Play and Its Pedagogical Potential in a Preschool Institution

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Abstract

The role of playing in young children's educational process is priceless. It represents the child's zone of proximal development and a possible transition into a higher stage of his/her cognitive and social development, and should be regarded as an integral part of the educational process in the institutions for early education. This implies providing proper conditions for playing and developing playing experiences, which includes creating a safe place and a positive environment for playing, offering "open" materials suitable for different stages of a child's development, providing enough uninterrupted playtime, showing an interest for children's activities and achievements, strengthening the children's cooperation, providing enough time for self-organization of the activities and allowing enough time to carefully listen and observe the children playing. Types of games and their complexity and educational value can be perceived from various perspectives, i.e. observed in terms of various theoretical approaches. This paper analyses playing from two framework perspectives – cognitive and social, and addresses the conditions in early education institutions needed for its uninterrupted activity and its pedagogic potential.

Key words: *children; educator; learning; observation; pedagogy of free play.*

Introduction

A simple definition of child's play simply does not exist; rather than defining it we can say that it generally is a non-specialized, non–clear cut multifunctional activity. Playing is an intrinsically motivated activity that comes to a child as a freedom of choice; it is pleasant, meaningful and actively engages the child (Isbell & Raines, 2007). Matejić (according to Duran, 1995), describes playing as an autotelic activity

that has its own source of motivation, the process of which is more important than the outcome itself, in which assets dominate the goals and as an activity that is not set to accomplish pragmatic effects.

Different authors focus on different functions of playing, accentuating different reasons of its occurrence. In the same way, some authors (former psychoanalysts) consider playing as an expression of sublimation, catharsis, abreaction and compensation, whilst others understand it as means of relaxation and fulfilment of interspace between more and less active activities.

Many authors describe a particularly significant influence of playing on a child's overall development, as well as specific segments of that development (Duran et al., 1988; Elkonin, 1978; Gaile Sloan, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009; Piaget & Vygotski, according to Broadhead et al., 2011; Šagud, 2002; Whitebread, 2011, and others).

Miller and Almon (2009) emphasize that playing even shows importance in neurological development, the reason being that every process involved in playing, such as repetition of actions, attachment to various people or objects, skill development, combination of materials and risk taking ensure essential impulses that help with establishing connections and developing interconnectivity of neural networks that consequently expand the capabilities of a child regarding studying, thoughts and communication.

Vygotski (according to Broadhead et al., 2011) emphasizes that playing represents children's zone of proximal development, narrowly, so to say, similar to a centre of focus in a magnifying glass, all tendencies of development. Furthermore, playing represents a way through which children can understand their experiences without repetition of the assimilation cycle and accommodation (Piaget, according to Vasta et al., 1998). The value of playing is its contribution to the overall development of cooperative relations of the child with others, as well as building their mutual trust (Erikson, according to Vasta et al., 1998), as is the development of self-regulation and metacognition in a child (Whitebread, 2011). Playing is an avenue of children's development and a natural backbone to pedagogy of central importance to the child due to it being developed and held in accordance to what is necessary for the child (Gaile Sloan, 2008).

Affirmation of a pedagogical approach in which playing is not set to be a margin of an educational process, but set to represent its central backbone exacts the readiness of an educator for understanding various qualities and characteristics of playing (Wood, 2011). Therefore, according to the words of the mentioned author, playing increases attention and attention span of a child, his or her personal engagement level, emotional engagement level and motivation, increases the development of imaginative and communicational potentials of a child, as well as contributes to the development of his relations with others. The author (Wood, 2011) elaborates on some sophisticated cognitive and meta-cognitive processes, which include creation of imaginary worlds and events, research in potential of various objects and symbols and their imaginative transformation, communicating and understanding of symbolic

activities and meanings, organizing of playful events and situations, defining roles (real and imaginary), research and negotiation amongst children on personal knowledge and understanding.

From the stated, as for many other different reasons, it is essential to ensure adequate opportunities and conditions regarding playing and developing playing experiences for children (Jackman, 2012). As we have previously stated, play needs to be an integral part of the educational process in an institution of early and preschool development (Jackman, 2012, p. 22). In that sense, the mentioned author emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and a positive environment for playing, ensuring open materials, acceptance and strengthening of individual remarks and specific capabilities of children during play. Ensuring enough continuous time for playing, offering activities and materials appropriate for children at different levels of development, showing true interest for activities and discoveries that children make, ensuring an environment that sustains attitudes and values of the concerned culture offers appropriate requisites characteristic to different cultures that will contribute to connecting children, strengthens the cooperation between them, ensures enough time for self-organization in children activities, time for careful listening and observing children during play (how, with whom and with what they are playing and what they are capable of).

Are Playing and Pedagogy of Early Childhood in a Conflict of Interest?

Regarding the positioning of playing based on frames of pedagogy and curriculums of early development, it is possible to discuss various ideas, as well as the role of an adult (educator) in child's play. Playing can be empowered, but also overloaded with the endeavour of the educator to use its full pedagogical potential. In this context, Rogers (2011) poses a question whether pedagogy and playing are in a conflict of interest. Methodically shaped actions of educators can endanger certain basic features of playing as a self-organized and an intrinsically motivated activity regarding children.

Developing a balance between the activities that the educator controls based on some didactic goal and self-initiated, self-organized activities, that may also strongly contribute to different aspects of a child's development and learning represents a big pedagogical challenge formed in the whole educational process. In this context, Wood (2011) confronts direct pedagogical approach with developmental or rather responsive approach. The first approach is characterized by a set organization of an educational process in which most of the activities are planned, directed, realized and evaluated by the educator, while the developmental or responsive pedagogical approach marks the focus of the educator on observation of children and ensuring support to the development of their interest in a process of forming activities and constructing knowledge and understanding. Due to the specified features, it is clear that the second (developmental/responsive) approach leaves much more space for the

situating of the game itself, such as activities in which children are the active authors, creators and protagonists.

An educator that is well qualified for understanding and supporting various self-initiated and self-organized child activities will notice and recognize the activities that he/she should not be a part of, or should be a part of in an unobtrusive and a subtle way much more easily. By doing so, they will escape the trap of excess use of pedagogical play, which many authors consider extremely important. Consequently, they will also have in mind that the playing experience offers the children more possibilities of studying, which has great value that comes from a frame of something which would be measurable by standard measuring instruments, but is priceless in the context of wellbeing for children (Rogers, 2011).

In a certain sense, all the presented thesis coincide with the work of Vygotski (Berk & Winsler, 1995), in which he emphasizes how advisable it is to avoid intellectual approach to child's play, because excessive and exaggerated interventions from adults could endanger the basic characteristics and importance of overall playing.

Regarding the complicated relation of playing and pedagogy, as well as the role of playing in thinking through and forming curriculums, these issues have been discussed by many other authors. Aubrey (according to Rogers, 2011) states that pedagogy of early childhood exists somewhere in-between child's free play and formally organized activities, shaped by the educator, whilst Wood (2009) discusses free and structured child's play. Establishment of a good ratio between more and less outer structure (on the part of adults) in different children's activities and especially playing, actually rests on how creating and shaping an educational process needs to have preset pedagogical priorities. They should, in the words of Rogers (2011) be directed to developing social competency and establishing authentic relations within the child community, which obviously encompasses the right of a child to decide what, where and who they will play with. On this trail, Rogers and Evans (2008) have coined the phrase "pedagogy of free play", confronting it with pedagogy that is based on the realization of set curriculum goals and accordingly, plentiful outer structure, or in other words direct interference of adults. Affirmation and practical materialization of the term "pedagogy of free play", as shaping the curriculum in which playing takes a central place in the process of education, in which playing requires creating completely new relations between adults and children based on mutual listening, appreciation and reciprocal communication. In a curriculum based on high level of child acknowledgment, children's right to the free choice of time, place, materials and partners in their activities is not treated as a possible choice, but as an ultimate pedagogical imperative of contemporary institutions of early development.

Types of Games and Their Educational Value

Types of games, their complexity and educational value may be regarded from different perspectives, or within a framework of various theoretical approaches. In this paper, we will mostly regard playing from two different framework perspectives,

cognitive and social. We will discuss the prerequisites that institutions of early development should have in order for their work to be smooth and continuous.

The first group of games is often named "cognitive games". It is possible to perceive it in a context of basic stages of cognitive child development, described in lines of notable authors (Piaget, according to Vasta et al., 1998). This group incorporates functional, dramatic, socio-dramatic, constructive games and games with specific rules. In the continuation of this work, these games will be explained and shown with a special emphasis on their pedagogical potential, as well as the conditions that an institution for early development should have in order for them to go on smoothly and with ease.

Sensory-Motor Games as a Predictor of a Child's Intellectual Development

From the first stages of playing games, various sensory and motor activities of a child occur, for the first time during the first two years of his/her life, in a period of time that Piaget (according to Jackman, 2012) calls sensory-motor in his cognitive theory. The activities in which a child researches various sensory modalities of his/her surroundings and steps into physical interaction with both people and objects, by which he/she develops his/her perceptive and motor capabilities are generally considered sensory-motor.

This is why many authors, including Gonzales - Mena (2008), call these activities functional or practical games. The pedagogical potential of these games largely determines the quality of the surrounding of a specific institution of early development that includes quality sensorial stimulations and the possibilities of gathering plentiful motor experiences. Despite those factors, adequate pedagogical conditions for an institution of early development are the following: ensuring enough continuous time for unobstructed development of these activities, acceptance and strengthening of the children's self-organizational potential. The significance of these games is best illustrated by Hughes (according to Isbell & Raines, 2007), who claims that there are two strongest predictors of (future) intellectual development in early childhood: primary being adequate parent enrolment and the secondary, accessibility of various stimulating (sensory-motor) materials for use in research.

Symbolic Playing as a Medium of Education and a Mirror of Achieved Development

At the starting point of the second cognitive development phase, which Piaget calls pre-operational, which stretches out from about the second until the sixth year of a child's life, intensive development of symbolic functions commences. More specifically, capabilities in usage of one thing for the sake of figuring out another, such as motor movements (a child takes an imaginary action), objects (a child uses objects in imaginary actions) or mental notion (of something that is currently not

available). One of the main indicators of the symbolic function development is the appearance of symbolic play. Symbolic play is not only a very convenient medium by which children can learn, it is also a mirror of an achieved cognitive, linguistic and social development of a child.

In symbolic play a child represents his or her real-life experience of people and events, during which he/she adopts and practices new physical and mental activities. As the child manifests adult's behaviour and actions that he/she spots in his/her surroundings, a child learns how to act accordingly in different situations (Tsao, 2002).

Symbolic function is, as Piaget sets it (according to Vasta et al., 1998), a usage capability of a certain thing as a symbol for something else. Those symbols, as we have pointed out, can be physical objects, various mental notions and of course, words. With regard to this, Duran et al. (1988) differentiate two basic levels in the expression of symbolic function. These two levels are "natural iconic system" (system of mental images, dreams and symbolic play) and "arbitrated natural language system" (spoken and written language, gestures and the like). These two systems differ in a few aspects, of which we will point out only one: the first system does not have any existent preset codified rules, the second one therefore obviously does.

Existence or absence of codified rules presents the basic difference between the modalities of communication that are basically sorted into category of signs (in which the connection between previously marked and unmarked is arranged as conventional, for example letters and numbers) and those that are usually considered symbols (in which a natural connection is established between the already marked and the object, person or sign being marked and in this aspect there are plentiful expressive modalities).

In symbolic play, a child often uses objects similar to those that are necessary for his or her game of choice (a stick becomes a horse, a pen becomes an injection, etc.), but they use them differently with regard to the marks that the very visual appearance of the specified object might suggest. Due to this reason, Vygotsky (according to Elkonin, 1978) does not only see symbolization, but also transfer of meaning from one object to another (in a way that a dice can represent a plate, a piece of meat, a fork, or anything that the children agree upon) in children's symbolic play.

A very well known Russian psychologist Elkonin (according to Bodrova & Leong, 2003) points out four main areas of influence in child's play on the development of the child. He states that playing has a positive influence on a child's motivation because playing is the first context in which they demonstrates their capability of pleasure delay. Furthermore, symbolic play, because of various role takeovers, allows for cognitive and emotional decentring. The understanding of other's perspectives is crucial for the coordination of multiple roles in a game and for negotiating its scenario. Playing contributes to the development of mental representations of a child because it allows separation of meanings from physical form, along with operating with symbolic substitutions regarding objects. Finally, playing strengthens the development

of purposeful deliberate behaviour because a child constantly follows a specific set of rules and gets feedback on how successful he or she is in doing so in a certain game.

Careful observation of children in symbolic play allows educators to follow the development and to discover new competencies (mathematical, linguistic, social or others) which often transcend their expectations regarding children of specific age.

In the same way, in symbolic play of a shop or a market, five and six years old children often use two- and even three-digit numbers. This and many more examples witness to a high pedagogical potential of symbolic play, which is because of this called by some authors "the queen of activities" of preschool aged children.

The quality of conditions for the development of symbolic play in an institution of early education corresponds with the characteristics of a quality educational process as a whole; it encompasses stimulation of the space-material environment. The flexibility of time organization, the dynamics of daily activities and the diversity of social interactions in children (of different ages) support an unobstructed approach on the part of the educator.

Some authors state that the development of symbolic play can be directly supported by the educator and thus contribute to the educational potential. In order to succeed, an educator must thoroughly understand various elements of symbolic play that Leong & Bodrova (2012) emphasize with PRoPELS, an acronym that marks the starting letters of the following words and phrases: Plan, Roles, Props, Extended timeframe, Language and Scenario. The mentioned authors describe each one of these elements through five stages of game development, which is clearly shown in Table 1. The mentioned authors also point out that it is necessary to closely examine and review symbolic playing and its development and later estimate when the intervention of an educator would be useful and which of the stated elements of playing would be appropriate for a child, similar to scaffolding a building.

It is possible to play more roles at the same time as roles reflect social relations.

In that way, for example, an educator can support the game plan asking the children which game they would like to play, or by encouraging the children to a discussion about the roles that they will take, which can happen in oral form, or the educator can rely on children's drawings and graphical representations. Ensuring scaffolding in a context of rules and roles in a game can include conversation with children about different social roles and social relations (especially those that a child cannot spot on his/her own), that are according to Elkonin (Leong & Bodrova, 2012) in direct focus of the developed game. For instance, educators can explain how a restaurant's personnel cannot prepare and serve food without being taught how to and being trained by someone authorized to teach food preparation and serving. Ensuring support in a sense of using requisites can mean helping children that are less experienced in using "open materials", which can be transformed and used in a variety of ways in a game. Offering scaffolding in usage of language by the educator means acceptance of new names that certain objects get during play considering their symbolic function

Table 1. *Five stages of development in children's symbolic play*

	Stage 1 Starting Script	Stage 2 Roles in Action	Stage 3 Roles in Action, Starting Scenario	Stage 4 Developed Roles, planned scenario, symbolic element	Stage 5 Dramatizing, multiple themes and roles
Game Plan	There is no game plan.	There is no game plan.	There is a game plan, actions are named prior to playing.	A plan and a scenario of the game exist prior to play.	A plan, a scenario and roles exist ahead and are elaborated.
Roles in Game	There is no role takeover.	Primarily action, then role playing, no rules.	There are roles with rules which they can depart from.	Roles are complex and multiple.	It is possible to play more roles at the same time, roles reflect social relations.
Requisites	Play with objects.	Play with objects that can result in a role.	Requisites necessary for specific roles.	Usage of symbolic object replacement.	Playing with imaginary objects that can also have roles.
Time Organization	Research on objects, no scenario.	Creation of scenarios which last a few minutes max.	Creation of scenarios that last 10 - 13 minutes.	Creation of a scenario that lasts 60 minutes, with support from an educator or adult even longer.	Creating scenarios that last one or more days, a game can be paused and started at will.
Language	Modest use of language.	Usage of language for description of roles.	Usage of language for description of roles and actions.	Usage of language for description of roles and actions. Usage of role language starts.	Usage of language for description of roles, actions and scenarios. Language is incorporated into the role.
Game Scenario	No scenario creation. Imitation of adults is most frequent.	Creation of scenarios that are stereotypical with the activity that is being imitated. Rules are incorporated into the game.	Scenario is known before hand, but new ideas are acceptable.	Games are series of coordinated scenarios that can change.	Games are series of coordinated scenarios that can change. Literature themes are often used.

Modified according to Leong & Bodrova (2012)

(which can change during play). Assigning new names to objects, based on their interchangeable function can help children with their symbolically natured word management, but can also contribute to the development of their meta-linguistic consciousness connected with the skill of writing (Elkonin, 1978, p. 33). Supporting the development of a scenario of a certain game can include a few components: newly acquired knowledge (roles, relations, activities of people connected to a certain topic, new insight about life and its situations, etc.) which can be accomplished by organizing visits, organizing various performances, or even with a great choice of suitable literature or video material. A more explicit support to the development of a game's scenario is taking on some game roles by the educator, which can have multiple advantages (but defects as well if the educator starts dominating child's play).

Devaluation and obstruction of symbolic play, especially in preschool aged children can be a result of insufficient understanding of its value, by the educators, but also by

the parents. As we are talking about a period during which parents often expect intense preparation for school (in the sense of comprehending some basic academic skills such as reading, writing, calculating, etc.), support to ensure conditions for symbolic play includes systematic support issued to parents in order to better understand symbolic play's importance and pedagogic value. Limiting time children spend in symbolic play at the expense of systematic observation of skills that children gain during and in symbolic play in a way that is harmonized with natural modalities of their education is unnecessary and pedagogically unapproved.

Symbolic Behaviour as "Natural Steps" to Linguistic Development

An "ordinary" symbolic game, as Ivić (1978) indicates, contains a symbolic system in which cooperation and interweaving of every symbolic means possible is existent (combination of speech, gestures, symbolic objects, symbolic personalities, or roles that children take). Symbolic play witnesses certain aspects of representational capacity of a child that transforms his/her experience through playing on a symbolic level (more on the subject in Šagud, 2002) and this very idea is the prerequisite of linguistic development. Moreover, the critical part in it is played by the very existence of symbolic function; it allows a child to translate personal experiences and categories of meaning gained through interaction with objects and people into a verbal code.

Emphasizing the complexity of symbolic play, Ivić (1978) talks about the "grammar" of symbolic play as a multi-layered organization unit system. In symbolic play, children independently master multi-layered organization of a system (activities which adults do not prepare or train them for). This is why close observation and understanding of symbolic play in children may represent a path of redefining the image of an educator on the possibilities of self-organizing in children's activities and gradual acceptance of the fact that activities of that kind have very high development potential, even if the educators do not take part in them or control them.

As an example, children often correctly use the patterns of communication characteristic to a life context which is interpreted in a specific game. In that way, whilst playing doctor, "doctors" (children that take the role of doctors) communicate with their "patients" (children that take the role of patients) with utmost respect, using phrases such as "Here you go, Sir...", whilst they refer to other "personnel" normally as if they were conversing with a friend. This shows subtle shades of civilized human communication, which no one taught such young children and they have developed independently based on personal experience in different life situations for which these skills are inherent (visiting a doctor, going to a market etc.), and they represent them in their play. Recognizing and understanding different shapes of symbolic behaviours as elements that represent "natural steps" to a child's linguistic development is of utmost importance in the formation of educational structure of work. Understanding the potential in linguistic development in most (at the first sight "non–linguistic") activities that children self-initially start, even when they are not using language in a

sense that is easiest to spot (using words), can represent a strong supporting pillar in the organization of the educational process and in the same context it can contribute to the support of linguistic development in children. The skill of reading different "invisible processes" that lead to the development of linguistic competency in children and harmonization of the educational interventions with these subtle processes go under especially valuable roles that educators take during the process of linguistic development in children.

Playing as a Base to Starting Projects

High pedagogic potential can contain constructive games, in which elements of functional and dramatic (symbolic) activities are interconnected on many occasions. The development of this kind of playing mostly starts with manipulation with various objects, their combinations and creation of some function or composition in which children often afterwards give out symbolic meaning and use it in their own symbolic game.

As an example, children use wooden dice and many other unformatted materials to make an animal zoo, after which they play visits to the zoo that incorporates selling tickets, feeding the animals, communication with the animals on a personal level, communication with other people and similar.

In a similar set of activities that we have noted in our research, children built castles, which later served as a setup for playing knights. In these activities children have dedicated a lot of time to solving some physical problems, such as lifting and lowering of a drawbridge. In this case, a high interest on the part of children for the theme of playing with a castle as their playing ground has lead to starting a project in which constructive and symbolic playing have not only been sustained, but also shown further development.

A big contribution to this was the very measured and thought-through interruption process of the educator, who has thought up a series of situations in which children had the ability to make further decisions, studies and were able to understand the problem of a lever and other physical problems that they were constantly encountering. With this and some other forms of indirect support in children's activities, the educators have sustained balance between their playing and studying, aware of the fact that there is a close natural connection and a very fluid limit.

Along the lines of the stated, as well as many other examples detailed description of which would transcend the set volume of this work, we may conclude that playing can represent a remarkably valuable contribution to the development of knowledge, understanding and different competencies in children, such as linguistic, social and mathematical.

As we have previously stated, in many different games, the engagement of an adult can be welcome and pedagogically explained, but it cannot be formed according to a universal, generally usable "receipt". The need for direct engagement of an adult in

a child's play, as well as the way in which this engagement will be achieved differs in various situations and requires great understanding of child's play and authentic logic with regard to the play situation. Otherwise, adult engagement in child's play can make the game lose its essential characteristics and sense, which is in no way desirable or good.

Pedagogic Potential of Games with Set Rules

Many limitations inherent to the previous stage of development will be overcome by a child when he/she reaches the period of concrete operations (Piaget places this in the period between the sixth and seventh year of a child's life), during which mental operations enable logical solutions of problems with concrete objects. In the genesis of play, it overlays the period of playing games with set rules, that characterize strictly defined rules of a clearly set role and behaviour that in high measures reflect the reality of the game. Games with rules, as classified by Duran (1995), involve playing with sensory-motor combinations (races, passing, playing ball games) or with intellectual combinations (card games, chess etc.) in which the individuals compete and where codex regulating is copied directly from the older generations or with some temporary agreement. They represent a special mechanism of regulating social relations within a group (undertaking rules and social norms, control of wishes and similar).

In an institution of early education, pedagogic potential of games with rules can be huge, but only if their use does not collide with modern remarks of the educational process that includes the will of a child to participate, developmental and individual harmony with specific interests and possibilities of specific child.

Although, according to Piaget's theory, this time period is in referral to 6 - 11 year old children, our research experiences point out that even much younger children, whilst playing games with certain rules are able to react to various sensory-motor and intellectual challenges. We have even noticed that it is harder to accept forms and rules than to respond to intellectual challenges that those kinds of games usually pose for the children of early and preschool age. On the other hand, exactly that can be their greatest value in the educational work with children. If they are used in an acceptable manner, those kinds of games can indirectly contribute to the development of emotional and social competencies in children, because they allow for dosed exposure regarding success and failure (they form balance between gratification and frustration).

Social Aspects of Child's play

It is well known that a certain stage of cognitive development can allow a better understanding of a child's social experiences. However, at the same time the social experiences also influence his/her cognitive development, that is the development of his/her social cognition. An institution of early development, as an irreplaceable polygon of social interactions, has a priceless role in these processes. It allows a

child everyday interactions with different peers that represent a very important starting point in the cognitive development in children (this thesis is represented by supporters of a cognitive-developmental theory, lead by Jean Piaget), whereby a special role is given to more competent peers (Vygotski, according to Berk & Winsler, 1995). Various interactions with peers, as well as the processes that they include are inherent especially during play, which is essentially a basic child activity. In that sense, playing represents an irreplaceable opportunity for a child to learn about people and social processes, as well as understand rules that lie in the background of all social interactions. Even the simplest conceived situations that children create in a game follow social rules.

One of the most often used classifications for games with regard to the level of social engagement in children, to which many authors are inclined (Vasta et al., 1998, Gonzales - Mena, 2008, Jackman, 2012 and many others) is: observation (a child observes other children while playing), independent playing (a child is playing independently of other children), comparative playing (a child is playing next to other children with different materials, but without direct interaction), linked playing (a child plays with other children, but without any existence of a joint cause) and finally, cooperative playing (a child is playing in a group that was created because of a joint cause, therefore the actions of different members are harmonized).

Naturally, a child's (children's) level of involvement whilst playing can vary, which depends on many different factors, one of which is usually the children's age.

Overall, the results of our research indicate that in an institution of early development there is a whole series of other factors that determine the engagement level of children in play and other activities much more than their age. A high engagement level of a child in various social interactions is especially visible in institutions that have succeeded to develop such a high quality social atmosphere, which allows for regular interaction of children of different ages (more about the subject in Ljubetić, 2012). Such forms of socializing accelerate the social development of children, allowing them to acquire various social experiences, unlike when their social interactions are made entirely with other children of their own age. In that sense, we hold that the level and the quality of children's social engagement in play is in high (maybe even crucial) measure determined by the institution that they attend - it can be equally stimulating as a restrictive one in the sense of encouragement and enabling children's social interactions, as well as acquisition of social experiences and competencies.

Conclusion

Playing, as a basic preschool child's activity strongly influences different aspects of his or her development, therefore it should be represented as the integral part of an educational process in an institution of early development. Affirmation and practical realization of "free play pedagogy", as well as formation of curriculums in which playing takes a central place, forms creativity in the relationship between children and

adults based on collective listening, acknowledging and reciprocal communication. The role of an educator in play can contribute to its development and quality if it does not threaten basic features of play as a self-organized and intrinsically motivated child activity. It is of critical importance to carefully observe children and to decode their logic in a "play" based situation, which serves as the basics of an educator's assessment on whether he or she should interfere and engage in playing, how and with what goal. The quality of playing is affected by many organizational preset conditions of an institution of early education, which are based on ensuring adequate spatial and material conditions, creating an above all positive environment, strengthening cooperation between children, ensuring enough continual time for playing and careful listening and observation of children during play.

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Igra i njezin pedagoški potencijal u ustanovi ranog odgoja

Sažetak

U odgoju i obrazovanju djeteta rane dobi igra ima neprocjenjivu ulogu. Ona predstavlja «zonu sljedećeg razvoja» djeteta i mogući prijelaz u višu fazu njegova kognitivnog i socijalnog razvoja pa je u ustanovi ranog odgoja valja shvaćati kao integralni dio odgojno-obrazovnog procesa. To implicira osiguranje adekvatnih uvjeta za igru i razvoj iskustava igranja, što uključuje kreiranje sigurnog mjesta i pozitivog ozračja za igru, ponudu „otvorenih" materijala primjerenih različitim razvojnim razinama djece, uvažavanje i osnaživanje individualnih značajki i specifičnih mogućnosti djece, osiguravanje dovoljno neprekinutog vremena, iskazivanje iskrenog interesa za aktivnosti i postignuća djece, osnaživanje suradnje među djecom, osiguravanje dovoljno vremena za samoorganizaciju aktivnosti i osiguravanja vremena za pažljivo slušanje i promatranje djece u igri. Vrste igara, njihovu složenost i odgojno-obrazovnu vrijednost moguće je razmatrati iz različitih perspektiva, tj. sagledavati u okviru različitih teorijskih pristupa. U ovom radu igra će se razmatrati iz dvije okvirne perspetive, spoznajne i socijalne. Raspravljat će se o preduvjetima u ustanovi ranog odgoja potrebnim za njezino nesmetano odvijanje i njezin pedagoški potencijal.

Ključne riječi: *dijete; odgajatelj; pedagogija slobodne igre; promatranje; učenje.*