

Research on Pathways to Improve Preschool Teachers' Abilities in Observing and Guiding Children's Games

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Abstract: Games support the development of preschool children's abilities in core dimensions including language, social interaction, emotion regulation and logical thinking, and constitute an important component of kindergarten educational activities. As observers, supporters and guides of children's games, teachers need professional observation and guidance capabilities to accurately capture children's behavioral signals in games, respond to children's developmental needs, and give full play to the educational value of games. Based on the above, this paper analyzes existing problems in preschool teachers' game observation and guidance work, such as fragmented observation, superficial interpretation and inappropriate guidance. Combined with practical teaching problems, it puts forward pathways for improving preschool teachers' abilities in game observation and guidance. It is expected to provide references for the professional growth of front-line preschool teachers and facilitate steady improvement of the quality of kindergarten-based game education.

Keywords: Preschool teachers; Game observation; Game guidance; Professional competence; Improvement pathways

Online publication: October 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Games represent the primary learning mode for preschool children and form the core component of kindergarten daily activities. Preschool teachers' competence in game observation and guidance directly affects kindergarten teaching quality and children's growth. Nevertheless, judging from the status quo of preschool-education talent training in universities and industrial development, preschool teachers generally possess solid theoretical knowledge yet lack practical observation and dynamic-guidance capabilities, which prevents game-based teaching from achieving desired effects. Therefore, systematically researching improvement pathways for preschool teachers' game-observation and-guidance competence is not only an inherent requirement for promoting preschool teachers' professional development, but also a realistic need for deepening the curriculum-gamification reform in kindergartens and fostering children's all-round development.

2. Existing problems in preschool teachers' game observation and guidance

2.1. Fragmented game observation lacking purpose and professionalism

Game observation serves as the foundation for teachers to provide game-related guidance for children. Some teachers only focus on superficial issues such as safety and discipline during children's games, while paying insufficient attention to children's exploratory behaviors, cooperative behaviors, creative behaviors and emotional changes. Moreover, such observation is mostly random, without preset objectives and overall planning ^[1]. In addition, some teachers adopt relatively extensive observation methods, mainly relying on fragmented written records. They seldom apply professional observation approaches including event sampling, time sampling and anecdotal records to make complete and systematic documentation of children's game processes, resulting in scattered and one-sided recorded information ^[2].

2.2. Superficial interpretation of behaviors, difficulty in insight into children's developmental needs

Game behaviors are external manifestations of children's cognitive levels, psychological needs and developmental deficiencies, featuring concealment and situational attributes. When conducting game observation, some teachers can merely "see behaviors" instead of "understand behaviors" and fail to perceive children's developmental needs and dilemmas through their game performances. For instance, it is quite common for teachers to interpret children's game stagnation, peer conflicts, material exploration and other behaviors based on subjective experience ^[3,4]. Such superficial behavioral interpretation leads to untargeted teacher guidance and makes it hard to satisfy children's developmental demands fully.

2.3. Inappropriate game guidance with unreasonable intervention timing and approaches

"Moderate support and invisible empowerment" constitute the core of game guidance. In the process of providing game guidance for children, teachers shall guarantee children's subjectivity in games. In fact, some teachers over-intervene and deprive children of subjectivity. Typical practices include dominating game progress according to teaching schedules, arbitrarily correcting children's creative play styles, solving problems on children's behalf, and excessively controlling game order. Such over-interference undermines children's autonomy in games and stifles their creativity. On the other hand, some teachers hold a one-sided understanding of "autonomous games". They overemphasize children's autonomy and fail to intervene in a timely manner when children encounter difficulties, ask for help actively, or cannot proceed with games, so that game guidance becomes a mere formality ^[5,6].

3. Pathways to improve preschool teachers' abilities in observing and guiding children's games

3.1. Consolidate theoretical foundations and establish scientific game-education concepts

To tackle common problems in preschool teachers' game observation and guidance, preschool-education programs in colleges and universities as well as in-service teacher training shall strengthen specialized theoretical teaching of games and consolidate preschool teachers' theoretical basis. For example, Froebel's game theory, Piaget's cognitive-game theory and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory offer theoretical support for preschool teachers' game observation and guidance. Special thematic teaching modules can be designed around these theories in relevant education and training activities to guide preschool teachers

to correctly understand games and form concrete perceptions of the core value of games for children's development ^[7]. On the one hand, integrating such theoretical knowledge into preschool-teacher training helps teachers sort out the logical chain of "observation-interpretation-guidance", get rid of cognitive misconceptions of "valuing safety over development" and "valuing control over support", and truly establish a game-education concept centered on children's development. On the other hand, these theories enable preschool teachers to redefine their own roles in children's games, clearly understand their responsibilities as observers, supporters and guides, and avoid the cognitive trap of acting as "managers" or "dominators" ^[8]. On the basis of incorporating relevant theoretical knowledge, preschool-education programs and in-service teacher training shall also attach importance to the formation of preschool teachers' game-education concepts and guide them to establish a "child-oriented" game outlook. "Child-orientation" stresses respect for children's principal position in games and requires teachers to encourage children to independently choose game themes, partners and materials. Its infiltration into preschool-teacher training helps fundamentally correct teachers' wrong perceptions of "valuing outcomes over processes" and "valuing control over support" ^[9].

3.2. Standardize observation methods and build a systematic game-observation system

Professional observation competence constitutes a core component of preschool teachers' practical capabilities. In the cultivation of preschool teachers' game-observation and-guidance abilities, it is necessary to guide them to form a complete observation workflow of "objective presetting-process observation-accurate recording-review and analysis". In this workflow, "objective presetting" means that before organizing children's game activities, teachers set activity objectives in light of the developmental level of various competencies among children in the class, and determine observation directions and priorities according to game-activity objectives ^[10,11]. For example, if a game activity aims to mainly foster children's spatial-planning competence and peer-cooperation performance, observation priorities can be placed on children's layout adjustment of game materials and negotiation processes for group division of labor, so as to prevent aimless and fragmented game observation. "Process observation" requires teachers to adopt professional observation methods such as event sampling, time sampling and anecdotal records according to game types and observation objectives to fully track children's game processes and avoid missing key behavioral information ^[12]. "Accurate recording" highlights the comprehensiveness and objectivity of records. To achieve this goal, preschool teachers shall abandon fragmented note-taking habits and adopt a combination of textual description, image-video recording and tabular statistics to fully restore behavioral details and situational backgrounds during children's games. "Review and analysis" refers to sorting out and analyzing recorded contents against preset observation objectives after games are finished, so as to extract key information. Such key information can serve as the basis for teachers to evaluate game-teaching effects and optimize guidance measures. The cultivation of preschool teachers' game-observation and-guidance competence shall place special stress on the teaching of observation methods, and guide teachers to build systematic game-observation systems starting from standardized observation practices.

3.3. Optimize teachers' guidance strategies and stick to the principle of moderate intervention

Guidance strategies are an important embodiment of preschool teachers' game-observation and-guidance competence. In the cultivation of such competence, emphasis shall be laid on teaching guidance strategies and teachers shall adhere to the principle of moderate intervention. Moderate intervention means "intervening

as needed, offering appropriate guidance and reserving room for growth”, abiding by the bottom line of non-interference, non-replacement and non-undertaking, so that children have sufficient room for exploration in autonomous games. For instance, preschool-education programs and in-service teacher training can simulate scenarios including game stagnation, sustained negative emotions, fierce peer conflicts and active requests for help. Game-guidance strategies are demonstrated corresponding to specific scenarios to help preschool teachers deeply understand the principle of moderate intervention and avoid two extremes: excessive intervention and complete laissez-faire. After preschool teachers master common game-guidance strategies for such scenarios, negative cases shall be incorporated into training activities to inspire in-depth thinking and guide teachers to flexibly apply acquired strategies to solve practical problems. A negative-case example is as follows: when games proceed smoothly and children are fully immersed, the teacher intervenes and interrupts children’s exploratory rhythm. This case can inspire preschool teachers to think about how to distinguish children’s game states and judge whether intervention is necessary. Its application in competence-cultivation activities is of great significance for reinforcing teachers’ behavioral logic of “observe first, judge second, intervene last”^[13].

3.4. Empower through teaching-research activities and build regular platforms for professional growth

As an important carrier for improving teachers’ competencies, kindergarten-based teaching research shall be integrated into improvement strategies for preschool teachers’ game-observation and-guidance abilities, and build regular communication and practice platforms to support teachers’ growth. Approaches for promoting kindergarten-based teaching research include: establishing regular game-teaching-research mechanisms, and holding regular activities such as game-case seminars, observation-skill training and high-quality-class observation to realize normalized teaching-research empowerment; encouraging preschool teachers to share typical game cases in teaching-research activities, conduct collective seminars on relevant cases, explore ideas for interpreting children’s behaviors and optimize guidance schemes, and help teachers tackle common difficulties in game teaching; inviting regional preschool-education experts and backbone teachers to provide one-on-one guidance targeting practical problems in teachers’ game observation and guidance, and broaden preschool teachers’ horizons for professional growth with advanced practical experience; building collaborative-education platforms between universities and kindergartens, and carrying out special lectures, practical guidance, project research and other teaching-research activities relying on theoretical strengths of preschool-education majors to make up for in-service teachers’ theoretical deficiencies and guide them to explore integration paths of theories and practices matching their own teaching styles. These measures can fully integrate resources from kindergartens, universities and local regions, enrich contents and forms of teaching-research activities, and allow preschool teachers to gradually make up for competence deficiencies in observation, interpretation and guidance through regular and diversified teaching-research activities, thus steadily improving their game-observation and-guidance abilities^[14].

3.5. Persist in reflection and practice to form a virtuous growth closed loop

Teachers’ professional growth cannot be separated from continuous practice and reflection. To effectively improve game-observation and-guidance competence, preschool teachers shall develop habits of regular reflection. They shall conduct reviews after each game activity, analyzing whether game observation is comprehensive, whether children’s-behavior interpretation is accurate, whether intervention is reasonable and

whether guidance is effective ^[15]. For example, teachers can analyze the whole process of game observation and guidance around core questions: whether observation objectives are clear, whether observation records are complete, whether behavior interpretation conforms to children's actual developmental levels, and whether intervention and guidance follow the moderate-intervention principle. They shall summarize valuable experience and existing deficiencies from each game-teaching session. Such experience and deficiencies offer clear directions for subsequent adjustment of game-observation schemes and optimization of guidance strategies, and prevent teachers from falling into the dilemma of "practicing without making progress". On this basis, preschool teachers can sort out their own growth trajectories by writing reflective journals for game observation and organizing typical game-guidance cases, and gradually form a virtuous growth closed-loop of "practice-reflection-adjustment-re-practice". Such a growth closed-loop can, on the one hand, help preschool teachers steadily advance their professional capabilities in observation, interpretation and guidance. On the other hand, it enhances teachers' teaching-research competence and facilitates their transformation from experience-oriented practitioners to research-oriented educators. To accelerate the development of preschool teachers' game-observation and-guidance abilities, kindergartens shall provide relevant support for in-service teachers. For example, regular activities such as mutual review of reflective journals and excellent-case sharing sessions can be organized to guide teachers to expand reflective thinking through mutual communication, spot previously-ignored details, absorb excellent observation and guidance experience from other teachers, and convert such experience into their own game-observation and-guidance competence.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, game-observation and-guidance competence constitutes an indispensable professional capability for preschool teachers. In preschool-teacher training, great importance shall be attached to the cultivation of such competence. Targeting problems exposed among preschool teachers in relevant work, a systematic competence-training system shall be built from five dimensions: consolidating theories, standardizing methods, optimizing strategies, empowering via teaching-research, and persisting in reflection and practice. This helps preschool teachers gradually establish scientific game-education concepts, develop good working habits and make up for competence deficiencies. Meanwhile, preschool teachers themselves shall take initiative to focus on professional growth, apply scientific methods in daily game-based teaching, review game-observation and-guidance procedures, and sum up relevant experience, so as to truly improve their own game-observation and-guidance competence and give full play to the advantages of game-based teaching.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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