

Constructive Empathizing – Educational Competence in the Light of Child’s Play

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Introduction

The metaphor of *instructional scaffolding* which elaborates upon Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development belongs to a currently predominant (together with the theory of affordance) manner of thinking about a child’s development. The experimental approaches of cognitive and developmental psychologies are complemented by philosophical reflection in the fields of the philosophy of culture and education, ethics, and social philosophy. The specificity of the philosophical approach consists in the methodological analysis of the interpretive skills gained in the process of learning culture¹, in the perspective of everyday acts of humanistic interpretation. The processes of internalization and externalization, i.e. the *inhaling* and *exhaling* of meanings, are creative phenomena, simply because they occur in every new situation. The development of a child’s cultural competence rests on such a reproduction of culture (understood as desired states of affairs and the ways in which they can be realized) by the child that the zone of proximal development (ZPD) created by its caretakers becomes significantly transformed. That happens when a child becomes independent in the field which is the aim of the zone of proximal development. Each stage of development requires that the caretaker creates a new theory of the child’s mind. Thus, the development of educational competence runs parallel to child development stages. At earlier stages the transformations pertain to the relationship between a child and its caretaker. At later stages the zone of proximal development created by a caretaker in the context of the external social reality gains importance. At a certain stage in its development a child

¹ In a further part of the paper, when I present the construct of educational competence, I use many terms to refer to child’s development. There is no classic term to understand development which I conceptualized by pointing to developing dynamic between the abstract and spontaneous thinking about the world. The background of my understanding of that dynamics is John Dewey’s principle of anti-dualism that assumes relation between artistic production and aesthetic experience (White M., *Philosophy of Culture. The scope of holistic realism*, New Jersey 2002, p. 29). The Deweyan term “artistic-aesthetic experience” refers not to learning culture, but to culture acquisition. One could also consider using the German word “Bildung” in that context – however, since it is rather problematic to find an equivalent term in other language, this issue would require a separate study.

independently creates and manages its own zone of development. The process is facilitated by a caretaker who participates in the development of interests, the choice of a school and a career path, and the search for a job, and who, later in life, is proud of the achievements of an adult child.

The first stage of a child's growing independence, when the caretaker adapts to creative acts of a child's cultural reproduction, is the period of child's play. Contrary to the earlier acts of learning, the aim of which is answering one-time needs, child's play, for the first time, provides an opportunity for self-education, when a child follows its own developing desires which it makes the object of reasoning and develops with the help of intersubjectively communicable means. The aim of this article is to delineate the structure of such an educational competence as would assist the development of a child's symbolically realized will.

The aim of this paper is the construct of educational competence which I understand as a special connection between abstract thinking and everyday, spontaneous (individual) actions. Created by the caretaker, abstract-concrete dynamic lets the child absorb culturally correct behavior first and the understanding behind it, second. Higher understanding of culture lets the child act through social value and social rules, which is to me a sign of important transformation from play which requires no effort, to work which is rich in a number of unpleasant feelings².

1. Preliminary Consideration: Child's Play as a Way of Training for Coping with the Environment

Thus, an essential attribute of play is a rule that has become an affect. "An idea that has become an affect, a concept that has turned into a passion" – this Spinoza's ideal finds its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom. To carry out a rule is a source of pleasure. The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse (cf. Spinoza's adage that an affect can be overcome by a stronger affect). Hence, such a rule is an internal rule, i.e., a rule of inner self-restraint and self-determination, as Piaget says, and not a rule a child obeys as a physical law (Vygotsky 1966, 21).

The quotation above is a fragment of Vygotsky's lecture from 1933 devoted to the role of play in a child's psychological development and, in my view, expresses the essence of the speech. Early pre-school play is, according to Vygotsky, a child's most important activity which enables the transition to a new developmental stage. In the psychology of development it is assumed that the period of child's play is between 3 and 5 or 6 years of age, the period of the development of will and, consequently, the ability of self-control (self-

restraint). The activity of play observed at that time is analyzed by distinguishing a number of functions which it fulfills in the context of development: education, social competences, learning the language, memory development, social education, and many other functions (cf. Brzezińska, 1985).

In this article I focus primarily on the context of the learning of cultural skills and norms, and the manners of their realization (directives). From that point of view I am interested in the development of will which is actively triggered by play. A pre-school child is developing functions related to memory. Therefore it connects current stimuli with previous experiences, which leads to the possibility of delaying current affects. However, those affects, here understood as a kind of accumulated energy, must be released, in a different situation than the one which gave rise to them. Caretakers' prohibitions cause a delayed imaginary form of fulfillment of the content of an affect. The child generalizes the "unrealized tendencies", motives and affects, compensating the prohibitions of some activities with other activities which constitute a similar or greater challenge. The concrete is here transformed into the general form. A child which cannot realize itself in the world of things activates imagination. In the realm of imagination it has the freedom of coping with the world. Vygotsky speaks here about the difference between the levels of meaning and action. As at the earlier stage of development a thing was the source of meaning, so at the stage of play meaning is in the center of attention while a thing becomes merely a material for its realization (embodiment). For that reason play is a "pretend" situation in which objects, taken out of everyday practice, fulfill their uncommon role in a child's imagination. Play is a creation of reality, separated from current meanings but not from the world in general. That means that a playing child superimposes certain meanings of imagined but possible reality onto objects. Thus, when a fork becomes a 'sword' and a chair becomes a 'dragon' the relationships formed between the sword and the dragon are logical, everyone 'knows' that one fights a dragon with a sword and that such a fight is difficult and risky. A child uses rules which allow the introduction of an element of the resistance of reality into the play situation, which makes the play a series of victories and failures, depending on how strictly the child observes the created rules, restraining or not the wish to immediately realize affects.

In Nohl's words, a dual affective plan occurs during play. For example, a child weeps in its role of a patient in a play but is happy as the player [...]. At every step a child experiences the conflict between the rule of the game and what it would do if suddenly it could act spontaneously (cf., 156).

The moment of finding a position between the two affective levels is a moment of a significant valuation of the world. It decides about the meanings with which the reality of play is infused, about a child's role in that reality, and

about the manners in which the child can deal with that reality. The child practices abiding by the rules which it wholly accepts. The will is here formed through self-restriction practiced in various forms of confrontation with the created rules. The principal characteristic of will in a play situation is its internal freedom. From a child's point of view we would say that play is an autotelic behavior, having a purpose in itself, an activity for pleasure, largely free from caretakers' interference. Only in that way can play have self-restricting elements. The caretaker's role is to actively participate in the play. A caretaker suggests certain themes, tells about various aspects of reality. Nevertheless, it is a child that creates the situation of the resistance of reality and overcoming that resistance. A caretaker diminishes and increases the child's decisive abilities (competencies) but adapts to the rules introduced by the child, for example by asking questions which allow him or her to get to know the child's world. Those questions, however, extend the child's knowledge and skills. The child which answers them has to fit in new elements of reality and, depending on them, change the rules to which the play world is subject. The caretaker makes the play more difficult in a manner which the child is not able to reject, as the content provided by the caretaker is irrefutably true to a child at the age of heteronomous morality. Still, the play must not be obstructed with the use of questions the difficulty of which surpasses the child's intellectual abilities. Play is a form of learning, of trial of coping with the world, i.e. testing it in the state of a relatively stable sense of safety. For instance, a child which is afraid of dogs will stop to play when it sees an approaching dog. Similarly, if we overestimate a child's abilities and overburden it, the child will not be in a mood for play. In other words, a child distinguishes between reality and play. A child's sense of competence in play, then, depends on a number of situational factors 'managed' by the child's caretaker.

2. A Structural-Epistemological Approach to the Zone of Proximal Development

...the native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind (Dewey 1910, 3).

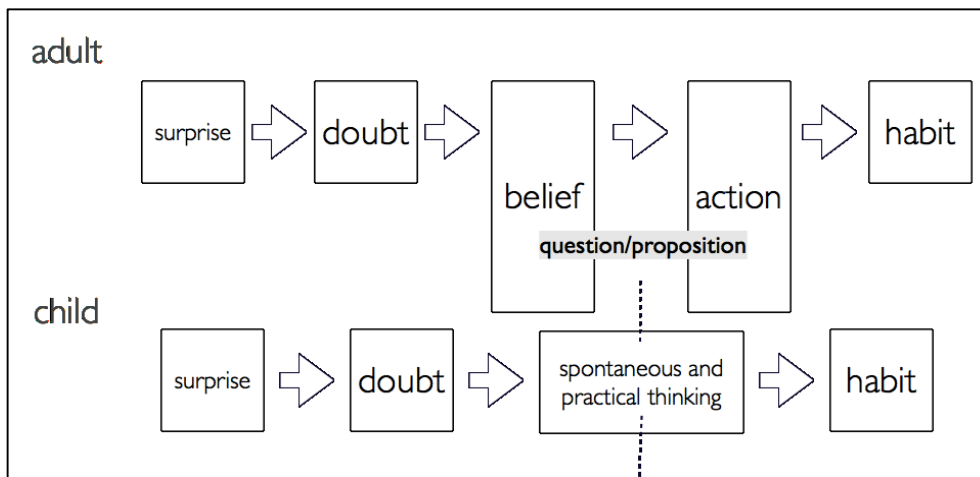
Learning culture is an interactive process, which is best illustrated by the phenomenon of the interaction between a child and its caretaker. A child's activity is similar to that of a researcher (an adult participant of culture³) in at least three aspects. (1) The creation of the world, and later the realization of its image, is undertaken in sequences of *belief* and *action* – when we take a

³ In the Deweyan understanding of life as a research process.

closer look at child's play we can see how the already elaborate image of the child's imagined reality gains a new element which is, so to speak, a new 'belief' to try out. (2) The aim of action is to overcome the resistance of reality. (3) The content of action – the themes experienced in imaginative play, important to a child – contains elements which agree with reality. The accepted rules constitute, approximately, a copy of the categories of cultural contents and norms, and the manners of their realization (cf. Zamiara, 1989). A caretaker provides structural elements belonging to a higher developmental form, by asking questions, suggesting themes for play, and participating in the play in a specific, also dual, way. The following illustration presents the process.

Any process of cognition starts from a situation of surprise. Next, a doubt appears as to one's abilities and beliefs. A caretaker, who has extended abilities to conceptually analyze a problem, can extend a child's accidental abilities of coping with the world. The child undertakes activities in a habitual and spontaneous manner. Such unreflective activities, undertaken without the consciousness of the physical structure of objects, I define as acting with the use of tools (Heidegger) or spontaneous-practical thinking⁴ (cf. Pałubicka 2006, 43-47). The imitative character of that thinking is, though, only an imputation from an external perspective and does not reflect a child's experiences. Expert knowledge results from gaining the skill of reflexive-theoretical thinking (ibid.), it is of linguistic (third-person) nature, and is

Figure 1: The Epistemic Structure of Instructional Scaffolding



⁴ Spontaneous-practical thinking, thinking from the readiness-to-hand perspective is so strongly connected with actions which are its expression that it is usually treated as their organic component. That 'merger' is described in various ways. For example, from an observer's point of view, one can say that the actor imitates collective representation, and manipulating objectiveness is manipulating imaginations, or that operations on imaginations change into manipulations of objectiveness, or, finally, that a subject transcends operations on imaginations outside itself, it objectifies them (Pałubicka 2006, 47).

external with respect to a child's knowledge. However, during the interaction with a child a caretaker does not make use of expressions resulting directly from that manner of thinking, because a child is not capable of utilizing a pragmatic interpretation⁵ for third-person, objective knowledge – it does not know how to combine thought and action. The task of the creator of the zone of proximal development is to transpose the third-person knowledge into a form of subjective interaction when the expert knowledge defines a certain system of meanings and rules (it is still a boundary, then), while also enabling free, spontaneous 'interpretation' of those meanings and rules, made by a child in the course of action instead of pragmatic interpretation. In the situation of child's play the caretaker projects, in a way, a 'game of creating the world', and the child is both a 'creator' and a 'hero'. The caretaker fulfills the role of an 'architect of an intelligent machine' modified and developed by the 'creator' who establishes his or her own rules, and personalized by the 'hero' who experiences those rules. How does the caretaker's project get implemented? According to the "main principle of cultural development" which says that

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapyschological) (Vygotsky 1987, 145).

The internalization of cultural meanings is made through a child's spontaneous, creative actions, the most important element of which is full acceptance. On that road there is the identification with the course of the cultural world (the creation of that world) and (through the creation of the "laboratory habit of the mind") the ability to cope with it. A caretaker who is the catalyst of a child's development, through his or her ability to translate expert knowledge about an object into an interaction of subjects uses educational competence. That happens when a caretaker's participation is adapted to a child's abilities and the knowledge external to a child becomes 'hidden' in the system managed by the child in which the child freely moves and creatively 'encounters' the elements of reality coming from the caretaker, in its own idea of the world. A caretaker exists outside and inside the play, just like a child. It is only then that we speak about a full dyad which is the basis for the creation between its members of a third element: a world external with respect to play, something not only physical but primarily axiological. The caretaker's specific educational participation in child's play can be understood as the result of the coexistence of two elements;

1. The objective inviting component: the adaptation to the child's knowledge and skills by constant creation of possibilities for the extension of the child's knowledge and abilities.

⁵ It cannot derive the rules of action from an idea.

2. The subjective accompanying component: creating a common, subject-subject engagement constituting an autotelic interaction between the partners.

The inviting-accompanying competence by which I understand constructive empathizing which occurs due to the conversion between the caretaker's revealed and hidden knowledge presumes the ability to build a social-cognitive structure. That anti-dualist structure is opposed to Marc H. Bornstein's division into two types of child-instructor interaction. The researcher distinguishes the *autotelic interaction* type related to social interaction and directed at expressing feelings and taking care, and a didactic type which focuses a child's attention on the properties of the external world (cf. Bornstein, 1989). The dualistic understanding of a child's development is only accepted due to research procedures. However, in the light of contemporary humanities there is no possibility of creating such a dichotomy. The extension of the world in a child's mind, through *building a scaffolding* (cf. Schaffer, 1992) is made at the social level, the ultimate argument for which is the already mentioned principle of cultural development. By the inviting-accompanying competence (constructive empathizing) I understand the particular ability to educate a child in the field of cultural content and the principles of the functioning of the world in a manner which leads to the complementariness and uniformity of facts and values of the everyday coping with the world so that a child's instrumental aim is, in practice (the way of achieving it), a social aim. It is not, then, only about the forming of an experimental attitude, a manipulative learning of the world, and later internalization of its meaning, but also about a correct reference of the former to the latter, within the range of social tolerance and acceptance as a value received and given, that is value instituted within the course of experimental-interactive actions. The projected educational competence allows the understanding of the caretaker's role in the development of child's social independence: between egocentric play and work comprehended as social self-development. The pleasure experienced by a child as a result of imagined reality will be called play. Interweaving real elements into play (i.e. introducing objects the real use of which agrees with the imagined one) entails work – the effort necessary for the experience of pleasure (cf. Dewey, 1910). The drifting of play, in a child's development, in the direction of work is based on introducing real acts of coping with the world into the careless world of playful training. The support for the drifting of play toward work is founded upon, from the counselor's viewpoint, the arrangement of the real world in the form of a child's imagined world. A lack of such action can be understood as educational anti-competence, a directive expectation, when the caretaker gives orders without the mediation of the play reality, and then expects concrete results. In that case abstract-concrete dynamic thinking is not embodied and available to the child world. This dynamism seems to be the key to

understanding the zone of proximal development and instructional scaffolding.

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Abstract. Pre-school play is an important moment in a child's development. Caretakers play an important role during play. This article presents a structure of educational competence called "constructive empathizing" or "*inviting-accompanying* competence". A caretaker's special task during child's play is conversion between the third-person knowledge and a subjective, autotelic interaction. The caretaker's constructive empathizing during a child's play determines the child's social and moral development, it helps the child to turn play into work, as a sign of higher spontaneous understanding of cultural norms standing behind cultural correctness actions. Finally, it is evidence of dynamic interaction between abstract-concrete thinking, with the child learning from the caretaker.

Keywords. pretend play, competence, empathy, zone of proximal development, moral development

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