Crafting, imagining and creating characters with digital natives and seniors: A study on transgenerational toy play in Finnish Kindergarten

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As children’s play culture of today is largely affected by screen-based technologies and even play with physical artefacts (i.e. object play) is enhanced with the use of mobile devices and sharing online on social media platforms, the ideas of dematerialization and digitalization prevail. At the same time, the multidimensional and multimaterial nature of popular physical playthings such as contemporary character toys (dolls, action figures and soft toys) is undeniable.

This presentation outlines an exploratory study based on ideas of materiality as a starting point for childhood play and imagination: around Do-It-Yourself toy making, imaginative character creation and finally transgenerational play between preschool-aged digital natives (5-6 year olds) and seniors (ages 80+ years) based in a Finnish Kindergarten and an elderly activity center environment. The study seeks to find answers to how transgenerational play ideas emerge through toying with traditional play material such as wood and what part shared imagination plays in the process of generating ideas for play in relation to DIY character creation.

The study is based on a multimethod approach combining a tripartite Do-It-Yourself toy-crafting and play situation with participatory observation, visual documentation and qualitative interviews. It employs research material collected during three transgenerational play sessions: First, ten preschool-children have been paired up with a senior person. They have started the session by exchanging play knowledge – by a dialogue about their experiences of playthings. Then, the pairs have been handed materials to make a wooden toy character together. Each child-senior pair has discussed what kind of character they would like to make of the materials and how the making of the toy could be realized. During the second session the pairs have executed the plans by crafting an individual character each with help from the preschool teachers. In the third and final session the child and senior pair has reunited to investigate the co-created toy character, discuss its narrative dimensions (i.e. personality) and together imagine play patterns related to their toy character. The study illustrates how play memories of seniors become intertwined with contemporary play practices through shared experiences of childhood, materiality and togetherness in toy-making.

Keywords: materiality, object play, toys, toy-making, transgenerational play