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Play and child autonomy

Abstract

This paper focuses on the play as a consisting part of culture as well as the educational instrument for "adulthood" production on the example of autonomy. At the pre-school age play is a dominant context of interaction for both educational and developmental progress. Elements of normative regulation (social suitability) and personal discretion (personal preferences, social on the individual level) are constantly in a play co-relation. The autonomy of a child implies child's social and individual competence. Therefore, the play pedagogy requires adult guidance. This paper talks about child autonomy during play supported by guidance. At the same time, guidance refers also to preservation of play autonomy from choice, participation, playing to reflexion.

Exploration of functional features of adult and behaviour of a child (co-player) offers insight in the quality of social interaction, which influences child and play autonomy.

The research results imply the possible conclusion about specific forms of parent and teacher behaviour present during the constructive play with a child. Parents are directed to functional and social suitability of a play, giving it the frame, content and course. Their consistent "supervision" speaks in favour of the tendency of continuity in relation to conformity. On the other hand, pre-school teachers are at the same time focused on both context of a play, and teaching. However, their focus on the end result of a play and their insisting on their intentions speak in favour of the tendency to use the play as a means of social regulation. Variability in the behaviour of pre-school teachers indicates their "balancing" between autonomy and social conformity.

We'll start with a first grade teacher's comment on play at school. The majority of children in a class attended a kindergarten before school. One day a teacher commented children's playfulness: Stop playing, school is not a kindergarten. You could play in a kindergarten, but you have to study hard here.

Education and play

This comment tells us a lot about the teacher's perception of play as something secondary and unimportant and learning as something "serious" and important and which leaves no place for play. Learning as a "serious" and important activity takes place in a normatively set conditions where a teacher, being the one who carries out the educational goals, has the control. This example, which is not an exemption in the educational practice, is a challenge to all those who study the cultural and educational aspects of play. Since I study play in the context of social interaction and pre-school child autonomy, this paper focuses on play as an "educational instrument" for the "production" of adulthood shown on the example of child autonomy.

Play, being a consisting part of culture, is at the same time an educational instrument for "production" of adulthood. However, we must be careful not to use play as the childhood's project. Mouritsen (2001) stresses out that childhood is reflected in the play's culture in a different way from the ways typical for "projects of adults" with children such as education, socialisation, acculturation. The object of these projects is a production of "adulthood",

while play is a children's project with childhood. Growing up in a dominant culture (community, institution, family etc.) has ideological, theoretical and practical implications. And while the adulthood is characterised by work, childhood is characterised by play. On the way towards adulthood play is transformed through education, culture, institutions. Rossie (1999) also points out in his anthropological study of toys, culture and society the connection between toys, play activities and social and cultural reality of the society children grow up in. Family, playgroups, peers, neighbourhood and wider local community are social institutions that in a different way and on a different level regulate play. Numerous toys and play activities of children in a less traditional parts of North Africa help children integrate themselves in their primary social group, adapt themselves to roles they are offered, interiorise dominant norms and values.

Caldwell (1985) too thinks that reducing play to just a mere means represents adults' point of view. Seeing play as a means that leads to a certain goal (play and intelligence, play and problem solving...) can result in losing the insight into its meaning in a child's life. Therefore he speaks in favour of researching play as a goal in itself. To a child play is its own goal.

Interpretation of play only as an instrument for the production of "adulthood" means demolition of childhood. Therefore, Mouritsen (2001) thinks it necessary to make a clear profile of the play culture. Otherwise the interpretation of childhood will remain the projection of adults, with the danger of childhood and the play culture colonisation in the sense that both childhood and play become "raw material" for the production of "goods" - adulthood.

If play is looked upon from the point of view of education and development, their connection is obvious. According to Schmuck (1999) a child learning how to play develops his/her capabilities and possibilities.

When it comes to play in teachers' education Bowman (1990) warns about the problem of a too big distance between the pre-school curriculum and play. She sees the reasons for it in the "effective school" movement that directed the attention to the aspects of learning environment such as time, work on exercises and group instruction. The educational reform encouraged parents; administrators and legislators to favour an early acquisition of academic skills and in that way suppress and eliminate play. A tendency to use play in order to develop typical terms and skills implies that play is used in order to achieve teacher's goals. Bowman (1990) claims, personal and highly motivated aspects of play become in that case sacrificed because the teacher puts his/her motives before children's. Bowman further reminds that play connects cognitive, emotional, physical and social development, reality and fantasy, time and space, real and symbolic situations. Focus on only strictly defined school goals, without "play fusion" of the elements of personal, social and physical world translates into denial of the basic structure and holistic nature of children learning. Similarly, if play is interpreted as children's work and if teachers create learning objectives in order to justify the presence of play in the curriculum, play might vanish from school environment. In order for play to become a legitimate component of the high quality pre-school curriculum Bowman (1990) advocates conducting research on play in its early stages in co-operation with teacher training institutions and schools and various "services".

Obviously play, as a multi-dimensional activity characterised by intrinsic motivation, inner control, expressivity, symbolism and self-guidance, is in contrast with the formal education that is based on external motivation and control, purposefulness (given), correctness, accuracy and precision. However, recent interpretations for the first time describe play as something children have right on, should be given opportunity to exercise, not only in early childhood but, from developmental reasons, also in the first school years (Best Play, 2000). Hypothesis that children are actors of their own social life implies that it is necessary to respect children's opinions and reactions, to be consistent with health and security requirements as much as possible, as well as with the requirement to respect other people's needs. The emphasis is placed on the necessity to preserve children's freedom to play and feeling of freedom at play. Fears of adults, commercial interests, the influence of religious and cultural organisations, various educational policies and practices might inhibit children's freedom to play and freedom at play. Children's control over their own play is a crucial factor that enriches their experience and offers more opportunities to learn and

develop. Adding more tasks and insisting on the products of play are in contrast with intrinsic motivation of play. Strategies where adults support children in the creation of their own play objectives and results are therefore favoured.

The noticeable tendency toward holistic approach to play and education is in contrast with the radical interpretation of play as a biological/social and psychological phenomenon that belongs to specific stages of development or as a historical and cultural phenomenon. Educational theories favour practical, creative and informal learning.

Developmental and educational value of play

Contemporary educational theories, pre-school and school curricula emphasise, according to the chosen theoretical approach, the developmental and educational value of play for different areas of child development. DeVries (1998) for example thinks Piaget's research and play theory to have convinced educational constructivists that games have a value for intellectual and moral development. Creating a context where children readily accept and follow rules, games contribute to children's self-regulation i.e. autonomy. They are the type of activity that enables children to develop their inner moral beliefs. Or, according to Vygotsky (1966), a child creates his/her own rules during the play - the rule of inner self-control and self-determination. As opposed to teaching of moral rules or behaviour, constructivists prefer teaching that encourages the construction of inner moral beliefs about what is good and necessary in relation with others. In other words, social and moral objective of constructivist theory is to develop an autonomous feeling of moral duty towards other people, which happens only through dictation of adults. The mere obeying by the rules imposed on children by adults does not mean that they are personally convinced of their moral value. The feeling of moral duty (necessity) towards others is developed at play when children come across issues of justice, individual rights and the purpose of rules. At play, children can practice mutual respect as a "defining feature of co-operation and democratic principles". When it comes to intellectual development, DeVries (1998) thinks that games promote it, forcing a child to reason and practice a more logical way of thinking. Educational value of games can be evaluated according to following criteria (DeVries, 1998): interest and challenge, children's possibility to evaluate success, active participation during the game. DeVries (1998) draws principles of teaching from the presented interpretation of developmental and educational value of play. The basic principle of teaching is to reduce the adult authority and encourage children on self-regulation, which promotes child autonomy. This principle can be accomplished in several ways: presenting rules that come from some other authority, not a teacher or parent (written rules), participating in a play as a co-player, supporting and helping children in their arguments about rules and achieving the consensus on how to play justly in a case of a conflict, leaving the decision to children and encouraging children to invent plays.

Vygotsky and his followers put play in a social and cultural context and interpret it as the fundamental prime mover of child development, especially of planning and self-control. Berk & Winsler (1995) consider important Vygotsky's idea that play creates a zone of proximal development. At play a child is for "a head taller than him/herself" - he/she goes to a higher level of psychological functioning. Voluntary subjection to rules during play helps a child plan, control his/her behaviour in order to achieve the planned and subject his/her actions to rules. We are talking about a sort of social learning - how to become a productive member of the society, community. But we need to be careful here: what does exactly "productive member of the society" mean? Does it mean a social adaptability Kooij & Posthumus Meyjes (1986) ascribe to East European authors when they cite Eljkonjin and talk about the concept of play? Or the social maturity i.e. competence determined as independence in behaviour and responsibility to self and others? Or does it mean being ready, capable to take part in social life, to understand culture, community behaviour, to self-confirm and realize various social roles? (Kon, 1988).

Berk & Winsler (1995) mention some of the previous research that confirm the function of play in creation of intellectual, linguistic and social development of a child, as well as the social nature of symbolic representation in phantasy play. An illusory plan, imagination is a product of social collaboration of children with an adult as an experienced representative

of the culture in question. Social collaboration presupposes informational and co-ordinational, supportive behaviour of a partner (in this case an adult and a child) in order to achieve mutual benefit.

Smirnova (1997), one of Vygotsky's followers, explains the adult role in the play development of a child at an early age. The child acquires in the interaction with an adult a sign system - a "culture tool". The function of substitution is in the beginning split between the adult and the child. The way of substituting one object with another is "handed down" from the adult to the child. The adult and his/her behaviour are a pattern for the child. The child acts according to his/her dichotomous need - to act on one's own and to act as an adult (Eljkonjin, 1978). At first, the child observes the adult's play and then he/she joins - they play together, the child imitates the activities of the adult, later on he/she introduces some new variants that precede independent substitutes of the play. Introduction of a sign (renaming the object) means for the child metamorphosis of the experienced external situation into a purposeful one. Perception is mediated by a word; earlier objects are supplemented by the new meaning.

Meaning transition from one object to another is possible only during the emotional involvement of a child in a play and the emotional importance of play activities.

Adults in child play and autonomy

Material environment makes an important consisting part of the social context. Berk & Winsler (1995) cite Kinsman & Berk's research that shows that the space for play reflects attitudes and values of the surrounding culture. A teacher is rarely aware of that influence. Adults, besides influencing through social interaction, also influence through arranging play environment. Physical context of a play is important because it can mould and direct opportunities for peer interaction, the choice of play topics, and give a frame to that surrounding culture. Phantasy play and games are directly connected with the development of reflective thinking, self-regulation and socially co-operative behaviour. According to Berk & Winsler (1995) play is, in the light of Vygotsky's learning, an ideal and instructive context for mature, cognitive and socially competent behaviour.

The former research on play confirms the influence (direct and indirect) of adults on child play (the choice of play, the way of playing, the length, the intensity...). However, there are still many controversial issues connected with social environment and play. I'll mention just a few: What are educational and developmental effects of adult "interventions"(parents and non-parents) during child play in relation to play and child autonomy? The role of play in parent and teacher education - the change of attitudes and behaviour? Why these and not some other questions? I suppose that the knowledge about these aspects of play and education might be useful both to the theory and practice of education. Also to the educational theory - for creation of a more consistent and developmentally more suitable system of child rearing, which will have a minimal social and instrumental i.e. ideological function. And to the practice of education - forming open system strategies that promote adult and child autonomy.

Being a long-term teacher that trains future pre-school teacher, being also an observer and a researcher of pre-school practice, I noticed two fundamental elements in the relation adult - child, i.e. institution - child: adult value system, i.e. adults' implicit educational theory that mirror social and cultural heritage and personality of adults. The former research, mine and that of my associates, point to the following problems in the adult - child interaction:

- Variability of the interaction experience in different contexts
- Continuity vs. discontinuity in the value orientation of the adult behaviour
- Directiveness vs. social and cognitive co-ordination on the relation adult - child.

Similar problems are also noticed in the research of play adults - child within the family and institutional context. Most of all they deal with contradictory interpretation of adult role in child play. Caldwell (1985) mentions the paradox of play: adults who do not know how to play are supposed to teach play to children, who know perfectly well how to play. The basic implication of this paradox in the field of parent education is their "change", in order that they can play with pleasure, in an informative and educational way with their children. In connection with that, Caldwell (1985) suggests the following:

- Parents should teach their children to play both in a divergent and convergent way. It is important to encourage parents to value also a divergent play where a child in numerous ways uses objects and varies activities. This varying of activities is exactly the desired type of an answer. But this does not mean rejection of convergent playing - playing in a correct way ("driving" a toy train on railway tracks instead on a couch or a shelf).
- Parents should become aware that not all the toy types correspond with the sense of play as children see it. Toys that stimulate phantasy and socially dramatic play are preferred.
- Parents should understand the importance of social stimulation during play; they should also be aware of the fact that some plays will be played without their intervention.
- Parents should also know that children like playing with other children, as well as with adults.

Caldwell (1985) sees the purpose of adult education in their comprehension of the play paradox, according to which child play differs from adult play.

Dunn (1985), Sutton-Smith (1986), Berk & Winsler (1995), Isenberg & Jalongo (1997) and others mention a number of facts about contradiction in role interpretation of an adult in child play. On the one hand, the importance of adults (parents, teachers) as carriers and mediators of social cultural heritage in child play is emphasised, but on the other they claim it harmful to "guide" the play. Play guided by adults restricts child's autonomous expression in the real and fictional world. We are talking about a sort of play modelling, instructing children during the play and teacher's feedback (comments, statements, predictions, questions). Guidance, which has a social suitability as its goal (behaviour that fits conventional framework of society, culture) and which is founded on behaviour, is in contrast with the nature of play because play at the same time imitates and refutes reality (Sutton-Smith, 1986).

A more specific interpretation of adult guided child play is given by Isenberg & Jalongo (1997). According to them it is the way and the time of intervention that's important and not the its necessity. Berk & Winsler (1995) consider the quantity of interventions also important. Control-like interventions (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997) deprive children from the opportunity for self-regulation. In other words, interventions in situations where children are capable to perform the "task" on their own discourage children's self-regulatory behaviour and increase their dependence on the adult.

Isenberg & Jalongo (1997) see the solution in support-like guidance of child play, i.e. scaffolding in vygotskian sense. According to Berk & Winsler (1995) in a supportive interaction children acquire communicational conventions, social skills and representative capacity, which enable them to create fictitious situations - "as if". Developmental values of adult - child play are being questioned when the adult communicates in a too dominant, one-sided and obtrusive way. Levenstein (1985), having observed interactive behaviour of mothers at play as well as the child's educational achievement, points to the delicacy of a supportive network of mother - child relationship, which is formed during the play interaction. He considers important mother's general responsiveness together with verbal or "silent care".

Contrary to non-stimulative adult-child communication at play, accomplished most often through direct teaching, Rautamies & Haennikaeinen & Tuominiemi & Tuominiemi (1998) stand in for indirect influence through the choice of material. Advocating the interaction as the most important way of influencing child play and development, the authors warn about the quality of that communication. The more time spent in social interaction in small groups and sub-groups, the more reflection, innovation and co-operation, supportive, warm, friendly behaviour, the higher probability for children to realize that they and their ideas are appreciated. The role of adults in enriching the ideas for play means helping children in finding ideas, verbalising their wishes and needs. When it comes to the educational aspect of play, the role of a teacher, in author's opinion, is to create high-quality learning environment and to design valuable, for a child purposeful activities. It is common in reality to come across mechanical separation of play and learning, where adults consider learning to be the only activity for acquiring new knowledge and facts. Therefore the tension between the orientation on a task, insisted on by the adult and children's tendency to transform the adult initiated situation into a play. It is artificial to speak about learning and play as two separate processes.

Play guidance: control and/or support

In our own recent research of the adult-child interaction at play and non-play activities (Babić, Kuzma, 2000) it has been noticed that the problems of how to conduct a play (control, support) have their background in adult (parents, teachers) private theories. Adult beliefs about what interests children and/or what they should be interested in, as well as what and in what way children play and/or should be playing can be contradictory to the actual children's interests and play.

In play (as in other pre-school activities) the elements of normative regulation and personal discretion are in constant inter-relationship - social on the individual plan. Nucci (1996) connects child autonomy with the development of child's competence on a social and individual plan. A child establishes personal boundaries through the process of interpersonal negotiation. In an asymmetrical relation with an adult the freedom of child's actions becomes questionable in situations when the authority of the adult is determined by his/her attempt to invest in child his/her family and personal identity.

These problems about adult-child play are in direct connection with the development of child autonomy. The autonomy in the sense of independence in thinking and behaviour i.e. self-regulation - directing child's own behaviour.

The starting point in studying the influence of parents and pre-school teachers on child autonomy at play is: social adult - child interaction is a crucial factor in the child development, meaning play as well. Above other things we are talking here about the social interaction quality in the sense that there is a high level of intersubjectivity, social and cognitive co-ordination and contiguous teaching. From the developmental point of view, these social interaction attributes are in a direct connection with autonomy. Autonomy in thinking and actions are elements consistent with social and constructive theory of development, learning and teaching. They are at the same time also central values in democratic societies. Little & Dam (1998) have a similar opinion. Their starting point is a view that autonomy is a semantically complex term that implies freedom. But the question is - freedom from what? Child/student autonomy is interpreted as the freedom from teacher's control, from curriculum limitations, even the freedom of choice - "not to learn". Little & Dam (1998) think the most important freedom to be the freedom from the student's "self", meaning overcoming personal heritage and strengthening an individual child/student. In a general and behavioural sense autonomy is the outcome of development and learning, teaching. The authors obviously focus autonomy on individuality and independence, which can be achieved in a collaboration of a child/student and a teacher.

The research of adult-child interaction at constructive play, conducted on the sample of 52 children (aged 4,5 to 6,0), 52 parents and 52 pre-school teachers, indicated that there are differences in the behaviour of parents and teachers.

There are differences in the interpretation of child play. Teachers see it as a possibility for learning. They balance between play and "serious situations". Parents focus on the pragmatic dimension of play - reality and finality (to make something with building blocks, mostly something that resembles reality such as a house etc.)

There are differences in the reasons of interventions. Teachers intervene in order to "supervise" and "support" child behaviour. On the one hand, they support play, but on the other educational situation. Parents, on the other hand intervene to create a play framework, to determine the content and course of play - they follow the logic of "supervision" consistently. Play situations of a type "as if", processuality, divergence and uncertainty are out of parents' reach.

If adult interventions are tutoring and if they deprive children from possibility to self-regulate and increase in that way child's dependence on the adult, their value is questionable. If adults insist on their intentions through various forms of child behaviour re-directions (direct suggestions, "disguised" orders etc.) as well as through direct involvement (moving, putting away, fixing etc.) a child loses control, the possibility to choose, his/her actions are limited and play "suffocates".

The research results suggest the conclusion that parents and pre-school teachers accept and support play and child autonomy in the degree that suits the values of social conformity.

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