

Symbolic Play of Children at an Early Age

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Abstract

This paper aims to approach the development of symbolic play of children of early age and its impact on their overall development from developmental, psychological, ecological, cultural, pedagogical and methodological points of view. Emphasis is placed on the development of this specific, holistic, immanent activity, important from the very beginning of its appearance and by analysing the theories of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky. In symbolic play a child gradually masters the symbolic representation of the world as a self-conscious, self-initiated, self-organized and active subject by mentally modifying experiences from its reality and is therefore considered by scientists to be a forerunner of abstract thinking. Furthermore, the paper briefly presents the contribution of the theory of mind to clarifying symbolic play and its complexity already at the early stages of a child's development. The second part deals with the pedagogical and methodological fundamentals important for the emergence and development of symbolic play in an institutional context. By emphasizing sensitivity and the importance of educator's role in a play and in creating the conditions for its functioning one comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to study the play from a child's perspective and to take into consideration the implications it may have on the professional development of teachers/educators, on the quality of educational practice and the development of the early childhood pedagogy.

Key words: *child at an early age; child's play; educator; institution of early education; symbolic representation.*

Introduction

All you need to know about children for children - you learn best from them!

Loris Malaguzzi

Symbolic play is a crucial feature of a child's cognitive and social development and the best tool for understanding the world in which he/she lives (Piaget 1963, Vygotsky

1977, Bruner 2000). A play is to a child the same as work to adults, a leading activity that combines ideas, feelings and relationships with the development of increasing competence and control and also enables experiencing itself as a strong self.¹ “There is no such activity, except for the play, which encompasses as many functions as if light was refracting through the prism, in which various options are tried out spontaneously, voluntarily, autotelic, and without a sense of failure.” (Duran et al., 1988, p.21).²

This is possible for a child because of the features that characterize a symbolic play, such as: intrinsic motivation, flexibility, connectivity with positive emotions, possibility to abreact negative experiences from life and focus on the process, rather than on the result of the activity. In a symbolic play a child solves problems in an individual and specific way, without fear of failure, and in the process it also applies and varies different types of behaviour and puts them in new and unusual contexts in which it uses familiar patterns and evaluates them, changes them and copes with them accordingly. How significant a symbolic play is for the development of a human being is perhaps best illustrated by the Root-Bernstein’s study (2001) conducted among particularly creative people - people geniuses such as the Nobel Prize and the MacArthur Foundation award winners. This study showed that symbolic play occurred much more often in early childhood at people – geniuses than at the controlled group of participants in the same field, which indicates the importance of the play for human development.

Study of a symbolic play can be approached from different perspectives, such as: developmental, psychoanalytic, behavioural, environmental, cultural, anthropological, phenomenological, etc., but in this paper the play will be approached from the developmental and eco-cultural perspective.

Development of Symbolic Play and the Child’s Development

From the developmental point of view play is essential for a child because it contributes to his/her cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. In a symbolic play different mental processes are developed: first the symbolic function, then thinking, memory, imagination, speech, creativity and all other cognitive functions. In the contents of symbolic play a child reflects different social situations such as family relationships, shopping, working people, etc. in a creative way, which contributes to the adoption of gender roles, learning the rules, socialization, mastering the culture which the child belongs to, and the creation of children’s culture,

¹ Fogel (1993, according to Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide 2009) developed a theory of *the dialogue self* – the one that results from communication. This self appears in the earliest pre-symbolic period, i.e. before G.H.Mead and other followers of the classical theory of socialization spoke of the appearance of any other self. According to Fogel, a baby is already a social and communicative being. Self is a continuous result of a communicative process in verbal and non-verbal dialogue among people and so is its “position” located more among people than within the individual.

² The quotes in this article originally written in Croatian are translations made for the purpose of this paper, unless otherwise indicated.

understanding and adoption of some higher emotions, overcoming egocentrism, moving away from the present situation, etc. Many researchers have tried to give their definitions to play by using various terms: imaginary or imaginative play, play of fiction, illusionary play, role play, and dramatization play, *as if* play, etc. (Šagud, 2002). That is probably why Kaufman, Singer and Singer (2012) define a symbolic play as performing stories that involve multilateral perspectives and manipulate ideas and emotions through play. Vasta, Haith and Miller (1998, p. 270) indicate a symbolic play as the only human behaviour that integrates and balances all aspects of functioning, and is established through the ability of symbolic function, i.e. the ability to use some things (mental images, words) as symbols for perception of something else. Development of symbolic play is motivated by hidden cognitive changes and capacity of a child to manipulate symbols and representations in a specific ecological and cultural context (Bloch & Pellegrini, 1989, according to Sommer et al., 2009). Fawcett and Hay (2008) also define a symbolic play as the ability to represent the actual or imaginary experience through a combined use of objects, movements, actions and speech. However, mental representation cannot happen until the child has gone through the process of internalization i.e. until it comes to the separation of the external, physical plan (objects and actions) from its mental image - image on the inner, mental plan which requires maturation, and is preceded by the so-called affective and underlying communication (Ivić, 1978). The symbolic function is the general ability to acquire and use, that is to create characters (Ivić, 1978), which a child begins to acquire very early, already after understanding object permanence i.e. development of memory, after 12 months of age. The most recent research is presented in the book "The baby philosopher" by Alison Gopnik (2011) who states, "Babies are starting to act at the age of eighteen months, even earlier than that. Acting or pretending stands for a kind of counterfactual thinking in a current situation - imagining that things could be different" (Gopnik, 2011, p. 29) and continues: "Lately cognitive scientists have carefully studied what children know about fantasy and illusion. It turned out that two- and three-year-olds distinguish fantasy from reality very well" (Gopnik, 2011, p.32).

Developmentally speaking, symbolic play follows the practical, exploratory, manipulative and functional play. These plays do not have to be solely a study of physical properties of objects, although they usually are, but also a mental practice, for example, when a child constantly raises the question of why, not to get a response, but to practice the behaviour of asking questions, repeat vocalizations, etc. Piaget names this type of play a practical one and modern psychologists label it often as pre-symbolic, pre-representational because a child plays with objects and examines them without replacing an item or a gesture with some other item. But in these play, children develop schemes that will later be used and combined in symbolic play. "Schemes or mental patterns that were previously constructed by a child are modified and built as the child is trying to make sense of a new experience in the light of what it already knows" (Van Horn et al., 1993, p. 13).

The emergence of symbolic ability enables a child to create meaning in its mind in further development; therefore, it helps a child to separate itself from the concrete plan in a reality and use thought and speech, and to express these meanings through gestures, intonation, substitution of objects and words as arbitrary symbols. In this manner a symbolic play marks the beginning of representational thinking through the use of substitution of objects or actions (Ivić, 1978, Miljak, 1984, Duran, 1988, 2001, Rogers & Sawyers 1995, Šagud, 2002). It leads to separation of characters from the marked so the child behaves *as if* the object or behaviour was something else than it in reality is [Bretherton, 1984, according to Bancroft, Fawcett & Hay (Eds.), 2008]. And this substitution of something that appears to be or is apparent and specific with a mental plan marks a new ability – a mental representation, essential for abstract thinking. These symbolic representations become the basis for the symbolic play that is at an early stage of development a solitary activity a child performs on one's own and based on the previous experience gained from observing his/her surroundings. Initially, symbolic representations appear as literal, in a time delayed imitation of something already seen, and with the growth of experience and maturation a child begins to improve, modify and combine them. In a play of acting a child still does not overtake the whole role but only elements of an action. Actions in a play until the age of three are determined by situational circumstances under which playing activities are realized and in such a way that at first external objects determine the action, therefore encourage playing. Later actions are exempt from attachment to external appearance and are more determined through ideas and meaning. From logically unrelated, partial and individual actions in a play, in parallel with further development of the child, they become more complex and coherent with an imaginary temporal and spatial context of the play. Only at the age of three does a child integrate all the elements of an imaginary role in the play and is able to introduce it to other players.

Thus, according to Piaget, certain levels of a play appear in early child development (Piaget according to Rogers & Sawyers 1995, p. 19):

1. Degree is usually associated with the emergence of speech when a child enters the preoperative level of development and takes approximately up to four years. Then there are several types of symbolic play, namely:

Type 1A What a child has adopted on his/her own, he/she now applies on another, for example, a baby imagining feeding its big sister.

Type 1B Children borrow or imitate the pattern of actions of others: for example, an older baby imagines making a phone call. Meltzoff (1988), for example, claims that babies at the age of 9 months can mimic the action they saw 24 hours before, and at 14 months they may delay miming a seen gesture up to a week, which indicates that the deferred imitation is a root of symbolic play already in early sensory-motor period of development.

- Type 2 Children denote an object with the other one or their bodies with other people or things, such as a child between the ages of 13-19 months that imagines pouring a tea from a jug into a cup.
- Type 3 Children perform four types of symbolic combinations that are primarily affective, as follows:
- 3.1. Simple combinations: Children construct the scene in which the reality changes and create a new one - imaginary, adapted to them.
 - 3.2. Compensatory combinations: Children correct reality by bringing illegal actions in symbolic play in order to create a desired reality.
 - 3.3. Liquidation combinations: Children reconstruct unpleasant situations in a more desirable context in order to weaken them.
 - 3.4. Anticipatory symbolic combinations: Children invent a person that disobeys the order and therefore suffers the consequences.

Children in all four combinations of the third type of symbolic play, as described by Piaget, contribute to their emotional health, and development is facilitated through taking over a role and replacement of items and actions to change reality (Rogers & Sawyers, 1995, p. 19).

At an early age a child's progress in symbolic play is reflected in a more purposeful usage of toys, primarily as true replicas of reality, e.g. a child imagines feeding a doll, sweeping, etc., and makes use of toys very similar to real objects. Children aged between 19 and 24 months at first combine in symbolic play two toys in the imagining, then a few, such as a plate, a spoon and a sponge, they make sounds that accompany imagining a movement of cars, planes, or imagine actions as if they were someone or something else (Frost et al., 2012). When a child can mentally represent objects and engage in symbolic activities at the level of mental combinations, it gradually shows the ability to plan plays and is able to switch from one relationship to another: one to the imagined environment at the time of the play and one that is simultaneously real.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing interest in the historical-cultural theory of Vygotsky, which was reaffirmed by Bruner, leads to a shift in the theory of constructivism and increasingly highlights the social and cultural nature of learning, which is reflected in the understanding of the play.

While Piaget saw a child as an egocentric "lone scientist" who, through interaction with the physical environment, gradually creates a mental image of the world, Vygotsky set the child and the play in a social, cultural context, seeing it as a significant role in the development of a child's mental functions, especially thinking. He maintained that symbolic play was of the social nature in its origin and content and that it occurred as a result of the wishes and unfulfilled needs of children during early childhood, stating: "It seems to me that if there were not any currently unrealized requirements at the preschool age, there would not be any play" (Vygotsky, 1966, according to Duran et al.,

1995, p. 29). But he emphasized that symbolic play was not created as a result of any unfulfilled desires and needs, but primarily from the desire of children to be included in the adult world. And for these reasons it is important to consider emotional factors and motives that lead to symbolic play. He believed that all children's activities (e.g. manipulative, functional, exploratory play) could not be called a play, but only those activities that meet the following three features:

- children create an imaginary situation,
- they assume the role and act in accordance with it and,
- they follow certain rules that are specific for the assumed role, even though they are not set in advance and a child follows them voluntarily.

Each of these three components of symbolic play acquires an important role in the formation of a child's thinking, particularly in the development of abstract thinking as it encourages a child's ability to act on the inner, mental level and engage in deliberate, wilful behaviour in a play at the outer level, argued Vygotsky (Cole, 1978, Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Vygotsky's view of a play as an important mechanism in the development of a child and the source of the development of higher mental functions through mediation, intention and internalized mental processes is based on his settings on the role of social interaction and communication in mental development. Since inter-subjectivity is primarily a social process, the origin of knowledge is social, the role of adults and more advanced peers in the development of advanced symbolic play as a transitional stage to higher and more complex thought abilities becomes particularly evident. Namely, Vygotsky argued that "all higher mental functions have their origin in the current relations between individuals" (Vygotski, 1978, p. 57, Miljak, 1984), meaning that they appear twice, they take place at two levels: inter-subjective (social level) and intra-subjective (individual level). "Interpersonal processes are transformed into intrapersonal" (Vygotski, 1978, p. 57, Miljak, 1984). Since inter-subjectivity primarily stands for a social process and the origin of knowledge is social, the role of adults and more advanced peers in the development of symbolic play as a transitional stage to higher and more complex thinking abilities is particularly evident. Social experiences of a child shape its ways of thinking and interpreting the world with speech as the most abstract, arbitrary code that plays a crucial role and is used for representation of experience. That is why it is argued that speech is inseparable from thinking at an early age, which is at the factual point most prominent in the so-called baby's self-talk that a child in its actions in the play time, along with other mental representations uses to interpret experience. "A child talks to itself as if thinking aloud" (Vygotsky, 1977, p. 67).

But speech is also used for the development of higher mental activities that a child must develop together (socially) in interaction with others, by constructing and transferring through dialogue. In these interactions a child explores communicative conventions, social skills and representational abilities, and all those skills are simultaneously contained in symbolic play. And here we come to another important

Vygotsky's theoretical concept, the one on the areas of development. Namely, Vygotsky noted the current and proximal zone of development. In the current zone a child acts in accordance with the currently achieved level of development, and this is what it can do on its own at a certain level of development. Proximal (future) development zone refers to those tasks that a child cannot yet do on his/her own, but performs them with the help of adults or more advanced peers. While children are engaged in a cooperative dialogue with more mature partners they internalize the language of these interactions and use them to organize their own independent efforts in the same way. According to sociocultural theory, a supportive management of an adult that creates a support (scaffold) to children's learning is essential to their cognitive development. This communication is sensitively adapted to a child's present stage of development by offering the necessary assistance and encouraging him/her to take more responsibility for the task when his/her abilities increase (Berk, 1994).

Due to these settings a symbolic play promotes the development of internalized representations by which a child appears to be more in line with internal ideas than with external reality, in other words, it acts independently of what it sees (Vygotsky 1933/1967, p. 11 according to Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). Furthermore, the role-play in an imaginary scenario requires that the child simultaneously conducts two types of actions: external (with objects and actions-substitutes) and internal (as operations of meaning). Internal operations in symbolic play are quite dependent on external operations with objects because a child cannot be easily and immediately disconnected from the concrete plan (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Cole et al., 1978; Duran, 1988; Ivić, 1978; Vygotsky, 1977). However, the incidence of internal actions shows the start of the transmission of the earlier forms of thinking (sensory-motor and visual-representational) to more advanced, more abstract thinking. (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2009). Therefore, Vygotsky saw a symbolic play as an excellent tool, a highly motivated shape and adaptive mechanism to encourage cognitive development in early childhood, especially for the development of reflective thinking as well as for self-regulation and socially cooperative behaviour. And that is why a child can reach in a symbolic play what in reality it cannot yet. A famous Vygotsky's slogan in connection with this is that a child in a play is a head taller than he/she really is.

For Bruner a symbolic representation is also significant for cognitive development within the systems: action, iconic and symbolic, and symbolic play is considered a kind of transition from the action in the iconic and symbolic system. Special importance is given to speech stating that the possibility of coding stimulates and liberates the individual from attachment to act only on the factual point of view, and is supplied with a more sophisticated and flexible cognition. In symbolic play Bruner sees a medium for free trial and combining behaviour and application of skills that a child would not express under other circumstances. For these reasons, he sees in a play the strength for the development of tools and strategies to solve problems. According to

him a play is a social phenomenon and an integral part of human culture, a type of communication system and behaviours that allow the exchange of messages.

“Making sense is a social process, it is an activity, which is always located within the cultural and historical context. (...) if a child is placed in a shared social context, it seems more competent as an intelligent social operator, than as a ‘lone scientist’”, when it deals with the world of the unknown (Bruner & Haste, 1987, p. 1). Thus, Bruner reaffirms Vygotsky’s theory which enriches Piaget’s constructivism with the emphasis on the importance of the social dimension in the development of a human being, and therefore adds a significant role of culture in human development.

Theory of Mind Helps Understanding in a Play

The theory of mind, developed in the 80s and 90s by developmental psychologists, contributes to clarifying child’s abilities that are needed in a play and are developed in it. Researchers found that understanding desires, beliefs and intentions of others is of crucial importance for the initiation and progress of symbolic play. To be spontaneous and reciprocal is an important element for inclusion in the play with others and requires a complex understanding of their own mental state and the state of co-players. In this way the theory of mind becomes a primary communication tool in the lives of children, but it is not less important in adult life.

Children’s ability to connect the mental world like wishes and beliefs and understand them in themselves and others allows them to act as mental agents. Symbolic play, especially at an early age, does not begin with direct calls, for example *let’s play*, but children transmit relevant implicit signs in the context using meta-communicative language like gestures, specific body posture, persistent looking at another child, etc. Garvey (1974, according to Sommer, Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2009) defined the play meta-communication as regulatory actions that children show during the play in order to maintain it, negotiate in it and direct it. Negotiation is especially important because the success of the intended interaction depends on synchronizing different wishes of children that are trying to find balance in the play. It is interesting to note that, regardless of the already mentioned study, Mira Stambak came to similar results that were based on her observations while studying and at the same time participating in the prosocial relationships of children in a younger nursery group in Paris in the 1980s.

By repeating opposition and the need to fulfil different desires in the context of creating an imaginary, playing scenarios, foundations are set for the understanding of the opinions of others. Intensive detection of imagining which acquires adapting to wishes and concepts of another person or harmonizing with our own imagining contributes to the understanding that others see the world differently.

Lilard (2000, according to Sommer, Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2009, p. 18) states that the act of imagining includes:

- (1) the one who imagines,
- (2) a reality on which one imagines and which is generally different from what is imagined,

- (3) imagining is guided by mental representations,
- (4) imagining must be projected to reality,
- (5) the one who imagines must be aware of the actual situation and the one that is no longer actual, i.e. represented, and
- (6) he must design representation intentionally.

The same author has proposed further qualitative research of imagination in children of an early age in order to better examine children's understanding of mental states in negotiations and interaction with peers.

Thanks to the power of mental representations children as thinkers carry out an inter-subjective exchange in a play, trying to understand each other reciprocally. What is evident in this process are actions, and what remains invisible is the inner sense that children give to actions and how they understand and reflect them. So one child participates in the activities of another, contributes with its actions, as well and synchronizes with a peer. An action of one child starts an action and upgrading of activities of another child and in this way runs the play development process. In the course of the play information that children exchange with each other (at an early age often through actions) are subject to transformation, depending on desires, needs, ideas and emotions that are communicated. This interaction represents the beginning of self-regulation because children participants in interaction influence each other and create and adhere to internal rules, mutually determining and regulating behaviour. The higher the degree of interaction in their relation and the better they know each other and play together, the more successful their negotiation and adjustments in communication is. Also, by exchanging information with another child, communication in a play becomes the means by which a child influences its thoughts and behaviours, changes them, adapts and improves them. As such, communication becomes a means of interaction and influence of children during play.

A Child, Peers and Educators in Symbolic Play

An increasing proportion of children of early age spend most of the day in an institutionalized context in the institutions for early education while their parents work. Everyday life together in a natural way leads to social interactions with educators and other staff of the institution as well as with each other. These experiences help them show themselves to others and to internalize others, develop friendships and gradually create their own children's culture within educational groups and institutions. Scientists who have studied social interactions among the youngest children have concluded that continuity of residence and frequency of contact with other, well-known children have a positive effect on the socio-emotional and intellectual development, including the emergence and development of symbolic play. Parents whose children attend an institution of early education have the same opinion.

Already in the second half of the school year in the youngest group of children in the institution of early education a solitary symbolic play in which children reconstruct

and represent situations with most experience from the real world can be seen. So a child sets scenes like going for a walk, eating, sleeping, driving, etc. Of course, this does not apply to all children, and especially not those in the period of adjustment to the new institutional environment, when a child only studies the condition it was put into and gradually builds confidence in this environment. Symbolic representations are an integral part of the educational process of the youngest children, and as such can be seen in the educational groups dominated by warm socio-emotional climate with a permanent educator, the atmosphere of peace, relaxation and freedom, good spatial and material organization and appropriate timing of daily activities. The child will be playing on the condition that his/her other needs are met. Better relationships between educators and children will create an atmosphere for successful communication, which will, in turn, affect the improvement of relations between the children. Atmosphere permeated with mutual trust, in which every individual feels the security and freedom to express their thoughts and feelings, and in which collaborative relationships are established, will be motivating for communication, and then for the play as well. In contrast, an atmosphere of anxiety, distrust, in which group members are afraid to express their thoughts and feelings and are afraid of condemnation and disapproval, is very demotivating, blocking successful communication and mutual play.

Eventually, close friendly relations allow children to develop more inter-subjectivity and mutual understanding of desires, thoughts and intentions through joint long-term experience in a positive environment. And these experiences of collaborative activities are required in symbolic play because they imply the construction of common meanings by emphasizing the necessary coordination between the participants. In this respect, Corsaro (1985, according to Sommer et al., 2009) states that children reflect their perception of the world in a play within the peer culture in which they depend on reciprocal peer activities and mutual understanding of their desires, beliefs and intentions of other children.

At an early age in play of pretending it is the object that encourages the child to act, and not vice versa, so the equipment in the centres in which children can play independently is of major importance (for example, when a child sees a spoon it encourages it to feed dolls). In the third year of life, children play parallel to each other and reflect a number of related symbolic actions in various centres of activity - from the family-drama to the "master" activities, provided that their teachers supplement and change the necessary props in order to help them represent these activities. Playes last longer because a child has more experience in his/her surroundings, and starts to cooperate with other children more successfully. In this period of life children love to dress up in various costumes, which further motivates them to symbolize certain actions, use speech and exchange with other children. All this will lead to taking a role in a play at a later stage of development. Children use objects in different ways, and it is significant that the same item at a different time can have different meanings. From the age of three (on average) a child achieves a new stage in the development of

the play – it appoints a role and acts symbolically in accordance with its features and there also appears the division of functions among teammates. A child follows the real sequence of activities in a play as it has experienced it. At this age children often step out of the role in order to agree on further sequence of activities or perhaps on a new role. In this developmental stage in their play with peers, children aged 3-4, along with a simple play scenario, show initial capability of the so-called meta-play or meta-level of a play (Duran, 1988, 2001, Edwards, Gandini & Forman (Eds.), 1998, Sommer et al., 2009). It is a child's ability to distinguish between effects on the imaginary, play plan and cooperation with another child outside a play framework in order to organize and arrange the play. At the age of four, a child starts to plan activities using speech, and the execution of the action is followed by speech. This phenomenon of verbal presentation of thoughts will be, as well as symbolic play, kept up to the age of 6 or 7, when it will be internalized and will take place only at the level of thinking.

An organization that provides common socializing and play of children of different ages is a part of socio-educational conditions of the institutional context, with supportive teachers who respect, feel and understand a child and who know how to observe and listen, as well as set the scene for play (toys, space, stimulating environment and uninterrupted time). In the field of symbolic play this means that older children not only offer a more complex model of the play in which a younger child will be involved mentally (not directly) as an active observer, but can also be sensitive to other needs of younger children. Thus, as more experienced players they will quickly understand the wishes and intentions of younger children in a play and will help with guided participation in coordinating the play and/or offer to direct the focus to a better mutual understanding of the play. Furthermore, imagining someone or something else in the play places great demands and challenges on younger children. They do not find it easy to simulate thoughts, actions and emotions of another and at the same time coordinate with an imaginary scenario of the peer (Duran, 1988, Sommer et al., 2009), and their associating with older children can significantly help in that respect.

The central figure in the facilitating or disabling children's symbolic play is the identity of a teacher or educator in all his or her professional and personal dimensions. He/she orchestrates the children's group life and it is therefore of great importance whether he/she respects the children, observes with interest, listens, understands and appropriately responds to the socio-emotional and mental world of a child, or simply does his/her job routinely without documenting and reflecting on what is going on among children and between the educator and the children, i.e. whether the educator conducts the children's play or subtly encourages it.

It is of great importance that professionals work with children at an early age without fear that their presence will disrupt the play or terminate it, when children are sensitive to all kinds of influences from the environment. It is important that a child feels free, accepted and loved in a play, and has adequate conditions to be able

to play a lot and for a longer period at its own pace. Educators should “strive at all times to interpret gestures, words, and actions of children in order to recognize what they feel through actual experience and move from that”, as suggested by Giudici and Rinaldi (2001, p. 188). A mentally absent educator cannot effectively gain insight into the process of the play and provide children with the necessary information, support or assistance in time. Some previous studies of the role of educators in a child’s play showed that teachers rarely engage in play with children. Therefore, Wood, MacMahon and Oranstouna (1980, according to Šagud, 2002, p. 65) propose four options that educators may use during a play, as follows:

- Parallel teammate - educator is not in direct contact with children in the play, but only shows how to use the assets.
- Teammate – he/she plays or imagines situations with children, and indirectly determines the course of playing with mutual verification of the course of the play.
- Tutor - teaches and directly determines the direction of the play with a dominant role.
- Representative of reality - teaches and directs children to realistically reconstruct the reality of the play.

While the first two options support the development of the play because the educator establishes congruent interaction with children in order to encourage them and the flow of the play, this cannot be said for the other two proposed options of educator’s intervention in the play. And that is the reason that rough engagement of an adult usually leads to suffocation and even disappearance of a play. However, this does not mean that an adult is not needed in the play, but that the role of an adult should remain subtle. The Oxford study, for example, showed that children prefer to be included in the play when it involves teachers, but that the mere presence of teachers does not always mean a higher level of play (Šagud, 2002). Guided participation of teachers in a play or complete indifference to it are two sides of the same coin. Indifference of adults, rare interaction with the children, lack of common plays, lack of acceptance and encouragement of children’s spontaneous symbolic play are just some of the reasons that have a negative impact on the play, and thus the overall child development.

Educators who are not included or are insufficiently involved in children’s play, or engage in a way that controls or corrects the play, reduce child motivation and desire for a play and lead to its termination. Imposition of educator’s ideas and especially frequent asking questions in a spontaneous symbolic play, can interfere with a child’s play time script, suffocate it and even lead to an end. This happens because most adults do not know how to play like children. Even when they try to engage in the best way, they still remain outside the play framework.

However, there are many varieties of desirable behaviour of educators when it comes to children’s symbolic play. For example, sometimes the educator can offer a new appropriate centre of activities for symbolic play or innovate existing centres with attractive and diverse materials. The educator can provide children with new

experiences and ideas that will continue to serve in the processing of the play, or can cautiously lead children to a higher level of cognitive functioning during the play. Sometimes he or she can just play on their own in front of the youngest children. It is important to accept the imaginary situation initiated by the child as a partner in the play, or to show sincere interest in activities, socializing and children's discoveries during the play in a non-direct manner, but by being fully interested at the same time. It is difficult to predict in advance which procedures will be applied by the educator and when, because it depends on a variety of contextual situations, assessment and creativity of certain teachers, but it should be noted that it is important that the educator observes and records the behaviour of children while playing. Subsequent reflection and dialogue with their peers on the resulting pedagogical documentation can help understand children in symbolic play better, to study and understand the ways in which children learn, understand and interpret the world, to notice their potentially incongruent interference in the play and gradually develop a more subtle approach to the play. Documentation is a tool that helps to make the process of children's learning in symbolic play visible and divisible, but also makes evident the unpredictability and complexity of the play process and the role of educators in it (Giudici & Rinaldi, 2001). Therefore, one of the primary tasks of educators participating in the children's play through its documentation and reflection should be "learning modes of play" for the sake of gradual lifelong learning and professional development in the function of a better understanding of children and making sense of the world through symbolic representation in a way the children see it. In other words, the educator should approach the play from a child's perspective not to abuse it for their teaching goals but to study and continue to subtly evolve it. The study of symbolic play and other children's activities allows a preschool teacher to understand a child better as a self-initiating, active and self-conscious entity that needs to be respected.

Conclusion

From the above review of the development of symbolic play of children at an early age and its importance for the development of a child, it can be concluded that it is a specific activity immanent to a child, with the help of which a child develops as a whole person in all areas of development. Development of symbolic play is motivated by hidden cognitive changes and capacity of a child to manipulate symbols and representations in a specific ecological and cultural context (Bloch & Pellegrini, 1989, according to Sommer et al., 2009). Due to these settings a symbolic play promotes the development of internalized representations by which a child appears to be more in line with internal ideas than with external reality, in other words, it acts independently of what it sees. These internal operations are at an early age quite dependant on external operations with objects, because a child cannot be easily and immediately disconnected from a concrete plan and therefore searches

for support in substitution of objects and actions. However, the incidence of internal actions through characters indicates a start of the shift from earlier forms of thinking (sensory-motor and visual-representational) to more advanced, abstract thinking. Therefore, developmental psychologists see great potential in symbolic play, especially for intellectual development, and consider it as a forerunner of abstract thinking. Piaget saw a play as a form of immature thinking, Vygotsky as the essence of mental development, as well as Bruner who also added a cultural dimension. Contemporary scientists believe that learning and development are inseparable from symbolic play because a child tries to make sense of his/her experiences and create personal meaning. That is why they try to study the play from the perspective of children as active participants in constructing their own lives and build a new pedagogy based on it, called by some of the most modern authors the development education/pedagogy.

The theory of mind, developed during the 1980s by developmental psychologists, also contributes to understanding the origin and development of symbolic play, especially in the part of mutual alignment of children in the play, because in order to conduct and implement the play with others, a complex understanding of the player's own and teammate's mental state is required. In this way the theory of mind becomes a primary communication tool, not only in the lives of children, but also because the adults as well want to understand the play and participate in it congruently so they should have access to the reciprocal process of imagining and adaptation of children in the facilitation of a joint play scenario.

Highlighting the development of symbolic play and its effects on the holistic development of a child at an early age can have significant pedagogical implications on educational practice by directing teachers to carefully watch, listen to, document and reflect on children's symbolic play. This should help them understand it better and comprehend it through the child's perspective in order to gradually create optimal conditions in their professional development and apply appropriate methodological procedures for its encouragement, promotion and child development by changing their image of a child and its possibilities.

Some authors suggest that in recent years a child spends less time in a play for various reasons and mostly due to a hectic lifestyle, changes in family structure, the growing orientation towards academic achievements, the impact of modern technology, etc. Due to that, as well as the unbeatable value of play for a child's development and education, this work should be seen, among other things, as a kind of appeal to cautious approach and fostering symbolic play in contemporary childhood.

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Simbolička igra djece rane dobi

Sažetak

U radu se razvoju simboličke igre i njezinu utjecaju na cjelokupni razvoj djece rane dobi prilazi s razvojno-psihološkog, ekološko-kulturnog i pedagoško-metodičkog motrišta. Naglasak je na razvoju te specifične, holističke i djetetu imanentne i glavne aktivnosti od početka njezine pojave i to raščlambom Piagetove, Vigotskijeve i Brunerove teorije. U simboličkoj igri, mentalno prerađujući iskustva iz stvarnosti, dijete kao samosvjesni, samoinicirani, samoorganizirani i aktivni subjekt postupno ovladava simboličkom reprezentacijom svijeta, pa je znanstvenici smatraju pretečom apstraktnog mišljenja. U radu je ukratko izložen doprinos teorije uma rasvjetljavanju simboličke igre i njezine složenosti već na ranom stupnju djetetova razvoja. U drugom dijelu rada obrađuju se pedagoško-metodičke osnove važne za pojavu i razvoj simboličke igre u institucijskome kontekstu. Apostrofirajući osjetljivost odgojiteljeve uloge u igri i stvaranju uvjeta za njezino odvijanje, zaključuje se o potrebi proučavanja igre iz dječje perspektive i implikacijama koje ono može imati na profesionalni razvoj odgojitelja, kvalitetu odgojne prakse i razvoj pedagogije ranog djetinjstva.

Ključne riječi: *dijete rane dobi; dječja igra; odgojitelj; simbolička reprezentacija; ustanova ranog odgoja i obrazovanja.*