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The Interrelation between Initiative in Play and Dialectical Thinking in Preschool Age

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In the article play is considered as a space for the development of creative (dialectical) thinking in preschool age. The aim of the study is to analyze the relationship between the success of children in solving creative (dialectical) tasks and initiative in spontaneous play. The study involved 57 preschoolers from 2 preschool groups, contrasting in the quality of the educational environment. A qualitative and quantitative analysis of the initiative in play was carried out using an observation tool developed on the basis of the methodology of E.O. Smirnova. A total of 14 videos of a joint play were analyzed. "What can be simultaneously at the same time", "Dialectical stories", "Three stories" were used to measure the level of creative (dialectical) thinking. Qualitative analysis made it possible to distinguish two types of initiative actions — maintaining and changing the course of play. The study revealed the correlation between creative thinking in children's narratives and play-changing initiative. The study points to the value of play as an activity where the child can not only solve, but also set tasks.

Keywords: preschool age; play; initiative; creative thinking; dialectical thinking.

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Взаимосвязь инициативы в игре и диалектического мышления у дошкольников

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Представлены материалы исследования, посвященного проблематике игры как пространства развития творческого (диалектического) мышления в дошкольном возрасте. Цель исследования — проанализировать взаимосвязь между успешностью решения детьми творческих (диалектических) задач и проявлением инициативы в игре. В исследовании приняли участие 57 дошкольников из 2 дошкольных групп, контрастных по качеству образовательной среды. Качественный и количественный анализ проявлений инициативы в игре проведен с помощью инструмента для наблюдения, разработанного на основе методики Е.О. Смирновой. Всего проанализировано 14 видеозаписей совместной игры. Для диагностики творческого (диалектического) мышления были использованы методики «Что может быть одновременно», «Диалектические истории», «Три истории». Качественный анализ позволил выделить два типа инициативы — сохраняющую и изменяющую игру. Выявлена взаимосвязь между творческим мышлением в детских нарративах и инициативой, меняющей ход игры. Исследование указывает на ценность игры как деятельности, где ребенок может не только решать, но и ставить задачи.

Ключевые слова: дошкольный возраст; игра; инициатива; творческое мышление; диалектическое мышление.

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Introduction

The development of creative abilities of preschoolers is one of the most pressing problems in the research of age, its relevance is growing due to the increasing understanding of the importance of creativity for the full development and self-realization of the individual. Particular importance holds an understanding of creative thinking as being dialectical in its nature, which operates with special logical structures — different from the formal-logical thinking and its operations, described by J. Piaget [5]. Dialectical cognitive actions are considered to be accessible to both adults and children and perform as a mechanism of solving contradictory situations and generating new ideas [2].

Researchers emphasize the meaning of play primarily as of a space of emotions and empathy [5; 16], this increases interest in considering it as a possible context for the development of creative thinking. This corresponds with the core methodological principle of cultural-historical psychology of the unity of affect and intellect: in play, a child solves not just cognitive problems, these tasks are always filled with meaning and loaded with emotions. The goal of this paper is to study the correlation between play and creative thinking in preschoolers.

The issue of the correlation between play and creativity was defined by the "great dialogue" between L.S. Vygotsky and J. Piaget. L.S. Vygotsky considered play as a space for the manifestation of creative imagination [4] and in his article "Play and Development" notes that play clearly reveals children's capabilities that are not yet visible in ordinary behavior [4, p. 226]. But in the work of J. Piaget play as a symbolic activity appears to be a space of assimilation and is opposed to intellectual adaptation and the formation of formal operations, Here, play acts as a way of egocentric satisfaction of needs (although in the long term it is important for achieving egulibrium) [5].

Over the past decades, a number of studies have been conducted on the connection between play and creative thinking: research of the relationship of play and divergent thinking [14], studying the role of play for the subsequent solution of divergent problems [21], formative research that question the influence of several play sessions on creativity [14; 17; 18], as well as longitudinal

studies of the ability to play as a predictor of creativity in primary school [20; 23].

At the same time, the research results are ambiguous: although a connection between play and creativity is found in some studies, the developmental impact of play sessions on creativity haven't always been found significant.

A. Lillard [22] sees the reason for the inconsistency of data in the research design — short play sessions, small samples, etc. Another reason may be the diversity of the concepts of creativity and play used.

In this paper we understand the imaginary situation as the criterion for the play, and double subjectivity as its key feature [6; 13], and distinguish the play from the 'play event' (takes place in a 'play world') [16], because in the play world an imaginary situation is created by an adult, and the child can only partially influence it. The assumption is that play can become a space for the emergence of creative thinking because an important aspect of the creative process is intellectual initiative, which allows a person not only to solve assigned tasks, but also to set tasks for themselves independently [1].

The concept of creative thinking has been repeatedly criticized due to the lack of a definition of the thought process and its characteristics that leads to the creation of a new idea [1], and due to the irrelevance of the concept of creative thinking for such activities where, when putting forward a new idea, the child must take into account the positions of partners [8]. Here, by creative thinking we will understand the use of special dialectical structures, which are a universal mechanism for generating new ideas, accessible to adults and children. Dialectical structures understood as dialectical cognitive actions (such as transformation, mediation, change of alternative, etc.), which allow to productively operate with opposites and resolve contradictory situations [2]. On the one hand, the concept of dialectical thinking describes the creative process as structural, leading to an insight, the resolution of conflict and a new understanding of the situation, and on the other — creative process described as divergent, generating many possible solutions.

The relevance of creativity as dialectical thinking is also confirmed by the fact that play itself has a dialectical structure, which is manifested in the intricacies of play substitution, the coordination of different ideas in a joint play, the duality of emotions, and the pleasure of acting along the line of greatest resistance [3].

In the context of searching for correlates of creative thinking in play, the phenomenon of children's initiative is important. In contrast to the study by N.V. Khazratova [8], conducted under the guidance of V.N. Druzhinin, where children's creative moves during play were diagnosed, we consider it important to make children's play initiative the subject of observation instead as a more observable phenomenon. Following E.O. Smirnova, we understand initiative in play as "the ability to act regardless of circumstances and to overcome them" [7, p. 14], and consider it to be a possible prerequisite for creativity. Important to note that children's supra-situational activity as a manifestation of creativity has so far been studied in problem solving, not in play [1].

Main hypothesis: there is a correlation between the initiative shown by older preschoolers in play and their creative (dialectical) thinking.

Additional hypothesis: in groups of older preschoolers with different quality of educational environment, children's manifestations of initiative in play will be different.

Methods

The sample consists of 57 preschool children (6—6.5 years old, 27 boys) from 2 Moscow schools. 2 groups with different levels of quality of the educational environment were selected: total scores, respectively, 2.21 and 3.68 (28 children from one

group, 29 from the other). The difference in the quality of the educational environment was calculated using Student's t-test and was significant in terms of the overall score at the level of 0.004.

Observations of play were conducted in a playroom familiar to the children, where unstructured materials were available, and lasted no less than 50 minutes. The adult present provided only indirect support and did not join the play. Each child took part in two play sessions with a different composition of children (each group had 7—8 children). The children consented to filming. A total of 14 videos were made. Children's play was assessed using video recordings.

For evaluation of video recordings, a modification of the play observation parameters (substitution and interaction in the game) of E.O. Smirnova's was used [6]. It was also supplemented by the two-step play action [12]. Video recordings were simultaneously independently rated (not included in the study sample) by experts to test the reliability of the assessment tool. The parameters that manifested discrepancy between the estimates were corrected. After the second round of parallel assessment which used new video recordings, the experts' assessments completely coincided.

In order to diagnose creative (dialectical) thinking, following methods were used: "What can happen at the same time" (solving problematic/contradictory situations) [2], "Fairy tale stories", in which children are asked to solve a problem situation among fictional characters [10], and method "Three Stories", in which children supposed to create their own narrative — to compose a story about fire, a non-scary story about a scary character and a funny story) [11].

Assessment of the quality of the educational environment in groups using ECERS-3 scales [9]. The ECERS-3 scales measure the extent to which the educational environment (equipment, materials, interaction between teachers and children, time for free activities)

is focused on supporting children's initiative and takes into account children's interests and needs. according to ECERS-3 higher levels of quality imply greater opportunities for free activity in general and for play in particular. The assessment involves a 3-hour structured and non-participant observation by a certified expert in a group homeroom and on a walk in the morning.

Findings

The first stage of qualitative analysis — the initial viewing of videos — allowed to suggest that there are two types of initiative in the play: the first used to preserve the course of the play and second one used to change it. Preservation of the play expressed, for example, in suggesting a play idea that would help to continue the play without changing it (the story continues through cycles of repetitions, and new ways of playing do not appear). On the other hand, changing

the course of the play would involve effort in both continuation (e.g. maintaining a connection with the original plot) and in causing change in the play: the play itself is the same, but new ideas and plot twists appear, and the possibilities for transforming emotions in the play expand. We suggest that it is the second type of initiative in the play that is associated with the level of development of creative thinking in preschoolers, since it allows one to simultaneously maintain and change the course of play.

After the initial analysis of the video recordings, the assessment parameters were corrected and supplemented with indicators (see table 1).

Analysis of the video using corrected parameters allowed to discover that children show both types of play initiative: play-saving initiative and play-changing initiative. During the play, the same child could make initiative actions of both types.

Table 1

Parameters for assessing initiative in children's play

Observation	Play-saving initiative (1 point for each appearance)	Play-changing initiative (2 points for each appearance)
The child suggests a challenge	The challenge in the logic of the plot is a provocation, but repetitive, extensive unfolding of the game	The challenge is new to the game — sets a new direction, preserves and changes the game at the same time
An answer to the challenge	An answer in the logic of the challenge, repetition of the answer	An answer to a challenge, changing the course of the play: • Adding new lines to the plot; • Changing the situation to the opposite; • Coordination and connection of conflicting ideas; • Resolving a real conflict between players through changing the plot
Subject substitution	One initiates the use of a copy toy or item for its intended purpose or initiates the use of a substitute item due to similarity	Invents and creates an object for the play, uses unusual substitutions when necessary to implement a play idea, solve or create a problem situation in the play
Play space	Initiates the functional use of space or creates playing places in the play following the logic of the original plot (changing quantity, but not quality)	Creates new play spaces, opposite in meaning to original ones
Play interaction	The proposed idea is accepted or rejected, meanwhile the joint play continues nonetheless	The child suggests linking two or more different ideas into one story

The maximum score obtained by a child during the two play sessions on the parameters "play-saving initiative" and "play-changing initiative" was used for statistical analysis. Scores were counted for each type of initiative separately.

Judging by manifestations of initiative, we identified three groups of children: 51% showed both types of initiative, 30.3% showed only initiative that preserved the play, 17.8% of children had no recorded manifestations of initiative in the play: last group either did not participate in the play or collaborated with other children. Significant differences were found (Two Sample Wilcoxon rank sum test) between groups with different quality of the educational environment, for both play-saving initiative (P-value=0.00191) and play-changing initiative (P-value=0.00127). In groups with a higher quality of education, children show initiative in play significantly more often than in groups with a lower quality.

Using one of the play sessions as an example, let's look at the differences between the two types of initiative. Playing girls act out the relationship between a horse and its owner and switch roles from time to time. For some time, role-playing actions follow the traditional algorithm: the owner harnesses the horse, feeds it, and prepares to ride it. The initiative that preserves the play lies in the children's proposals to feed the horse, ride it, arrange a place for it to spend the night ("Here's some hay, oats, eat it, little horse!", "Now I'm a horse, do the same with me", "Lure it with oats! Lure it with pancakes"). We qualified these actions as a manifestation of initiative, since one of the children proposed them, and the rest accepted them, and the play continued. Then, after a while, play-changing initiative happened: "Let me be a naughty horse". The "Naughty Horse" set a new vector for the play: it behaved in a fundamentally non-normative manner, upending the traditional role of the horse:

it ran away, children had to look for it, catch it, etc. In this case, the child created a challenge for himself and for others, a test of loss and overcoming it. L.I. Elkoninova points out that creating a challenge situation is one of the options for a play initiative [12]. In this case, we see the "cognitive construction" of the challenge: the behavior of a "disobedient horse" — the transformation of a normative role into its opposite, its consistent negation.

Next, let's describe several cases of children's initiative that changed the direction of the play to see if it is possible to reconstruct the problem that the child was solving. In this case, the logic of analysis is opposite to traditional approaches in the study of creative thinking, where the child is presented with a task and his answer is analyzed according to the parameters of constructiveness or originality. In this case, it is impossible to detect such an important aspect of creativity as initiative, independent formulation of the problem, which is a basic characteristic of creativity [1]. Here we reconstructed the problem situations that children solved based on the analysis of children's initiative. We consider this approach to be more valid for studying children's creative thinking.

Let's look at two cases, "Mermaids" and "Monster". In each case, we will start from the manifestation of a child's initiative. which changed the course of the play. In the "Mermaid" case, as the play unfolded, the ship on which the children were sailing hit an iceberg, and it was clear that dramatic events were about to happen. But then one of the girls said a phrase that changed the course of the play: "We drowned, but suddenly it turned out that we were not dying, because we are mermaids and can live under water". An initiative here is also a solution to the problem: transforming all children from sailors into mermaids allowed the play to continue (over the next 40 minutes, all participants enthusiastically created mermaid costumes and explored the underwater world).

In the Monster case, children fought with cardboard swords two against one. Composition of the pair changed all the time, children switched places, so all children at some point were in a role of a lone fighter. Those who had a partner at the time were quite happy, but when they found themselves alone children become upset. It continued for some time, until one of the boys, who, in turn, found himself without a partner, exclaimed: "I came up with an idea! Let's fight the monster!" and pointed to the carpet between the players. He suggested that instead of fighting with each other, they should switch to fighting with an imaginary character, thanks to which all the participants unite and no one is alone anymore. In this case, the task that the child solved was a task of uniting opposites and resolving a contradiction.

The described cases show that under the initiative action in the play the formulation and solution of a problem situation can be discovered.

Correlation analysis revealed significant relationship (p<0.05) between the frequency of children's initiative that changes the play, and the results of diagnosing creative thinking based on the material of narratives that were composed by the children themselves (the "Three Stories" method) (r=0.27 according to Spearman). No connection was found between creative thinking and play-saving initiative.

No significant correlations were found between the presence of play-changing initiative and the success of solving contradictory (dialectical) problems, which were proposed outside the situation where children create a symbolic context: in the methods "What can happen at the same time?" and "Dialectical Stories".

Discussion

The additional hypothesis of our study was confirmed by significant differences

in the two preschool groups in terms of initiative in play (both play-saving and play-changing), which suggest that the quality of educational conditions, in particular, the nature of the teacher's interaction with children and the richness of the play environment, can act as one of the significant factors. However, this hypothesis requires further testing, since the nature of the manifestation of children's initiative could be influenced by other factors (for example, child's home educational environment, the socio-economic status of families, etc.), which were not analyzed in the framework of this study.

Correlations between the success of resolving conflicting situations and the presence of transformations and ambivalent characters in the narratives created by children were found only for play-changing initiative, which allows us to conclude that the distinction made between two types of initiative is legitimate and there are significant differences between types of initiative play actions, in particular, different cognitive mechanisms behind them.

Relationships between parameters that were found in this study partially confirm the main hypothesis and suggest that creative (dialectical) thinking can act as a cognitive mechanism for performing play-changing initiative.

A qualitative analysis of play-changing initiative also shows the possibility of discovering — as a source of the initiative action — a much needed solution to some problem that arises during the play, which confirms the hypothesis of E.O. Smirnova that "initiative is the most important prerequisite for creativity" [7].

Also of interest is the lack of significant correlations between children's play initiative (including play-changing) and the results of diagnosing dialectical thinking in the course of solving problems outside the symbolic context. It can be assumed that in symbolic space, where there is a diver-

gence between the real and semantic fields, problem solving occurs differently than in a conceptual or pre-conceptual context. This is consistent with the understanding of the importance of symbolic activity for the cognitive development of preschool children, which researchers point out, in particular, in studies on the role of conceptual play worlds, fantasy stories and symbolic reflection for cognitive development [15; 19].

The conducted research, establishing the interrelation between creative (dialectical) thinking in children's narratives and play-changing initiative, indicates the value of the play as an activity where the child can not only solve, but also set tasks (communicative, "challenging" tasks, etc.). Let us note that this multidimensionality and synthetic nature makes it difficult to analyze play: this is why a child's initiative often seems to be an unmotivated fantasy.

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and only reconstruction makes it possible to see the problem that the child posed and solved.

A relevant question in the context of growing interest in both children's play and creative thinking, which our research does not allow us to answer, but only to raise: is it possible to influence the development of creative (dialectical) thinking through the support of developed play, which creates space for the manifestation of children's initiative?

The data obtained in the study is another argument in favor of creating conditions for developed play, where there are opportunities to show initiative. It is this kind of play that is the "ninth wave of child development," according to the figurative expression of L.S. Vygotsky [4], and can become a space for the development of creative thinking.

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