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Theoretical article

Pretend Play and Project-Based Learning as Factors in the Development of Preschool Children

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Abstract. In psychology, playing is traditionally considered the most developing form of preschool children's activity. Nowadays, despite the large amount of research demonstrating the significant impact of pretend play on the psychological development of the preschoolers, project-based learning is widespread in kindergartens. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to determine whether it is enough for the successful development of the preschool children to include them in pretend play or whether it is important to use other educational technologies as well. According to the cultural-historical and activity-based approaches in the educational psychology, the key features of play and project-based learning are identified as fundamental for the development of the preschoolers. Based on the identified key features, the authors conduct a comparative analysis of play and project-based learning in order to determine their fundamental differences. The results of the analysis show that these types of activities have their own developmental tools: an imaginary situation (in play) and a space for children's realization (for project-based activity). It is also demonstrated that inclusion in pretend play involves a process orientation caused by the underdevelopment of the operational sphere in the preschoolers, while project-based learning is result-oriented activity aimed at creating a socially significant product. Finally, an essential point in play and project-based activity is associated with the role of the adult. In play, the child is independent, being the subject of play activity. In project activities, the child is the author of an idea, with the adult being the child's interpreter. The research shows the fundamental differences between pretend play and project-based activity for the development of the preschoolers, which should be taken into account when working with children of this age.

Key words: developmental psychology, preschool age, pretend play, project approach, creative activity

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Introduction

The very essence of preschool age involve considering play as the leading form of children's activity. This has been reflected in the works of A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Elkonin, A.V. Zaporozhets and a number of other researchers of the mental development of preschool children. Both domestic and foreign authors have convincingly shown that play has a positive impact on the development of higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1966; Elias, Berk, 2002; Bergen, 2002; Bodrova, Leong, 2003; Modina, 2008; Kelly et al., 2011; Kravtsova, Kravtsov, 2017; Lillard, Taggart, 2019; Fleeer, 2022; Kovalenko, Skvortsova, 2022). It has been established that pretend play promotes the development of creativity and thinking, influence the formation of symbolic representation, etc. in preschool children.

It seems to us that, when considering the specifics of children's activity in the context of the cultural-historical paradigm, it is worth paying attention to the study of M. Mead. She was able to show that in cultures dominated by subsistence forms of farming (gathering, hunting and fishing), as was the case in the Samoan Islands, children already in preschool age could be directly involved in the life of the community, helping adults in their activities (Mead, 1988, pp. 101–102).

This situation does not exclude play for children, but raises the question of the significance of its influence on their development. L.S. Vygotsky paid much attention to the analysis of play. He emphasized that the play of preschool children implied the satisfaction of their needs. In this regard, he wrote: "By the beginning of preschool age, on the one hand, unsatisfied desires appear, tendencies that cannot be immediately realized, and, on the other hand, the tendency of early childhood towards the immediate realization of desires remains. A child wants, for example, to be in his mother's place, or to be a rider and ride a horse... This is where play arises, which, from the point of view of the question of why a child plays, should always be understood as an imaginary illusory realization of unrealizable desires" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 63).

In other words, Vygotsky said that play arises in conditions of contradiction between the child's ability to act and desires. It is also important to note that play arises from the experience the child has. Indeed, firstly, unsatisfied desires are associated with the representative image of what is desired and, secondly, with the emotional state of the preschooler. Thus, desire already represents the idea of the unity of *affect* and *intellect*, which is a characteristic sign of the presence of experience (Veresov, 2017, 2019; Sukhikh et al., 2022).

Vygotsky's point of view was, in a certain sense, reproduced by Leontiev. He also considered the emergence of play activity as a resolution of the contradiction between the need to act and the inability to perform the necessary operations. He emphasized that this contradiction can be resolved, "but it can be resolved in a child only in one single type of activity, namely in play activity, in play. This is explained by the fact that play is not a productive activity; its motive lies not in its result, but in the content of the action itself. Therefore, the play action is free from its obligatory side, which is determined by the real conditions of this action, i.e., free from obligatory methods of action, operations" (Leontiev, 1972, p. 475).

In fact, according to Leontiev, children develop play because they cannot directly become involved in the activities of adults, although the need for such activity remains. It is based on the fact that the development of children allows them to understand, although perhaps superficially, what adults do. The consequence of understanding is the desire to act ‘like adults’, which leads the children to a contradictory situation: they really want to act, but cannot, due to the limitations of their operational capabilities. This contradiction is resolved in play, where the children satisfy their needs in a symbolic form.

As Elkonin showed, precisely due to the fact that children cannot directly be involved in production activities, a special period arises when they are left to their own devices. He wrote: “A situation arises in which the children cannot be taught to use tools due to their complexity, and also due to the fact that the emerging division of labor creates opportunities for choosing future activities that are not clearly determined by the activities of the parents. A peculiar period appears when the children are left to their own devices. There emerge children’s communities, in which children live, although freed from worries about their own food, but organically connected with the life of society. It is in these children’s communities that play begins to dominate” (Elkonin, 1978, p. 63).

From the above passage it follows that the period under consideration is childhood, the peculiarity of which is the emergence of play. At the same time, Elkonin noted: “The earlier the stage of development of society, the earlier the children are included in the productive labor of the adults and become independent producers” (Elkonin, 1978, p. 41).

The analysis leads to the conclusion that children play due to the inability to join in the activities of adults due to limitations in their own operational sphere. In this case, one of the main characteristics of play activity becomes its procedural nature, caused by the underdevelopment of the operational sphere of the preschoolers. This means that, in play, the children replace real operations with conventional play actions with toys or substitute objects. It is precisely the lack of an adequate operational composition of the performing repertoire in children that suggests the emergence of an imaginary situation, the main characteristic of the play (according to Vygotsky). The play itself appears to be an activity in which there are no adequate operations.

Here the question arises: is it enough to limit the preschoolers to mastering play activities only, or is it necessary to support other forms of activity? For example, project-based activities are currently becoming widespread in children’s educational institutions (Penkovskikh, 2010; Bell, 2010; Zhienbaeva, Syzdykbaeva, 2013; Shakirova, 2022; Salnikova, Zhuravlev, 2022; Ushakova, 2023).

In addition, it should be noted that the emergence of an adequate operational side of the child’s activity means at the same time the completion of play activity. Thus, the question that needs to be answered within the framework of this paper is to determine whether it is sufficient to include the preschoolers in play activity for their successful development, or whether it is necessary to use other types of activities in which these children, showing their subjectivity, are developing. But their

development in this case should differ from that which takes place in pretend play. To answer the question posed, we need to compare pretend play with project-based activities and try to see in them such differences that can serve as the basis for their use in a preschool educational institution.

Preschoolers' development in play

If, in play, as Leontiev showed, there are no operations adequate to the activities of adults, it is necessary to understand what the objective side of the play activity is, what it is aimed at and what the child discovers for itself in it.

In play activities, situations that surround the child at the moment are modeled. The child must also act adequately in these situations. But in order to do so, the child must understand the meaning of these situations. It is precisely at mastering the meanings of human behavior that children's play activities are aimed at.

Elkonin wrote on this point: "... the content of an expanded, developed form of pretend play is not an object and its use and change by a person, but relationships between people, carried out through actions with objects; i.e., not a person is an object, but a person is a person" (Elkonin, 1978, p. 31).

Vygotsky considered the main feature of pretend play to be the presence of an imaginary situation. Thanks to it, the child is freed from the influence of the perceptual field and begins to act in accordance with the meanings given by this situation. Taking on a play role requires the child to obey the rules of action set by this role, which makes the child's behavior arbitrary. Considering that it is impossible to act in accordance with meanings without awareness of these meanings, the child's behavior presupposes not only the ability to manage its actions, subject them to the rules associated with the role, but also constantly reflect on its own mental activity.

A similar conclusion follows from the analysis of a case in which two sisters were playing at being sisters, described by J. Sully. Vygotsky emphasized: "The essential difference between play, as Sully describes it, is that the child, starting to play, tries to be a sister. A girl behaves in life without thinking that she is a sister in relation to the other one... However, when the sisters play "at being sisters," each of them continuously shows her sisterhood all the way..." (Vygotsky, 1966). Indeed, as follows from Vygotsky's text, in the phrase "the child, starting to play, tries to be a sister," the word "tries" precisely means that the child does comprehend its action. In other words, the child constantly reflects on its own behavior, correlating it with the rules of behavior of 'a good sister'. Vygotsky explained the importance of play for the development of a child's behavior as follows: "Such obedience to the rules is a completely impossible thing in life; however, it becomes possible in play; thus, play creates the child's zone of proximal development. In play, children are always above their average age, above their usual everyday behavior; they seem to be head and shoulders above themselves" (Vygotsky, 1966).

Analyzing play activity, Vygotsky noted its following features:

1) play activity develops due to the contradiction between the child's desire to immediately carry out socially significant activities and limited ability to implement it;

- 2) play creates the child's zone of proximal development;
- 3) the child's ability to control its own behavior in play is higher than in ordinary non-play situations.

The main result of Vygotsky's study of play is that he convincingly showed how children achieve a level of development that would be difficult to achieve without their participation in play activities (Vygotsky, 1966).

In our opinion, of particular interest in the analysis of play activity is the role of the adult. The point here is that, if, in teaching children the adults lead them, helping them solve this or that problem, in play activities they are distant from the children. Of course, adults are the bearers of those social relations and cultural patterns that the preschoolers master in the process of pretend play (Veresov et al., 2021). Their role as participants in interaction situations modeled by children in play remains intact. The differences lie in the fact that in teaching the adult reveals in detail the cultural properties of the models, while in play the child itself reproduces them, imitating the adult.

Project-based learning as creative activity for the preschoolers

At the same time, a question may arise: If children are provided with such an operational repertoire, will they be involved in activities similar to those of adults, associated with obtaining a socially significant product? In this context, of interest is the paper by A. Lillard and J. Taggart (2019). They took note of the position expressed by M. Montessori, which conveys the attitude of children to play. She argued that the preschool children would prefer to play with real things rather than toy substitutes (Lillard, Taggart, 2019, p. 3). Lillard and Taggart conducted an experimental study among preschoolers aged 3 to 6 years regarding their choices of real objects and their toy counterparts. They concluded that the participants "preferred real activities because they liked to feel effective and do real things. They chose imaginary actions if they were afraid, could not, or were not allowed to perform actions with real objects" (Lillard, Taggart, 2019, p. 4). From their description of the children's behavior, it appears that the preschoolers chose toy analogs only if they were "afraid" or "unable to act" with real objects. But this behavior precisely shows that the operational side of the actions was not mastered by them. Similar results were obtained by M. Ban and I. Uchiyama (2022) for tender-age infants.

The above requirements are met in project-based activity. Project activity is understood as related to solving a problem formulated by the child (Katz, Chard, 1992; Penkovskikh, 2010; Helm et al., 2023). The problem itself contains a question to which there is no direct answer. Solving the problem involves studying the conditions and analyzing the possibilities that can be identified in the context of the proposed circumstances. Therefore, a search begins for various options for answering the question posed. Each option is analyzed, defined and substantiated. Then the best one is selected. On its basis, a plan for the implementation of project-based activity is drawn up, in accordance with which the product is created. The result of this activity must necessarily be socially significant. It is presented in a social environment that is significant for the child and is assessed as im-

portant for the functioning of the society that develops around the child (Zhienbaeva, Syzdykbaeva, 2013; Shakirova, 2022).

The main task of project-based activity is to support the child's cognitive initiative and transform it into a socially and culturally significant activity aimed at obtaining a socially approved and used product (Alasuutari, 2014; Abdulaeva, 2022; Helm et al., 2023). Since obtaining a socially significant product involves the use of performing skills and a certain level of development of executive functions, project-based activity requires the active participation of adults (teachers and parents) as assistants in the implementation of children's ideas while maintaining their author's position. A comparison of project-based activity and pretend play is presented in Table.

Comparison of pretend play and project-based learning of preschoolers

No.	Characteristic	Pretend play	Project-based learning
1	Productivity	Non-product-oriented	Principally product-oriented
2	Social significance	Socially insignificant	Socially significant
3	Emergence of activity	Spontaneous	Voluntary
4	Development of activity	Developing without a plan	Developing according to a plan
5	Place of action	Imaginary situation	Real situation
6	Authorship	The child is not considered as the author of a socially significant product	The child is considered as the author of a socially significant product
7	Positioning the child in society	The child is considered as the subject of pretend play	The child is considered as a prosocial personality

The data in Table clearly shows that project-based activity is fundamentally different from pretend play. In project-based activity, the child acts as the author of its own positive idea, implemented in the form of a socially significant product, which allows the child's personality to develop. Thus, project activity becomes a form of creative activity for the preschoolers. It is also necessary to answer the question: "What actually develops during the implementation of project activities?" Here we can answer that carrying out project-based activity allows the preschoolers to develop their personal qualities.

For a child's personality to develop, it is necessary to create a special space, which is called the space for children's realization (Veraksa, 2018). Within this space, relations between participants in the educational process are arranged in such a way that they are positive. It is assumed that these relationships should primarily be aimed at supporting the child's personality, so that the child will be able to acquire a high status in the system of interpersonal relationships with peers and adults from its environment. This status is achieved when this social environment, firstly, recognizes the child as the author of the created product and, secondly, when the presented product itself receives a positive assessment. It is obvious that during the implementation of project activities, the child develops its speech, social interaction skills and skills related to this activity itself, including planning, analysis of possible options, forecasting, reflection, etc. (Aslan, 2013; Habok, 2015; Can et al., 2017; Kuznetsova, 2020; Bezrukikh et al., 2021; Başaran, Bay, 2023).

Completing an individual or collective project allows the preschoolers to present the results of their own activities, which are creative in nature. At the same time, the essential point here is that it turns out to be impossible to obtain such results without expanding the space for children's realization. Further, it is also important to keep in mind that it is very difficult to obtain the results that characterize the development of a preschooler's personality in other ways than by establishing positive relationships with peers, depending on the results of creative activity.

It should be noted that Vygotsky considered "creative activity in its true psychological sense as the creation of something new" (Vygotsky 1967, p. 33). Therefore, it is important to clearly understand, what is "the creation of something new"? This, apparently, means the creation of a product analogues of which do not yet exist (Krashennnikov, 2008; Bayanova, Khamatvaleeva, 2022). Of interest is Vygotsky's position in relation to the creative idea. He draws attention to a special feature associated with its development: "This feature is the desire of the imagination for embodiment: this is the true basis and driving principle of creative activity. Any construction of the imagination, based on reality, strives to describe a full circle and be embodied in reality" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 36). Vygotsky further explains: "Creative imagination in its full form strives to externally confirm itself with a deed that exists not only for the creator himself, but also for all others" (Vygotsky, 1967, pp. 36–37).

As can be seen from Vygotsky's reasoning above, it contains ideas that are quite close to the concept of the space of children's realization. Firstly, he spoke about the need to embody the image of the imagination, i.e. about the need to implement a creative idea by creating a creative product. And, secondly, he pointed out the need to present the result to the social environment and receive its recognition.

Conclusion: development of the preschoolers in pretend play and project-based activity

Pretend lay and project-based activity influence the development of the child's psyche. These types of activities have their own development tools: an imaginary situation (in pretend play) and a space for children's realization (for project-based activity). An essential point in the implementation of play and project-based activities is associated with the role of the adult.

It should be borne in mind that every cultural artifact is characterized not only by its external form but also by the method of its cultural use. The method is not directly deduced from the external form of the artifact. In order to understand the method, it is the adult who is needed to show the child how to act correctly. In this case, the culture is mastered in the learning process. The key point here is the adult-child interaction (similar to the teacher-student interaction). The adult appears as an instructor, revealing to the child the correct ways to use cultural artifacts, and the child acts as a student, carrying out the adult's instructions.

As we have already noted, development in play is characterized by the transformation of natural forms of activity into cultural ones. At the heart of these transformations is the desire to act 'like adults'. A.V. Zaporozhets said that play is a form of life for a child (Zaporozhets, 1966). The peculiarity of play lies in

the fact that it is a free activity in the sense that the child plays until the moment it remains interesting. Therefore, in play the child shows its subjectivity. Thus, the child's position in play can be characterized as subjective. It is prepared by the entire course of development and manifests itself during a crisis period in the affirmation of one's own 'Self' in the form of 'I myself'. The child's subjectivity limits the adult's position. In pretend play, the adult takes on the role of just an observer, whereas the child turns out to be the subject.

Project-based activity is a creative activity that is developed in the space for children's realization. Children's creative activity can be understood as the creation of a new product that is absent in the child's environment. Thus, the child creates a new world, creating something that does not yet exist, i.e., the future. The child gains experience in constructing it in the space for children's realization in the creative process (Veraksa, 2018). In this case, the child turns out to be the author of the product being created, whereas the adult acts as the child's assistant. It is important to note that the impetus for creative activity is the experience that is formed in the present. Experience is the basis for the formation of a project idea (Katz, Chard, 1992; Veresov, 2017, 2019). The space for children's realization should be created both in the family and in a preschool educational institution (Veraksa, 2018; Raevskaya, Tatarko, 2022).

The quality of the adult-child interaction changes depending on the situation. In learning, the child takes the position of a student and depends on the adult. In play, the child is independent and is the subject of play activity.

In project-based activity, the child acts as the author of the idea, with the adult becoming the child's interpreter, i.e., the child manifests itself as an individual, and the adult acts as the child's assistant. Creative activity in this case involves movement in the space of possibilities associated with the search for the best option among various ideas. It is clear that for something new to emerge there must be the possibility of its emergence. It is the presence of the space of possibilities and movement in it, thanks to the construction of the space for children's realization, that allows preschoolers to engage in creative activity.

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Теоретическая статья

Сюжетно-ролевая игра и проектная деятельность как факторы развития детей дошкольного возраста

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Аннотация. Традиционно при изучении развития ребенка в дошкольном возрасте рассматривается игровая деятельность как ведущая форма детской активности. Несмотря на большой объем исследований, демонстрирующих значительное влияние сюжетно-ролевой игры на психологическое развитие дошкольников, в современных детских образовательных учреждениях в настоящее время широкое распространение получила проектная деятельность. Поэтому цель данной работы заключалась в том, чтобы определить, достаточно ли для успешного развития детей дошкольного возраста их включения в сюжетно-ролевую игру или важно использовать и другие виды деятельности. С опорой на культурно-исторический и деятельностный подходы в психологии образования были определены ключевые особенности игровой и проектной деятельности, принципиальные для развития дошкольников. На основании выделенных существенных харак-

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теристик проведен сравнительный анализ игровой и проектной деятельности, определены их принципиальные различия. В рамках анализа показано, что данные виды деятельности имеют свои инструменты развития: мнимую ситуацию (в игре) и пространство детской реализации (для проектной деятельности). Также продемонстрировано, что одной из ключевых характеристик игровой деятельности является ее процессуальность, вызванная неразвитостью операциональной сферы дошкольников, в то время как проектная деятельность направлена на создание социально значимого продукта, на результат. Наконец, существенный момент реализации игровой и проектной деятельности связан с ролью взрослого. В игре ребенок независим и является субъектом игровой деятельности. В проектной деятельности ребенок выступает как автор идеи, а взрослый как интерпретатор ребенка. Таким образом, показаны принципиальные различия игровой и проектной деятельности для развития дошкольников, которые необходимо учитывать при работе с детьми данного возраста для наиболее гармоничного обучения и воспитания.

Ключевые слова: психология развития, дошкольный возраст, сюжетно-ролевая игра, проектная деятельность, творчество

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