

Pedagogical Aspects of Socializing Processes in Children's Play

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Abstract

Playing is not only the discovery of the world, but it represents the joy of socializing and achieving interpersonal contacts of a child, primarily with other children, friends, dolls or imaginary characters. By observing a child playing, it is easy to deduce his/her imitation, imagination and dramatization, which are actually characteristic behaviours through which a child presents or relives his/her experiences using various symbols, for example, emotional experiences, speech or social skills. Learning and practicing social skills in an adequate and pro-social way, as well as practicing these skills through play with other children is extremely important in child's early development and education. In order to succeed in that, the educator first and foremost needs to understand the process of a child's learning in order to support and encourage the development of social skills through appropriate interventions. Furthermore, an educator has the responsibility to create a stimulating environment which will provide a child with a free choice of activities, the use of all senses and quality communication, as well as a diversity of interactions which are necessary for a pedagogical shaping of the environment appropriate for children and their ever-growing interests, knowledge and understanding. For the purpose of this research a questionnaire was constructed regarding children's play and has been applied on a sample of 198 children who attend preschool institutions. The paper considers practical implications of the results given as a means to stimulate the development of socialization processes in children's play considering their involvement in homogenous or heterogeneous educational groups.

Key words: child; educator; homogenous and heterogeneous educational groups; play; socialization.

Introduction

A child is a creative and interactive being who participates actively in his/her education and socialization. A child's active nature is recognized through his/her play, spontaneous learning, exploration, curiosity, imagination and creativity. Playing is the source of every child's creativity and inventiveness (Rinaldi, 2006). Playing is the most natural context of a child's self-expression and is always accompanied by satisfaction, joy and dynamics. Of course, playing is not merely entertainment for a child, but an activity which satisfies the basic needs of a child, develops his/her abilities and helps the child in socialization and learning. Playing, freely initiated by a child, always contains the motivation which a child uses actively in learning various skills. An emotional attitude and a child's motivation for playing are the most common sources of a child's joy which, in general, affects the whole development of a child in a positive way. Although emotions are the most common initiators of playing, playing always contains, in larger or smaller amounts, the cognitive processes through which the child imagines, constructs, revises, presents his/her experiences and uses his/her activity to reach an understanding of self and others. Everything that happens is expressed through playing, as Broadhead, Howard and Wood (2010, p. 98) simply say: "...what would happen if it was in real life." This is symbolic playing through which a child gradually understands and learns ways in which reality and imagination interweave. Symbolic playing also shows, as pointed out by Vygotsky (1983, according to Duran, 2003), that children successfully go beyond contextual framework and create unpredictable creative transformations and may seem stronger than they actually are through their behaviour. Playing is a productive, indirect way to study the entire development of children because it reflects the zone of further development. However, it is also the zone of actual development, because the child demonstrates existing competencies. More specifically: "Through playing, as through a prism of light, many functions are shown and many different possibilities are tested spontaneously, voluntarily, as autotelic and without the feeling of failure." (Duran, 2003, p. 168). Whenever a child plays, he or she gains certain knowledge and learns certain behaviours. Moreover, knowing that one event causes another, it helps the child to understand what will happen and what has happened. Thus, education, especially at an early age, should not be implemented by treating children as passive consumers of ready-made information given to them by adults. An educator has the responsibility to create a stimulating environment, to organize various situations in which the child may learn and explore independently, as well as question and modify his/her knowledge. So, every activity meaningful to a child, without the pressure of success, will activate all the senses in a child and will motivate him/her to think back on previous experiences and connect them with new ones. Situations of playing together give a child, as said by Gopnik (2012) space for the process of meta-cognition, because it enables the child a more intense experience of his/her knowledge, but in a different light, enriched by new and different thoughts of other significant people. Congruently,

the author states that important aspects of quality symbolic playing are: “continuous thinking, cooperation, pretending, imagination, creativity, roleplaying, implementation, rehearsal, manipulation, participation, interest, perseverance, pleasure and emotional security” (Gopnik, 2012, p. 63).

The Educator and the Child at Play

The role of an educator in a child’s play is particularly important. Based on observation of children during their free activities, it can certainly be determined that children gladly spend their time playing, but a more thorough examination may determine that an educator’s intervention may sometimes cause a great difference in everything that children are ready to do or learn independently. Furthermore, through play, a child reserves the right to play without adult participation, and playing is especially interesting when conducted away from the controlling gaze of adults. Additionally, an adult may be recognized and a desirable playing partner only if they follow the rules of a child’s play. This fulfilling, reciprocal relationship between a child and an adult is expressed in a frequent quote by Loris Malaguzzi (according to Rinaldi, 2006). He claims that education in which an adult is a reliable guide and friend, and an equal partner in a child’s play and learning, helps the child to learn by exploring the world and use his/her own language (in one of the hundreds of symbolic languages). From an equal relationship between educators and children, it is possible to recognize what the prevailing opinion of educators regarding children is, if they trust children and respect their basic rights for playing. Many authors have written on this particular subject, and we will point out Kessler’s opinion (1992, according to Miljak, 2009), who emphasizes that if an educator is continuously in the foreground and controls a child’s play through directive structure, it is obvious that this educator does not trust children and lessens their natural and creative potentials in this manner. When children feel respected and feel that their opinions and actions are valued by an educator, they become more open and more motivated to accomplish their goals through playing. In general, understanding existing knowledge and developmental capabilities of a child, creation and enrichment of a stimulating environment, as well as giving an appropriate support to a child in his/her play makes the essence of an educator’s pedagogical approach.

Heterogeneous or Homogeneous Educational Groups – between Theory and Practice

Bredecamp (1996), Barth (2004), Rinaldi (2006), Gopnik (2012) and many others interpret the child as a competent being with multiple potentials who learns and develops best in a community, with other children and adults. In their basic educational principles, they emphasize the importance of respecting personal specificity of every individual, which implies the awareness and accepting individual possibilities and specificities of each individual, thus affecting the creation of an environment in

which individual possibilities and values of each child are emphasized. Considering that children have an inborn potential, openness, curiosity and desire to connect with other people and communicate with them, such experiences of learning during early institutional education are not so difficult to ensure. Heterogeneous educational groups create a natural context in which children of various capabilities, knowledge, skills and habits learn. Research results indicate that through various interactions with other children or adults, a child follows the rules in an easier and quicker way, adheres to given limitations, makes compromises, helps others, communicates successfully, examines similarities and differences, so a child becomes socialized and he/she learns (Dunn, Contos & Potter, 1996).

Literature also confirms a positive influence of heterogeneous educational groups on the cognitive development of children, for example, a younger child has the opportunity to learn at his/her own pace, to overcome various cognitive challenges, and natural spontaneous interaction between children creates a live exchange of knowledge where children with less knowledge internalize new findings in the presence of a child with more knowledge. As is known, when a child learns, his/her personal knowledge is not sufficient; a child needs interaction with other children so that he/she may compare his/her own experiences or knowledge. Thus negotiation with others is a source of new knowledge for a child. In other words, individual thoughts are compared with other interpretations which encourage new ways of thinking, and discussions, as well as presenting different ideas, have significant roles in this process because they reinforce important aspects of a child's thoughts, while simultaneously giving sufficient time to a new joint process of constructing knowledge. In that sense, Barth (2004) emphasizes the value of mutual negotiations between children regarding a chosen subject (of learning, project, etc.) for which the author uses the term cognitive dialogue. It is created by an exchange of ideas where a child gives an important aspect of his/her thinking, simultaneously giving new meaning and contributing to a mutual construction of knowledge. Knowledge is better developed in the context of diversity, rather than in homogeneous educational groups because knowledge is best built based on the activity within a social interaction between people of various capabilities. It is a shared mutual cooperative relationship which creates a strong feeling of collectiveness between children of diverse abilities. It is important to encourage such a culture of living and learning from the earliest childhood when a dialogue of an individual in cooperation with others is valued and encouraged, naturally within a community of different, but equal people, where different possibilities can (and must) be explored and questioned. This is why the modern approach to forming educational groups in an early education institution relies on encouraging the socialization of children of different developmental age, which is most similar to the actual life of a child within a family community, where a child grows up with older or younger siblings who respect each other and learn naturally from one another.

Although the advantages of homogeneous groups have been elaborated on in great detail in research by many authors, Jensen (2005) emphasises frequent issues

which appear in education and are connected directly to the structure or the way an institution is organized, and warns that many traditional environments use insufficiently the advantages, possibilities and points of view of living together by members of various age. Many practitioners are still attracted to the traditional paradigm of equality, so diversity, as well as creating the context in which diversity is accepted, is still a great professional challenge to many. In pedagogical practice educators point out difficulties connected with working in heterogeneous educational groups, such as: a large number of children in educational groups, lack of space, lack of toys and didactic materials, different interests of children for certain content, etc. Subsequently, we often hear that homogeneous educational groups are easier to teach. Regardless of their strong arguments in favour of formal education, Leach (2003, p. 163) claims that it is not possible to apply these arguments to an early education institutions, "A pre-school institution is not a community where adults follow their goals along with children. It is a group shaped only for children who have a right to their diversity." To clarify, she emphasizes that entering the new millennium, there is nothing less equal than an equal treatment towards those who are different. This is why the author considers the role and importance of working with different children (different ages, personalities and potential) to be significant.

These and many other viewpoints create the following questions: "Which are the values that still dominate the educational process? Has the knowledge of a child changed and how much? What is the quality of life and learning of a child that we may speak of today justifiably and with arguments?" The question of professional education of educators becomes especially valued and necessary, as it is directed towards the creation of flexible educational situations in which children of various age have sufficient opportunities to play, learn and cooperate, which affects directly relationships between children and thus develops positive and encouraging attitudes toward each other. Answers to these and similar questions will aid a more objective consideration of the abovementioned issues, as well as the advancement of pedagogical practice. As Barth (2004, p. 64) said: "Nothing is as practical as a good theory, under the conditions that it may serve as a means of analysis in an actual educational situation".

Empirical Research

Sample

The research encompassed 197 children between the ages of three and seven, both male and female, attending kindergartens Petrinjčica in Petrinja and Cvrčak in Zagreb, and this includes four homogeneous educational groups and five heterogeneous educational groups. The research encompassed 106 boys and 91 girls.

For the purposes of this research, a questionnaire regarding children's playing was constructed, examining the social skills of children through 20 questions. The educators' task was to select one of the given answers on a five point Likert-type scale (1-"not true", 2-"sometimes true", 3-"neither true nor false", 4-"often true", 5-"always

true”). With each description of the behaviour of the child the answers on the scale 1-5 as described earlier were offered. In the responses, educators have chosen the behaviour that best describes the child.

Research Procedure

Educators have filled out the questionnaire of children’s playing (an educator’s report) for each child. At the beginning of the questionnaire there is an instruction for educators on how to answer the questions, saying that there are no correct or incorrect answers, that the research is anonymous and that the results will help in a better understanding of a child’s play. Each educator, depending on the number of children in their educational homogeneous or heterogeneous group, estimated between 20 and 26 children in a period of one month. The research has been done in the spring of 2012.

To test the mean differences of subsamples we used a t-test for independent samples.

Results

The problem task of this research was: to examine whether there are differences in social skills of children playing in homogeneous and heterogeneous educational groups. On a scale of 20 items, descriptive values are shown (Table 1).

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for ordinal variables*

N	Min	Max	Means	Mode	Std. Deviation	Asymmetrical distribution (Skewness)		Flattening distribution (Kurtosis)	
							Std. error		Std. error
197	1	5	3.99	4	.878	-.630	.173	-.021	.345
197	2	5	4.20	5	.946	-.881	.173	-.336	.345
197	1	5	3.99	4	1.008	-.897	.173	.155	.345
197	1	5	4.12	5	.912	-.896	.173	.234	.345
197	1	5	3.76	4	.876	-.470	.173	.067	.345
197	2	5	3.88	4	.927	-.542	.173	-.492	.345
197	1	5	3.86	4	.946	-.709	.173	.027	.345
197	1	5	3.94	4	.870	-.549	.173	-.086	.345
197	2	5	3.65	4	.847	-.139	.173	-.569	.345
197	1	5	3.51	4	.993	-.527	.173	-.236	.345
197	1	5	3.52	4	1.033	-.300	.173	-.680	.345
197	1	5	3.87	4	.916	-.820	.173	.551	.345
197	2	5	4.14	5	.953	-.967	.173	.019	.345
197	1	5	3.72	4	.919	-.610	.173	.133	.345
197	1	5	3.59	4	.935	-.692	.173	.543	.345
197	1	5	3.40	4	.946	-.333	.173	-.125	.345
197	1	5	3.53	4	.972	-.431	.173	-.064	.345
197	1	5	3.07	4	.995	.024	.173	-1.069	.345
197	2	5	3.94	4	.913	-.570	.173	-.440	.345
197	2	5	3.79	3	.961	-.188	.173	-1.020	.345

Legend – **a1** – spontaneously begins communication with other children; **a2** – expresses emotions and needs regarding other children easily and clearly; **a3** – freely expresses ideas, comments, gives instructions according to needs; **a4** – on his/her own initiative, includes him/herself in a game in progress; **a5** – assumes a role, stays in character; **a6** – uses imagination and creativity to construct and reconstruct a space for playing; **a7** – shows (expresses) openness toward a new experience; **a8** – actively uses existing materials or props in playing; **a9** – distances him/herself in order to develop and extend the game; **a10** – listens to others, shows understanding for the perspective of others; **a11** – negotiates the rules of the game; **a12** – actively uses existing materials or props in a game; **a13** – communicates by speech; **a14** – regulates his/her own emotions and feelings; **a15** – uses strategies to resolve conflicts in appropriate ways; **a16** – offers alternative suggestions to continue playing; **a17** – shows the ability to negotiate and cooperate in order to achieve arranged goals; **a18** – invites observers to join the game; **a19** – is a favourite partner for playing for other children; **a20** – maintains friendships with the same and opposite gender.

From the values of the descriptive statistics as shown in Table 1, it is possible to conclude that the central tendency measures (arithmetic mean and mode) are high, implying positive value, having a scale value of 4 and/or 5 respectively. It is the slightly left arithmetic distribution (skewness) which is aligned with a high arithmetic mean as well as with the values on the scale. Considering the kurtosis particles are in the range from mild platykurtic to mild leptokurtic distribution. Normality of distribution is tested with the K-S test, and all items statistically significantly diverge from the needed normality ($p=0.000$). Therefore, the overall result on the social skills of children in play groups around higher values, implicates a positive influence of a preschool institution which, as the results show, opens up numerous opportunities for a child to learn and develop his/her social skills through play and communication. Other research studies also confirm this positive influence of preschool institutions on the development of a child, such as the longitudinal research on a sample of 3000 children of both genders, years 3-7. All children encompassed by this research, whose families are of different ethnic and socio-economic status, went through the entire program of a preschool institution. Results of this research show that an earlier and high quality institutional education significantly improves the development of a child's autonomy, emotional and social expression and the overall development of social competency (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, 2010). Furthermore, in collective play that represents collective problem solving, and in combination with numerous possibilities of expression and formation of personal opinion, a child learns and advances in the development of social competencies. As a significant contribution to the social dimension of a child's development, the company of children of different ages is emphasized, as well as gender and capabilities (Brock, Dodds, Jarvis, Olusonga, 2009, Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Justification for said standpoints can be found in the work of authors such as Rinaldi (2006), Slunjski (2008), Miljak (2009), Jurčević-Lozančić (2010), and many others.

For the difference testing of arithmetic means of subsamples (of heterogeneous and homogenous groups), considering the substrate of 20 items of the questionnaire about children's play, a t-test for individual samples has been applied. The results of the test are shown in Table 2.

The analysis of the data shown in Table 2 (the arithmetic means of subsamples: heterogeneous group, 98 children, and homogeneous group, 99 children) shows that

there is no measurable statistical difference between children from heterogeneous and those from homogenous groups – on the total of 14 items. For those items where the Levene test of homogeneity of variances is at the level of statistical significance ($p \leq 0.05$), the interpreted statistics of the t-test in the category when it is not satisfied or the homogeneity of variances is not met (table 2).

Table 2. Differences between subsamples (of heterogeneous and homogenous groups), considering the scale items

Item code		Levene test of homogeneity of variances		t test				
		F	Sig.	T	Degrees of freedom	Stat. significance	Difference of arithmetic mean	Std. error differences
a1	Equality of variances was satisfied	3.289	.071	-.892	195	.373	-.112	.125
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.893	192.058	.373	-.112	.125
a2	Equality of variances was satisfied	5.920	.016	-5.985	195	.000	-.743	.124
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-5.991	187.372	.000*	-.743	.124
a3	Equality of variances was satisfied	5.619	.019	-1.203	195	.230	-.173	.143
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-1.204	190.054	.230	-.173	.143
a4	Equality of variances was satisfied	1.412	.236	-.633	195	.527	-.082	.130
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.634	191.654	.527	-.082	.130
a5	Equality of variances was satisfied	16.552	.000	-.956	195	.340	-.119	.125
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.958	172.424	.339	-.119	.125
a6	Equality of variances was satisfied	12.827	.000	-1.769	195	.078	-.232	.131
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-1.771	186.576	.078	-.232	.131
a7	Equality of variances was satisfied	6.734	.010	-.969	195	.334	-.131	.135
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.970	189.088	.333	-.131	.135
a8	Equality of variances was satisfied	3.420	.066	-.241	195	.810	-.030	.124
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.241	192.039	.810	-.030	.124
a9	Equality of variances was satisfied	8.388	.004	-3.611	195	.000	-.423	.117
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-3.614	190.950	.000*	-.423	.117
a10	Equality of variances was satisfied	12.779	.000	-3.584	195	.000	-.492	.137
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-3.589	183.012	.000*	-.492	.137
a11	Equality of variances was satisfied	11.708	.001	-2.266	195	.025	-.330	.146
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-2.269	183.744	.024*	-.330	.145
a12	Equality of variances was satisfied	6.912	.009	-.922	195	.357	-.120	.131
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.924	181.620	.357	-.120	.130
a13	Equality of variances was satisfied	.811	.369	1.947	195	.053	.263	.135
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			1.947	194.772	.053	.263	.135
a14	Equality of variances was satisfied	4.534	.034	-.830	195	.407	-.109	.131
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.831	187.731	.407	-.109	.131
a15	Equality of variances was satisfied	10.480	.001	-1.652	195	.100	-.219	.133
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-1.654	179.401	.100	-.219	.133
a16	Equality of variances was satisfied	7.169	.008	-3.851	195	.000	-.502	.130
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-3.857	176.843	.000*	-.502	.130
a17	Equality of variances was satisfied	10.565	.001	-2.800	195	.006	-.381	.136
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-2.804	179.538	.006*	-.381	.136
a18	Equality of variances was satisfied	.240	.625	1.069	195	.286	.152	.142
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			1.070	194.659	.286	.152	.142
a19	Equality of variances was satisfied	2.217	.138	-.619	195	.537	-.081	.130
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.619	193.008	.537	-.081	.130
a20	Equality of variances was satisfied	3.411	.066	-.428	195	.669	-.059	.137
	Equality of variances was not satisfied			-.428	192.469	.669	-.059	.137

* $p \leq 0.05$

The results of research show that heterogeneous and homogenous educational groups significantly differ on six items. Analysing the results, we can see that there is a significant statistical difference benefiting children in homogeneous educational groups, as their adjustment of needs and feelings with other children is more flexible, and they know how to do it in an acceptable way (a2). As is well known and accepted, fulfilment of psychological and primary existential needs in an interaction with other children is especially important with children of preschool age. Maria Montessori, an esteemed pedagogue of the 20th century, emphasised that heterogeneous educational groups composed of children of various age and developmental capabilities, equip each child with the possibility of a more quality development and the fulfilment of primary needs according to an individual rhythm, so a child that is more advanced needs not stop for those that need more time, and slower children do not suffer from the pressure of constant expediting (Montessori, 2003). Also, it can be said that the results of contemporary research (Wood & Attfield, 2005, Dunn et al., 1996, Casey, 2010, Rinaldi, 2006, Beaty, 2012) show that heterogeneous educational groups constitute a natural context for the fulfilment of emotional, social and cognitive needs in which the advance and development of a child is not appraised when compared to others, rather the individuality of each child is accepted. It is not surprising then, as results of this research show, that children in heterogeneous educational groups attune their needs and feelings more flexibly with other children, and know how to do it in an appropriate way. Furthermore, as it can be seen from detailed data of this research, children that go through heterogeneous educational groups distance themselves in a more flexible and knowledgeable way in order to develop and, if needed, prolong playing, which shows that a socially competent attitude exists (a9). In Cadwell (2003) and other research (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008, Casey, 2010), in groups of various chronological age, a child settles down more quickly and easily in different situations, and reacts coherently to processes of others, which points to the ability to attune to the behaviour of other children and adults. We consider that to be one of the vital ways of development and learning of social competencies that are best developed in the context of heterogeneous educational groups, in view of results of this research.

Furthermore, by analysing data in Table 2, it can be seen that heterogeneous educational groups (a10) open up possibilities that enable the child to listen to others and show understanding for the views of others, which leads to better understanding of others. Explanation of said differences can surely be an argument by view that the environment in heterogeneous educational groups is more natural, more similar to that which a child expects from real life (where there is always someone older or younger, better or worse in a given activity), which contributes to a more positive treatment of a child toward him/herself, his/her feelings and a positive relationship to others, their feelings and their needs. Above mentioned competencies of children, such as listening to and understanding of others, as the results of this research show, are being developed in an enticing and appreciating environment of a preschool

institution, in a diverse interaction between children (older and younger peers), as well as with adults in heterogeneous educational groups. Broadhead, Howard, Wood (2010) also emphasize that mutual caring, assertive qualities, as well as various cognitive skills, visible in preschool age from listening to educators' instructions, understanding within mutual interaction are more prevalent in environments with children of different age. Also, results of this research (Table 2) show that children in heterogeneous educational groups negotiate the rules of play more successfully (a11), offer alternative suggestions for its advancement if needed (a16), and show the ability to arrange cooperation that leads to planned goals (a17). According to Wood and Attfield (2005), every time those children assume different roles when playing, they enter and exit from mutual imagination to structure, define, negotiate and steer parts of the play. Obviously, those qualities are better developed in heterogeneous educational groups, which is confirmed by the results of this research. Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998) also indicate that within joint activities in which children of various age are present, an older child will try harder to get acquainted with the younger child, which induces empathy and offers negotiation and cooperation opportunities, contributing to goal achievement in mutual play. According to the same authors, in diverse interactions between children, they are more motivated in listening to others to better understand the complex flow of information that help them keep a sequence of activities within playing.

Conclusion

As the research results have shown, from the entirety of 20 questions of the questionnaire about children's play aimed at children's social skills, heterogeneous and homogeneous education groups differ in six questions. Likewise, there is a notable difference between the rest of the questions, indicating that children in heterogeneous education groups better express social skills in collective play, but, in this research, those differences did not prove to be statistically significant, hence they have not been interpreted in detail. Placing children in heterogeneous groups is not a magical recipe, or an exclusive method recommended for application without detailed deliberation and additional complementary approaches leading toward better quality of a child's life. Heterogeneous educational groups encourage and enable cooperation, mutual encouragement, cooperative learning and spontaneous grouping in which children of various ages advance and learn according to their individual capabilities and abilities. Although there are some limitations to this research, we consider the results as stimulus for further investigations. Future research should focus on the assessment of social skills in children's play from the perspective of others (i.e. parents, individual thoughts of both educators leading the educational group), thus achieving a more integral view of all perspectives as key indicators of development levels of a child's social skills in playing. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that the overall environment in the educational group affects significantly the spur of where the individual social

skills are directed at, as well as that it is to go on about the professional competencies of educators, i.e. their overall capabilities in questioning and objective assessment of a child's social skills. Therefore, without additional information, it is difficult to generalize on conclusions. We hence consider the results of this research to be theoretical and methodological grounds for further research.

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Pedagoški aspekti socijalizacijskih procesa u igri djece

Sažetak

Igra nije samo otkrivanje svijeta, već predstavlja radost druženja i ostvarivanja međusobnih kontakata djeteta ponajprije s drugom djecom, prijateljima, lutkama ili likovima iz mašte. Promatrajući dijete u igri, vrlo lako se može uočiti da su njegovo imitiranje, zamišljanje i dramatiziranje zapravo karakteristična ponašanja kojima dijete prezentira ili proživljava svoja iskustva koristeći se različitim simbolima, primjerice emocionalnim iskustvima, govorom ili socijalnim vještinama. Učenje i uvježbavanje socijalnih vještina na adekvatan i proaktivan način, kao i njihovo prakticiranje u igri s drugom djecom, iznimno je važno u ranom razvoju i odgoju djeteta. Da bi se u tome uspjelo, ponajprije odgojitelj treba razumjeti proces učenja djece kako bi mogao podržavati i poticati razvoj njihovih socijalnih vještina primjerenim intervencijama. Štoviše, odgojitelj ima odgovornost oblikovati stimulativnu okolinu koja će omogućiti djetetu slobodan izbor aktivnosti, korištenje svih osjetila, kvalitetnu komunikaciju i mnoštvo raznovrsnih interakcija, za što je nužno pedagoško oblikovanje prostora primjerenog djeci i njihovim stalno rastućim interesima, znanjima i razumijevanju. Za potrebe ovog istraživanja oblikovan je anketni Upitnik o igri djece koji je primijenjen na uzorku od 197 djece polaznika predškolskih ustanova. U radu se razmatraju praktične implikacije dobivenih rezultata u smjeru poticanja razvoja pojedinih socijalizacijskih procesa u igri djece s obzirom na njihovu uključenost u homogene ili heterogene odgojne skupine.

Ključne riječi: *dijete; heterogene i homogene odgojne skupine; igra; odgojitelj; socijalizacija.*