

## THE ROLE OF PLAY AND THE AUTONOMY OF THE CHILD IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

The child is a creative being, whose development is associated with his active role in the process of learning. He/she learns in an experiential way, relying on his/her autonomy in connecting the interests and needs, on the one side, with the challenges of the environment, on the other side. Autonomy is a reflection of holistic discourse and is an inseparable component of human development, through which, the child develops the capabilities of self-organization and self-accountability, in the process of their own development and learning. That is why the autonomy should be supported and directed in a way that is compatible with children's developmental specifics. Taking into account the specific experimental learning, the most appropriate way to support and direct the autonomy of children in the process of development and learning is the application of play. Namely, play enables the so-called "organizing of chaos" of knowledge in children and does not allow them to create non-systemic connection of facts through the learning processes.

Therefore, this paper draws attention to the need of treatment of games as a methodological concept in the organized preschool education. Especially, important questions are: What is the autonomy process, why is the early child development important, what is play in a child's development, what is used as a source of games, what is a didactic tool in the process of its organizing, how much the children use their own autonomy in their game role, where do ideas for the game derive from, and how much this process indicates the need to connect games with the life activities of children?

*Keywords:* Play (game), autonomy, life activities, early learning and development

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### Understanding autonomy and early child development

The society of knowledge and rapid change needs intellectual potential that, independently of external influences, will make decisions, and will think critically and creatively. The inclusion of a person in the social life, in which he contributes to the development of a modern human society, depends largely on the person's ability to self-realization, respecting the general human norms and values. Hence, it can be said that an autonomous person will successfully fit into social cohesion and with a high level of intellectualism will resist the challenges from outside. A person with his own attitudes will be able to respect the socially accepted forms of behavior, thereby balancing the social and personal ideals in the interest of individual integrity and the general human wellbeing.

Yidong Zhao, in his paper „Autonomous development in early childhood“, refers to the interpretation of autonomy in Collins Concise's New Zealand Dictionary (2008), in which the philosophical interpretation of it means „the doctrine that the individual human will is or ought to be governed only by its own principles and laws“ (Yidong Zhao, 2014, p.2). He also emphasizes the interpretation of Honderich, (2005) who says that the autonomous person does not rely solely on “The capacity to act on particular desires and choices ... [but also on] a more general capacity to be self-determining, to be in control of one's own life” (Yidong Zhao, 2014, p. 2). This definition suggests that autonomy enables people, with capacity, to use and enjoy

their right to control and manage themselves. The possibility and the feeling of being autonomous contributes to a happy and content person, in the function of the society's development. It implies independence and freedom in the use of capacity, to enjoy through self-control and self-management (see: Yidong Zhao, 2014)

In early childhood development, autonomy is an inseparable component of the holistic and human discourse, through which, the child develops the skills for self-organization and self-responsibility, in the process of development and learning. We find a dominant role of autonomy, as a natural phenomenon, in the early age of a child, in whom, the personality development relies mostly on his natural potentials, specificities and interests. Namely, in the period of early childhood development, autonomy is an integral part of the character of the child's personality and precisely in that period, in a specific and unique way, it directs the individual needs, interests, and potentials of each child. Amanda Munday, in her work "What is Autonomy in Early Childhood Education", says: "Children have an innate desire to be independent and to do things on their own, so it is important to give them the task for the appropriate age and to provide the necessary support to help them succeed." (Amanda Munday, 2018) Observed from this aspect, the goal should be supporting the autonomy to remain a human trait, by the means of which, the person becomes self-conscious, independent, actively self-confident, and a decision-maker. In other words, the gradual disappearance of innate and natural autonomy must not be allowed through a rigidly set and strictly directed educational process, that does not respect the child's individual needs and potentials.

This refers especially to the process of early childhood development, in which the foundations of a creative, humane, independent, and self-conscious person, are laid. Of course, in this period, upbringing and education are based on the individual approach, resulting from the different pace and way of learning in each child individually, which is an ideal basis for encouraging the development of autonomy in every person. The child is part of nature, and therefore the educational influences on him should follow natural and humanistic discourses. A child is a creative being that develops through an active role in the process of learning and survival. He learns in a sensory and experienced way, relying on his autonomy in linking his interests to the challenges of the environment. Hence, "...autonomy in relation to early childhood education means letting children know that they have control over themselves and the choices that they make" (Amanda Munday, 2018, p.1).

### **Play and autonomy in early childhood development**

In early childhood development, autonomy should be supported and directed in a way that is consistent with the child's developmental specifics. Taking into account the specific experimental learning, the most appropriate way to support and direct the autonomy of children, in the process of development and learning, is the application of the game. Namely, the game enables the so-called "organizing of chaos" in knowledge and does not allow the children to create their non-systemic connection through the learning processes.

A child's play has an important role in his development. It is a source of knowledge, emotion and social experiences for children. In a children's world, play is interwoven with life's activities. Play has a serious impact on the life of children and it is a basic educational tool in early childhood development. Because of that, the children's play is treated in the discourses of many classic or contemporary pedagogues and psychologists, such as Froebel, Steiner, Vigotsky, Montessori, Piaget, Bruner, Johnson, Bredecamp and others. "From the activities they participate in, to how they play and interact with peers, autonomy plays a role in everything a child does in the classroom. Learning how to be independent is a critical skill for preschoolers to develop, as it teaches them how to conduct themselves later in life as they take

on greater responsibilities” (Amanda Munday, 2018, 1). The game (play) is the life activity of the child, through which he develops, learns, lives and grows, gaining human qualities.

To understand the game, there is a need to emphasize its features, according to which it can be defined: Namely, the game has the following features:

- Way of learning and discovering;
- Source of knowledge and understanding of the environment;
- Way of experiencing reality;
- Manner of expression and behavior;
- Manner of communication and mutual understanding among children;
- Manner of self-awareness;
- Manner of transforming, comparing, verifying and changing children's knowledge;
- Manner and relaxation medium
- A medium for thinking
- Medium for connecting senso-motor, cognitive, and social-emotional experiences
- Lifestyle and "work"

When we talk about play, we mean the free play, in which the child chooses the concept independently, organizes his course and realizes it according to his imagination. In free games, childhood autonomy is the most appropriate. In fact, the educator should support the free play of the child, as well as the free choice that he makes within that framework. He should, within the envisaged daily goals and activities, be provided with a greater choice of assets, materials, etc., from which he will make the choices and get ideas for games, and use them all skillfully and with infinite focus, in order to realize the educational goals. Yidong Zhao, researching on the autonomy of children, also suggests that free play is another key activity that encourages young children’s sense of autonomy. Steiner notes that children acquire confidence and qualities of independent learning when they engage in free play (Yidong Zhao, 2014)

Unlike the adult person, whose game is subject to targeted organization and directed action, the motives for it in children are personal. They perceive the game as a spontaneous, sensual, and experimental activity. In it, they spontaneously engage and express themselves freely. All this contributes to the realization of the natural and holistic education, in which, through experience and spontaneous expression, the children develop their self-knowledge, self-esteem, and independence.

In terms of the role of the game in the creation of self-organization and self-control of children in the kindergarten, there is an interesting survey conducted by Grossman (2007) (cited by Yidong Zhao, 2014). His experiment was conducted in two groups with 4-year old children. In the first group, the children independently chose activities and toys, while in the other group, the children of the same age were seated on chairs and, according to the instructions of the educator, they answered to his questions and accepted organized activities. The results showed that the children in the first group demonstrated the ability to self-organization, were more focused, and dedicated on quieter activities. In the second group, the children showed nervousness and failed to pay attention. They were uninterested and unorganized (broadly in Yidong Zhao, 2014).

According to all this, it can be said that the free play has unlimited power for the overall development of the child, including his independence. Providing a symbolic transformation of the child's experience, it provides new knowledge, ideas, experiences, performances, notions. Through the game of the child, he skillfully creates situations that keep him under control, thus providing a sense of autonomy and competence. Every child understands the concrete idea in an abstract thought process, which satisfies the model of the development sequence of the cognitive process that is characteristic of the early childhood development, i.e.: from practically

- perceptively thinking, through a perceptively- presented thinking to the development of the logical thinking. According to Vigotsky, the child in the games exceeds his developmental phase and goes above his age, makes a step forward and predicts the development that follows (Vigotsky, 1989). If we want to make a holistic treatment of a child in the educational process, we have to know that the source of games for children will be the environment and nature. The teacher has to be pedagogically and didactically prepared in order to organize a rich environment and a playing process.

The game is the foundation for the realization of the educational activity in the programs for early learning and development. It is the basic form in planning quality early childhood development. In the Early Learning and Development Program in Macedonia, it is one of the principles on which this program is based. Namely, the principle that is named in this document as "Principle of game dominance and the principle of connecting with life reality" is explained by the fact that "children learn best through the game. In the learning process, the game is accepted as a method of learning, through which children acquire elementary knowledge and practical skills necessary for a quality life" (Early Learning and Development Program, 2014). Among the skills that are necessary for a quality life, there is also independence and self-confidence.

## Conclusion

An autonomous person is needed in any society that aspires to develop in a democratic and humane way. This person is satisfied with herself, she knows herself well, she respects herself and believes in her own decisions, which means she builds a humane attitude towards the whole environment. Therefore, we can say that an individual who is an autonomous person will successfully fit into social cohesion and intellectually, at a high level, will resist the challenges from outside. Only those who have personal attitudes that can freely express, without offending the others, will be able to respect socially accepted forms of behavior, thereby balancing the social and personal ideals, in which the individual integrity and the non-alienation of human beings, are supported. Autonomy has to be built from the earliest age, as early as the period in which the child has a natural sensation for his or her needs and interests. Namely, the child is a creative being, whose development is related to his active role in the process of learning and survival. He learns in a sensible and experiential way, relying on his autonomy in connecting the interests and needs with the challenges of the environment. The support of autonomy, in the interest of creativity and human development, depends on the provision of the game and the conditions for it. In that sense, it should be emphasized that free play is the one game that supports autonomy. The free play is a medium in which the child, by expressing himself, becomes acquainted and accepts in the most appropriate way. Therefore, game should find its place in the educational processes, where it will be used for the realization of the planned educational goals by the experienced and proficient tutor.

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