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Using a Play-Based Methodology in Qualitative Research: A Case of Using Social Board to Examine School Climate

Abstract

Little, if any, examination of using play-based tools to examine children's opinions in research exists in the current literature. Therefore, this paper is meant to address that gap within the literature and showcase the study about the use of a specific play-based methodological tool in qualitative research. This specific tool called social board was developed for the purpose of a research project, which was carried out as part of my doctoral thesis. The main aim of my doctoral thesis was to identify the socio-cultural value system of Norwegian elementary school children. In this paper, I discuss the basic assumptions of a play-based methodology, which combines pedagogical and psychological approaches. In fact, this methodology has inspired the design of the social board tool. Then, I present how this research tool was developed and used in practice. I also indicate some of the strengths and limitations of the research tool. Ultimately, this study provides empirical evidence supporting the social validity of play-based methodological tools such as the social board.

Keywords: play-based methodology, play-based assessment, school climate, school culture, social board tool, qualitative research

Introduction

Every researcher who examines school climate through qualitative methods such as school ethnography, becomes an attentive observer of every interaction that occurs in the research field. However, sometimes the observations are not satisfactory for a researcher and that is precisely what I have experienced. During my thesis research, the goal of which was to recognize the socio-cultural value system of Norwegian elementary schoolchildren, I developed a specific type of a play-based methodological tool called a *social board*. Assuming that school will never be free of cultural influences (Bruner, 2006), I used observations to assess school climate and school culture. In the course of the study, I found it necessary to use the tool in question in order to analyse and interpret the data.

I conducted a school ethnography, which belongs to the category of qualitative research. The observations spread over three months period whereas the social board tool was used one time as a supplement to the observations. The social board activity survey was undertaken by 1st – 4th grade pupils from one Norwegian school, located in the south of the country. The research tool was used to examine four elementary classes comprising approximately 75 students aged 7-11 years. The school was chosen randomly. The social board was used in the selected classes to determine (a) the democratic school climate and (b) a sense of community within the school based on students' sense of belonging.

When conducting research in the school, I had the impression that the group under investigation wished to say more and that my task was to find a common area of communication with them. Observations were not enough to gather desired data. Taking the specific character of the development of the youngest school children

(from 1st till 4th grade) who participated in the research, I decided to resort to an alternative tool based on a play-based methodology, which would enable me to obtain pupils' opinions (preferably all at once). I wanted to avoid personal interviews with children and also traditional questionnaire, as they may be time-consuming, confusing and stressful for examined group of pupils. At the same time, it was important to me to create a tool that would be well received by children. The main goal in creating a tool was to take into account their physical and cognitive development, social skills and previous experience.

As a researcher, I was concerned about the language barrier since English was not a native language for both, the participants and the researcher. Using a play-based methodology (where research tool is associated with fun rather than evaluation), helped children reduce a potential tension associated with overcoming the language barrier.

This study would not be possible without the assistance of trusted teachers from grade 1 – 4, who played a huge role in surveying the youngest school children with the use of the social board.

The power of play

The creation of the tool that I called social board was inspired by the previously mentioned challenges, scientific curiosity and belief – that play is as natural to children as breathing. It is also a universal utterance of children (Drewes, 2006) and perhaps the most developmentally appropriate and powerful medium for children to develop cause-effect thinking critical to impulse control, process stressful experience and learn social skills (Chaloner, 2001). Play can provide a child with a sense of power and control that comes from mastering new experiences. Play is a crucial activity for children's proper development and wellbeing. Through play activities children can communicate with adults including researchers or therapists without using words/language (nonverbally, symbolically or in action-oriented manner). Therapists or researcher can read through children's action and behaviour.

Play is often used as a therapeutic session and play-based assessments are part of therapeutic sessions. The use of play based methods helps establish a working relationship with children. A unique atmosphere of a playtime, presence of toys, and play materials tell children that they are given permission to be children and to feel free to be themselves (Landreth, 1993). Landreth (1991) states that the toys become children's words and play becomes the language, which foster greater understanding of their opinions and feelings. Through the play-based methods or methodological tools researchers can send a message to children of full acceptance and permission to be themselves without the fear of judgment. Winnicott (1971) notices that playing also allows a child to be an individual, to think and express oneself and to make one's own decisions.

Play-based methods and play-based methodology

Conducting opinion polls for children, including the young pupils (grade 1 – 4), is not an easy task. Until recently, not much has been said about the importance and possibilities of using play-based research tools (such as the social board) in qualitative research. It is worth mentioning that play-based methods, like for

example play-based observations or play-based interviews have been present in educational and psychological science since the 1980s (Farmer-Dougana & Kaszuba, 1999). Playing has been used in several ways to help children learn and discover their attitudes. For example, from many years therapists have used play-based assessments and techniques during therapeutic sessions to solve children's emotional, behavioural and school problems (Chaloner, 2001). Also teachers use play-based methods to teach in classrooms. Play-based methods are designed for children in different ages, even before kindergarten age, like TPBA (transdisciplinary play-based assessment) model designed by Toni Linder (1993). Shaefer and Drewes (2009) stress that play-based assessment and play-based methods afford opportunities to observe children in their most natural form which then allows to conduct play-based therapy. In that case the importance of play in examining children's attitude in any research seems to be crucial for better understanding and the best way to see the world through the child's eyes (to understand children's perspective).

The basic assumption of the play-based methodology is to create a research tool that is associated with fun rather than with study or evaluation. The aim of this type of methodology is to create an understandable and easy-to-use research tool. The play-based methodological tool must meet the emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children, which requires pedagogical and psychological knowledge. The play-based research itself needs to include play's features – this works similarly to a play-based psychological observation, in which a child is examined during playtime. It turns out that the major critique of a play-based methodology includes the following arguments: (a) the lack of strict research projects and analytical data methods (Philips, 1985); (b) the unreliability of research reports or the lack of control in terms of sample under investigation and the research itself; (c) at times, there is no control group and the community sample is too small for generalization (LeBlanc & Ritchie, 1999). I believe that the abovementioned assumptions could just as well be raised towards traditional methodology used to examine children's opinions and attitudes. It is well known that all research methods have some limitations.

It must also be taken into account that the use of play-based tools can be risky as children can simply start to "play a game" with the intention to collect points to win a game instead of following instructions of the researcher. This situation was addressed through teachers' involvement in using a play-based methodology and using in-depth knowledge about a group to see when a real playtime (collecting points) starts. As evident, teachers' role within a study became an invaluable initiative.

Experience of creating a social board tool

In the course of my observations, I noticed that schoolchildren used a dartboard during play-time and class-time. The board was well known to them and hence a simple dartboard served as a pattern to create a methodological research tool. The construction of the tool was very simple and thus the board became a good alternative to the traditional scale or smiley faces slider used to examine children's opinions.

The board depicted the research problem I wished to address. There were two main issues to explore: the democratic school climate and a sense of community within the school. The board consisted of four circles numbered from 1 to 4. I used a Likert-type scale, where scale follows: 4 – I strongly agree to 1 – I strongly disagree. Number 4 was placed in the center of the board, thus being the proverbial bull’s eye. As my goal was to investigate two issues, I printed out two boards on a different colours of paper to avoid the organizational chaos. The social board for democratic school climate was printed out on a green paper, whereas the sense of community board on a yellow one. Every student received two small boards and in addition, there were analogical bigger size yellow and green boards (one common for all pupils) displayed on the black board in front of the classroom. On the common board students marked their opinions one after another during the third stage of research (see below: *Stage three – marking the results on a common board*).

Different colours helped students to avoid organizational mistakes when they were asked to mark their opinions on the common board. It was easier to ask students for taking a board with them, reading and then marking opinion form “yellow paper dart” or from “green paper dart”, than to call a board by a name: “a democratic climate board” or “a sense of community board”. Simple and direct instructions were easily understandable for pupils (i.e., short instruction: “please take a green paper dart and come to the common board”).

The common board was hand-drawn by me, the researcher and the students on a big sheet of paper to increase students’ participation in a study and to make them familiar with the design of the board. A smartboard could be an alternative to the common paper board. During the research study, I tested both tools – the smartboard and the paper board. The traditional form, that is the paper one, turned out to work more effectively. When marking the smartboard, students tended to touch it with their wrists and leaving additional marks on it, which, interfered with the progress of the study.

Social board in practice

The research was conducted in several stages as described in the following text. During the stages 1 – 4 in which pupils worked with the tool I was able to evaluate the quality of the social board with the assistance of the class teachers. As I already mentioned, their assistance was of essence in conducting the study.

Stage one – familiarizing students with the tool and the purpose of the research

The first stage of the research involved explaining to students the workings of the research tool and the purpose of the research study. Along with teachers’ assistance, I familiarized students with the scale of the board and read out loud the questions written on the board. Students were asked to put different marks on the board according to their gender (girls put a dot, boys a cross), and to write their names.

In one of the classes, after receiving the instructions, pupils made sure that they understood it correctly, saying: “It’s like a dartboard, isn’t it?”. This means that the

basic premise of the play-based methodology (i.e., associating tools with fun) was fulfilled.

It is worth mentioning that I did not have to convince any of the teachers to use the tool. Unanimously, all the teachers considered it an interesting alternative to the traditional system of scales and smiley faces, which are typically used to examine children's views. It can be said that the play-based methodological tool defended itself and immediately gained acceptance. Teachers on their own initiative called the tool a social dart. They also suggested that it would be reasonable to use different colours of paper on the boards to facilitate the work of schoolchildren.

Stage two – working with social board

Every student received a green democratic school climate board and a yellow sense of community board. Children were asked to mark on them their opinions. Students could choose when they start and finish work thus they were working without time pressure. I did not collect the boards from the students, they were asked to put them aside when they were done. The students were told to inform the researcher when they were finished with the boards. However, in some cases when children finished their work, it was the class teacher whom they informed, not the researcher. I can assume class teacher's role (a trusted person) was important, especially for youngest groups (1st and 2nd grade).

Stage three – marking the results on a common board

Students who completed small boards were asked to come to the common board one after another and mark their opinions there (copy it on the common board). In order to make this activity more fun for students and thus use play-based method, they were picked to the board by using riddles or mathematical problems.

At this stage of the study the researcher and the class teacher took a closer look at students marking their opinions because younger children (particularly from 1st and 2nd grade) tended to follow the opinions of their classmates. At this stage a scrupulous attention of the researcher and teacher's knowledge about the group was essential as it helped to assess if students' answers were true. It is worth mentioning that students found the tool easy to use, as it was evident in their final comments: "It was easy" or "It was fun to say my opinion that way".

Stage four – summarizing the results in the classroom

At this stage it was the class teacher, participating actively in the research from the very beginning, who took the initiative. It was the class teacher's task to summarize the results and discuss them openly in front of the whole classroom.

Stage five – summarizing the results with the teacher, collaborative diagnosis

The researcher and the class teacher met together to summarize the study and exchange insights. This stage required a reciprocal, trustworthy relationship between the researcher and the class teacher.

Stage six – devising own research conclusions

During this stage, the researcher analysed and interpreted collected data.

Results

The play-based methodological tool has been proven effective in exploring the democratic school climate and a sense of community. The study showed that pupils found the tool simple and understandable. The fact that the tool was inspired by a board that the school children were familiar with, eliminated the element of surprise. Pupils needed just a short instruction to understand how to use it in all four stages. Most importantly, they did not associate the social board activity survey with unpleasant evaluation. In teachers' opinion, the social board was a great alternative to the scale or the smiley faces slider, which are most commonly used for surveying the youngest pupils.

The research has shown that it is not only pedagogical and psychological knowledge of the development and children's ways of thinking but also teachers' positive attitude and active engagement that are important in the creation and use of play-based tools. Teachers played an invaluable role and were of great assistance in this qualitative research. Their opinions and knowledge about pupils helped me as a researcher to assess children's moods and introduce to them the play-based tool. It would be less effective or more time consuming to use the board without their active involvement. I think that the presence of a trusted person is crucial in working with children.

Play-based methodological tools can be successfully used in qualitative research. In fact, employing the play-based methodology in this study become supplementary to observations as opposed to an independent technique.

One of the limitation encountered was the lack of computer software version of the tool which I mentioned earlier. An alternative to the paper social board could have been a computer software which would examine children's opinions or a multimedia tool such as a tablet. Using information technology with the use of applications on the tablet or the smart board could be very helpful in data collection. I intend to develop this idea in the future.

Conclusion

This research experience has shown that listening to the opinions and views of school-age children is not a simple task. Traditional evaluations such as observations, surveys or interviews often leave much to be desired. Traditional methods may be inappropriate, boring or unfamiliar to the younger pupils. Play-based methodological tools provide an interesting alternative to the existing evaluation scales. Throughout my doctoral studies, I discovered only a few opportunities that can be offered by the play-based methodology, which combine pedagogical and psychological approaches. This study showed that play-based tools can be used to explore students' views about different topics, in this case to examine democratic school climate and sense of community. I am convinced that social dart idea has many more opportunities and it should be fully discovered for the sake of the youngest groups of respondents.

Finally, to illustrate the efforts of this research study in practice, I wish to mention that after the data collection process in the school was finalized, I was asked for permission to allow the use of the social board within the school. I have been informed that the school has been using this tool to this day, mainly to acquire

students' opinions. This provides evidence that play-based methodological tools have a future and are worth developing.

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