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## Play from the Perspective of Future Pedagogues' Childhood and Adulthood

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### Abstract

This paper presents contemporary views of play and results from a research on play from the perspective of childhood and adulthood. Research results indicate that play from the perspective of childhood is a voluntary, free and fun activity with friends and peers outside of adult pressure and limitations, and play from the perspective of adulthood is, above all, an educational tool. Observed differences confirm the existence of the phenomenon of 'social arrangement'. One of the possible explanations of the view of play as an educational tool could be an awareness of the power of social structure and its influences on individuals' behaviour. Social conformity as a dominant ideal of educational institutions opposes the understanding of play from the childhood perspective.

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### 1. Introduction

Play has been a long-term topic of discussions and research with the intention to determine play, its characteristics, purposes, practices and roles in ontogenetic human development.

Contemporary play discourses are increasingly focused on play as a multidimensional social and cultural phenomenon and as a significant factor of learning and development. Plurality of perspectives is manifested in specific conceptualizations, interpretations of play. They are, above all, visible in viewing play as a basic, leading childhood activity [1] and “authentic characteristic of children” [2] and childhood characteristic, play as a developmental factor [3, 4,5] and play as an educational tool [6].

I think it is important to point out the contradictions in the views, interpretations of play: from advocating to refuting, with simultaneous compromise. For example, on the one hand, claims about play as a free, intrinsically motivated, expressive, self-purposeful, divergent and processual activity are connected with contradictory claims

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about play as a guided, purposeful, rule-regulated and product-oriented activity. Van Gils [2] thinks there is a possibility of balancing between opposing views of play: play as an authentic characteristic of children, offering them tools for personal development and play as a pedagogical tool of education adapted to children.

Does this mean a balance, in the sense of a compromise, i.e. the middle path, simultaneously accepting the dominant politics concerning children and childhood? If play is, above all, an instrument for the production of 'adulthood', than childhood and the essence of play in children's lives are marginalized. Marginalization of children and play in the sense of their separation and exclusion from the real adult world [7]. In childhood pedagogies, this positions play as an important means of maintaining power relations between childhood and adulthood [8, 9].

Personal research of adult (parents and preschool teachers)–child interaction in play and learning, teaching [10, 11] and research of childhood reality in kindergartens [12, 13] confirmed assumptions about adults' orientation towards social conformity, regulatory function of play and play as a means of "producing" adulthood. Adults' instrumental interests in child play could be explained by their view of childhood as a "project of adults". The traditional interpretation of children as "passive products" of socialization, development, education [14] means advocating a model of education based on stereotypes of childhood in the adult culture. Contemporary considerations of childhood (sociological, psychological and pedagogical) in conditions of early institutionalization are focused on a sociocultural positioning of children and childhood and the interpretative paradigm in researching different perspectives (perspectives of the child/children, perspectives of adults: parents and educational professionals, perspectives of children's institutions – from global to local levels)...

In relation to child play, this means cognition of what it is in children's life contexts: is it a separate world in which reality is simulated or is it a constituent part of everyday life activities? Furthermore, what is play from the perspectives of children, childhood, and what from the perspectives of adults, adulthood? In research that start from play as a constituent part of children's life activities, children and adults are approached as equivalent social participants while being aware of the limitations conditioned by the social structure, or regulation of children–adult social relations.

## 2. Interpretative approach to play research

Viewing children as participants in the construction of their own childhood and in the production of the adult world [14], or children as social actors who construct their everyday life and the world around them [15] influenced a shift of focus in childhood research from the perspective of adults – "top-down" to the perspective of children – "bottom-up" [16] and on research methodology: from quantitative to qualitative, interpretative methodology. The interpretative research approach acknowledges the construction of meaning, meaning making in sociocultural frameworks. Sense and meaning are socially constructed and, as such, a basis for creating the social world and the "dynamic" meaning system.

Childhood and play are viewed as a sociocultural reality, which is important to understand in different contexts, on different levels, from different perspectives and different conceptual frameworks. Understanding in the sense of discovering the meaning of specific activities, or participants' actions from their multiple perspectives.

Epistemological openness and methodological pluralism are basic characteristics of ethnographic research [17] or researching from the interpretative perspective. Understanding social interactions and meaning making is emphasized and that is one of the assumptions of a more holistic understanding of developmental, social and cultural processes, which emerge in different institutional contexts of children's and adults' growing up and living. In play research, this means focusing on understanding the meanings of internalized personal and social play experiences. "...[T]he selection and expression of ideas and concepts and how they are re-constructed is determined by an author's values, background, and available resources." [18].

For this paper I have chosen a method of reminiscence, i. e. memory, which can be found in literature under the following names "life story", "autobiography", "autobiographical memory" [19], "autobiographical narrations", "personal philosophy of life" "memories". Here, I am talking about a method used in research of life

world (Lebenswelt) [20], i. e., the life of an individual in retrospective. As a kind of a “historical approach”, it is applicable in research focused at understanding the present through an individual’s past in specific situational contexts. According to Fivush and Haden [19] reminiscence or talking about the past is a critical part of autobiographic memories. The primary function of remembrance is social representation: talking about a personal past to others in order to emphasize events that are meaningful for those who are involved, and also to illustrate personal characteristics [19].

In life stories, autobiographical facts are subjected to selective choice and interpretation, in order to design one’s own life and communicate with others. McAdams [21] views a personal life story, that is “evolving and dynamic”, as “a key component of what constitutes the individuality of that particular person, situated in a particular family and among particular friends and acquaintances, and living in a particular society at a particular historical moment” [21].

In accordance with this approach, childhood years are a “major life chapter”, in which play is one of the main events, and specific play events are specific events, or play episodes. Specific events encompass general play experiences in different social and physical contexts (type of play, participants and places of play), and play episodes encompass specific examples of play in personal memory (the most common, favourite play, participants, places)<sup>a</sup>.

Personal play research from the perspective of children, childhood showed similarities in the elaboration of play in current and former children: from a general view of play as very important in their childhood, to a specific elaboration of play experiences in the context with other children (in the family, neighbourhood, school: brothers, sisters, friends...) and in a familiar and safe physical environment (house, apartment, in front of the building, the streets, the playground...). In other words, *Current and “former” children identified play as, above all, a voluntary, free and fun activity, “reserved” for friends and peers, in a surrounding outside of pressure and adult limitations. Limitations in the sense of space, time, contents, participants and ways of playing being prescribed. Children think adult limitations and pressures are more common in schools that prioritize the realizations of educational goals. Play in school is in the function of direct learning and teaching, and therefore is not play* [11].

### 3. Research methodology

The stronghold for researching the “new” perspective about play is previous research on child-adult interaction in the context of play, learning and teaching. Knowledge about the interrelatedness of childhood experiences and professional educational experience, and knowledge about preschool teachers’ variability of behaviour in play in terms of balancing between being playful and didactic opens new questions: What is permanent, and what is changeable in personal play “theories”? How do childhood play experience and current professional education affect changes in personal “theories”? Changes in the sense of social adaptation (social conformity) and/or social consensus based upon negotiation and reaching agreement as assumptions of comprehension and autonomous choice and behaviour?

*The research aim* was to ascertain the basic characteristics of play in personal constructions – views of play from the perspective of childhood and adulthood. Or, understand the reality of play from the perspective of the past (childhood memories) and from the perspective of the future (projection of future professional activity). Reality as individuals see and interpret it (former children and current adults). Personal view as a designed, elaborated interpretation of the existing and becoming (past and future) in interaction with others and each other. Personal play meanings as a way of understanding personal activities, behaviours in various contexts.

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<sup>a</sup> A possible objection is why the rarest or unpopular play is not included. Previous research of childhood and play autobiographic memory showed that life stories, as a kind of “idealized” presentation of personal experience, exclude negative experiences, events. Even in situations when the story is thematically set, in the sense of expressing positive and negative experiences. Individual descriptions have characteristics of notes, without further elaboration, which diminishes the possibility of communicativeness, in the sense of sharing with others. If a story is a form of presenting and communicating the self with others, then the intentionality of the personal story could be understood – a positive self-representation, own positive experiences and repressing negative experiences as potential factors of “ruining” the personal image from the perspective of others.

*Methodology.* The theoretical frame of research is sociocultural theory of development and the interpretative approach. By accepting reflexivity as important in interpreting the importance of lived experiences, the “look back” procedure was used in order to ascertain how individuals make meanings and interpret the world of play. Sandberg’s research [22, 23, 24, 25] in which the retrospective method was used to describe and analyse play from the perspective of childhood pointed out the importance of autobiographical memory and the possibility of its research. Comparing personal research with the papers of the above stated authors and the theoretical elaboration of the autobiographical memory [19, 21], a more specific form of the retrospective method in researching play “then and now”. Instead of an interview, the topic of the story was given from the perspective of the past and future and an additional framework for elaborating the story was also given: a) a retrospective narration of what is play, which play was their favourite, who did they play most often with and where, what was play at home, and what at school, and about experiences of playing with adults (at home and in school); b) a perspective narration of how they see play from the position of their future profession – pedagogue (play in institutional contexts: kindergartens, schools etc.).

Within Contemporary childhood<sup>b</sup> classes I conducted a research on a sample of 35 pedagogy students (second year of graduate study), aged 23 in average.

The “life story research” procedure was used, and the topic was play in my childhood and in my future profession as a pedagogue. To process the information, i. e. life stories, the procedures within the ‘grounded theory’ methodology were used. After initial, axial and selective coding, categories were established, in the sense of complete meanings within episodes/units and subtitles of life stories. In order for the established categories to be valid and reliable, the procedure of an independent analysis of two researchers/assessors was used. Insight into the similarities and differences between the categories, meanings were “negotiated”. During the process of coding and determining categories, we used our experience from previous research about children’s view of play.

#### 4. Research results

##### 4.1. Play from the perspective of childhood

Data about what is play in life stories from a retrospective and future perspective were analysed according to the criteria: contents and purpose of play. Contents of play encompasses the emotional aspect of play (freedom, contentment, joy...), social aspect of play (fellowship, “competing”...), constructive aspect of play (various forms of material, linguistic, behavioural transformation). The criterion ‘purpose of play’ encompasses: expression (of emotion and power), education (learning and teaching to gain specific knowledge, skills) and development (encouraging development in the sense of student achievement in different areas).

Play from the perspective of childhood is fun and freedom. Fun placed in the context of activity and time with other children is determined by carefreeness, contentment, joy, happiness as an expression of positive emotions and as a purpose. Examples: “*When I was a child, I didn’t think about playing, I just knew what fun was for me and what I liked doing.*”; “*For me, play was the funniest part of the day, a time when I was dedicated only to myself, my desires and the desires of the people I played with. All activities that were not guided by adults, and included hanging out and having fun with peers were considered play by me.*”

Freedom in the sense of a way of spending time (free time, casualness, spontaneity), in choosing the location, participants and way of playing (possibility of choice, free expression, creation of own world). Examples: “*For me, play was any activity in which I was free, which I could design myself.*”; “*For me, play was a time when I*

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<sup>b</sup> Within Contemporary childhood, one of the topics was Contemporary approaches to childhood research. On a theoretical and practical level students considered possibilities of applying the specific procedures such as: a semi-structured interviews, focus groups, surveying, observation in kindergartens and schools and “a retrospective narration, i. e. retrospective interview about childhood in general and particular phases of childhood and their specific experiences in relation to the future. The students were both “researchers” and “examinees” simultaneously. Their experiences from both of the roles were continuously analysed in whole-group discussions and by verifying them in available published research about childhood and play.

*could spend time with my friends and toys without any duties or burdens.”; “I consider play to be free creation and designing of my own world in which I choose the participants and rules...”; “Play was my time, a time I could do what I wanted, be whatever I wanted and devote myself to myself and my friends. Through play I could escape duties in the family and school and easily satisfy my need for companionship, because I never liked to play alone.”*

This view of play is confirmed by findings of previous research according to which play from the perspective of children is a free and fun activity with friends and peers outside of adults' limitations.

#### *4.2. Play from the perspective of adulthood – future pedagogues*

Play from the perspective of future pedagogues is, above all, an educational tool in the sense of a method, means of learning, teaching and development (socialization, intellectual development, creativity, social skills, proper development, preparation for life...). Examples: *“I see play as an activity, which provides the opportunity for learning various life roles, as an opportunity for a child's socialization... Play is an opportunity to prepare the children for their future role in the adult world.”; “As a future pedagogue or teacher I see play as an activity in which children are free, carefree, through which they socialize and develop their identity. The importance of play is significant, and we, adults (pedagogues, teachers, parents) should encourage it and allow children to create their own world in play, in which we will be assistants, and not stumbling blocks.”; “From my professional point of view, I think play is as important for the child/student as it is for adults, because it is a process in which both participants should learn from each other and one about the other. Adults as bearers of knowledge and experience can and must through play know how to learn in a process that will be beneficial for the children. In this sense, play becomes a means of learning that children accept and participate in without coercion or feeling burdened or having to satisfy criteria/success. On the other hand, this should not be taken too far, because, if so, play, as a free and carefree activity could lose its purpose. From this viewpoint, adults should learn about children, listen to them and acknowledge their desires and abilities... ”.*

Freedom and fun appear individually and, primarily, as a supplement to learning and teaching. Students balance between their play experience from their childhood and future professional expectations.

The observed differences in the view of play from the perspective of childhood and adulthood confirm the existence of the phenomenon of „social arrangement“. One of the possible explanations of the view of play as an educational tool in the perspective of future pedagogues can be an awareness of the power of the social structure, it's possible and real influences and consequences on the behaviour of an individual. During schooling, the students gained experiences and constructed their views in different institutional contexts in which social regulation of behaviour is dominant. In the position of powerless, „future beings“ they could and can be successful if they attune their views with social expectations, demands.

## **5. Conclusion**

The research confirms earlier research findings about the interaction of the personal and social experience, meaning making and transformation of play and childhood worldviews. Social conformity as a dominant ideal of educational institutions contradicts the understanding of play from the perspective of childhood.

Insight into personal views is one of the possibilities of a higher level of understanding and demystification of relations between the official or dominant theories and personal/implicit, intuitive „theories“ and practices of play in different social, and especially educational contexts.

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