

Children's Play in Cultural-Historical Psychology: Substitution, Loss and Recreation of the Ideal Form of Activity in the Educational Space

Ekaterina V. Trifonova

Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education
«Moscow Pedagogical State University» (MPGU), Moscow, Russia
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-9700>, e-mail: ev.trifonova@mpgu.su

The article deals with the problem of children's play from the standpoint of the Cultural-Historical Psychology. The fact that developed forms of play are rather rare in the life of contemporary children is considered from the position of the absence in their life of the ideal form of the play, which inevitably leads to the impossibility of appropriating the corresponding activity. The distortion and loss of the ideal form of play has a long history and did not occur immediately. Based on the analysis of documentary sources (methodical letters, periodicals, scientific literature, etc.), it is shown how teachers' ideas about children's play changed, what forms of play were broadcast to children in educational organizations and what other channels of assigning play experience were at the disposal of children in different historical periods. The article describes the developed forms of play and indicates what conditions are necessary for their emergence.

Keywords: ideal form of the play, children's independent symbolic play, creative play, organized play, story-role-playing play, fantasy play, the leading activity of a preschooler.

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Детская игра с позиций культурно-исторической психологии: подмена, утрата и воссоздание идеальной формы деятельности в образовательном пространстве

Е.В. Трифонова

Московский педагогический государственный университет (ФГБОУ ВО «МПГУ»),
г. Москва, Российская Федерация
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-9700>, e-mail: ev.trifonova@mpgu.su

В статье рассматривается проблема детской игры с позиций культурно-исторической психологии. Ситуация ухода игры из жизни современных детей анализируется с позиции отсутствия в их жизни идеальной формы игры, что неизбежно приводит к тому, что соответствующая деятельность не может быть присвоена. Искажение и утрата идеальной формы игры произошла не одномоментно, этот процесс имеет долгую историю. На основании анализа документальных источников (методических писем, периодической печати, научной литературы и пр.) показано, как менялись представления педагогов о детской игре, какая форма игры транслировалась детям в условиях образовательных организаций и какие другие каналы присвоения игрового опыта были в распоряжении детей в разные эпохи. В статье дана характеристика развитых форм игры, показано, какие условия необходимы для их возникновения.

Ключевые слова: идеальная форма игры, самостоятельная игра, творческая игра, организованная игра, сюжетно-ролевая игра, фантазийная игра, ведущая деятельность дошкольника.

The question of the essence of children's play and its role in the development of the child is revealed in the lecture by L.S. Vygotsky "The play and its role in the mental development of the child", read in 1933 in the Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute. Herzen and published in 1966 [2].

In this work, L.S. Vygotsky for the first time calls play the leading activity of a preschooler. Having stated this, one cannot ignore the objections of N.N. Veresov, who drew attention to this issue. Indeed, at the very beginning of the article, the play is designated as the leading line of development: "The play is not the predominant form of activity, but it is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in preschool age" [2, p. 62]. However, at the end of the article, exactly the stated wording sounds, which demonstrates that the authorship of the provision on the play as the leading activity belongs to L.S. Vygotsky: "In essence, the child moves through play activity. Only in this sense can play be called a leading activity, i.e. determining the development of a child" [2, p. 75]. Of course, L.S. Vygotsky did not consider play as a leading activity in the modern sense, and this is important to emphasize. But the very authorship of the term, which was subsequently adopted by the theory of activity, still belongs to L.S. Vygotsky.

If only one thesis had to be left out of the entire article, the most significant from the point of view of characterizing children's play, then this would be the provision on the criterion of play activity: "The criterion for distinguishing a child's play activity from the general group of other forms of his activity should be taken as that in the play the child creates an imaginary situation. This becomes possible on the basis of the divergence of the visible and semantic fields" [2, p. 65]. The establishing a criterion takes the play from the level of general categories "which cannot be precisely defined, such as 'love', 'humor', 'happiness', etc." (Jan Van Gils) [26, p. 84] to the level of a full-fledged scientific concept. Such an understanding of the play exists only in domestic psychology, while in Western psychology the concept of "play" includes such activities and activities that in the Russian tradition are considered as drawing, designing, experimenting, etc. A look at the play as an activity of children free from adult control, does not highlight its specifics, but at the same time allows you to save the most important characteristic of children's amateur performance, which, due to a number of historical reasons, which we will discuss below, was lost in Russian pedagogy, which led to a distortion of the ideal form of the play within the framework of real pedagogical practice. This substitution is still found even in the understand-

ing formulated by L.S. Vygotsky of the play criterion: "Often we confuse an imaginary situation that should unfold in the play by the child himself, and a scenario already invented by someone and only embodied by the child in his own activity" [16, p. 73].

The next most important provision of the L.S. Vygotsky's article should recognize the disclosure of the dynamics of the development of children's play: "The development from an explicit imaginary situation and hidden rules to a games with explicit rules and a hidden imaginary situation constitutes two poles, outlines the evolution of children's play" [2, p. 67]. The description of the most complex interaction within the framework of the play of children's arbitrariness and the emerging self-regulation is one of the most important provisions of L.S. Vygotsky. The most valuable is how he shows the birth of self-regulation: not through effort, but through affect: "In the play, a situation is created in which ... a double affective plan arises. A child, for example, cries in the play, like a patient, but rejoices, like a player. The child refuses to play from a direct impulse, coordinating his behavior, each of his actions with the rules of the play" [2, p. 72]. From the standpoint of understanding development as mastery of one's own behavior, the play appears as "the realm of self-regulation and freedom" [2, p. 72]. Until now, one has to face the opinion that there are children whose story-role-playing play is not yet sufficiently developed, but they can follow certain rules in life. Here it is important to breed reasons: this is self-regulation, which has internal motivation or subordination to an external requirement? The play contributes to the formation of self-regulation; self-regulation in the implementation of one's own activity and discipline, obedience are not phenomena of the same order [27].

Developing the idea of the formation of children's self-regulation, L.S. Vygotsky writes: "Playing with an imaginary situation ... is a new type of behavior, the essence of which lies in the fact that activity in an imaginary situation frees the child from situational bondage" [2, p. 68]. However, the transition from direct to indirect behavior is determined not only by affect: the subject field of the play is one of the most important "tools" that allows you to move from the "visible" field to the "semantic" one: "Action in a situation that is not seen, but only thought, action in imaginary field, in an imaginary situation, leads to the fact that the child learns to be determined in his behavior not only by the direct perception of a thing or the situation directly affecting him, but by the meaning of this situation" [2, p. 69]. However, to this day, this provision is ignored by adults, so far in kindergartens and at home, a realistic toy "rules the ball".

What does this lead to? The child remains within the framework of a real, non-playing action, i.e. in fact, within the framework of manipulating the toy, there is no going beyond the visual field into the semantic field, while “movement in the semantic field is the most important thing in the play” [2, p. 73]. But it is precisely this provision that is completely ignored in most kindergartens, despite the requirement of “multi-functionality” of the developing subject environment, which is spelled out in the Federal State Educational Standard for Preschool Education.

And the last: in 1933, L.S. Vygotsky noted that “play creates the child’s zone of proximal development... in play, he is, as it were, head and shoulders above himself” [2, p. 74]. In 1948 Z.V. Manuilenko published the results of an experiment in which she clearly showed with numbers and graphs exactly which “head” the child is higher than himself in the play, how much longer he is able to maintain a motionless posture on the instructions of the experimenter or in a meaningful context of the play. A modern study by E.O. Smirnova and O.V. Gudareva showed qualitative differences in the formation of the self-regulation of modern children, and these differences are determined precisely by the low level of development of children’s play, which was also established in the study [25]: most modern children do not have the opportunity to become “head and shoulders above themselves” precisely because that their play does not receive the conditions for its development in accordance with the age possibilities. In fact, this is a play that remains at the level of manipulation without moving into a semantic field.

Describing the specifics of child development, L.S. Vygotsky introduces the concept of an ideal form: “In the development of a child, what should happen at the end of development, as a result of development, is already given in the environment from the very beginning” [3, p. 83]. He designates this as the “ideal form” of the corresponding activity, ability, etc., which the child discovers in an adult, older child, or more developed peer and appropriates in the process of joint activity with him.

Ontogenetic development is understood as the interaction of a real (existing in a child) and an ideal (established in culture) form and is largely determined by how successfully an intermediary action is built, usually implemented by an adult. According to B.D. Elkonin, the crisis of modern childhood is connected precisely with the crisis of mediation. The mediating action in relation to the play is built in such a way that the child is presented with a completely different “ideal form” of the play than the one that embodied the developed forms of the play in the time of L.S. Vygotsky and later. If we compare the story-role-playing plays that children played on their own in the 50s of the last century with those that are offered in a kindergarten to a modern child, then a colossal difference will be revealed. Moreover, the story side of the play is the least of all; here the goal-setting,

the ways of implementing the play, the external pattern of this activity are built differently. Neither in essence, nor in appearance, it is completely different from that artificial form, which is called “play” in pedagogical practice. In such a play, the movement in the semantic field is completely transferred to the optical field, thereby turning the play into acting out.

Below, the process will be described and the reasons for how and why the substitution and loss of the ideal form of the play occurred.

There are plays that are similar in animals and in infants and young children (while the higher forms of play have not yet been mastered), they can also be observed in older children. If we turn to the psychological classification of children’s plays S.L. Novoselova [17], then these are plays-experiments with natural objects and any objects, as well as plays-experiments with the capabilities of one’s own body [23]. At a certain stage of socio-genesis and then ontogenesis of the child, a story-role-playing play arises, where there is a discrepancy between the visible and semantic plan. In the classification of S.L. Novoselova, they are all combined into a large class of plays that arise on the initiative of the child, including both the lower forms of play behavior (experimental plays) and its higher forms (story-role-playing plays).

The lower forms of play can arise in the child “by themselves” just as they arise and are observed in higher animals. They are not a product of culture and do not ensure the formation of proper human qualities and abilities: “Those who believe that all children are naturally creative, inherently imaginative, that they need only be given freedom to evolve rich and charming ways of life for themselves, will find in the behaviour of Manus children no confirmation of their faith. ... but, alas for the theorists, their play is like that of young puppies or kittens. Unaided by the rich hints for play which children of other societies take from the admired adult traditions, they have a dull, uninteresting child life, romping good humouredly until they are tired, then lying inert and breathless until rested sufficiently to romp again” [15, p. 176].

The highest forms of the play have a cultural and historical origin, which was shown in the works of D.B. Elkonin [30] and confirmed by a number of ethnographic and psychological studies [15; 21 and others]. The specificity of the content and methods of organizing such plays depends on the cultural traditions of the society: “Story-role-playing plays have never reproduced the social relations existing in the community, the roles of father and mother were absent in the plays. One of the local women explained to the experimenter that children do not play adults because such plays show disrespect for them. The latter is unacceptable — the community treats adults and older people with great respect” [21, p. 130]. Those, if the story-role-playing play is prohibited or distorted in society, it does not develop. Below we will show the influence of social attitudes on the spe-

cifics of the development of the story-role-playing play of the Soviet and Russian children.

Ethnographic and historical documents indicate the specifics of the transfer of playing experience. Children aged 6–10 were more often involved in housework, including as “nannies” looking after the kids. This practice was common in many societies [6]. Obviously, for children aged 6–10, play is an already established and preferred activity, which they indulge in at every opportunity. The kids left in their care first watched these plays, then imitated, then joined them in secondary roles, then as full participants in the play. So in children’s groups of different ages, the transfer of playing experience took place. It is obvious that such plays did not have educational and educational functions, but they fully performed the role of a leading activity, because those mental qualities of a child that are really formed in the play are formed in any play, regardless of its content (correct or incorrect, “good” or “bad”), because the content of a children’s play is always determined by the historical era, the social system, the social orientation of society, the peculiarities of the family way of life, etc., and the developing potential of the play is universal [29, p. 85].

Since the 17th century the play becomes a means of education [18; 28]. Since the 19th century Froebel gardens open in Europe and Russia. The literature contains eloquent descriptions of how this system was implemented in kindergartens and in relation to the use of didactic kits [11, p. 249–250], and in relation to the organization of story-role-playing plays [12, p. 98–100]. These descriptions give an idea of how the ideal form of the play was distorted, in which spectacle and effectiveness came first instead of “movement in the semantic field” [2] and procedurality [10]. It can be assumed that in those years such dramatizations could not have a strong influence on children’s plays, since the possibility of plays in children’s communities of different ages remained. However, the trend was already very clear at that time.

The attitude towards the excessive organization of the play on the part of teachers was steadily preserved in pedagogical practice, the leading teachers of those years opposed it (A.S. Simonovich, A.B. Kraevsky, D.D. Galanin, members of the Commission for the Review of Plays and Entertainment at Petersburg Literacy Committee, etc.) [28].

After the revolution, during the formation of domestic preschool education, the normative documentation recognized the basis of the kindergarten as “amateur activities of children, their free creativity, play.” The diaries of kindergarten teachers recorded plays organized by the children themselves in the civil war, in the arrest and imprisonment of feasting bourgeois, in agitators in the stands, in the funeral of Lenin, as well as typically children’s plays in arranging rooms, horses, etc. However, at the end of the 20s, the educators of plays on everyday topics are not mentioned. Even if they existed in children’s

life, they were not dominant in official discourse, they did not reach the level of discussion even in the practice of compiling written documents that were not intended for publication [24, p. 119], i.e. since the late 20’s there was a revision of plays into “suitable” and “unsuitable” with the dominance of “correct”, “ideological” plays.

In the 1930s, methodological letters were published in various areas of preschool education, incl. and children’s play. Independent symbolic plays, which were previously called imitative, imitation, etc., got their name, which then existed for a long time in domestic pedagogical practice — “creative plays”. At the same time, the play was proclaimed “one of the means of the comprehensive development of the child.” As a result, “stimulated” children’s plays appear, i.e. plays with a certain content, which is set (stimulated) by the educator. At the same time, “the methods of the most rude imposition, coercion were applied to the so-called “stimulated” plays” [14, p. 49].

In 1936, the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks “On Pedagogical Perversions in the System of the People’s Commissariat for Education” was issued, where stimulated play was declared a pedagogical perversion and prohibited. From this point on, many educators withdraw from the direct management of the play, fearing that they will be accused of returning to “stimulated” plays. It is characteristic that it was at this time (the end of the 40s-50s) that the descriptions of the most interesting plays in methodological collections fall. In particular, caregivers described long plays that continued to unfold for several weeks. Then they tried to revive such plays in the 1980s, but in those years there were no suitable conditions for such plays.

So, in the mid-1930s, the term “stimulated plays” disappeared, but the need to organize children’s plays on the topic needed by educators remained. The situation unexpectedly turned in favor of organized plays in the 1940s and 1950s, when D.B. Elkonin and S.L. Rubinshstein, a new term “story-role-playing” appeared and began to gain strength [28]. The new term was followed by a different understanding. The term “creative play” reflected the essential characteristic of children’s play — this is a play in which the child himself creates, “creates” his own world, in accordance with his desires and ideas. The term “plot-role-playing play” reflected the formative characteristics of the play. But one and the same form can be filled with different content, and the term “story-role-playing play”, defining the play in terms of form, did not fix the difference that was clearly defined by the names “creative” and “stimulated” play, i.e. the difference between the actual play activity and the set of play actions performed by the child when he has neither a play motive nor an actively recreated imaginary situation. This line has been erased terminologically. And, as a result, it began to fade from the consciousness of teach-

ers of those years. The ideal form of the play, broadcast to children, acquired a completely unchildish, artificial character.

In parallel, there was a change in the way of transferring gaming experience: it was in the middle of the twentieth century. natural forms of transferring gaming experience from generation to generation (from child to child) are changing to artificial ones (from adult to child), while kindergartens and schools have become increasingly important in the transfer of plays [7].

With the release of the Kindergarten Education Curriculum, the term “story-role-playing plays” was fixed as the only one, and the term “creative play” was declared “outdated terminology” and actually banned [28]. The story-role-playing play begins to be organized in the manner of a stimulated play, and from that time on, the dominance of organized plays in kindergartens is fixed and the stereotype is firmly fixed that a “good play” is a plot played out in roles on a certain topic according to a certain plan. As shown by the work of the innovative platform “Development and pedagogical support of the play as the leading activity of preschoolers” by “Russian Public Organization of Kindergarten Teachers”, this attitude is very strong to this day.

It was these play-outs that were understandable to adults that were presented to children as a “play”. The methodical letter of 1977 already captures an unfavorable picture: “Role-playing plays ... are monotonous and poor in subject matter ... Their content is mainly actions with objects and the relationships between people are poorly reproduced. Only a small part of the group (3–5 people) has the ability to invent a plot” [19, p. 14].

In 1977 A.V. Zaporozhets in a conversation with D.V. Mendzheritskoy noted that “the introduction of the term “story-role-playing play” into the kindergarten curriculum was a mistake” [22, p. 10].

However, children still had the opportunity to gain and expand their gaming experience within the framework of yard plays. And the description of the higher forms of play that have been found to date, which are already characteristic of younger schoolchildren, refer specifically to this era of the 70–80s [4; 20 etc.]

In the late 1980s, powerful perestroika processes began in all spheres of our society. During these years, the concepts of preschool education were developed, while in both there is a sharp criticism of the current situation in kindergartens: children’s play is regulated, reproductive, deformed as an activity, imposed on children.

As a reaction to the current situation, the slogan sounds: “Let the children play enough, do not teach children to play!”. The pendulum has swung the other way: in contrast to the total organization of the play, there is a complete rejection of interference in it. By itself, this refusal could have been a way out, but it took place in a very specific socio-economic situation: there were few or only one children in families, parents and grandparents

were busy earning a living in the difficult conditions of those years, the criminogenic situation was that children alone were no longer allowed into the yards. The channels for transferring gaming experience both through adults and through the children’s subculture turned out to be closed. In the absence of cultural patterns, children’s plays are being primitivized, both independent symbolic play and organized. An extremely accurate description of the situation: “Today, the play is not disappearing from culture, but rather culture is disappearing from the play” [9, p. 259]. It can be assumed that more global processes are reflected here than the “perestroika” ones. they were also observed in other countries: modern children are almost always under the control of adults, there are practically no free communities for children, and there are no conditions for free play with peers [5].

What are the consequences of changing the ideal form in the cultural space? “If there is no corresponding ideal form in the environment, then the child will not develop the corresponding activity, the corresponding property, the corresponding quality” [3, 86]. One of the main reasons for the disappearance of the play is that the ideal form of gaming activity appears in a distorted form (when learning to play, when the goals of the play change to educational ones) or disappears altogether (in the absence of cultural gaming experience). And the fact that “children do not play” is connected not only with the crisis of mediation (B.D. Elkonin), but also with the fact that an adult replaces the ideal form of play by transmitting a different activity to the child.

A child who has not watched real exciting plays, but was forced to take part in organized ones, most likely will neither want to, nor, accordingly, be able to play such plays. This, in turn, means that his play will remain at the level of playing around with objects and situations, there will be no transition to more complex play forms, in the process of implementing which the child will develop the corresponding abilities (which was shown in the study by E.O. Smirnova and O.V. Gudareva [25]).

These days, there is a very gradual resurgence of the “real” play as a cultural phenomenon. This process is extremely slow because the forms of existence of such a play are very different from those understandable actions for which the play has been presented for many years, which causes rejection and even outrage among teachers. Nevertheless, the position of cultural-historical psychology in relation to understanding the essence of children’s play is spreading in the pedagogical environment (the curriculum “PROdetey”, “Let’s Play” Festival-Competition, Yegor Bakhotsky Playground and Communication, experience of advanced kindergartens, publications that give criteria separation of the quasi-play and the “real” play, etc.). This indicates a process of rebirth, recreating the ideal form of the play in its original form.

The conditions for the development of play should provide the child with options for organizing more

complex, developed plays, which he will observe as some ideal form and include at an accessible level in his own activities.

D.B. Elkonin characterized the expanded or developed form of play, noting that “in play, the child, as it were, passes into the developed world of higher forms of human activity, into the developed world of the rules of human relationships” [30, p. 335]. However, D.B. Elkonin made an important clarification: “not every recreation and recreation of every life phenomenon is a play” [30, p. 21], so the transfer of money and products in the play corner “shop” is not a play, even if it is accompanied by memorized polite phrases; there is no real relationship here.

The highest forms of the plot play are a kind of “designing of worlds” (A.G. Asmolov) with attempts to recreate, feel, survive the complexity of the world order, the richness of human relations — interpersonal, political, economic, etc.

Descriptions and characteristics of such plays can be found in fiction (L.A. Kassil), in memoirs (A.N. Benois, A.V. Krotov, N.V. Gladkikh, I. Krasilshchik), not as much as one would like would — in scientific works (W. Wundt, S.M. Lojter, N.V. Gladkikh, A.S. Obukhov and M.V. Martynova, etc.). These are fantasy plays, which are “Modeling aimed at creating a new reality with its own picture of the world” [13]. In the process of unfolding such a play, “children’s consciousness appropriates the content of the cultural space of the adult world and masters the ways of constructing and being “their own” worlds, relatively independently born and existing according to the play principle” [20, p. 231].

In the studies of S.M. Lojter they are called plays in the country-utopia or country-dream [13]. N.V. Gladkikh specifies that whether children invent their own country or borrow its image from books or movies, they create some kind of “ideal” space that they like. However, “a necessary condition for a group play is to be interesting, and playing the “realm of abundance and harmony”, in general, is rather boring. The ideal space is ill-suited for action” [4, p. 191]. “Where the exemplary and correct frame of the “dream country” is initially set, the play fizzles out, almost without starting. And where there is

scope for surprises, adventures, scandal and laughter, everyone is drawn in with enthusiasm” [4, p. 196].

The specificity of such a play is that it can be realized completely internally (in the child’s imagination) or in the space of dialogue, becoming less accessible for observation. At the same time, the visible field is either simply completely removed (“imagination play”), or it can be based on extremely unrepresentable and incomprehensible elements of the play (play artifacts), which, at the same time, are extremely clear to the players. Actually, according to these artifacts, years later, the semantic field of the play is recreated, which covers all the available phenomena of human existence (reproduction of periodicals, news, language, calendar, state symbols, historical events, etc.) [4; 8; 20]. And it is important to understand the specifics of the existence of such a play: it exists not so much at the moment of implementation (you can simply “not catch” these moments), but in the space of preparation: “the main thing ... was the preparation for the play, it took 5–6 hours, and the play 30–50 minutes” [1, p. 73].

Such plays can be considered as the most striking manifestations of an extended developed form of play, encountering which can qualitatively affect the gaming experience of younger children. However, as discussions in the framework of seminars or advanced training courses on the problems of play show, such plays, being present in the memory of many teachers, are not perceived by them as possible options for organizing joint activities with children. Due to the dominance of a different model of the play, they do not consider such plays as a pedagogical resource for organizing the conditions for children’s development, they do not fall into the practice of organizing plays with children of older preschool age.

Providing conditions for the formation of developed forms of play, it is important to take into account that in addition to meeting with different options for implementing the ideal form of play, it is important for children to interact with the bearer of this experience, a mediator who does not teach, but introduces children to this culture, and it is also necessary that the child there was a sufficient (excessive) amount of time and a variety of ornamental and junk materials to construct their worlds.

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Information about the authors

Ekaterina V. Trifonova, PhD in Psychology, Associate professor of the Psychological Anthropology Department at the Institute of childhood Moscow State University of Education (MPGU), Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-9700>, e-mail: ev.trifonova@mpgu.su

Информация об авторах

Трифонова Екатерина Вячеславовна, кандидат психологических наук, доцент кафедры психологической антропологии Института детства, Московский педагогический государственный университет, (ФГБОУ ВО «МПГУ»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-9700>, e-mail: ev.trifonova@mpgu.su

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