

Bożena Pawlak

Pedagogical University of Cracow

### **Play as a subject, field of training and method of work in early school education.**

Play, as Wincenty Okoń claims, is a specific kind of contact between man and reality, a kind of way we experience a real world. This experience not only provides amusement but also maintains balance and harmony between man and his world. During a lifetime play tends to be a factor of learning which is basically more attractive than non-play activities and what is more, ensures achieving better results.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to pay attention to two areas of early year - school teachers' work, areas in which exploiting plays, and various aspects related to them, is possible and highly recommended. These aims are: the child's didactic and upbringing process in classroom, which means teacher - children relations, and a process of cooperation between school and home which are teacher - pupils' parents relations.

A feature that characterizes an early school age activity is that both, play and work are present. According to Wincenty Okoń, in childhood „..... play prepared children for work, but now work gradually emerges from play. It works this way because children are not satisfied with just a play and they want to cope with real tasks which school and home expect them to do. Work and play tend to create a unity (...)”<sup>2</sup>. Integration of these two types of activities is a challenge which requires from the teachers not only imagination and creativity in undertaking didactic and upbringing tasks, but also being aware that none of the dominance – neither play itself, nor work, nor constantly united work and play, is neither good nor sufficient for early school years. It seems to be necessary to exploit all mentioned above elements with regard to the rule of alteration and rationalism of being well – proportioned. During the first years of school education there must be time for common, joyful play and time to make children know that sometimes success comes after difficult, weary and systematical job.

Wanda Hemmerling, analysing the meaning of the plays, draws attention to the fact that “starting some processes and cognitive activities causes in childrens' minds mental tension. This tension, because of low resistance at the early school age, contributes to getting

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<sup>1</sup> W.Okoń, Zabawa a rzeczywistość. Warszawa 1987, s. 6.

<sup>2</sup> W.Okoń, Zabawa a rzeczywistość. Warszawa 1987, s. 276

easily weary and bored. Play makes tasks more interesting preventing children from a feeling of weariness and additionally stimulates them to overcome obstacles”<sup>1</sup>.

For this reason many early school age educators incorporate plays into methods they use in order to support the pupils’ cognitive process in their first years of education.

I would like to point out that play supports not only mental activities (thinking, association, cognition) and emotional (experience, empathy) but also practical ones (acting, creativity). Furthermore, plays create opportunity to elicit from children perceptive activity (discovering things by physical senses), assimilate activity (learning, especially by heart) and exploratory activities (discovering and creating things). So it cannot be easily denied what Wanda Hemmerling claims that: „in learning through plays all basic elements of multidirectional education can be found”<sup>2</sup>.

In my opinion, nowadays, in the times of the reform of Polish educational system, play as such, can be seen as a method that makes integrated education easier. There is a great number of arguments in favour of this statement e.g uniting many different types of activities, joining in play various themes from different educational areas, or integration of didactic and upbringing processes.

Gabriela Kapica writes about the role that play occupies in the process of upbringing: „plays, individual at the beginning, then with group character, are social type of activity. They create in child approach to social life, they teach him or her to follow the rules, to cooperate, to understand the standards of moral obligation and priorities”<sup>3</sup>.

The presence of play in early school education is not only limited to its influence on children, but it can also be related to many different aspects.

For a teacher children’s plays are important research field and a source of information. The information can refer to an individual pupil (if someone plays, what he or she plays, how, how long, where, which way, why he or she gives up a play etc.) or to relations among pupils (in what kind of groups they play – who plays, how many children, which roles they play, what are their favourite games, how they overcome obstacles etc.). All these pieces of information once collected, analysed and compiled with information coming from some other sources( e.g parents’ meetings, kindergarten reports and opinion of the teachers who teach the same class) undoubtedly can broaden teacher’s knowledge about every single pupil and about entire class.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Hemmerling, Zabawy w nauczaniu początkowym. Warszawa 1990, s. 12.

<sup>2</sup> W. Hemmerling, Zabawy w nauczaniu początkowym. Warszawa 1990, s. 10.

<sup>3</sup> G. Kapica, Zabawa. [w:] Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna. Red. W. Pomykało. Warszawa 1993, s. 933.

Having such data at one's disposal, facilitates preparing semestral descriptive assessment, conducting parents' meetings and discussions with school psychologist. Furthermore, it can also be inspiration for some of class activities.

The authors of the programmes of study are aware of the fact that for early school children, play is a typical subject of their conversations. For this reason they propose working on the following topics: *what to play, our toys, winter children's games, family games, plays from different parts of the world etc.*<sup>1</sup>

However, at an early school age, plays are very often combined with conflict – causing situations. In this case good negotiating skills, such as active listening, art of asking questions and making proposals, are very helpful. It is quite obvious, that although not everybody was born as a skilful negotiator we always have a chance to acquire such skills by appropriate and systematic practice. And now a question arises – when is the best moment to start teaching such skills? Among the authors of contemporary programmes of study, there are some who propose to introduce the subject of interpersonal communication as a part of early school integrated education (1-3 forms). Children's plays are probably the best opportunity to do this.

These are examples of general teaching requirements which have been taken from three different programmes of study for an early school pupils.

#### PROPOSITION 1

- shaping attitudes that enable successful functioning in terms of widely comprehended environment

#### PROPOSITION 2

- shaping and developing skills related to socialising
  - establishing, developing, maintaining and finishing interpersonal relations
  - sticking to the rules in various situations
- Teaching and developing skills related to leisure time
  - beginning and organising plays related to interests
  - taking parts in games and plays according to established rules
  - making decisions connected with the way one spends time e.g. time and type of play.

#### PROPOSITION 3

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<sup>1</sup> I have studied carefully 9 proposed by Polish Ministry of Education programmes of study. They have been chosen at random. I searched for the signs of presence of the children's plays problem. A full list of them is placed at the end of my essay. In my paper, topics which are common, for most of the programmes, are used.

- ability to share work and play
  - treating play as a form of relax
  - perception of human's work as a basic and creative form of man's activity
  - recognizing good qualities of an input of someone else's work in terms of achieving success
  - recognizing good qualities of our own work in in terms of achieving success
  - obeying rules in play and work regardless of one's personal benefits
  - coping with tasks undertaken by the group
  - getting involved into a process of sharing ideas about inventing new plays
- ability to play together
  - having knowledge of age - suitable plays and games
  - obeying rules of certain plays and games
  - showing inclinations to being a leader in organizing plays and games<sup>1</sup>.

It is quite obvious, that these propositions differ from each other in terms of level of specification. One can get the feeling, that some of the authors probably rely od the teachers' willingness to specify (on their own) terms used in the programme. I am afraid that it can result in neglecting or even rejecting, by teachers and pupils, topics proposed in the programmes of study.

Play in an early school education is also a great opportunity for children to make first attempts to self-observation, self-assessment and in result, to self-correction. In this case drama seems to be very useful method. Using closely related to child's world activities such as play, games, ability to live in a fictional world, verbal improvisation, motor, musical and art expression, provide them with a direct experience, exceeding their existing knowledge, enriching their imagination and influencing their emotions.

To sum up, I would like to point out, that multidirectional character of the problems hidden under simple expression – exploitation of plays in an early school education – and awareness of its multidirectional character, seems to be crucial for both – early school teachers and trainers preparing them for future occupations.

When a teacher starts to work with a new class he or she, starts to work with a new group of parents as well. How successful this work is going to be depends on many factors. One of them is undoubtedly a teacher, his or her interpersonal abilities and emotional involvement in a process of mutual cooperation between school and parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Quated targets come from programmes 1,2,8 on the list.

Factors that are required for cooperation between basic elements of school, cannot be analysed in such short work. Therefore I am going to focus on some aspects, aspects related to a widely comprehended problem of play.

When parents bring their child to school they expect from the teachers that they will be able to assess present level of development (the best opinion is desirable) and to undertake the best progress – centered activities. One of the ways to achieve such goal, is the way that I mentioned above – to observe a pupil carefully and to share the results of these observations with child's parents. Class events are probably the best way to introduce this idea when everybody: children, their parents and teachers can have a good and fruitful time. Class events are a great opportunity for the parents to watch their sweetheart against the background of its peers and to show that their child's school life is for them of great value. For a teacher class events are opportunity to watch child – parent, parent – parent and child – other children relations, in different than classroom, environment. After class events, when having conversation with parents, it is important for the teacher not to deliver final verdicts but to encourage parents to exchange their ideas and information.

Talking about cooperation with parents we have to mention that parent's meetings are naturally associated with idea of parents' presence in school. But – Do parents' meetings have anything in common with play? Yes, they do!

Plans of the parents' meetings should include results of the teacher's observations made during plays that take place in the classroom. The output can be discussed and analysed with the parents e.g how to make their children to obey rules, how they can help in children's arguments and rows, how to help children who have been neglected or rejected by the group etc.

When a teacher introduces a new, related to play, method of teaching, it is worth showing it to parents in order to make them play and learn with their child. When I used to work as a teacher I was enthusiastic about introducing a new piece of educational equipment. Unfortunately, it was quite expensive and I was afraid that parents would not want to cover the cost. I decided to use a ruse. I borrowed as many pieces of equipment as parents I expected to be in a parents' meeting. I gave each of them a task to do with the level of difficulty comparable to the level of the first form pupil. I asked parents to do the task, and then to share their opinions on how useful the equipment could be.

When I was looking at the parents I noticed that they were having a lot of fun. Afterwards, they were the ones who tried to persuade me to buy a new piece of equipment. This experience and similar ones convinced me that it was a good idea to include, from time to

time, elements of play, into parents' meetings and then when a members of the group get to know each other better, even elements of workshops.

Nowadays, workshops for parents are getting more and more popular. What distinguishes them from traditional parents' meetings, are different forms of work such as group work and different methods - active ones, for instance drama. Moreover, level of involvement seems to be much higher. Workshops provide opportunity to know each other better, to acquire knowledge, to gain new experience and chance to notice somebody else's involvement which can result in mutual understanding. There are two authors: Iwona Fechner Sędzicka and Ewa Lachowska - Żarska who wrote about this kind of approach to parents' meetings<sup>1</sup>. They claim that workshops are efficient forms of cooperation provided that 3 conditions are fulfilled.

- topics of parents's meetings should reflect their needs
- those kind of training should not take place more often than twice or three times per semester
- they must be very well prepared by the teachers

What I personally would like to point out is that all participants (parents) should also make some effort to get ready for such meetings. This is the effort to accept new approach and to reject some stereotypes related to thinking and reacting. I would suggest introducing elements of workshops gradually.

Wincent Okoń claims: "... in an adult life such forms of activity as work, social involvement and probably learning, are of a greater value than play. Play, this is to say, is often a matter of interest but mainly in terms of spending free time (...). Criterion of play in an adult man's life is totally subjective and stricly connected with so called autopermission. An adult starts having fun when he allows himself not to be obliged to do what he was going to do<sup>2</sup>.

It can be concluded that play is an important factor of cooperation between teacher and parents. Moreover, because even in this area, play is not one-dimensional element, a teacher who decides to apply this method into his work, has to pay attention to a range of aspects, some of which this paper has been devoted to.

I have analysed following programmes of study:

1. J. Bonar, E. Burakowska, M. Dąbrowski, A. Dereń, Ł. Dydyńska, S. Dylak, D. Paçhalska,

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<sup>1</sup> I. Fechner-Sędzicka, E. Lachowska-Żarska, Nauczyciele – rodzicom. Spotkania z rodzicami prowadzone metodą warsztatową w szkole podstawowej. Toruń 2002.

<sup>2</sup> W. Okoń, Zabawa a rzeczywistość, Warszawa 1987, s.328.

- A. Pregler, K. J. Szmidt, E. Tapała, E. Torbicka, Przygoda z klasą. Program nauczania zintegrowanego dla I etapu kształcenia w szkole podstawowej. WSiP, Warszawa 2003;
2. D. Cichy, E. B. Cywińska, M. Frindt, T. Janicka - Panek, H. Małkowska - Zegadło, L. Zielkowska, Program nauczania zintegrowanego w klasach 1-3 szkoły podstawowej. JUKA, Warszawa 1999;
  3. J. Hanisz, Program wczesnoszkolnej zintegrowanej edukacji XXI wieku klasy 1-3. WSiP, Warszawa 1999;
  4. A. Juskiewicz, W. Went, Program nauczania. Poznaję świat i wyrażam siebie. Kształcenie zintegrowane w klasach 1-3. Wydawnictwo Didasko, Warszawa 1999;
  5. J. Korzańska, Program kształcenia zintegrowanego abc. I etap edukacji. Pracownia Pedagogiczna i Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1999.
  6. M. Lorek, Elementariusz. Kształcenie zintegrowane. Program pracy w klasach I-III. MUZA SZKOLNA, Warszawa 2000;
  7. M. Płatek, G. Krawczyk, A. Niemiec, Pytam dlaczego ... . Program nauczania integralnego. Ośrodek Szkoleń Pedagogicznych, Kraków 1999;
  8. U. Stawińska, Ja, ty i świat. Program nauczania zintegrowanego w klasach I-III szkoły podstawowej. RES POLONA, Łódź 1999.
  9. H. Wilk - Siwek, L. Walkowicz, Tęczowa szkoła. Program zintegrowanego kształcenia i wychowania w klasach I-III. Wydawnictwo Kleks, Bielsko - Biała 1999.