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Group Dynamics in Play and Games among Pre-school Children

Introduction and background

Any educational strategy, which aims to achieve successful socialization, takes into account the particular impact of the elements of children’s immediate and broader social surroundings. The socio-psychological perspective to the formation and self-expression of the personality of a child requires an analysis of the major activities that children engage in during their pre-school years, the system of inner relations that are characteristic for any type of activity, as well as the interrelations between different activities themselves. According to E. Petrova, the pre-school stage of development features all major types of activities, but one of them plays the most decisive role in the subsequent evolution of the child’s personality. Is that really so, and why do we consider that nothing other than the game is that particular activity?

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most eminent and influential representatives of linguistic and analytical philosophy, states in his *Philosophical Investigations* that: “One might say that the concept “game” is a concept with blurred edges. But is a blurred concept a concept at all? [...] Someone says to me: ‘Show the children a game.’ I teach them gaming with dice, and the other says: ‘I didn’t mean that sort of game.’ Must the exclusion of the game with dice have come before his mind when he gave me the order?” The philosopher then continues, “But still, it isn’t a game, if there is some vagueness in the rules [...] This means: it has

impurities, and what I am interested in at present is the pure article. But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we too should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word "game" clearly".

The diverse interpretations of the interrelation between children and games often emerge due to the lack of the above conditional distinction. This highlights the need of a particular theoretical framework which could pinpoint game-related issues. Many authors have written on the importance of play and games in pre-school education (e.g. Sofronieva, 2011; Pramling-Samuelsson & Fler, 2009; Gyurova, 2009; Shopov, 2008; Daliso, 2007; Sofronieva & Tosheva, 2006; Caon, 2006, etc.). Here, first of all, we would like to consider some aspects of social rules and human interaction as perceived by M. Argyle. He argues that just like games, social relations are subject to particular rules; they ensure the implementation of group behavior patterns thus leading towards the attainment of certain objectives. We find this analogy between social rules and human interaction rules on the one hand, and rules and relations between participants in a game, to be the key to the understanding of children's interrelations as well as to their successful maintenance and enhancement on the part of the pedagogue in the course of play. Furthermore, this analogy is useful as a demonstration of the conditional simplicity in children's interrelations within a game, the presence of a pedagogue as well as the viability of the latter's socio-psychological approach.

Modern researchers seem to underestimate the role of game playing as an inherent component of culture systems. After Johan Huizinga's famous book *Homo Ludens*, written in the 1930s, there has been no other fundamental study of play with the exception of Daniel Elkonin's *The Psychology of Play*, which focuses upon child's development through playing as the predominant activity during the first seven years. Elkonin considers play an activity that mirrors social interactions outside the boundaries of an immediately utilitarian activity. He points out the resemblance that play bears to art, as they both ensue from a common genetic origin. During adulthood art replaces play forms as it offers an age-relevant range of possibilities for interaction and entertainment.

Both art and play provide interpretations of various aspects of human life and activity. Both of them gradually grow into a social necessity with an inherent and discrete educational function. It is the latter that renders new dimensions to the relations between play and culture which can be best traced during the pre-school age period. The mechanisms of play, further enhanced by culture, contribute to the socialization of the child. Thus, play is of major importance for socialization as it helps to transform behavior patterns into well-organized meanings and roles, as T. Shibutani suggests. The ratio between the latter two is of vital significance for pedagogical work.

We have hereto outlined some of the specific socializing functions of play. It should be noted, though, that analyses of the different aspects of play in the pre-school period vary in accordance with the way in which child's personality development is perceived. There are two main questions that are usually highlighted: firstly, is it justifiable to consider the occurrence of a mechanical shift in the three types of activities – namely, play, learning and work; and secondly, what are the principles that govern the definition of age-related developmental periods and the leading activity shift that corresponds to them?

Any delineation of age-related periods of psychological development calls for the definition of those formal indicators that provide the basis for the clear distinction of relevant development criteria. The majority of researchers are well aware of the fact that it is not possible to define consistently age-related developmental periods on the grounds of a single criterion. Alexei Leontiev points out that periodicity in child's psyche development is not directly related to actual period content and particular historical circumstances. He states that it is not the child's age which predetermines the development period content but rather the age boundaries of the period depend on its content and vary in accordance with changes in the social environment. The latter in their turn actuate the activity which becomes dominant during a particular development period. Nevertheless, we should not disregard the fact that Leontiev's activity theory is an element of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural concept of psyche development. Looking from this perspective, it would be difficult to

agree with the incompatibility of the leading activity concept and the socio-psychological theory of personality development, elaborated by Artur Petrovsky and dealing with the laws of intragroup and intergroup dynamics, as well as with the circumstances related to the shifting of individual social positions.

Admittedly, play is an important socialization factor but this in itself raises the question whether the above concepts are incompatible or intertwined? Are we justified in claiming that the leading activity concept displays best the integrative functions of play in the pedagogical process, thus making it possible to elaborate a pedagogic system for the overall development of the child's personality? This sustainable scientific paradigm and the achieved results presuppose the elaboration of such a system. Therefore, we maintain in particular that "the possibilities for discoveries, innovations and creative interpretations are related to the cultural competences at all stages of adolescent development. Pre-school education follows the provisions of the new programme strategy as of 2008 as a project for European intercultural practice of early childhood education. Thus, pedagogical technologies are being enhanced through the search for new opportunities for concept implementation into the nursery environment that provides the transition to primary school. They can be best analyzed and assessed from the perspective of their potential for further development with a view to the elaboration of a new level of education systems that correspond to the European key competences" (Gyurova, 2009).

When defining socialization as a process of expansion and multiplication of an individual's social relations, it becomes quite clear that play should not be separated from or opposed to the other impact factors in the educational process. On the contrary, as a socializing factor it influences other socializing institutions which become relatively independently manifested over the course of child's development. The relation between play and various other socializing factors at pre-school age opens new opportunities for the efficient development of child's personality. This is so both because the nature of children's interaction in the course of playing is the foundation for social behavior, and at the same time it provides the necessary precondition for successful socialization.

The structure of socialization itself makes it evident that play remains a valid and constant factor in the course of a lifetime, although its intensity varies. In the particular context of working with pre-school children, play should be contextualized alongside other socialization factors such as peers, family, teachers, mass media, etc. and this accumulated impact is of vital importance for the interaction between social and individual consciousness. The specific relation between play and other socializing factors results in a particular socializing effect due to the diversity of social roles that the child, stimulated by this relation, enacts during play. This further enhances the characteristic features of play as a leading activity that contributes to the generation and differentiation of other new types of activity, the formation and reformation of individual psychic processes, the identification of the main psychic changes in the course of child's personality development (according to A. Leontiev) and the broadening of the child's social culture.

Therefore, pedagogical support should be focused upon the reoccurring discrepancies between the child's desire to interact with its immediate environment and its actual abilities to do so. If play is perceived as a socializing factor which assists children in a very specific way to establish and maintain social contacts, then the role of the pedagogue is to cater for the satisfaction of social needs ensuing from the accumulative impact of the different socializing institutions. Paradoxical as it may sound, the pedagogue's mission at the nursery is to fulfill a mainly regulatory function, or in other words to provide for the implementation of the specific connections between the variety of significant socializing factors. Undoubtedly, the information which is disseminated in the society during any social process is social information as it essentially concerns human interaction, needs, interests, etc. If we take into account the fact that the social function of play is connected in more ways than one to the need of new experience then it becomes evident that in order to develop the activity of playing the child should use social information above all.

According to D. Elkonin, the foremost element of play is the role that the child takes on as it unites in itself all other elements. During pretend (or dramatic) play, the very actions of the child undergo significant the very actions of the child, as well as its attitude towards reality, undergo

significant transformation. But which aspect(s) of reality in particular shapes up the character and content of roles taken on by children? According to a number of pedagogy experts, the reality in which a child lives and interacts can be conditionally divided into two intertwined but still independent spheres. The first one is the sphere of objects and the second one is the sphere of activities and human interaction relevant to the particular activity. Thus, D. Elkonin draws the conclusion that the content of dramatic play is not the object and its utilization or transformation by man, but rather human interaction, implemented through particular actions with particular objects. In other words, it is "human-to-human interaction" rather than "human-to-object interaction".

Our study enabled us to conduct research of the possible connections between the different socializing factors in play. The role, taken on by the child during pretend play, depends on the type of information which can be either cognitive, i.e. derived from the immediate contact with reality, or social. The latter provides the child with the impetus to select a particular role content during play. Creative play occurs after the child has become the recipient of social information, which includes the objects relevant to it. Therefore, the "human-to-object-to-human" scenario seems to cater best for children's needs to master social relations by means of role play and performance of their inherent actions. Consequently, the pedagogue should encourage the child's reception of social information and its utilization in the playing process. Pedagogic effort needs to be in particular directed towards the impact of social information over the structure of the play and the dynamics of group interaction. Accordingly, the pedagogue should carefully:

1. Monitor the impact of social information disseminated among the children and its sources during dramatic play;
2. Analyze the intragroup processes when a group is relatively isolated over a certain period of time;
3. Monitor the trajectory of children's interest, their preferences to particular plots for pretend play and the relevant impact of social information;

4. Analyze the changes in play structure and roles under the influence of various socializing factors;
5. Check regularly the potential occurrence of a conflict between the social information disseminated by socializing institutions and the sensor information already acquired by the children.

In this way the pedagogue will manage to establish the necessary preconditions for the enhancement of children's ability to become activity subjects, which we consider as the uppermost objective of every educational effort in the pre-school context.

What is essential for the understanding of pretend play dynamics is the consideration of the so called missing link in the role taken on by the child. A child is interested in a particular role during a dramatic play as long as it provides certain aspects that remain unattained and undefined, i.e. as long as there is a missing link. This term generally denotes certain actions or typical behavioural patterns which would allow the child to embrace a given social role in its entirety. The missing link exists because the taking on of any role can be reduced to the performance of actions that are inherent to it and normally the logic of these actions is defined by life itself, i.e. by their sequence in reality. When a child takes on a role that either lacks a missing link or the child itself is not fully equipped with the necessary social information that ensures the smooth performance of the pretend play, then the play's evolution is curbed. This is the reason why the limitation of sources that would normally provide children with social information results in changes to group dynamics. Of particular interest is the differentiation of separate stages of pretend play, which are directly related to the contacts between children themselves as well as between units of the play. If sufficient access to necessary information is provided, then contacts between play units range between 50 and 70, while in the case of limited access to information they quickly drop down to 15 – 30, thus finally freezing in a complete standstill. At this stage children interact exclusively among themselves and their contact focuses upon the child which is of greater informative value for the particular play unit. With time, though, the informative value of each group member

is quickly exhausted, thus leading to individual isolation. Group connections are severed definitively. Children no longer play with each other, but rather next to each other. Verbal and nonverbal communication is reduced to the minimum. It is evident that the pedagogue should promptly identify such a situation and take relevant action.

Social information definitely assists changes in children's interactions both during playtime and in real life situations. There is an intriguing trend which is of particular significance with a view to resolving the conflict between so called play and real behavior. Interaction during play is considered to be related to roles, play content and rules, while real life interaction is subject to desires and behavioural motives. These two types of interaction do not necessarily overlap in all cases, which some pedagogues perceive as a barrier to the use of play as an active tool of education and self-education. Observations on and experiments with the impact of social information over play demonstrate a highly significant fact – namely, that the said impact of social information is largely manifested in the enhancement of group organization. When such information is insufficient, the child becomes much more suggestible and tends to accept unquestioningly the opinions of other group members. In contrast, when the child is equipped with the necessary social information, he or she reacts much more selectively to the opinions of other group members, in particular in terms of the content and values of their joint activity. It turns out that the conflict between real life and play behavior is resolved and the dilemma between independence and dependence is overcome. The child is in the position to self-determine itself within the group as a result of the very tasks and objectives of play.

Here we come upon one of the fundamental differences between our approach and G. Mead's symbolic interactionism. The latter reduces interaction between group members to a mere exchange of opinions. Symbolic interactionism undermines the intermediary role of activity content for interhuman relations. A pedagogue should take into account the above mentioned aspects of joint activity and the mutual subordination which are manifested in the different meanings that the child ascribes to the role it takes on. From a socio-psychological perspective,

social information impacts upon the development of self mainly in terms of the inclusion of the child in different social groups. Thus it collaborates with a phenomenon which is often both a tool and a product of socialization – namely, interpersonal perception. Therefore, the pre-school pedagogue is faced with the following phenomena, which are a direct result of the impact of social information – the emergence of opinion leaders; shifts in value orientations; the role of identification and self-reflection for the establishment of a child's self image.

Most researchers of socializing impacts focus upon the identification of the individual with other people whose behavior and value orientations become models for him (S. Freud, E. Erikson, A. Epstein). Usually this approach is taken within the theory of social learning, derived from the work of A. Bandura. This line of study is further followed by R. Walters, L. Berkowitz, U. Bronfenbrenner, Feshbach, etc. who claim that the observation of social models indicates the channels through which social information reaches the child. This implies the availability of numerous models and behaviours which the child can learn from via observation, i.e. it can identify itself with them. Clearly, model-following behavior exceeds mere imitation because when children acquire the motivation that is the driving force behind their actions they assume the relevant type of behaviour which is a symbolic equivalent of observed behaviour. Imitation is one of the major forms of acknowledging the impacts of reality and a tool for integration of the individual into a particular system of group values and ethical norms; therefore, it indisputably constitutes one of the components of child's character formation at the pre-school age.

It is common knowledge that social ideas tend to be disseminated more quickly if they are embodied in particular characters/persons, rather than if presented in abstract forms. Children are likely to identify with their favourite story characters. We find it important to highlight the fact that a child never enacts a single particular action of those characters or persons which it identifies with. It interprets some of their specific actions, never merely imitating them but rather enacting their general features (E. Petrova, C. Bruner). In other words, creative play occurs not via imitation but via interpretation of some typical behavior. Imitation is relevant at the

stage when new knowledge is acquired, but at the stage of playing it is replaced by interpretation.

Identification in its turn is a socio-psychological mechanism that is directly related to the issue of leadership. It emerges in the course of human interaction and challenges the pedagogue with a particularly intriguing question whether there are opinion leaders in the joint activity of children and whether the leader brings along some social novelty as a result of easier access to social information. To solve this issue the pedagogue needs to explain repeatedly the functions of the group leaders, assess their acts during all stages in the development of joint activity. Exceptionally valuable in this respect are the studies of N. Vitanova, based on sociometric test findings that provide the educator with the tool for making informed decisions. Sociometric methodology, when applied to the pre-school environment, addresses aspects of peer perception. It enables the pedagogue to identify leader functions as well. The latter fall into three general categories: organizational, informative, and communicative. The child leader, performing an organizational function, provides the coordination between the separate units of the joint activity. The informative child leader opens up opportunities for the acquisition of additional information. The communicative child leader enhances the ambience of friendliness and well-being within the group. We should specifically point to the relativity of this classification of leader functions – it can serve as a basic working tool for the pre-school pedagogue.

Finally, we can highlight once again the cognitive nature of play as it generates reflection. The emerging awareness of the self develops as a result of cognitive experience and the development of the child's relations with the world, material objects and other human beings. The rational aspect of play is manifested via the mechanisms of reflection and identification and by virtue of the often undermined unity of reflective, practice-oriented and communicative activity of children at the pre-school age.

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Abstract

The article covers topical problems related to the group dynamics theory and practice in play and games in nurseries. It offers a brief overview of various research findings in the pedagogy, social psychology, cultural theories and mass media.

According to the authors, play activities and games recreate social interactions of people. These activities broaden children's views and enhance interaction skills. They should be regarded as part of children's upbringing and education. Activities based on play and games in pre-schools are related to other factors which develop and foster children's social skills. The findings of the present study verify that group dynamics in play and games among children mirrors children's social behaviour and helps children build up and enhance their interaction skills.

Keywords: pre-school education, socialization, pretend play, interaction

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