Teacher’s Readiness to Work with Children while Playing

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Abstract

The article deals with the problem of revealing qualities that define Russian teachers’ personal readiness to work with children while playing. This problem is topical for Russia and has not been studied well enough. The traditional stereotype of a Russian teacher was connected with strictness and exactingness. Child abuse (in the form of punishment, even physically) was unofficially considered to be a norm in family education. Isolated instances of child abuse in families and day-care centres may be observed even today. Pedagogical cooperation which was formerly recognized in the 1990s tended to scare off educators over violations of pedagogical ethics and tact, often bordering on familiarity and lack of professionalism.

The 2013 new pre-school education standard emphasizes the use of games as children’s leading activity type. It actualized teachers’ qualities such as self-consciousness, empathy, collaboration, etc. As a result of it, cognitive development of children began to take a backseat. Russian school standards and programs are not as unrestricted as those in day-care centres. That is why schools are unwilling as yet to meet day-care centres halfway, instead they set down their own requirements for pre-schools (including the level of children’s cognitive development) and the latter have to adapt to them. One of the forms of such adaptation is a didactic game. The research suggests that in day-care centres a game is played under a teacher’s strict control. Consequently, it loses its freedom and fails to provide self-actualization to either teacher or child. Moreover, there is a different perception of the game among representatives of different religions. For example, the population of the Volga region (Kazan) consists of Russians, Tatars, Chuvashes, Maris. These peoples’ religious and national self-identification is on the rise. Some of them fully approve of the games while others don’t.

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1. Introduction

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In 2013 a new pre-school education standard was approved in Russia (The 2013 Federal standard). Implementing the standard involves the use of games in the educational process. Emphasis on play activity as a leading type of activity was acknowledged in the Russian pre-school educational system way back in the 1920s and 30s with the publication of the works by L. Vygotsky [1]. However, it was not until much later that the practice of pre-school education from these positions acquired conceptual foundation.

L. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical concept became a methodological basis for defining play as a leading type of activity for pre-school children [1].

A game is acknowledged to be the leading type of child’s activity; it comprises a cultural code of child development [2]. In this way, the game can activate a change in a child’s activity, lead the child to the external (or collective) plane, speed up interiorization processes, activate intelligence and emotions. Different aspects of play and preparation for its conduct are described in the earlier published materials [3], [4], [5].

The need for a game in pre-school and school age was recognized by many 20th century Russian educational scientists [6], [7], [8], etc. However, in reality the unofficial norm was cruelty and child abuse. They existed in the form of various punishments both in the family and day-care centres. Adults could subject a child to physical punishment, lock him up in a room, etc. It was not until 2013 that a special status of childhood and an emphasis on play activity were recognized and set down in the Federal State Educational Standard of Pre-School Education [9].

Neither did the European pre-school educational system realize the need for play activity until after L.S. Vygotsky’s papers appeared, but in practice the idea was implemented in day-care centres much earlier than in Russia. At the present time, this activity determines the content and goals of education in day-care centres in many countries [10], [11], [12], [13].

1.1. The research tasks are to:

- analyze the conceptual framework of pre-school education in Russia;
- determine the degree of popularity of play activity in day-care centres;
- define the specifics of play activity in day-care centres;
- define problems and prospects for play activity development.

2. Materials and Methods

The material for the research was provided by day-care centres in city of Kazan (the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation). The work was conducted in the period between 1990 and 2015. The research methods included observation, analysis, mathematical processing of empiric data, and design of play activity technologies.

3. Results and Discussions

The Russian standard has adopted a new concept – that of childhood, according to which a child should live (or experience) a childhood world during his pre-school period. The childhood world is all play. The child learns to perceive the surrounding world through a game. Today teachers should not consider a child to be a little pupil or worker; they should learn to see a child in him/her.

Therefore, the former paradigm of pre-school education was oriented toward a child’s personality as that of a conscious individual and a future worker. The new paradigm develops the philosophy of a childhood where both...
cultural-historical and activity concepts are relevant [14]. The way to implement these concepts is through a game. While the former teacher and child activity types were predominated by elements of socially useful work, education through work, inclusion of children into an adult-dominated world, the new type features are heavily dominated by game elements (cognitive, didactic, socio-dramatic and other types of play).

The issue of detecting the qualities of Russian educators that define their personal readiness to work with children while playing is highly topical, albeit little-studied. The traditional stereotype of a Russian educator has such attributes as strictness, exactingness and even inaccessibility (the educator, to a certain extent, had to keep his distance from the children). Cooperation which was officially recognized in the nineties frequently scared off educators because of pedagogical ethics, tact breach and was associated with familiarity and lack of professionalism.

Adoption of the new pre-school education standard actualized such qualities of teachers as self-consciousness, empathy, cooperation, etc. Whereas in the nineties these qualities were considered to be a form of innovative and untraditional approach to education, today they have become a norm for every teacher. In other words, educators, in their activity, now should stimulate a child’s self-fulfillment. The game becomes an important instrument in a child’s self-fulfillment. In doing so, the educators should also fulfill themselves in this jointly organized play activity.

3.1. Play Activity in Russian Day-Care Centres

This is not to say that before the standard was adopted every teacher was stern and incapable of organizing a game. We have conducted polls among day-care centre teachers over a period of years. There were about 800 teachers polled annually. They were asked one question: “Do you use play forms in the educational process at your day-care centre? If the answer was in the affirmative, What time do these forms take in your classes percentagewise? The results of the polls are given in Table 1 and Diagram 1.

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<th>Table 1. Play activity in Russian Day-Care Centres</th>
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Diagram 1. Share of Play Activity in Russian Day-Care Centres

As can be seen, beginning from the 1990s the share of play activity in Russian day-care centres steadily increased: from 10% in 1995 up to 36% in 2015. But, on the whole, the share is inconsiderable and, according to the respondents, most of the classes continue to be conducted traditionally (as an educational class).
Moreover, there is another matter which causes much debate: What is a game? Practicing educationalists define any kind of entertainment as part of it, with the exception of didactic and socio-dramatic play. Not all play activities are cognitive in nature, with many of them being of a developmental, sporting, health-saving nature and some of them performing the function of relaxation.

3.2. Quality of Pre-School Education

To assess the quality of pre-school education it is essential to answer the question if the game can substitute traditional education and which form is better – the traditional one (educational class) or the new one (game)?

A. Vanderheyden points out the fact that traditional measurements of a child are selective and are too painstaking [15]. That is why the program-based diagnostics has gained in popularity in the past few years. At the same time, education can be both traditional (as a class) and new (as a game).

After Russia adopted the 2013 standard it announced a moratorium on assessing pre-school education quality, which officially ended on January 1, 2015, but in sober fact it still continues: clear-cut assessment criteria and indicators have not been worked out yet. But many are concerned over the quality of pre-school education and it continues to be assessed by teachers themselves, heads of day-care centres, inspectors, and scholars. The most important assessment, it would seem, comes from parents and the general public rather than scholars.

Parents usually assess the quality on the strength of three indicators:

1) Does a child enjoy being in the day-care centre?
2) Does a child suffer from any illnesses while being at the day-care centre?
3) Will he/she be able to study well at school after leaving the day-care centre?

Play makes a child’s stay in the day-care centre joyful and happy which quite satisfies his or her parents. But should the child prove to be ill-prepared for school after the play activities, his parents’ admiration for the day-care centre ceases and the centre acquires a bad name not only among the parents but also among the public at large.

Russian school standards and programs are not as open as those in day-care centres. The year 2014 saw L.V. Zankov’s developing program removed from the list of federal programs (Zankov, 1975). This program (most probably, the only one of them) provided continuity between day-care centres and schools in terms of using games as the main activity type. That is the reason why schools do not meet the day-care centres halfway as yet, they send down their requests to pre-school educational facilities which the latter have to take them into account and accommodate.

At the same time, the quality of pre-school education is strongly affected by its ethnic, regional and religious specific features. Russian pedagogic science has failed to see them whereas the general public and the mass media are beginning to raise the alarm. There have been increasingly more instances when children become hostages to adults’ religious conflicts (even if teachers remain loyal to the social orientation of education, parents may hold religious, sectarian and other views).

3.3. Ethnic and Regional Peculiarities of Pre-School Education in Russia
Ethnic and regional specifics of education have much to do with the problems of a multicultural society [16], [17]. There has been growing religious and national self-identification in Russia. This creates many problems in organizing pre-school education.

Of great importance is the problem of latent aggression based on ethnic differences. In Russian preschool institutions there are many teachers who are driven by latent ethnicity-based aggression [18].

Over the last few years there has been a strong upsurge of national self-identification and religious intolerance. A total of 9 terrorist attacks due to ethnic animosity and religious intolerance were aborted in Tatarstan in 2014 alone. The national identity of the Tatar people is currently undergoing a change in its cultural code. This code used to be connected with the names of the two national poets – the Russian one - Pushkin and the Tatar one – Tukai. Today this code is getting increasingly imbued with historical and cultural sense and is connected with Bulgary, the Tatar Bulgars’ ancient capital in the 12th-13th centuries (now it is the centre of pilgrimage by Tatar people from around the world) and with the name of the poet Kul Sharif (who died during the seizure of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible in the mid 16th century, in commemoration of whom a jameh mosque was built in the centre of Kazan), with the name of the writer Gayaz Iskhaki (who emigrated to Turkey to contact Hitler and attempted to create an independent republic "Idel-Ural" in the Mid-Volga and Ural region during WWII).

The culture code change affects educational process in the day-care centre through the kids’ parents. Our survey showed that people in the Volga region believe that they all are skilled in the problems of education and education does not matter when we discuss the issues of preventing aggression based on ethnicity [18].

Different notions of games are a typical feature of the ethnic and religious specifics in the Volga region: Muslim Tatars regard some games as an offense against God. That is why it is necessary while planning the games to avoid, if possible, those with pictures and to correctly conduct socio-dramatic games that involve parts that may be misconstrued by orthodox Muslims.

However, we do not see any particular restrictions in conducting games of a didactic type. Those may include games that involve experiments with fairy tales, objects of the surrounding world (sand, grass, rock, water, air, etc.), wordplay (with an emphasis on the properties and characteristics of objects). Some theatricalized games (dramatization games, tabletop theater, puppet theater, etc.) may be educative. In this case it is important to turn a cognitive step not into education, but into a "memory trap" for a child, into the joy of an unconscious discovery.

4. Guidance

The pre-school age in Russia is that between 6 and 7 years. In some West European countries five year-old children start school. In Russia children of this age still go to day-care centres. Traditionally, Russian children go to school at the age of 6-7. One should not equal children of this age to 4-5 year old children. The research shows that children of the senior pre-school age (6-7 years) should engage in didactic games more intensively. Health and fitness games that have recently prevailed in the Russian educational practice weaken the cognitive readiness of 6-7 year old children for studying at school.

References

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