ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

Pedagogika / Pedagogy
2015, t. 118, Nr. 2, p. 174–187 / Vol. 118, No. 2, pp. 174–187, 2015

LIETUVOS EDUKOLOGIJOS UNIVERSITETAS

The Dynamics of Pretend Play Development in Early Childhood

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Abstract. The phenomenon of play is constantly raising many questions for researchers and practitioners. Why is play important, what kind of play should be promoted in kindergarten classrooms, should it be supported and how? This article provides a short analysis on the concept of play and introduces an investigation aimed at analyzing the dynamics of the development of children's pretend play in early childhood settings. This research is performed within the framework of Cultural-Historical theory of play. The development of children's pretend play in ECEC groups will be discussed; gender differences and the level of pretend play within different age groups of children will be analyzed.

Keywords: *pretend play, early childhood, dynamics of play development, Cultural-Historical theory of play.*

Introduction

In 2014 the European Commission published a report on early childhood education and care in Europe (*Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe* 2014). This document "provides insights into what constitutes high quality early childhood education and care through policy-driven and internationally comparable indicators" (19). Along with 20 other countries, Lithuania did not provide data about children's free play. In spite of this fact, probably all ECEC programs in Lithuania describe the importance of play as the main activity of a child, therefore, the understanding of play phenomenon

Pedagogika / 2015, t. 118, Nr. 2
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15823/p.2015.013

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

is very ambiguous among practitioners. It is still unclear *why exactly* play is important, what *kind of play* should be promoted in the kindergarten classrooms and *what is an adult's role* in supporting children's play activity.

There is no single definition for play. Researchers describe play phenomenon by pointing to its specific features: intrinsic motivation, non-literality, positive affect, flexibility and means / ends (i.e. the child is more interested in behavior than the outcome of the behavior (Smith, 2010)). Lillard et al. (2013) use the same four criteria to define play. Intrinsic motivation suggests voluntariness: one engages in the activity by choice for its own sake. Nonliterality refers to the fact that, in play, behaviors lack their usual meaning while paradoxically retaining it. Positive affect touches on the idea that people look like they are having fun when they play. Flexibility denotes that play behaviors vary from real ones in form (they might be exaggerated or truncated) and / or content (one might play by eating with a stick instead of a spoon).

The nature of play is explained differently depending on the theoretical approach towards the nature of human development. Over a century or even more, play is seen as a psychological phenomenon determined by maturation and is understood as a certain stage in human and animal development (developmentalism assumption). The Cultural-Historical theory of play (Vygotsky, El'konin, Leont'ev) defines play as a result / product of cultural processes. El'konin (1978, 1999, 2005) claims that the emergence of certain forms / types of children's play is connected with the historical development of human societies and the change of children's social status. Play motivation and its need is societal, not biological. Instruments in play have a social nature and play is socially elaborated and guided by materials and toys, scripts and rules offered. Based on these different explanations of the nature of play activity, the importance of play for child development and the role of an adult are understood differently as well.

Most studies are carried out with the aim to provide evidence of the importance or non-importance of play and are performed having developmentalism paradigm in the background, in order to explain play phenomenon as a natural stage in child development. Another aspect of these studies is that, mainly the effects of play on child development are studied and not so much the quality and level of play activity itself. Some other studies concentrate on play research methods and often criticize them.

Recently, Lillard et al. (2013) reviewed a variety of correlational and experimental studies and, in the absence of consistently strong positive correlations, they casted doubt on the notion that pretend play serves a crucial, causal role in the child's development. In their opinion, pretend play has a unique and important role in promoting reasoning, language, narrative and emotional regulation – only four out of 11 child developmental domains (Lillard et al., 2013). However, Nicolopoulou and Ilgaz (2013) published a response to this critical review and pointed out that researchers focused especially on the assessment of research-mostly conducted during the 1970s and 1980s-on play-based narrative interventions and that a number of their criticisms were misplaced, overstated, conceptually problematic, or all of the above.

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

Without having a clear concept of play phenomenon, developmental scientists agree that pretend play is one of the crucial elements of child development (Hurwitz, 2002; Fisher et al., 2008; Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; Smith, 2010). Modern theory on development emphasizes the emotional, intellectual and social benefits of pretend play. Fiorelli and Russ (2012) found that emotional themes in play relate to positive mood in daily life and that imagination and organization in play relate to coping ability. Their results also support the stability of imagination and organization in pretend play over time. There is growing evidence to suggest that high-quality pretend play is an important facilitator of perspective taking and later abstract thought, that it may facilitate higher-level cognition, and that there are clear links between pretend play and social and linguistic competence (Bergen, 2002). Some research points to the potential mediating role of private speech in the association between pretense and executive function (EF), and other evidence suggests that adults can support children's EF development by facilitating and encouraging (but not controlling) young children's make-believe play (Berk, Meyers, 2013). Gopnik and Walker (2013) reviewed the idea that children pretend because it exercises their developing ability to reason counterfactually-ability essential for causal reasoning and learning. According to the model of play they outline, imaginative play serves as an engine of learning. Such play arises out of the human capacity for causal cognition and provides feedback to help develop causal-reasoning skills (Gopnik and Walker, 2013). Russ and Wallance (2013) discussed that engaging in pretend play fosters the development of creativity. According to Hendricks (2014), when children assume unusual or exotic roles (such as monsters, pets, and super heroes), they engage in the most complicated forms of cultural imagination and social dialogue, therefore developing the communication skills that are necessary for living in any society. Finally and most importantly, play is a distinctive pathway for the construction of self (Hendricks, 2014).

From the Cultural-Historical play theory viewpoint, mature forms of role-play develop general abilities (learning potential) in children, such as: general creativity; motivation; imagination; volition and self-regulation; understanding of the other person's point of view; and orientation towards the universal meanings of human activity. Some research was carried out in the frame of Cultural-Historical play theory.

Based on research conducted by the Center of Play and Toys in 2011, Smirnova and Ryabkova (2013) reported that mature forms of pretend play are extremely rare. The parameters of play observation was role, play actions, interactions with a partner, objects and space. Individual children's play skills were evaluated. Similar opinions held by other researchers (Bodrova, Leong, 2003, 2007; Mikhailenko, Korotkova, 2001) claimed that an increasing amount of children do not develop mature forms of play before school age. The results of an international review in sixteen countries (Singer, et al., 2008) also confirm that children's imaginative play is disappearing and is often replaced by media use (games, TV programs, DVDs).

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

Our research group follows the Cultural-Historical paradigm of play theory and understands play first of all, as a cultural activity. In play activity we see a developmental potential for the child and for the adult. According to Vygotsky, the creation of an imaginary situation is the most visible evidence to signal the beginning of play. A child tries to coordinate and maintain two situations – the real and the imaginary one. This is different from simple fantasizing which is not based on mental image construction and does not have / possess internal content. The creation of the imaginary situation primarily proceeds not in the child's mind, but is reflected in his / her actions. Thus, creation of imaginary situation reveals many different aspects of play, which can be defined as the structural parts of play1. According to El'konin (1978, 1999, 2005) the following structural elements of play activity could be singled out: roles, play actions, use of play objects, and relationships between the play partners. These structural elements are the key aspects / characteristics that we used to follow the dynamics of play development.

The **aim of this investigation** was to analyze the developmental dynamics of children's pretend play in early childhood settings and to analyze the dynamics of pretend play in ECEC institutions. **Research questions / goals / tasks are:** (1) to follow and describe the development of children's pretend play in ECEC groups, and (2) to analyze gender differences and the level of pretend play within different age groups of children.

Methodology

Participants. A group of researchers from LUES Play Research Laboratory performed the research as a part of EU funded "Development of Self-regulation in Play" project. The data for this study was collected from six kindergartens in Vilnius (86 %) and one in Marijampolė (14 %). Study data was collected from 454 children's free play activities. Out of all evaluated subjects, 224 were girls, 224 boys and 6 unspecified. Children's age varied from 1.5 to 7 years. Data distribution was according to age group: 90 children (19.8 %) – under the age of 4, 225 children (49.6 %) – from 4 to 6 years of age, and 139 children (30.6 %) – from 6 to 7 years of age. Early childhood teachers – 73 participants from Vilnius (97 %) and 2 – from Marijampolė (3 %) collected the data from their classrooms.

Methods and procedures. The teachers were asked to observe and evaluate children's free play activities (each teacher evaluated 6 children) using the proposed questionnaire. Before the evaluation, two researchers met with all participating teachers, presented the questionnaire, explained play parameters in detail, and answered any questions. During the meeting, teachers had to practice and to evaluate one child from their group (a pilot evaluation). Clarification questions were discussed together with other teachers and researchers.

[1] The questionnaire that is presented in the following part is composed based on these structural parts of pretend play.

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E-ISSN 2029-0551

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of structural elements of play activity proposed by El'konin (1978, 1999). Concrete parameters of play observation were developed by a group of researchers from the Toys and Play Research Centre, MSUPE (Smirnova and Ryabkova). In cooperation with the research group from Moscow (MSUPE), Lithuanian (LUES) research team elaborated upon the parameters for play observation. These parameters are the main tools to guide-teachers' observations and evaluations of children's play. The questionnaire include seven parameters of play activity: *play objects, self-position of the player, play partner, play space, play actions, play script / narrative, and the main content of play.* Each parameter of play observation is ranked in four different levels (from simple activity to more complex): e.g. *position in play:*

Child has no role;

Child has a role, but does not keep to the rules of the role or is inconsistent;

Child has a role and keeps to the rules of the role;

Child is flexible and freely improvises roles.

Data processing. SPSS 17.0 software was used for statistical (quantitative) data analysis: descriptive analysis (frequencies, percentage rank); checking of feature independence (χ^2 criteria); and the analysis of internal reliability of scales (Cronbach α). The questionnaire of play has a high rate of psychometric reliability: $\alpha = 0.907$.

Results and analysis

The following paragraphs show in detail each parameter of pretend play independently in order to reveal the process of pretend play development in young children starting from pre-play actions with different objects towards more elaborated forms of play.

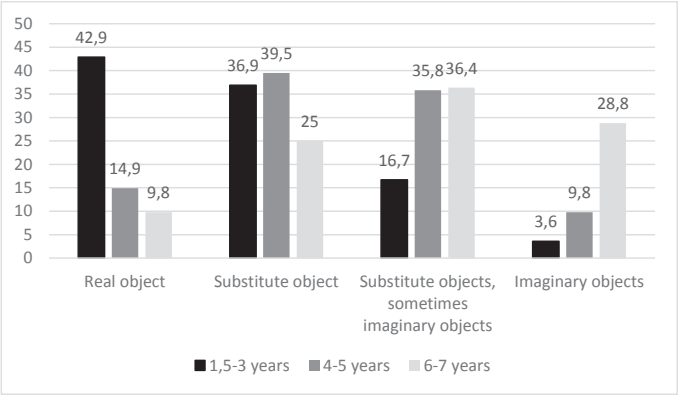

Fig. 1. *The usage of objects in play*

Many 1.5–3 year-old children (42.9 %) use real objects according to their intended purpose in their play. Accordingly, play with real objects decreases in older children –

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E-ISSN 2029-0551

only 14.9 % of 4–5 year-old children use real objects and only 9.8 % of 6–7 year-olds. The majority of 4–5 year-old children play with substitute objects (39.5 %) or both with substitute objects and with imaginary objects (35.8 %). Theoretically, most of 6–7 year-old children should play with imaginary objects, but our data revealed that this number is not high: only one third of children (28.8 %) play with imaginary objects. Children of pre-primary classes / groups demonstrated an extremely low number of play with imaginary objects. Such results might be caused by different reasons: one being that the physical environment was very rich with toys and substitute objects for play. Another reason is the adults' position towards children's play. The majority of teachers did not have good ideas on how to support children's play activities. However, data analysis revealed, that statistically significant results vary between children's age groups (1.5–3 years, 4–5 years and 6–7 years) ($\chi^2 = 75.327$, $p = 0.000$). At an older age, more children play with imaginary objects. There are no statistically significant differences ($\chi^2 = 6.647$, $p = 0.084$) between boys and girls in how they use play objects.

The second parameter of play is player's position and is connected with role and rules (see Fig. 2). Data revealed that almost half of 1.5–3 year-old children (43.2 %) assumed a role, but failed to stick to the rules of their role or they displayed inconsistencies. Such a high level of play between very young children may possibly be explained by the fact that small children tend to imitate elder siblings 'in roles' but, in fact, only instrumentally performing separate play actions without creating more consistent roles. For example, young boys in Play Laboratory ran with self-made guns or swords, shot and fought, and pretended to be 'pirates' or 'robbers'. At the beginning they looked seriously involved in role-play but after a few minutes of observation, it was clear that they repeated a single action of shooting and running and soon after became involved in some other activity.

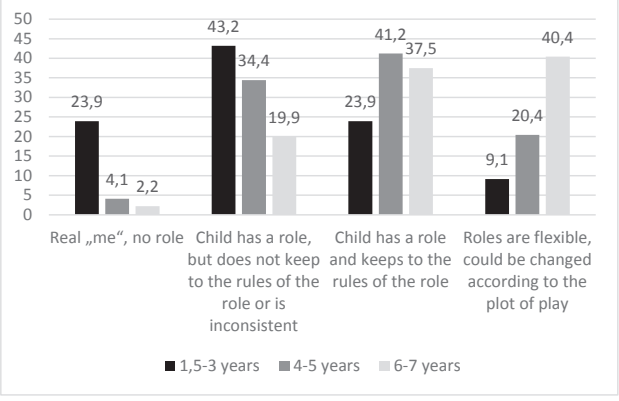

Fig. 2. *Child's position in play*

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

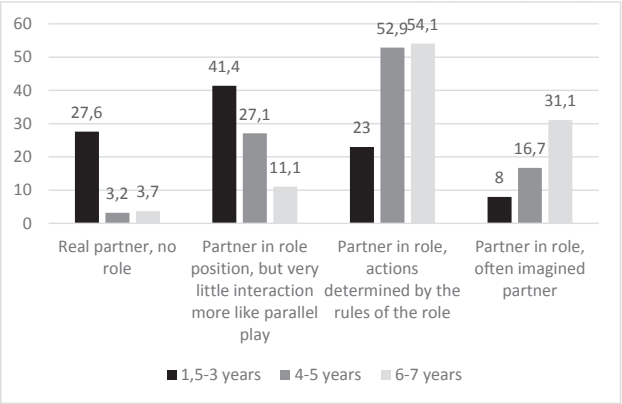

Fig. 3. *Partner's position in play*

Almost the same amount (41.2 %) of 4–5 years-old children assumed the role and followed the rules of their role. The highest level of the parameter – when a child is flexible and can freely improvise different roles – reached 40.4 % of 6–7 years-old children. Statistically significant results varied between age groups: older children prefer taking roles and are able to keep to the rules of their role ($\chi^2 = 80.192$, $p = 0.000$). There are statistically significant differences between boys and girls ($\chi^2 = 15.592$, $p = 0.001$). Girls achieve a higher level of play: they adopt a role and keep to the rules of their role (girls – 40.6 %, boys – 31.8 %) or are flexible and able to change their roles according to the plot of play (girls – 28.8 %, boys – 20.0 %).

Another important parameter is the partner's position in play (see Fig. 3). Two-fifths of the youngest (1.5–3 year-olds) children (41.4 %) play with a partner who is 'in role' position, but they have very few interactions. Older children's (4–5 year-olds) play partner's actions are determined by rules of their role (52.9 %), with the same results for the oldest group – 54.1 %. It is important to emphasize that only one-third of these pupils' (31.1 %) play partners have a role, or their partner may be imaginary. This result indicates that a substantial proportion of children use their imagination in play. Again, this indicates that a play partner's position significantly varies by age ($\chi^2 = 100.350$, $p = 0.000$) and that elder children tend to play with a partner who has a role. Additionally, gender relates to the development of children's play partner's position ($\chi^2 = 14.437$, $p = 0.002$) – girls play more with a partner 'in role' and keep to the rules of their role (girls – 54.3 %, boys – 39.4 %). Among the highest level is play with an imaginative partner where achievement is almost the same between boys (19.3 %) and girls (20.1 %).

Our analysis of play space showed that the youngest boys and girls equally preferred real play space (27.3 %) and constructed / created play space (27,3 %). Accordingly, almost half of 4–5 year-old children constructed / created (45.3 %) play space. Only two-fifths of the oldest (6–7 year-olds) children (39.9 %) achieved the highest level. For their play, the space was modeled or marked by words and / or actions. It was observed that all children preferred

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E-ISSN 2029-0551

certain, probably their favorite, places for play. However, this parameter of play depends on the age ($\chi^2 = 75.651$, $p = 0.000$), but had no gender differences ($\chi^2 = 6.599$, $p = 0.086$).

The next parameter of play development is play actions, (see Fig. 4). About one-third of the youngest boys and girls (27.4 %) play on the level of separate operations (for example, feeding a doll). A larger number of young children (41.7 %) already achieved the level of separate play actions, which combined separate operations: they play short, improvised daily life episodes (23.8 %). Almost the same amount of elder (4–5 year-olds) children play separated play events or constructed a schematic play situation (for example, playing home) – (42.5 %). Slightly more than half of the children (53.2 %) achieved the highest level of play and created a chain of successive play events.

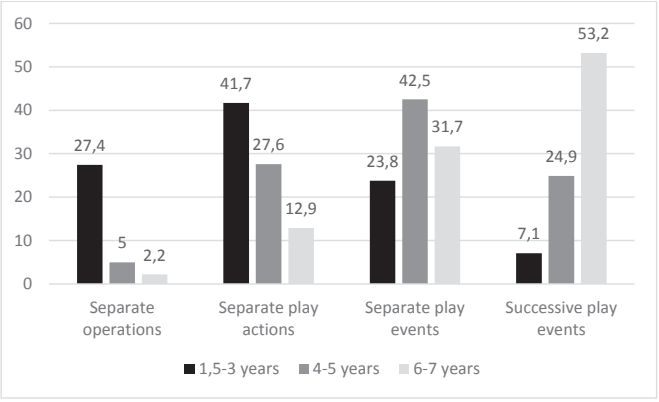

Fig. 4. *Play actions*

Such a high level of achievement in all age groups might be due to the fact that it is not easy to differentiate between separate play events and successive play events. More time for observation is required to define the level of play actions. Data analysis revealed that play actions were statistically significant and vary according to age ($\chi^2 = 111.242$, $p = 0.000$) and according to gender ($\chi^2 = 14.861$, $p = 0.002$) of children. Girls tend to play on the level of separate play events or create a schematic play situation – 42.7 %, and boys correspondingly only – 27.3 %. It is important to note that the highest level of play achievement – successive play events – was slightly more for boys (32.7 %) than girls (28.9 %). Overall observations of children's play suggest that boys tend to play adventurous plots whereas the girls develop the context of play, with details of played events and highlight different aspects of the relationships between the roles, etc.

Another parameter of play is play script or narrative. It is known that at the beginning of a play activity children play simple repetitions of daily events, and then later they start improvising mixing daily episodes with adventures and finally move to magic / fantastic events. The following are the results from our data (see Fig. 5).

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

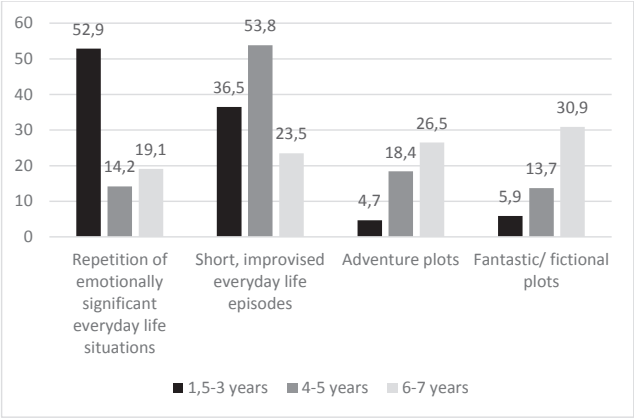

Fig. 5. *Play script / narrative*

Data analysis shows that half (52.9 %) of the youngest children play on the level of realistic repetition of daily events, whereas the elder (4–5 year-olds) children and (6–7 year-olds) children preformed accordingly – 14.2 % and 19.1 %. The group of (4–5 year-olds) children prefer to play short, improvised daily episodes – 53.8 %. Children's play themes are closely tied to their personal experience and / or experimentation with adult roles (i.e. housework, family, shopping). The number of children playing adventurous or fantastic/magic plots is not high: in middle age group (4–5 year-olds) – 18.4 % and 13.7 % of all children and in pre-primary class – 26.5 % and 30.9 % of all children. Statistically significant results vary according to the children's age ($\chi^2 = 95.447$, $p = 0.000$): the eldest boys and girls play more on the level of adventurous and fantastic plots. No statistically significant differences occur between gender ($\chi^2 = 5.158$, $p = 0.161$).

The last parameter of play development within children's play is the main content (see Fig. 6).

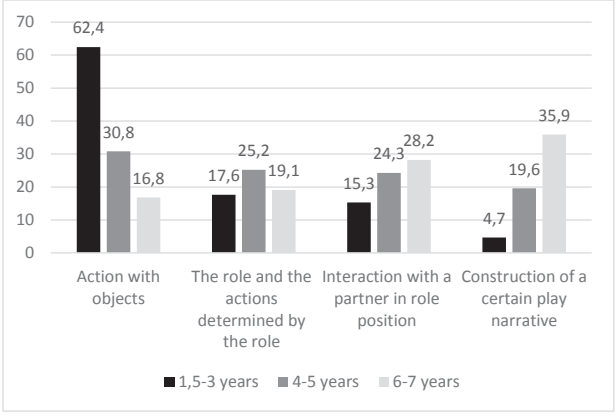

Fig. 6. *The main content of play*

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

Not surprisingly, the content of play for the youngest children before 3 years of age are actions with objects. Almost two thirds of children – (62.4 %) are involved in such kind of play. Children 4–5 years of age are less involved (30.8 %) in play on the level of actions with objects. The content of their play is more on the level of play actions determined by role (25.2 %) or on the level of interactions with a partner in role position – 24.3 %. Many pre-primary children are on the level of play narrative construction – (35.9 %). The content of their play comprises of the construction of play narrative. A large number from this age group did not achieve the highest level of play parameter. Statistically significant results vary based on the children's age ($\chi^2 = 63.046$, $p = 0.000$): older children have more interactions with partners in role positions or construct a certain play narrative. In comparison, boys and girls did not show any statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 6.095$, $p = 0.107$) concerning the main content of their play. It is not easy to evaluate the level of children's play according to this last parameter. Several observations during a period of time should be made in order to understand the content of child's play in the group.

Summarizing our analysis, the following are general conclusions about the main tendencies of the development of pretend play in early childhood:

The early stages of pretense could be observed in young (1.5–3 year-olds) children's play: they play with real objects; they rarely assume a role and are inconsistent in following the rules of their role; they perform separate operations, sometimes their play might be on the level of play actions of emotionally significant personal events;

In middle age (4–5 year-olds) children the level of pretend play is higher: within this age group, children play with substitute objects, sometimes with imaginary objects: they might assume roles, but do not always follow the rules of their role; at this age, play partners also tend to be (is allowed to be) in role position; play proceeds on the level of play actions and play events, sometimes short improvised episodes can be observed, whereas adventurous or fantastic plots are still rare;

The eldest preschoolers (6–7 year-olds) are engaged in more elaborated forms of pretend play: children play with substitute or imaginary objects; assume roles and follow the rules of their roles, in addition, they are rather flexible and can skillfully change the rules; they play with one or several partners in roles, they might play with imagined partners; more than half of this age group of children construct adventurous or fantastic events while playing. Still, it is important to note, that according to our results, only one third of all this age group of children achieve the highest level of play.

In conclusion, there are limitations to this study. Given the fact that teachers evaluated children's play, it is likely that the level of play may not have been fully reflected in the real situation. A decision was made to choose between the teachers who know their children and the researchers who came into the classrooms not knowing the children and disturbing their usual life. It was important for this study to obtain authentic information and to create the most favorable conditions for children's play within their familiar environment. Also, children's play skills might be slightly heightened / raised

or reduced (favor or Halo factors). This choice does not allow to make broader generalizations, which was not our goal. The main aim was to check developmental tendencies of play, to see whether it corresponds to other researchers' observations and to find out what proportion / part of children reach the highest level of play.

Conclusions

It is possible to follow the dynamics of the development of children's pretend play according to the proposed parameters: *play objects, position of the player, play partner, play space, play actions, play script / narrative, and the main content of play.*

Data analysis revealed that early stages of pretense could be observed in young (1.5–3 year-olds) children's play; in middle age (4–5 year-olds) children the level of pretend play is higher; and the eldest preschoolers (6–7 year-olds) are engaged in more elaborated forms of pretend play.

The dynamics of play development is statistically significant and is age dependent: the older the child, the higher level of play he / she could achieve in all parameters of pretend play.

Following parameters of pretend play: *position of the player, play partner* and *play actions* are related to children's gender. Girls reached a higher level in these parameters in comparison with the boys.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the European Social Fund under the Global Grant measure (No. VP-3.1-ŠMM- 07-K-02-066).

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ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

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Santrauka

Žaidimas, kaip vienas iš svarbiausių vaikystės fenomenų, mokslininkams kelia daug klausimų: ar / kada / kaip žaidimas yra reikšmingas vaiko raidai ir kaip jį palaikyti, skatinti? Straipsnyje atliekama trumpa žaidimo fenomeno analizė ir, remiantis kultūrine-istorine paradigma, siekiama aiškintis ikimokyklinio amžiaus vaikų menamo žaidimo dinamiką. Taigi, vaikų menamo žaidimo dinamiką galima stebėti pagal struktūrines žaidimo dalis: žaidimo vaidmenis, žaidybinius veiksmus, daiktų naudojimą žaidime, realius santykius tarp žaidžiančių partnerių, žaidimo siužetą, žaidimo vietos kūrimą. Remiantis tyrimo duomenimis, galime matyti tokias ikimokyklinio amžiaus vaikų menamo žaidimo dinamikos tendencijas:

– jauniausio amžiaus (1,5–3 metų) vaikų žaidime stebime menamo žaidimo užuomazgas / pradmenis: jie žaidžia su realiais objektais, vaidmenį prisiima retai ir jo taisyklių nesilaiko, atlieka atskiras žaidimo operacijas, kartais – veiksmus, dažniausiai žaidžia emociškai jiems reikšmingus įvykius;

– vidurinio amžiaus (4–5 metų) vaikų menamas lygis aukštesnis: vaikai žaidžia su daiktais – pakaitalais, kartais su menamais žaislais, atlieka vaidmenį, tačiau ne visada laikosi taisyklių. Šiame amžiuje žaidimo partneris taip pat dažnai turi vaidmenį, yra žaidžiama veiksmais ar atskirais žaidimo įvykiais, galima įžvelgti trumpų, improvizuotų kasdieninių epizodų, retai – nuotykių ar fantastinių siužetų;

– vyriausiame (priešmokykliniame amžiuje, 6–7 metų) vaikai žaidžia menamą žaidimą: naudoja daiktus – pakaitalus, kartais – įsivaizduojamus objektus, prisiima vaidmenis, laikosi jų taisyklių ir net jas keičia. Vaikų žaidimo partneris atlieka vaidmenį ir kartais yra įsivaizduojamas. Daugiau nei pusė vaikų žaidžia-kuria žaidimo įvykius ir jie būna nuotykiniai ar stebukliniai. Tačiau būtina pastebėti, kad pagal tyrimo rezultatus aukščiausią menamo žaidimo lygį pasiekia tik apie trečdalis šio amžiaus vaikų.

Menamo žaidimo raidos dinamika statistiškai reikšmingai priklauso nuo vaikų amžiaus: kuo vyresnis vaikas, tuo labiau jis gali pasiekti visų menamo žaidimo parametrų aukštesnį lygį. Vaikų

ISSN 1392-0340
E-ISSN 2029-0551

lytis yra susijusi su šiais menamo vaikų žaidimo parametrais: vaiko pozicija žaidime, partnerio pozicija ir žaidybiniais veiksmais. Mergaitės pasiekia aukštesnį šių parametrų lygį negu berniukai.

Esminiai žodžiai: *ikimokyklinis amžius, menamo žaidimo raidos dinamika, kultūrinė-istorinė žaidimo teorija.*

Įteikta / Received 2015-01-14
Priimta / Accepted 2015-02-12