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PRESCHOOL AS THE SPACE OF INFORMAL PEER EDUCATION

PRZEDSZKOLE JAKO PRZESTRZEŃ NIEFORMALNEJ RÓWIEŚNICZEJ EDUKACJI

Abstract: Preschool is the first institution in the Polish system of education that exhibits educational character. Apart from activities teachers engage them in, following the curriculum, children learn from one another through peer interaction. The aim of the following article is to present characteristic features of the preschool environment as the context for informal peer learning of children. From the group of factors that condition learning we discuss: material surrounding of the preschool, daily schedule, parental expectations as well as selected official documents and internal (unofficial) regulations for such institutions, among other things. Critical analysis of the aforementioned elements shows the pre-school surrounding, both in social and physical sense, as the untapped potential in the learning process of kindergarten pupils.

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Streszczenie: Przedszkole jest w polskim systemie szkolnictwa pierwszą instytucją o charakterze edukacyjnym. Równoległe do uczenia się kierowanego przez nauczycieli, zgodnie z oficjalnym programem edukacyjnym, w placówkach przedszkolnych dzieci uczą się od siebie wzajemnie, w toku interakcji rówieśniczych. Celem artykułu jest charakterystyka instytucjonalnego środowiska przedszkolnego jako kontekstu dla nieformalnego rówieśniczego uczenia się dzieci. Jako czynniki kształtujące ten proces wskazano m.in. przestrzeń materialną przedszkola, organizację dnia, oczekiwania rodziców oraz wybrane dokumenty oficjalne i wewnętrzne przepisy regulujące pracę instytucji. Krytyczna analiza wymienionych elementów przedstawia przestrzeń przedszkola jako niewykorzystany potencjał do uczenia się wychowanków.

Słowa kluczowe: przedszkole, edukacja przedszkolna, rówieśnicze uczenie się, uczenie się nieformalne

INTRODUCTION

Since the kindergarten became a link of the Polish educational system, researchers and teachers are discussing the educational nature of the work of this institution. It is worth mentioning here that although the terms “preschool upbringing” and “preschool education” are used interchangeably in relation to the first stage of institutional education, the language of ministerial documents uses the term “preschool upbringing”.

This may have consequences for the social understanding of the role of the preschool stage in human life. As D. Waloszek (2006, p. 110) writes, in the teaching and academic environment, upbringing is usually attributed to activities aimed at the development of personality, and education of the intellect. According to D. Klus-Stańska (2017, p. 239), the use of the term “preschool upbringing” “means emphasis on behavior-modification and normative issues, and marginalization of children’s cognitive development”. In the curriculum documents, the goal of the kindergarten is “support for the overall development of the child”, which is “implemented through the process of care, upbringing and teaching – learning” (MEN, 2017, p. 2). Thus, learning is one of the basic processes the course of which determines the meaning of the existence of preschool institutions.

The aim of this article is to review educational practices in Polish preschools from the perspective of the conditions for peer learning of pupils. Peer learning at the preschool level is still poorly researched in Poland. Theoretical texts on this issue emphasize the developmental and educational importance of children’s learning from each other and analyze selected factors conditioning this process (Sajdera, 2005; Brzezińska, 2009; Brzezińska, Rycielska, 2009; Brzezińska, Apelt, 2013; Appelt, Matejczuk, 2013; Brzezińska, 2014; Sławińska, 2015; Babiuk-Massalska, 2019), while a few domestic studies most often present two forms of peer learning tutoring (Pawlak, 2009; Kosno, 2013) or collaboration (Bilewicz-Kuźnia, 2015; Andrzejewska,

2013). The context for peer interactions in the above-mentioned projects were formal situations, arranged by adults. A new look at peer learning may be a shift from formal (teacher-led) to informal learning by preschoolers. In other words, the aim of the analyzes undertaken will be to reconstruct the institutional context created by kindergarten for the spontaneous peer learning of preschoolers.

TERMINOLOGY

For the purposes of the presented considerations, it seems necessary to explain two key terms for the presented problem peer learning and informal learning. Peer learning occurs when learners learn with and from each other in both formal and informal ways (Boud, 2014, p. 4), without immediate teacher intervention (Boud et al., 2001, p. 4). This relationship takes place between participants equal to each other (in the social sense), who are not professional teachers (Topping, 2005, p. 631). Learning this way is not only reserved for educational institutions or for children's interactions – it can be realized in a variety of contexts, although it often concerns people who experience long-term failure in learning (Topping, 2015). The literature on the subject distinguishes three types of peer learning tutoring, learning I collaboration and collaborative learning (Damon, 1995) – each of them may have different variants, and the boundaries between them are not always clear.

As already mentioned, peer learning can be formal or informal. Informal learning includes all activities where the acquisition of knowledge or skills takes place outside the curricula of educational institutions (Livingstone, 1999, p. 4). In this approach, attention is paid to the process, not the area of learning, and its “informality” is determined not by the place (institution) in which it takes place, but by the way in which learners acquire knowledge (Duguid et al., 2013). Thus, informal learning for children takes place independently and sometimes against the aims of the official preschool education curriculum.

With regard to the preschool stage, non-formal learning includes mainly free play and other spontaneous children's activities beyond the direct control of the teacher. The educational value of play significantly exceeds the commonly recognized benefits of social interactions – for researchers, play is not only the most important form of activity, but also the most important factor in the development of a preschool child (Vygotsky, 2002), a basic educational strategy, a development/educational imperative (Waloszek, 2006, pp. 268–269). In Poland, unlike in Western countries, institutional peer learning programs are not popular and practically non-existent at the preschool level. However, spontaneous play with friends is an arena of incessant learning, the cognitive and social effects of which are still demonstrated by researchers. These include an increase in academic achievement, social and communication skills, and the development of more difficult to define personality traits (Topping, 2005). Peer learning can also be a space preparing children for the so-called

deep (or “deeper”) learning, which is understood as a process by which a person is able to acquire and assimilate knowledge in a given context and apply it in a slightly different context - apply knowledge in practice (learn in the direction of knowledge transfer) (Musiał, 2018). The phenomenon of deep learning is associated with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, primarily through problem solving, conducting independent research and scientific research, and one of the next steps that make up the deep learning cycle is building a supportive, safe learning culture, an essential part of which is positive student-student relationship (Jensen, Nickelsen, 2008). In the course of everyday games and conversations children share their knowledge. The scope and complexity of problems solved in the conditions of cooperation and “resource exchange” may surprise adults.

PRESCHOOL AS AN INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

According to I. Knud (2006, p. 214), learning is always somehow “localized”, so it takes place in a specific space, in an external context, which is a part of learning and determines both the course of this process and its result. Educational institutions are indicated as one of the three separate contexts of human learning – in addition to everyday life and work. I assume that preschools as institutions create a specific educational context, including a set of features characteristic of the preschool learning environment, common to many institutions, despite organizational diversity. Assuming the understanding of an institution as “a category of rules and principles constituting social life in a given institution or in a given institutional system” (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2009, p. 273), it should be admitted that, apart from the norms imposed from the outside, in preschools there are also rules that are “an element of a contract, an act of will of individuals who create and constitute relations between themselves” (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2009, p. 275). With regard to the aims of the article, my intention is therefore to indicate those elements of the preschool learning environment that arise not only in response to ministerial regulations, but also as a result of habits, safeguards, omissions or stereotypes about preschool education. Complementary elements of the preschool educational environment are material space (the preschool building and other facilities on its premises, their arrangement and equipment) and (more difficult to define and multidimensional) intangible space, covering the scope of powers, norms of conduct and relations between various educational entities.

Simply put, the educational environment is the set of conditions in which learning takes place (Dumont, Istance, 2013).

MATERIAL SPACE OF PRESCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S PLAY

Looking at the material space of the preschool, it can be noticed that its arrangement is customary and traditional, although it follows certain fashions. Research has shown (Siarkiewicz, 2000; Falkiewicz-Szult, 2006) that preschool space is found by pupils who cannot organize and modify it, and the rules of its use may interfere with the development of social competences and limit the child's subjectivity. Children are deprived of the possibility to freely use the space seemingly intended for them and experiencing the consequences of the decisions made regarding its various modeling, and they cannot participate in the construction of social norms related to its use. Such a state of affairs may be related to the lack of appropriate provisions in subsequent versions of the core curriculum for preschools, which would give importance to the independent modeling of the preschool space (or the participation of children in this process with adults) for their subjectivity or learning. Preschools tempt children and parents with rich equipment, but in many cases there is a conspicuous excess including equipment, aids and toys, as well as information and decorative elements created by teachers, called by D. Waloszek (2014, p. 119) "educational scenography". Overloaded rooms prevent children from freely accessing preschool equipment and modeling the space on their own, and the abundance of toys (as well as their extreme poverty) may be a brake on children's play. We are dealing here with the phenomenon of habituation, known in psychology, i.e. getting used to stimuli – an excess of toys, decorations and information displayed in every available place causes that "room equipment ceases to be an offer inviting to action" (Molińska, Rajczyk, 2014, p. 58). The narrow use of certain toys and the literalness with which they imitate reality can also be harmful. Such equipment of play corners, in conjunction with ready space management, limits the development of children's play. Because the constitutive element of its organization are preparatory and organizing activities that do not belong to the proper play, but ensure its duration (Al-Khamisy, 2001, p. 11), being at the same time an opportunity to develop creativity, versatile skills and a sense of agency in children.

EDUCATIONAL OFFER AND ORGANIZATION OF THE DAY IN PRESCHOOL

An even greater threat to spontaneous play, and thus to informal learning, is the phenomenon of **the teacher's appropriation of time for free activity of children**, which is present in the organization of preschools. Publicly disclosed concepts for the work of preschools include play as an important element of a child's development. Unofficially, however, in many preschools, free play is treated as educationally less

valuable than activity directed by teachers. As noted by Swedish researchers in the work of preschools fun and learning are divided in time and space, which is accompanied by strong rhetoric emphasizing its developmental importance. Moreover, play is an activity initiated by the children themselves, while learning is associated with the activity initiated by adults (Samuelsson, Carlsson, 2008).

For the aforementioned reasons, the free activity of children is shortened and disturbed by classes conducted by teachers, treated as “obligatory” (resulting from the requirements of the core curriculum) or in the form of “additional” classes, developing the interests and talents of preschoolers. The first ones, provided for in the official framework schedule, are often unauthorizedly extended, even against the developmental possibilities of children, at the expense of for example, playing in the preschool garden. The latter such as dance, art, theater, chess, robotics, are organized for lack of other possibilities during the free time. Due to the fact that the monitoring of the implementation of the core curriculum by teachers is one of the elements of pedagogical supervision and contributes to the evaluation of their work, as a legal act it remains inviolable and beyond the reach of (official) criticism. However, from the scientific perspective, like any normative document, it is the subject of research and discussion. The current core curriculum for preschools has met with the crushing criticism of early childhood education experts. D. Klus-Stańska, a member of the Pedagogical Sciences Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, assessed it as “an unprofessional document: careless, chaotic, selective, incomplete, significantly different in form, structure and content from similar documents adopted in similar countries” (2017, p. 243). The accusations include “reduction of manifestations of independent cognitive activity”, “ignoring the child’s research attitude”. The author of the opinion writes that “[in the light of the provisions of the core curriculum] the child’s life is reduced to institutional logic” (2017, p. 242). Therefore, if the document, fundamental for the organization of teaching work in preschools, does not emphasize or even notice in its content the spontaneous learning of children, driven by internal motivation and curiosity of the world, it is difficult to blame teachers who are accountable for the “implementation of the core curriculum” about neglect on this level.

Some preschools, especially non-public ones, competing for clients expand their offer using the services of various external entities, as a result of which preschoolers have some educational and entertainment attractions every day. This is one of the burdens resulting from the functioning of educational institutions in the neoliberal free-market model, which was also not resisted by preschools (Cf. Karwowska-Struczyk, 2012; Michałowska, 2013; Dzikiewicz-Gazda, 2013). The time spent in the facility is carefully calculated, and the children move from room to room, from one instructor or animator to another. As D. Waloszek (2009, p. 139) writes, “children stopped playing, learning – they are entertained (by actors, magicians)”. Such organization of children’s activities in preschool is part of contemporary culture, called the culture of excess, in which “we are inundated with images, sounds,

performances, words, products and services” (Szlendak, 2013, p. 8). The culture of excess is accompanied by the fashion for “investing in a child” (Kuszak, 2018, p. 26), also an example of neoliberal practices. It should be clearly emphasized that despite the high attractiveness of the mentioned activities, they are not perceived by children as fun. Interrupting and limiting play time causes children to finish play before it is finalized, which can be a cause of childhood frustration (Al-Khamisy, 2001). The belief in the superiority of the guided activities over the free classes also results in the teachers limiting those children’s activities the implementation of which requires longer preparation, many materials or the participation of many partners at the same time, or which, for example are associated with a large “mess”, thus depriving the pupils of opportunities to learn planning work, cooperation or gaining other important development experiences.

Teachers also admit that **free play is a bargaining chip in enforcing positive behaviors of pupils**. Interviews with beginning teachers show that in some preschools, principals expect (and sometimes even demand) that children participate in teacher-led activities and games at times when parents can observe pedagogical work. Although the types of activities proposed at that time cannot be denied the developmental potential, their property is also the fact that (like many other activities undertaken by children during the day) they do not come from their choice. This way, principals and teachers want to convince parents that they care about their children’s development and regulate their activity in the “desired direction”, which is to be a testimony to the high competence of professional teaching staff. This practice arises from behaviorist-inspired beliefs about the superiority of knowledge from the teacher over personal knowledge: “Knowledge at school is commonly associated with the curriculum, textbooks and the teacher’s message, i.e. with what the institution contributes to teaching” (Klus-Stańska, 2019, p. 7). Meanwhile, as emphasized by M. Kocór, although the direct effect of education is the increase in knowledge, skills, desired attitudes and behaviors of students, “it is difficult to distinguish which attitudes and behaviors are the result of school’s influence, and which are the result of family and peer socialization, the media or their coherent systemic actions” (Klus-Stańska, 2019, p. 158). Thus, “displaying” didactic work with pupils when their parents pick them up, practiced by some preschools, should be considered a superficial and manipulative action, and in the context of what has already been said, in the perception of more aware observers revealing the image of the preschool’s work, the opposite to the intended.

The cognitive and social (as well as emotional, as Knud (2006) states) dimensions of learning are difficult to separate, they reveal themselves in parallel. As the research of P. Williams (2001) proves, play and daily routine activities in kindergarten trigger spontaneous learning from peers, the subject of which are social norms both official, introduced by the teacher, and internal, applicable in preschool peer culture. Children learn how to gain access to play and negotiate its terms, what behaviors guarantee acceptance of their peers and make friends, how to protect the play space and protect

their access to things. In favorable conditions, the measure of which is not disturbing the caregivers, play can therefore be a source of knowledge for a preschool child about social mechanisms on a micro scale. Thus, the cognitive aspect of peer learning includes the knowledge “what is the world like” and the social – competence “how to act in this world”.

The course of children’s learning in a preschool institution is also shaped by **the phenomenon of excessive formalism in the implementation of legal provisions** (not only educational) and **adoring parents’ expectations**. While organizing the daily work, the teacher is constantly watching the rules, regulations and orders that they do not know or non-compliance results in inconvenience or sanctions on the part of supervisory authorities or parents of charges. Sometimes it is for fear of breaking the accepted rules and procedures (safety, health, hygiene), official and customary, and sometimes in response to unjustified parents’ expectations, in preschool the children’s exploration of the world, striving for independence, spontaneous experience, trial and error method is limited.

Strict safety procedures mean that children are not allowed to climb trees, even if they are very low, or play war, they do not go outside when there is just any drizzle, and even in the park, where there is no traffic, they have to move in the column couple after couple. Teachers ensure that children’s free activity is free of the slightest risk, which is, however, natural for children’s games and has developmental value (Gray, 2015, pp. 205–208). Even with the safety of children as an understandable priority, enforcing certain rules in very directive activities seems overkill.

Physical risk taken by children in games not controlled by adults is accompanied by “social risk”, for example, a potential lack of acceptance by some peers or exclusion from play, which, according to W. Corsaro (1985, after Williams, 2001), is an inherent element of culture and teaches children to regulate interpersonal relations. By adopting this perspective, preventing children’s conflicts or excessive teacher interference in their course disrupts natural social learning. Williams proves with his research that the behavior of children shows the effects of the rules adopted in preschools and may prompt teachers to reconsider them.

SUMMARY AND PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The analyzes carried out in the article lead to a general conclusion that the institutional environment of Polish preschools is not conducive to informal learning by peers. Education in an institution is necessarily different from a child’s natural learning at home, but even in conditions as strongly controlled externally, as in the case of public education, it is possible to shape the space that triggers natural learning processes. The following conditions favor the triggering of informal learning by pupils in the course of peer interactions:

- Diverse, but not overloaded material space, with the right of children to model it adequately to the current cognitive and social needs.
- Departure from the model of planning pedagogical work, in which the goals and contents are set by the teacher, following the program provisions in a fixed order (specified, for example, in a methodological guide), and the child follows them, towards one where the starting point is goals and content appointed by the child him/herself. An intermediate solution would be the implementation of the curriculum content in response to the interests and needs of children, extended by issues not included in the program documents, but arousing the cognitive curiosity of preschoolers. This type of planning apparently applies only to teacher-led activities, but in practice requires educators to focus on informal learning, which may be the starting point for “compulsory” classes.
- A more flexible day schedule and time for children to be free and minimizing adult interference, including a common-sense approach to child risk and safety.
- Strengthening the importance of free play in the minds of teachers and parents of pupils. It cannot be required that all parents fully understand the pro-development nature of play and children’s learning mechanisms. With regard to educational issues, the average parent is intuitive and uses common knowledge. It is the teaching staff (including the management) that should be required to present scientific arguments supporting the adopted concept and organization of the preschool’s teaching work.

The implementation of the above postulates, as usual in the case of efforts by educational institutions to improve the quality of their work, requires the cooperation and integration of activities of several entities (kindergarten, parents, the governing body, the school board), which may turn out to be difficult, but not impossible.

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