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DIGITAL PLAY IN PRESCHOOLS

Understandings from educational use
and professional learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to improve knowledge on preschool teachers' educational use of digital play and their professional learning about it. The thesis is focused on three questions; How can preschool teacher educational use of digital play be understood? How can the professional learning context of preschool teachers using digital play for educational purposes be understood? And, How can preschool teacher knowledge needs concerning educational use of digital play be understood? The participants were preschool teachers who had started to introduce tablets and digital play in educational practice. Netnography, Self-report essays, and Interviews were used as methods for data collection. The data consist of 465 posts from online forums, ten self-report essays and eleven interviews with preschool teachers. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used as a method for data analysis. The theoretical framework 'Learning in Working Life (Illeris, 2007), which examines the constituent parts of workers' professional learning context, was used to make sense of, and interpret the findings towards a synthesis and a deeper understanding of the informants' stated experiences from educational use of digital play and from professionally learning about it. The results show that the participants' incentives for using digital play were linked to a user-friendly technology and to the perceived opportunities to support children's life-focused and school-focused learning. Moreover, the children's learning environment was perceived to be enhanced by digital play, as it enabled opportunities for variation, individual adaptation and innovation in the educational practice. The participants envisioned digital play in preschools to be: different from children's home use, purposeful, embedded in educational practice, secure, primarily collaborative and preferably used with teacher presence. Their professional learning context included reluctance from colleagues and guardians and limited time and opportunities to learn about digital play at work. In this situation, technology, like opportunities for knowledge exchange via Internet forums, became an enabler of professional learning. Some participants also explored digital play together with the children, to overcome the shortcomings of the professional learning context. The participants needed knowledge about topics in social discourse, technology and educational use of digital play. Dealing with children's access to tablets and how to enhance children's agency in digital play were issues that many participants worked to improve. Sometimes the envisioned educational use of digital play conflicted with the participants' experiences from the professional learning context, which can be interpreted as instances when the participants experienced the introduction of digital play as challenging.

Keywords

digital play, preschool, digitalisation, tablets, professional learning, professional development, early years, digital competence, literacy, workplace learning, preschool teachers, early childhood education, technology integration

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