

Dr Wanda Łata

Dr Ingrid Paško

Searching for Nature in the City Kindergarten Conditions

The child's play is a form of human activity. It appears at various phases of human development where it plays different roles. While facilitating human development, child's play also undergoes its own development. Real child's play, that is created from the beginning to the end by a child happens at the kindergarten age, which is called the age of play. The age of play is a transitory period, because as the human grows up and undertakes new social roles, child's play is gradually being located at the margin of human life and activities. The child should finish the age of play more grown-up, actually as a result of the play, but also the child should be able to play. Yet, the child cannot remain in the world of play, or become separated from the world, or try to find a shelter from more difficult tasks. Consequently, child's play for a healthy child is not an escape from the real world, but it constitutes a method to act which can lead to this world.

In recent years in psychological and pedagogical research there has been a significant increase in the interest of play as a fundamental form of child's activity at the kindergarten age. Psychologists and pedagogues unanimously emphasise that the play greatly influences child's wide-ranging development. An important role is played here by interaction theories of child's development (Erikson, Maslow, Piaget, Rogers, Kielar-Turska).

Play activity of the kindergarten child is a natural developmental need, because the child learns during a play and by a play. The child is curious of the world, and the changeability and diversity of natural phenomena influence the child's sensitivity, create experiences and prompt the child to act. One of essential features of the play is the fact that it is first of all an examining activity, a wonderful adventure and continuous experimenting¹.

Child's play is full of seriousness and difficulty, it is animated by the child's rich fantasy and imagination. The role of the kindergarten teacher is to create proper conditions for children to play activities. The adult should organise playing conditions for the child in such a way as to make use of the opportunities of that age and to develop creative attitudes². It is also important that child's play should result from the natural need of the child, and not from the

1 Bogdanowicz Z. (1990), Zabawy badawcze w przedszkolu, WsiP, Warszawa.

2 Dwyer W. (1983), Zabawy tematyczne dzieci w domu i w przedszkolu, Ossolineum, Wrocław, Kraków.

order of an adult. The adult standing by takes part in the play to such an extent, in which the child needs it.

Psychology distinguishes various taxonomies of plays based on different criteria. There is no unambiguous terminology in this discipline: the same child's play might be variously characterized, and individual terms usually isolate this feature of the play which a given author claims to be the most characteristic from the point of view of the theory that they accept.

The child's play can be classified with respect to its content and form. The child play can be categorized considering the number of children that participate in the play or considering children's age and the environment. Therefore it is assumed that the classification of plays has emerged in the course of psychological and pedagogical practice. Throughout that practice it has been changing and improving.

The classification that is known and today recognized is that of the Russian psychologist P.A.Rudika.³ The following four types of plays are categorised with regard to pedagogical meaning of development:

creative plays, called 'thematic'

constructive plays

didactic plays

motion plays

As a result of research conducted at the beginning of the 1960s, the above plays classification of P.A Rudika was supplemented in Poland by Z. Topińska⁴, where examining and chasing plays were added to the classification. The author took into consideration the content and direction of child's spontaneous activity. Chasing plays are this kind of plays in which the child can discover and create its first theories explaining the world. Child's development takes place by activity and consequently the quality of kindergarten education is connected with the quality of child's plays and activities.

Child's chasing play consists in real or apparent pursuit of some person or thing, in other words, it is based on tracking understood as an activity which refers to child's experiences in various domains of life. While searching for or following a trail the child learns orientation

3 Przetacznik-Gierowska M. Makiello-Jarza G. (1992). Psychologia rozwojowa i wychowawcza wieku dziecięcego, WSiP, Warszawa.

Żebrowska M. (1975) Psychologia rozwojowa dzieci i młodzieży, PWN, Warszawa.

4 Topińska Z. (1961). Kierowanie zabawą dzieci w przedszkolu. PZWSz, Warszawa.

and free movement in the open area, learns the ability to read symbols and graphic signs, how to overcome obstacles, perceptiveness, observation as well as how to draw conclusions. The child also broadens, strengthens and orders its knowledge and acquires new knowledge. As a result of chasing plays the child familiarizes with the closest social and technical environment. In the course of chasing plays the child, by directly communing with nature, perceives its beauty, the child also develops its sensitivity and learns respect for the environment.

The term “playing in hunting”, introduced by the Swiss psychologist Claparede (1921), has gone out of date and has never had any reference in the Polish tradition. As a result the term “chasing plays”, used by Topińska, is extremely well-chosen. In the Polish kindergarten pedagogy B. Muchacka and I. Suchanek in their book “Chasing plays in kindergarten education” (2000) discussed issues related to chasing plays⁵. They have undertaken and creatively developed the problems outlined by Topińska, both from theoretical and practical points of view. They started their discussion from the nature and fundamental characteristics of child’s chasing plays. They claim that it is an action that goes on according to a given order, and whose rules must be meticulously respected, so that an unknown for the participants aim could be achieved and so that not to lose the trail on the way.

From the psychological point of view the fact that the child experiences important elements of reality is essential, because “chasing” i.e. searching for something significant, useful but also hidden is the leitmotiv of the child’s play. In order to characterize the value of child’s chasing plays for cognitive education, and also to learn the environment, special attention should be paid to almost all cognitive processes.

Child’s plays, which focus on following tracks, signs, searching for and recognizing natural trails are for children exceptionally educational and broaden their minds. During chasing plays causal-result thinking develops and world orientation improves. This type of child’s play is organized for children at later kindergarten age (5-6 years olds).

The role of the teacher as an initiator and stimulator of developmental and cognitive processes is very important. It is worth emphasising that the child’s chasing play is a play which is being planned by the teacher and organized for a whole group.

The kindergarten garden, especially in urban areas, is the usual place of the chasing plays. That is the place where the teacher can place indispensable objects and signs without being afraid that someone can destroy them. The kindergarten garden sports and motion plays

⁵ Muchacka B. Suchanek I. (2000). Zabawy tropiące w edukacji przedszkolnej, Wyd. “Edukacja”, Kraków.

equipment can be used to give children fitness tasks together with riddles and searching for hidden objects. However, such places as parks, forests or meadows are best to chase nature. Children can trail the seasons, animal trails, as well as habits of fauna and flora.

The essence of a child chasing play can be interpreted on the basis of the definition of the play by J. Huizinga, who says that "Child's play is a voluntary action or an occupation done in certain given limits of time and space, according to voluntarily accepted and unconditional rules, it is the aim in itself, it is accompanied by emotional tension, joy, and awareness of being different from everyday life"⁶. On the basis of this definition a few characteristics of child's play can be distinguished, which correspond with the chasing play. Firstly, the object of the child's chasing play can be some conventional sign, such as a tree, a twig, a leaf, a fruit, a feather, or a stone. A good way to inspire a play is to choose a character from children's literature that is connected with nature, for example, Halabala the Dwarf, Marceli the Starling, Kolczatek (Hedgehog) or Ekoludek (Eco-creature).

The next characteristic which Huizinga distinguishes is emotional tension that accompanies a child during a chasing play, when the child is emotionally engaged and searches for trails leading to an aim. Thanks to this tension the child experiences various intellectual stimuli, such as pleasure and satisfaction that the child has found, learned and trailed something. Emotional tension which accompanies the act of trailing is relieved at the moment of achieving the aim. In child's plays cognitive elements become valuable for a child when there appear positive emotions in experiencing the world.

Child's chasing play is governed by certain rules which determine the play order. When the laws and rules are not respected the child will not reach the aim, and then the child's play will be interrupted or not finished.

All the characteristics mentioned above prove that the child's chasing play is an action internally motivated, happening at a given place and time, within certain rules and reinforced by an accompanying tension.

The research conducted was aimed at showing how chasing plays enable city children to learn the environment, the contact with which is one of the most efficient factors of child's development. Kindergarten children are interested in the surrounding world. Natural phenomena, their changeability and variety affects sensitivity, forms experiences and inspires to act. Chasing plays satisfy child's curiosity of learning nature.

The empirical part of the paper contains results of observation conducted during

6 J. Huizinga (1985) *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*, PWN, Warszawa.

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The importance of the child`s chasing plays for development of various skills of children was confirmed by the observations that we have done during inspections of classes in the Kindergarten nr 55, Sienkiewicza Street, in Krakow, in the group of 5 and 6 years old children. These plays make classes more attractive for participants and arouse their interests for nature. Children become more sensitive for animals or plants and more eager to work for nature preservation. Joy and a friendly atmosphere that have accompanied each game and excitement caused by seeking and finding “a surprise – a treasure” made the play both mysterious and successful.

Children demanded more of such games and it proves that this type of nature cognition had being given them emotional experiences and had satisfied their need of mental and motorical activity.

We have also noticed that children willingly undertook attempts of working independently as well as in a team. Besides they did not afraid to express their own opinions and to find different solutions of various problems connected with nature.

After a few months' observation we conclude that a vocabulary of children have become more rich in the field of environment or nature – it proves that the child`s chasing plays are an effective and attractive method of cognition of nature in case of the children in a city kindergarten.

Conclusions:

The child`s chasing nature play evokes a lot of emotions, makes absorption of information easier and influences on the effectiveness of learning.

Thanks to the child`s chasing play children have developed respect for nature, have become “a carer of nature” and their knowledge connected with environment has improved.

An organizing of a kindergarten`s animal farm or garden may influence on a development of

ability of cooperation and helping each other.

Frequent meetings with nature have evoked children esthetical feelings and developed their interests in environment.

All these characteristics prove that the child's chasing play is an action internally motivated, happening at a given place and time, within certain rules and reinforced by an accompanying tension.