

School Readiness in the Context of the Problem of Preschool and Primary School Education Continuity

N. I. Gootkina*,

Ph.D. in Psychology, senior researcher, the head of the School readiness laboratory, professor at the Developmental psychology chair, Educational psychology faculty of the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education

The article is devoted to the problem of preschool and primary school education continuity. It has been noted that the contemporary preschool education system considers this age mainly as a stage in preparing children for school education, which results in misinterpretation of the “child’s school readiness” phenomenon. The fact that the preschool age has independent value in ontogenesis of a child and a person in whole is totally overlooked. Defending the idea of the preschool period inherent worth, the author shows importance of psychological school readiness (in case of competent interpretation of the phenomenon) in the context of preschool and primary school education continuity.

Analyzing approaches to continuity problem, the author shows differences between behavioral and cultural-historical theories of child’s psychical development as regards to this issue: under the first approach, continuity in two forms of education is considered from a position of their convergence, or, more precisely, building preschool education following the example of school education. Under the second approach, continuity is realized not on the basis of convergence of two forms of education, as it happens now in many countries worldwide (also including Russia), but based on their maximal distinction that results from the child’s development specificity at each of the ages under consideration.

Keywords: psychological school readiness, continuity, preschool education, primary school education, preschool age, primary school age.

Inherent worth of a preschool development period as a special psychological age

The contemporary preschool education system considers preschool period in the

child’s life mainly as the age of child’s preparation for school education. It is totally overlooked that this development stage has independent value in the child’s ontogenesis, as well as

*ngootkina@mail.ru

the fact that by the end of this age-specific period children should have new psychological formations that determine further development at primary school age (and not only at this age). However, the above psychological new formations arise only in case if, over the entire preschool childhood period, the personality develops in accordance with age-specific patterns of psychical development. First of all, it means that a certain age-specific social situation of development should be formed for a child at each psychological age [4], the attribute of the situation being the key activity that corresponds to motivation dominating at that time, and therefore, is specific for each stage (psychological age) [13].

To ensure that the preschool age is completed in psychological new formations appearance that testify to the child's transition to the next – primary school age, a preschooler should have an opportunity to be mainly engaged over this period in the key activity for this age, namely playing games, as well as in other kinds of traditional children's pastime: cognitive-exploratory and productive activity (including labor activity). Reading fiction and popular science literature, full-fledged contact with adults, peers and the nature also belong here (A.V. Zaporozhets, N.A. Korotkova, N. N. Podd'iakov et al.).

Each of these kinds of activity and occupation is necessary for the child's personality, intellectual and physical development. While playing, the child acts mainly in an imaginary situation, when engaged in other kinds of activities mentioned above, the child acquires real experience necessary for his psychical and physical development.

Thus, *cognitive-exploratory* activity promotes broadening of the child's outlook, formation of the picture of the world, thinking development, satisfying the need in new impressions and in cognitive activity, etc.

When involved in *productive* activity, the child acquires various abilities and skills, his thinking and other mental functions being also developed. Children's creative work is also attributed to productive activity.

Properly organized *labor* activity not only provides essential abilities and skills, it also

promotes upbringing of necessary moral qualities: the child's personality and moral development occurs as a result of getting real experience of feelings in specific labor activity and as a result of real contact with other people (adults and persons of the same age) but not during moral education lessons (A.V. Zaporozhets). As much importance should be attached to the child's education in labor activity as it is attached to his intellectual development.

The child's personality development in real life situations (labor activity, contacts) leads to emergence of new social motives (L.I. Bozhovich), which have the **effective** character in contrast to the **known** character of social motives that arise in playing activity and in classes.

Reading fiction and popular science literature is a must for the child's development. Without it, the child's speech, intellectual and personality development is inadequate. This type of activity is a single source of literary language for children, which is missing from adults' everyday colloquial speech. As preschoolers' dominating function is memory, and education is unintentional and involuntary, they easily memorize new words and turns of speech. Perception and feeling of fiction contents trains a feel for a native language. The children who read a lot speak the native language much better than the ones for whom adults read little but provide native language classes intended for special speech development. Fiction reading also promotes the child's imagination development and aesthetic education. Popular science literature contributes to broadening the outlook, worldview formation and development of thinking.

Contact promotes social and personality development: children "absorb" the adults' behavior pattern (which unfortunately is not always exemplary), acquire experience in adult/other children interaction. Contact with adults satisfies the child's cognitive need (at preschool age, the dominating type of child-adult contact is extra situational-cognitive communication [14]). Children's contacts with each other promote development of the child's active speech.

Playing is the leading activity at preschool age, because it is during playing new kinds

of preschooler activity appear, and mental processes (thinking, memory, attention, etc.) and personality develop (A. N. Leont'ev, D. B. Elkonin). What is crucially important – the zone of proximal development appears inside playing at preschool age (L. S. Vygotsky).

Playing is known to form **universal genetic prerequisites for educational activity** [6], such as generalization function, symbolic and semeiotic functions, imagination and fantasy, ideal action plan, ability to correlate own actions with the example, ability to abide by the rule, ability to cooperate, etc. Playing promotes the child's **arbitrary and volitional development**. This largely happens because the child's attention during this activity is aimed not at the action result (at getting the outcome as during productive action) but at the related process and methods of execution [9]. D. B. Elkonin claimed that arbitrary behavior appears in a group of children during role playing. Arbitrary behavior enables the child to ascend to a higher stage of development than he can do while playing alone. The group in this case corrects failures in imitating the supposed image. It is still very difficult for a child to accomplish such control on his own [20]. It is in the course of playing that preschooler's arbitrary mental functions develop, as higher psychical functions achieve such level of development in playing that is not shown yet by children in an ordinary life situation, but will become soon their average actual level of development [7; 10; 15]. L. I. Bozhovich wrote that children's game promotes preschoolers' will development. While playing, children single out and realize certain social standards and imperatives, and learn to obey; abidance by the rules is voluntary in games, which is very important for will training (in other words, game converts the adult's requirements into the child's own necessity). This is very important, because it is typical of a true will that real requirements, rules or social standards are obeyed not due to external constraint but of the person's own free will, as a self-restraint. Game requires self-restraint from a child [2].

It should be noted that game helps children's speech development as interaction in game requires active talking. A. V. Zaporozhets pointed out that game helps the child to learn

sympathy, which he manifests in dramatization games [8].

Thus, a conclusion can be made that game is an **adequate form of education in pre-school childhood**, but education is not systematic. If a child played to a full extent in pre-school childhood, i.e., genetically went through all game stages from subject game to rule-based games, then educating and developing functions of games are exhausted by the age of about 7. It is from this age that the child already can arbitrarily control his behavior and activity off the game [3], there appears subordination of behavior motives and activity [1], and therefore it is much easier for a child to get accustomed to school life rules and regulations, i.e., school adaptation process goes much easier. During a preschool period, children get a new need by the age of 7 if playing activity was full-fledged – the need in serious type of socially acknowledged activity, the game being no longer able to meet this need. In compliance with the new need, there appear new motives for behavior and activity (wide social motives [2]). That is why the teacher at school can start systematic teaching for the children who already have such motives. Pupils consider such training with interest as a new important adult activity. Now, educational activity becomes the leading one and undertakes a development function, i.e., the zone of proximal development appears in it. In case children go to school before reaching the age of 7, the teacher has to give lessons in a playing form, which does not ensure the desired result: the child does not play or learn to a full extent. Besides, school does not become the place to do serious work, which later tells upon the child's attitude to learning.

Two approaches to preschool and primary school education continuity and to school readiness

The main task of preschool upbringing and education is the child's optimal development in compliance with his age-specific peculiarities and patterns of the stage in life, as a result the child gets ready for entering culture. School is the element of culture, therefore school readiness can be also considered from this point of view.

Interpretation of school readiness existing now in teaching practice implies that the child should come to school with a certain stock of school-type knowledge, abilities and skills, called “basic skills” in the US researches [21], primary school education being based on them. Such kind of connection between preschool and school education ensures, from the viewpoint of authors of this approach, education continuity for children of different ages. In this system, the child’s development level before school is largely determined by the extent he is trained in these abilities and skills. This concept of the child’s mental development results from the behaviorism theory, where psychical development comes down to a set of skills and behavior patterns acquired by a person. *In this case, continuity of two forms of education is considered from the convergence position, or more precisely, from the position of preschool education adjusting to school education standards.*

Fundamentally different interpretation of preschool and primary school education continuity results from the cultural and historical approach to the child’s psychical development suggested by L. S. Vygotsky and further elaborated in works by his disciples and follows. To reveal the essence of continuity of educational work at preschool and school age based on this approach, we need to take into account age-specific characteristics of children’s development at the former and the latter age (the “psychological age” notion by L. S. Vygotsky [4]). Since these characteristics differ in principle, educational work with preschoolers can not follow the example of educating pupils in primary school. On the other hand, according to the cultural and historical approach, the child passes to the next psychological age only if his development has been fully completed at the previous age-related stage. This is testified to by psychological new formations that appear at the end of the age-related period. These new formations prepare the child’s further development at a new age-related stage based on other psychical development patterns inherent in a new age, thus having an effect on the education process. The preschool age psychological new formations (without

which it is ineffective to start teaching children at school) are as follows:

- Change in the child’s motivational sphere (appearance of cognitive and social motives of learning, appearance of subordination in behavior and activity motives, emergence of the new formation – “internal schoolchild position” (L.I.Bozhovich);
- Such level of development in arbitrary sphere that the child can cope with work following the example or the rule and to execute the self-regulation process (D. B. Elkonin);
- The child has mastered simple generalization operations (L. S. Vygotsky, L.I. Bozhovich);
- Good proficiency in the language applied for teaching at school (N.I. Gootkina).

These new formations are per se components of psychological school readiness [5]. It is important to emphasize that all these new formations are impossible without universal genetic prerequisites for educational activity as was mentioned above.

Proceeding from the cultural and historical approach, preschool/school education continuity is enforced not on the basis of convergence of two forms of education (likewise it is done now in many countries worldwide, including Russia) but on the basis of their maximal difference, resulting from specificity of the child’s development at each of the ages under consideration.

Preschool education or upbringing and teaching at preschool age?

The current disregard of the child’s psychical development pattern in preschoolers’ teaching and upbringing practice is, from my point of view, largely connected with the guideline for preschooler *education* that has recently emerged in our society. In preschool childhood, this is considered to be part of integral educational process, which is characterized by succession and continuity. Continuity is comprehended as placing easiest forms of upper educational tier down into lower educational tier. As a consequence, education in preschool childhood is built following the school education model, although it is more simple and easy. It should be noted that expediency

of using the term “education” as applicable to preschool age is rather questionable, since “education” is systematic teaching, but systematic teaching is impossible at preschool age due to specificity of age-related peculiarities of children. It is no mere chance that the “Dictionary of the Russian Language” by S.I. Ozhegov breaks down education into higher, secondary and specialized education; with no preschool education being mentioned there. The same dictionary states that the term “education” means: “teaching, enlightenment; body of knowledge acquired via special training” [18, p. 372]. Thus, the term “education” pulls the school-type educational system into the kindergarten. Although the contemporary interpretation of “education” also includes “upbringing”, preschool teachers’ attention is focused on school-type teaching of simple knowledge, abilities and skills to children – there is no time for anything else.

Upbringing and training work with children in kindergartens in Russia (as it was arranged till the 1960s) was replaced by educational work for the following reasons. Firstly, the tenor headed by A.P. Usova took the upper hand in domestic preschool pedagogics. A.P. Usova introduced systematic teaching or teaching under special educational program in kindergartens¹. In practice, it meant introduction of organized school-type studies with preschoolers. She believed that systematic teaching for children at kindergartens, starting from senior preschool age, would facilitate children’s comprehensive development. It was assumed that the “ability to learn” per se is gradually formed in the course of systematic teaching [19]. The main task of systematic preschool teaching under a special program was *acceleration* of the preschooler mental development. As of today, almost fifty-year experience in implementing ideas of this tenor has proved the contrary.

The second reason is that comprehensive school reform (in the late 60s and 70s of the XXth century) resulted in primary school lo-

osing one grade, which was per se a preparatory grade (primary school became three-year school instead of four-year school) and therefore failed to properly cope with its tasks. The attempt to restore a preparatory grade due to starting general education at the age of six did not succeed, and then, kindergarten-based groups were established to prepare for school, thus enforcing some analogue of the lost preparatory-grade program. This program was gradually spread on senior groups in kindergartens.

Thus, kindergartens that historically dealt mainly with children’s upbringing and training (teaching was not systematic and it was understood in the context of general age-specific development) gradually turned into preschool educational institutions intended primarily for preparing children to school via forming simple school-knowledge, abilities and skills.

Such pseudopreparation to schooling leads to quick extinction of cognitive interest and learning motivation already in the first grade of primary school because primary schoolchildren are inclined (according to available research [1]) to pursuit new and complicated tasks, which they do not encounter when the first grade curriculum is duplicated several times (when preparing for school and at the first grade). *Preparation for school via formation of simple school knowledge, abilities and skills at preschool age has nothing to do with psychological school readiness or by no means facilitates solution of the continuity problem in teaching preschoolers and primary schoolchildren.*

School readiness means that the child has got the need to undertake educational activity as a kind of socially useful activity in contrast to traditionally childish kinds of activity the child used to be occupied with in preschool childhood. The need becomes apparent in the form of cognitive and social motives of learning. Besides, the child can already be mindful of the beginning of systematic learning at school, i.e., he can arbitrarily regulate his behavior

¹Before that, upbringing and teaching work in kindergartens was mainly determined by E. A. Flerina’s tenor who understood importance of game and other purely children’s activities for the child’s development. She paid a lot of attention to aesthetic development of children.

and activity in compliance with posed tasks (educational, disciplinary and other tasks). As observations and research show [5], such level of development is usually reached by the age of 7 at the earliest. This is connected both with functional maturity of the nervous system and with psychical (personality, intellectual) and physical development patterns. It makes sense to speak about school readiness after the crisis of a 7-year-old child, which L. S. Vygotsky called the “loss-of-ingenuousness crisis” [3]. The attribute of this crisis is that intellectualization of all child’s psychical functions takes place during this period, i.e., functions become mediated and manageable, which has significant influence on self-consciousness development. As a result, childish ingenuousness disappears, and the child has the need to take a new social position in the human society that will reflect his moving into adulthood. Such objective position in the contemporary society is the pupil’s position, since school is a conventional institution for coming-of-age. In case of full-fledged development of a child throughout preschool childhood (in accordance with psychical development patterns) the need in taking the above position appears before the child really becomes a schoolchild. This happens as a result of formation of a new attitude to surroundings, which L. I. Bozhovich called the “internal schoolchild position” [1]. As a matter of fact, such position can be considered as a criterion of psychological school readiness. If the child has the internal schoolchild position, he will be mindful of school education process even if the educational activity per se is not always interesting for him. This position is a guarantee of the first-grader transformation into the subject of educational activity (an active, initiative and interested pupil). Should the child possess the internal schoolchild position, the teacher does not have to think how to make the educational process entertaining (via gaming techniques) as in this case cognitive and social motives of learning come into force. They stimulate the subject’s activity via consciously set targets, accepted intentions and sometimes even regardless of his attitude to the activity per se.

The concept of the child’s progressive development mainly due to his personality development is contrary in principle to intellectual development priority ideas prevailing in contemporary pedagogics.

A psychological new formation of senior preschool age – “internal schoolchild position” – really enables to speak about continuity of preschool and primary school education, because, as was mentioned earlier, it is a guarantee of the first-grader transformation into the educational activity subject. As findings of some research [11; 16; 17] show, internal schoolchild position is not formed when social situation of preschool age development no longer corresponds to its age-specific characteristic. Specifically, this happens because leading game activity is forced out by school-type classes (which is pretty often suggested by contemporary preschool educational programs). Therefore, the child’s personality development level characterized by internal schoolchild position is reached when the child has an opportunity to play to full extent and to be engaged in all specific childish kinds of activity at preschool age. These activities promote development of child’s spontaneous activity and result in the child’s personality development [12]. As it was pointed out above, a game forms universal genetic prerequisites for educational activity, therefore, the internal schoolchild position rather means not only personality readiness but simultaneously intellectual school readiness.

Under such interpretation of “continuity”, preschool education will, in the true sense of the word, prepare children to schooling. It will not declare such preparation to be the main task of the child’s preschool upbringing, education and development. This will allow to enforce not in word but in practice the principle of uniqueness and inherent worth of the child’s development in preschool childhood, as well as the child’s development amplification principle (A.V. Zaporozhets). As a result, by the age of 7, the child will get the necessary and sufficient level of personality, intellectual and physical development to start learning at school, or in other words he will acquire psychological school readiness.

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