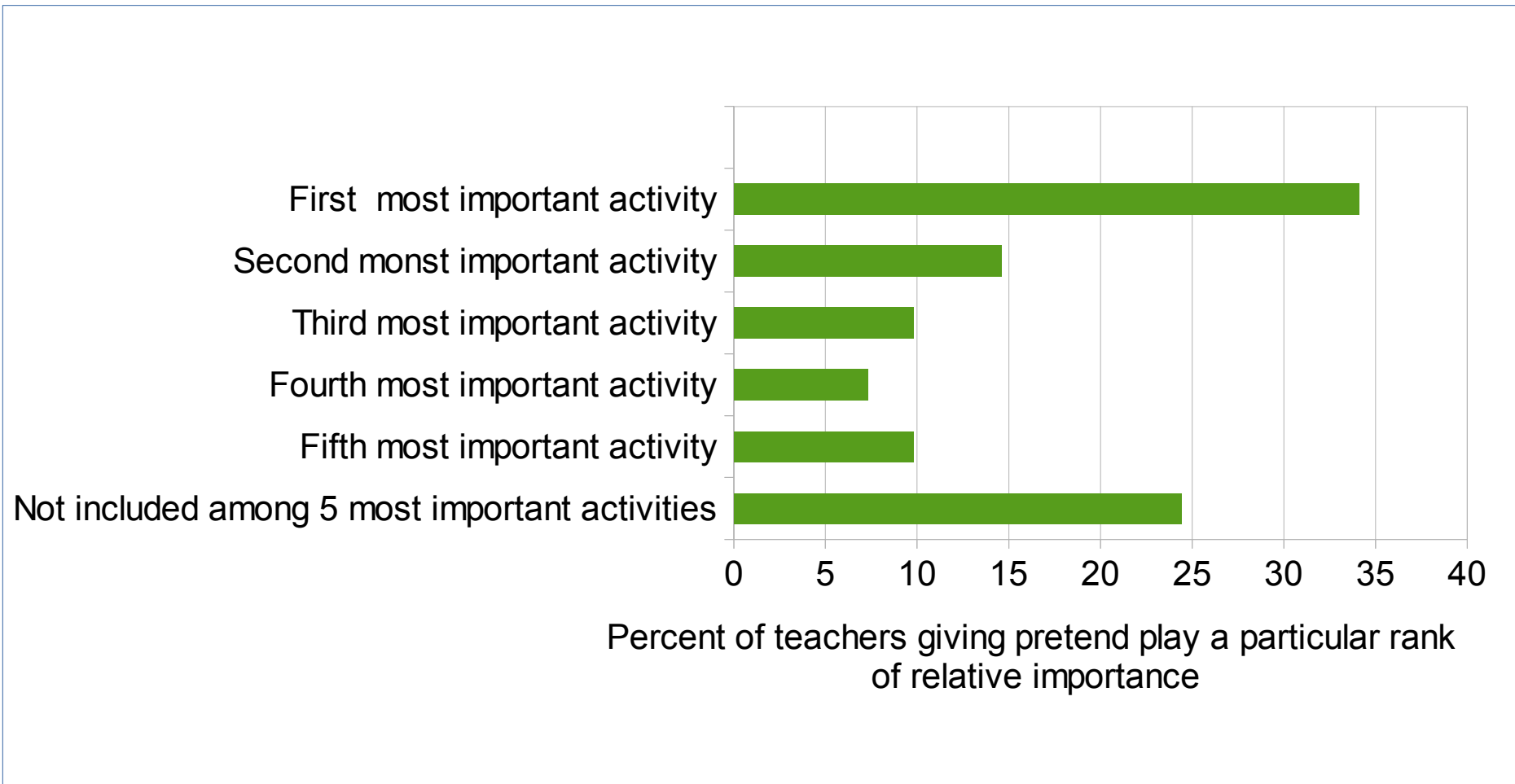


Figure 3. The relative importance of pretend play for preschool education in comparison to other kindergarten activities, according to kindergarten teachers (N = 82)