

The Evolution of Value, Practical Issues, and Countermeasures in the Use of Toys in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of the value and form of toys used in kindergartens in China since the founding of the People's Republic, identifies existing problems in toy selection and utilization, and proposes relevant strategies. Through a case study of a public kindergarten in Xianning, Hubei Province, the study finds issues such as a lack of age-appropriate toy selection, failure to reflect the characteristics of different learning corners, poor timing in toy use, and a lack of overall planning in toy procurement. The paper advocates for kindergartens to establish a proper perspective on toys, plan toy use throughout the daily schedule, and encourage the development of homemade toys based on actual needs.

Keywords

New era; kindergarten; toys; value evolution; child development.

1. Introduction

Toys are tools that serve both entertainment and educational purposes for children. Through manipulating toys, young children can enhance their social development, cognitive abilities, physical skills, and learning experiences. Kindergarten toys, designed specifically for children aged 3 to 6, integrate entertainment and teaching functions and are important educational tools. Educators must select toys based on children's age and developmental level to achieve the goal of learning through play. However, in practice, there are prominent issues such as unclear understanding of toy value and arbitrary selection and deployment. To regulate the use of toys in kindergartens, it is necessary to understand the evolution of toy value and form, analyze problems in toy selection and deployment, and explore targeted strategies for toy use in educational settings.

2. The Evolution of Value and Form of Toys in Chinese Kindergartens

China's kindergarten education started relatively late, with the first public kindergarten established in Wuchang in 1903, and kindergartens officially included in the education system in 1922. However, Chinese children's toys have a long history, dating back to the Neolithic Age. Over time, toys have gradually become more diverse in terms of material, craftsmanship, category, and style. In 1908, the publication of *Colorful Illustrated Square Characters* marked the beginning of modern Chinese toy history. After World War II, the toy industry developed rapidly with government support. Based on the influence of educational concepts on toy form and function, this study examines the form and value of children's toys in three stages: the early years of the PRC, the early reform and opening-up period, and the 21st century.

2.1. Early Years of the PRC (1949–1978):

In the early years of the People's Republic of China (1949–1957), the nation was undergoing a critical period of socialist transformation and economic reconstruction [1] Constrained by

socio-economic conditions and limited educational resources, early childhood toys were primarily made from locally available materials such as clay and wood. These included traditional handicrafts like clay figurines and wooden blocks, which helped foster children's hands-on skills and imagination. Rubber balls and abacuses were also common, satisfying basic needs for physical activity and cognitive development.

Major historical events such as the Korean War profoundly influenced societal values and the content of early childhood education. After World War II, China implemented a policy of public-private partnership in toy factories. Metal toys gained a strong reputation in international markets. Following the founding of the PRC, toy manufacturers focused on creating distinctly Chinese toys for children, moving away from imitations of Western products.

Under the influence of patriotism and socialist ideology, military-themed toys inspired by the Korean War became highly popular. This period saw toys reflecting a strong utilitarian value orientation.

2.2. Early Reform and Opening-Up Period (1978–2000):

In the early period of Reform and Opening-up (1978–1990), following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, policy shifts drove a transformation in the value orientation of Chinese toys. This marked a turning point, leading to significant changes and active encouragement of toy exports. As early as 1969, China showcased toys like the "photo-taking teddy bear" at the Hong Kong Toys Fair, marking its debut on the international stage.

After the implementation of reform and opening-up policies, rising living standards led to higher expectations for education. The function of toys shifted towards fostering knowledge and skills. During this period, kindergarten toys became increasingly diverse. In addition to plastic toys such as Barbie dolls and Rubik's cubes, educational, artistic, role-playing, electronic, and even early smart toys were introduced. These changes reflected a growing emphasis on promoting children's all-round development, nurturing creativity, and enhancing technological literacy.

2.3. 21st Century to Present:

Since the beginning of the 21st century (2000 onward), accelerating globalization [2] and the spread of digital and Internet technologies have transformed the toy industry. Smart toys, electronic games, programming toys, and other new products have emerged in constant succession, blending entertainment with education. Rising household purchasing power has led parents to pay greater attention to their children's all-round development, creating surging demand for high-quality educational toys. Kindergartens have likewise introduced programming, AI, and VR toys to cultivate children's multiple abilities. The toy market has continued to optimize, launching products tailored to different ages and scenarios.

Kindergarten toys are now moving toward intelligence and interactivity—the outcome of integrating technology with educational philosophy—aimed at fostering children's comprehensive development, enhancing their cooperative and communicative skills, and nurturing innovative thinking and future readiness. To date, toys have formed a landscape in which tradition and innovation, indigenous design and foreign import, and in-house kindergarten development and commercial R&D all coexist.

3. Problems in Toy Selection and Deployment – A Case Study of a Kindergarten in Xianning, Hubei

The studied public kindergarten was founded in 1979 and has been operating for 46 years. This paper focuses on three main types of activities: teaching, area play, and transitions. Since few

toys are used in daily life activities and many are used during transitions, the discussion centers on teaching, area play, and transition periods.

3.1. Failure to Meet the Developmental Needs and Interests of Different Age Groups

The kindergarten does not fully consider the developmental characteristics of children in different age groups when selecting and deploying toys, leading to poor learning outcomes. For example, during an “Ocean World” themed week, ocean cartoon toys were provided, but many children showed little interest.

3.2. Lack of Distinctive Features in Area Play for Different Age Groups

The kindergarten fails to effectively reflect the characteristics of toys in different learning areas, leaving new teachers unsure of how to deploy appropriate toys. As a result, children often refuse to engage with the toys due to lack of interest.

3.3. Ignoring the Time-Sensitive Nature of Toy Use

The structural complexity of a toy and the variety of ways it can be used determine how long children will engage with it—what we call the “time-specific” nature of toy use. At the kindergarten level, if the duration of transition periods is not fixed and no play requirements are set, some teachers find it hard to gauge how long the transition will last. They may then put out toys that are unsuitable for the next activity, leaving children too little time to manipulate them and causing disorder. Therefore, during transitions teachers must: (1) estimate the interval accurately so that toys can be fully used; (2) recognize the importance of the transition in bridging prior and subsequent activities. They also need to be clear about the content and timing of the activities before and after. When selecting toys, teachers should match them to both the length of the transition and the manipulation time required: paper-folding types for short transitions, construction sets for longer ones, and so on.

3.4. Lack of Overall Planning in Toy Procurement

Toy purchasing responsibilities are not clearly assigned, and any grade group leader can make purchases. Without timely communication, duplicate purchases are likely, leading to resource waste.

These problems, though analyzed from a teacher's perspective, are rooted in kindergarten management issues such as internal communication, teacher support, and age-appropriate toy deployment strategies. Therefore, management-level strategies are needed to address toy selection and deployment.

4. Strategies for Toy Selection and Deployment in Kindergartens

With the development of society, educational concepts, and technology, toys have evolved from simple entertainment tools to important educational resources. However, problems in toy selection persist, especially at the management level. Smarter approaches are needed.

4.1. Establish a Proper Perspective on Toys and Select Diverse Toys Reasonably

Toys serve as both a source of entertainment and a window through which young children explore the world; therefore, safety is the foremost consideration. They must have no sharp edges or corners, be flawlessly finished with no burrs, and be painted with coatings that meet international safety standards. When selecting toys, kindergartens should balance educational and recreational functions, base their choices on the *Guidelines for Learning and Development of 3–6-Year-Old Children*[3], and take full account of the children's age characteristics and physical-and-mental developmental needs. Attention should also be paid to whether the toys

can sustain children's interest, arouse their desire for challenge, and promote the development of motor skills. Both kindergarten administrators and teachers must adopt a scientifically sound view of toys and choose or replace them in a rational, needs-based manner.

4.2. Plan Toy Deployment Across the Daily Schedule

Kindergartens must map out toy provision as an integrated whole, ensuring that the materials in every segment support the stated educational goals and the ongoing curriculum. When planning, the focus of each routine segment should be clarified and toys matched to it: for instance, throwing rings and other gross-motor equipment are chosen for outdoor time. Types, quantities and usage periods of toys must be balanced so that children's interest is continually sparked. After the plan is implemented, its educational value and its impact on children's development should be evaluated; the plan should then be shared with parents to build trust and revised on the basis of feedback. Continuous, data-driven refinement keeps the daily programme attractive and engaging. A coherent, child-centred plan for toy deployment throughout the day is therefore the key to creating an environment that fosters healthy growth and optimal learning.

4.3. Encourage the Development of Homemade Toys Based on Activity Needs

Homemade toys have a significant impact on child development. They can be personalized according to children's interests, age characteristics, and developmental needs, stimulating creativity and imagination. They are also cost-effective and use easily accessible materials. Encourage teachers and children to make toys together, organize regular training for teachers, and ensure safety and educational goals are met. After creation, trial play and evaluation should be conducted before deployment.

5. Conclusion

China has a long history of toy development. Kindergarten toys possess multiple values, including entertainment and the promotion of cognitive and emotional development in children. This paper analyzes the evolution of toy value and form since the founding of the PRC, identifies issues in toy selection and deployment that affect child development, and proposes management-level strategies such as establishing a proper toy perspective, planning daily activities, and encouraging homemade toys. These strategies aim to maximize the educational function of toys and support children's lifelong learning and holistic development.

In summary, the evolution of toy value and form in kindergarten education is an ongoing process that requires the joint efforts and wisdom of educators, parents, and society. Through continuous exploration and practice, toys will play an increasingly important role in early childhood education, providing richer and more effective educational resources for cultivating children in the new era.

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