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Play in the hierarchy of the educational activity

Introduction

There is no doubt that we are approaching the society in which the role of play is going to gain significance. The growing importance of knowledge in processes of creation leads to the decrease in the significance of physical activity in favour of mental activity. The work efficiency is constantly increasing, and so is the availability of free time, which leaves more room for play. This situation encourages an increased participation and engagement in various types of play, which according to J. Huizinga stem from different areas of culture. Despite the fact that cultural creation undergoes constant professional development (sport, theater, literature, film), none of it's domains has been deprived of play elements. Play can and should accompany people throughout their lives; that also applies to adult individuals: it can be magic by choice, that means magic which is contemporary, realized, post-modernist, and the one that constitutes the element of lifestyle of all members of pluralistic societies (M. Buchowski, 1993. p.56).

Many scientific works consider the essence, differences, connections, interdependence between work and play. In various types of work the growing number of play elements can be observed. Therefore, the boundaries between play and work are diminishing. The advancements in science and technology created the new idea of play consistent with the needs of our civilization.

Psychologists and sociologists perceive play as the power which creates the culture. In this respect, play serves two functions: of social integration and differentiation. It aids in assimilation of members of a social group, in conforming to the rules and standards of the society, in preparing children to participate in the lives of adults. It also helps to tighten the bonds between generations and enhance the sense of belonging to a social group. Traditional games reveal distinctions between each social group according to age, gender, region, social class or generation. By playing them, society members prove their cultural uniqueness and the newly-formed groups strengthen the sense of common origin. A contemporary man fearing

unification imposed by the mass media, feels the need to return to his origin and authenticity. The return to folk culture, and specifically to traditional games played by the previous generations, can satisfy this need (Kielar- Turska, 1999, p.84). When regarding education in terms of culture, we should consider the first one twofold: (1) it's subject matter always constitutes the selected culture, (2) this subject matter as the subject of training-absorption undergoes the symbolic cultural regulation. A. Pluta, who claims her interest in kindergarten education, presents regulatory-cultural requirements of education in context. Education interpreted this way is composed of all opinions regulating educational activity. The structure of those opinions has a form of an educational circle, and sets the boundaries of an individual participation of their subjects labeled as teachers-educators.

Contemporary educational ideologies versus play

From the cultural character of play derives the multitude of it's functions, among those the educational function. Depending on which educational ideology is adopted, the process of teaching- learning can be portrayed as romantic (emphasizing the power of personal accomplishment, natural curiosity about the world, the urge to know more and the competence in new areas), cultural transmission (passing down the knowledge, skills, standards and values accumulated in the past – the transition of cultural achievements from the “ less knowledgeable” mind to the “ more knowledgeable “one), or progressive (the process in which the rhythm of educational influence is coordinated with the rhythm of an individual who is reaching higher levels of cognitive, moral, social and esthetic development (L. Kohlberg, R. Mayer, 1993).

A. Brzezińska (2000) presented as fundamental an argument that education is an interaction between two people: the one who is a student, and the other who functions as a teacher. The way both people behave depends mainly on the conditions in which they interact and also on the measures and resources available. Therefore, the commitment and resources of the student and the teacher are not the only factors influencing the effectiveness of a teaching process. There is also the quality of an external context- material and social; that is the quality of learning context. An adult plays an important role in supporting the new potential in a child and creating favorable circumstances for the development. L.N. Vygotski observed that the “support” method could be realized through playing, which is the key

activity in assisting the child's development. The author compares the relation between play and development to the one between teaching and development.

Teacher and the subjective participation of a child in a play as the method of learning

The question of what mental qualities of an educator support the subjective role of students in the process of teaching and upbringing seems rather plausible at this moment.

There are many learning techniques, some of them simple, other more complex. There are things one can learn without teacher's help; however, his assistance quite often turns out to be indispensable. Some theorists portray someone who is learning as a lonely explorer; others consider him/her a passive recipient of stimulation and experiment. Still, many of them think that in the process of teaching and learning occurs an active reaction between the student and the environment.

The purpose of play in establishing the contact with an adult is to engage the partner as:

- The one who plays the role of an assistant who guides, instructs, and explains when it is impossible for the child to act without the actual help.
- The one who plays the role of an advisor in the process of establishing the conditions of the child's activity
- The one who plays the role of an observer during the course of the activity

M. Kielar- Turska (1992, p.28-36) points to those characteristics of the teacher that enable him/her to properly stimulate the child's development; she emphasizes that effective communication between the teacher and the children is the initial requirement in the process of education. Verbal expression is as important as the non-verbal one. The author indicates a vital component of teacher's personality while communicating with children. It is empathy that allows him/her to adopt a positive attitude towards children and teaching when suggesting, encouraging and sustaining children's eagerness to learn. The teacher should be active, dynamic and innovative. He/she should also let children be themselves and avoid giving orders. Moreover, teachers should be curious about the world and be creative in order to preoccupy children. Those qualities should be properly implemented while working with

children in such a way that in the process of learning children have a chance to play and through playing have the opportunity to reveal their abilities and potential.

Acknowledging the importance of stimulating the individual's spontaneous and inspired activity through playing, it is crucial to recognize the strategies teachers implement while working with children.

It should be the teacher's task to evoke children's curiosity, encourage them to search spontaneously and prompt them to be more active in their explorations (B. Muchacka, 2000).

In many scientific notions and attempted research concerning stimulation of the child's activity through playing, emphasis is placed on optimum conditions in which the child could form its own idea of the world around him/her. The development of this particular type of the child's activity can occur when children are given attention, their needs are recognized, when there is favorable material context that prompts them to act and explore, and finally when they find themselves in situations that include the play component in which they can organize and systematize their knowledge of the world in accordance with their abilities.

Therefore, adults should make it possible for the children to experience the social and physical world through those forms that include play. In the process of education and upbringing, they ought to consider various directions of social interactions (adult-child, child-adult, child-child). Modification of child's development requires that teachers take into consideration child's area of activity and that they structure the methods of working with children. They can adopt two types of educational approach:

1. They can allow children to show initiative, play the way they like and explore on their own provided that children have the capacity to take advantage of that fact.
2. They can support, "build scaffolding" in case when children lack motivation, curiosity, experience and initiative (see B. Wilgocka-Okon).

The role of play in the process of child's education and upbringing.

In light of psychological theory of upbringing, activity indicates a spontaneous act of an individual, which provokes the development of his/her personality. It means that the educator should withhold from imposing on students the goals, the essence and the means of upbringing. The theory implies that everything that is imposed inhibits the natural behavior of children and the youth and consequently their individual growth. According to sociological concept of upbringing, activity means that the young play an active role in the lives and work

of adults. Evoking the activity means that their social instincts are activated and their activity is not separated from the social life (S. Nalaskowski, 2004).

Through playing, which is fairly typical of the kindergarten age group, the child expresses and develops various forms of activity – perceptive, inquiring, symbolic, imaginative and creative.

D. E. Berlyne (1960, 1966) identifies the phenomenon of play with different types of exploration, and he states that it lasts until the child reaches the optimum stage of excitement, which means that excitement is reduced as a result of stimulation. G. G. Fein (1981) and T. R. Shultz (1979) believe that play serves the purpose of altering child's excitement because there is always something new happening in the course of play. B. Sutton-Smith expresses an idea that play has an accommodating function and makes it possible for the child to explore. According to Bruner (1974), while playing the child focuses on the activity itself, not on its potential consequences. H.G. Voss, on the other hand, notices in the play elements of exploration, and compares it to a scientific experiment. J. Trawick-Smith (1989) stresses the relationship between play and cognitive development. The influence that children's playful activities have on their cognitive and emotional development has been also observed by J. A. Chafel (1991).

The behavior discussed is characteristic of exploratory games (B. Muchacka 1992). When playing such games the child ignores the world and everything that is beyond the area of exploration. He/she is completely preoccupied with what attracted his/her attention at that particular moment. During the exploratory play, the child discovers "the world's mechanism"; it behaves like an explorer in order to answer the question posed to the world. The child gains mental experience actively and independently. While acting, the child is thinking, learning how objects and certain phenomena function, discovering their features and characteristics. It also finds out about the dependence of an effect upon the cause between the objects of its interest. The information obtained in the course of study leaves the child with the feeling of pleasure and worth. Moreover, it inspires imagination and develops the thinking processes. All exploratory activities constitute the integral part of the play, and they help the child become familiar with new items and phenomena. The objective here is for the child to recognize the object, which is specific or nonspecific, or to experience something new that has not been noticed before (M. Przetacznikowa 1993, p.157).

For the child at kindergarten age, the spontaneous play is as important as the one that is guided or inspired. At that particular age the process of learning is mainly spontaneous and

incidental. It complements the proper and systematic process of learning and teaching. The true value of this type of learning, its essence and effectiveness appreciated in the 40-ties S. Szuman, who pointed to the fact that the very characteristic and crucial feature in the mental development of the child in its infancy, after the infancy stage and at kindergarten age is that it happens spontaneously and automatically(1946, p. 3-9). Each time Szuman names learning “ incidental” since it had not been planned beforehand, and it became valid when the opportunity to communicate something to the child occurred. What the educator communicated using specific examples was to broaden the knowledge, and had an explanatory character, which influenced the child’s mental development. Although the incidental learning experience had not been planned in advance, it was still intentional since it regarded child’s knowledge and was aimed at helping the child understand something that had been confusing.

Szuman named incidental learning ‘temporary’ (or casual) since it takes place sporadically and each time concerns a different issue, which is dictated by the current external circumstances or unexpected questions posed by the child. In this respect the incidental learning differs from the systematized academic learning, which is perpetual and consistently graded. Incidental learning can also be called ‘casual’ because information and explanations that the child is presented with are neither defined scientifically nor comprehensive. They are often expressed in colloquial manner and carry as much content as the child manages to grasp, understand and remember. According to Szuman, at the kindergarten age, the child develops its psyche automatically and spontaneously due to three types of activities in which it learns about the reality and gains experience. These are: play, imitation, and questions.

Szuman indicates two types of favorable circumstances, which aid the process of learning: internal and external. External circumstances include various occurrences the child perceives or those that interest him/ her at a given moment and cause adults to come up with information and explanation. Internal circumstances are all those processes and states of mind through which the child realizes its lack of knowledge in certain areas, or the lack of ability to find answers to certain questions (1965, p.220). Such circumstances usually provoke the child to ask questions which he/ she expects adults to answer.

Problem solving as the manifestation of cognitive activity

Solving problems requires the engagement of many mental processes such as understanding, reasoning, drawing conclusions, and finding the links between the cause and

the result. While playing, the child encounters certain obstacles, which are difficult for him/her to overcome when it is trying to utilize **the information** and the methods of **acting** he/she is familiar with. In the process of problem solving something new is discovered and the resources of experience and knowledge are created. Children at the kindergarten age use **practical** mechanisms to solve problems, and the process is connected with the inner form of thinking (based on fact and motion), or the mechanisms that are purely intellectual, implementing the way of thinking based on fact and picture.

The first type of thinking mentioned shows the connection between mental processes and practical application.

When playing with objects, the child alters them, which enables him/her to discover certain qualities of those objects that cannot be immediately noticed. While solving problems the child should not be aided in recognizing the existence of various hidden qualities and associations; later he/she should make the distinction between the crucial and the insignificant ones. Teachers should be familiar with the principles governing the development of cognitive processes and with the stages of the problem solving process. That knowledge would be useful for designing activities in such a way so that the children could learn to recognize the links between the objectives and the conditions of the task. The process of thinking at the time of problem solving takes place in the area of imagination and it is based on the picture of the problematic situation stored in memory.

The results of the child's cognitive activity

J.S. Bruner (1978) indicates that representations play an important role in a child at the kindergarten age. His concept of cognitive psychology includes three forms of reality representation: active, graphic and symbolic. He states that acting and creating pictures or images are the most popular ways of organizing one's knowledge of the world. The picture of the world and the self- image of an individual, says M. Tyszkowa, are the reason for human motivation to act. The program of activities through which the state of mental balance is realized is controlled by personality and it determines direction and dynamics of human activity (1977, p. 42). Representation, according to Bruner, has the following features: it is selective considering a goal, it is created on three levels, learning successive representations is based on induction of more general principles in order to create representations that are more economical. Attempting to define the nature of intellectual development, Bruner emphasized the role of representation. He claimed that as the child develops, it learns the methods of

representing the norms recurring in the environment around it, and later the child links them with the past and the future. According to Bruner, child's intellectual development happens when it learns the three main forms of representation previously mentioned, and when it is able to integrate them. In the course of an educational process, the kindergarten teacher should concentrate on activating child's cognitive abilities in a way that it can create representations on three levels, and move from one level to another easily. It also indicates the ability to establish correspondence between acting, graphic representation of things and occurrences and their symbolic depiction.

Child's cognitive activity manifests itself in different forms of play and it results in building the cognitive representation.

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