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The Act of Cultural Mediation in Children's Play

*"In the act of mediation lies the mystery of development,
mystery of transformation of real form into ideal".
(El'konin & Zinchenko, 2002)*

ABSTRACT: Classic (non-classic) cultural-historical theory has relatively few theoretical studies on children's play and several basic assumptions are not applied to child play. One of these assumptions is cultural mediation and especially the mechanism of mediation: the relation between ideal and real forms of action. In this article a case of adult-child joint play carried out in the frame of a long-term intervention study is reported. The case study of joint tower building play demonstrates what are the specific requirements of a successful mediator role of an adult in play situation. The main steps of successful adult mediation of play activity are defined.

KEYWORDS: children's play, cultural-historical theory, cultural mediation, poly-subject

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INTRODUCTION

Children's play has different status in different societies as recent research clearly demonstrates (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007). In developing societies children's pretend play is not supported but participation in adult work is accepted and encouraged. In modern western societies play age has been a separate stage of childhood and parents understand general importance of play as a developmental factor. During the last decade researchers are more worried about the decrease of child-driven playtime due to a focus on academics, enrichment activities and increased time with multimedia. The same tendency has been observed in several countries at the same time, not just in the USA (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino & DeLong, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009).

We agree that excessive programming of children's time is a real problem, but we should not misunderstand the societal character of children's "free" play. In Scandinavian countries "free" play is a part of preschool program and often stands for coffee break of the adults. We think that child-initiated play is extremely important for child development, but it should be related to adult-child joint play and cultural mediation of play. Enthusiastic supporters of "free" play model often suppose that any "play" experience develops the child without understanding the difference between advanced and elementary forms of play. Observations in day care institutions and survey studies (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, 2007; Mikhailenko & Korotkova, 2001) indicate that mature forms of play are becoming increasingly infrequent. The necessary adult guidance focusing on children's joint play is often lacking. Scandinavian "free" play nowadays consists of short replays of the high points from TV-series, computer games and other virtual media. There is a need for developing more mature forms of play, for example, by having adults intervene in children's play.

In this article I am introducing a project that trains teacher education students how to intervene effectively in children's play in order to support the development of more mature forms of play. The study is a part of experimental work (Bredikyte & Hakkarainen, 2011; Bredikyte, 2011) that has been carried out at the Research Center for Developmental Teaching and Learning at Kajaani University Consortium, University of Oulu, Finland. In the study I am introducing the concepts of *shared play* as a space for development of the poly-subject(s) – participants of play activity. I am defining the constituents of the act of mediation and analyzing changing roles and functions of the participants in the course of mediational act.

Theoretical background

The study has been carried out within the framework of cultural-historical theory, which, in the words of El'konin (1989), set the stage for the development of "non-classical" psychology. For classical psychology all psychological processes are pre-given and social relations have a role in the factors of mental development. For Vygotsky, "psychological functions are given in the form of *social relations* which *are the source*

of the origin of these functions and their development within humans” (El’konin, 1998, p. 473). This statement differentiates cultural-historical psychology from so-called classical psychology.

Throughout his whole life Vygotsky was developing the principles of this new psychology. Vygotsky named this *peak psychology* because the new psychology was interested in the highest developmental achievements of the personality – its “peaks”. This is typical of his approach turning attention towards the sources, factors and mechanisms of development, and especially the possibilities and potentials for development. The concept of cultural mediation is one of the central concepts in cultural-historical approach.

The act of cultural mediation

The essence of mediation is in denial of immediacy. All psychological relations that link us to reality and other people are never direct. In perception, thinking, action and communication psychological tools guide our psyche. The most important of these tools are language and other forms of representation. Mediation seems to be the necessary condition of the human psyche. Bakhurst (2007) sees the significance of the concept of cultural mediation in at least five aspects of human thinking: (1) it is characteristic exceptionally of human psychological capacities; (2) the possibility of self-consciousness; (3) condition of creative thinking; (4) necessary condition for the development of subjectivity; (d) the unity of the psyche and the world.

In the course of the mediational act objects, tools, signs, etc. become incorporated into natural forms of behavior and transform them into ideals, cultural entities. In the broadest sense they become instrumentalized forms of actions and activity. Exactly this kind of inclusion or incorporation takes place during the joint, united action of the subject with another – the mediator. Such unified act of mediation is more than assimilation or acquisition. This is *co-creation* and in the course of this act, a new unique, individual ideal form on the basis of the real form of a subject’s behavior arises.

This is a crucial aspect. The child- subject does not take any ready-made ideal form from the adult-mediator nor does the adult impose their ideal form on the child. A new ideal form of a child’s behavior is created/generated as a result of the act of mediation. The term *created* or *generated* reveals better the complicated process of cultural mediation, rather than *internalization*, which is usually used in Anglo-American texts. John-Steiner & Mahn (1996) point to the same aspect of the process of internalization, seeing it as “transformative rather than transmissive.”

This kind of co-creation could be best observed in how an infant starts producing new signs, such as different kind of cries, hand and body movements, seeking to express their intentions. An infant creates some kind of ‘code’ symbolizing his emotional state that could be recognized by an adult (most often the mother). El’konin & Zinchenko (2002) point out that co-creation starts from the most difficult part, namely from giving rise to a common language, which is the tool for communication. The child’s contribution to the act of mediation, of co-creation, is first of all an investment

in one's own development, own behavior and self-awareness. This is the *beginning of a child's self-development*. Through this invention an infant spontaneously starts guiding adult behavior. Exactly at this point, according to Zinchenko (1996) and Kudriavtsev (1997), lies the *beginning of human creativity*, and the *development* in general takes *acreative direction*.

The subject(s) of development

According to Kudriavtsev (1997), childhood is a period of the development of human potentials, the basic possibilities for future development. With the help of appropriate educational guidance and support, a child masters the fundamentals of the creative potential of culture.

The child is born into a social world where he is surrounded by the people, who interact with him. Child development starts as a response to social interaction with other persons (mother, father and other family members) as a *dialogue* and *co-creation* of common culture. According to many authors (Fogel, 1993; Lobok, 1997; Hobson, 2004; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Fogel, King & Shanker, 2007) children are active participants in the cultural system from the very beginning. Their cultural life begins from the simple actions of creating elementary cultural forms (gaze, smile, movements and sounds). By performing all these actions the child is starting the process of *self-development*: through creating the culture they are simultaneously creating themselves.

Lobok (1997) claims that a child's cultural development begins not from internalization of cultural norms, but from some elementary actions of "creating primeval culture". In his opinion every child, before being able to interpret signs of adult culture, creates their own subjective reality – "a mythology." This reality forms the basis for interpretation of meanings that cultural objects have. Such a view clearly points to the *self-development* of the child.

Fogel (1993) suggests that infants are active participants in a cultural system from the beginning, right from birth, and even earlier. He assumes that the three concepts – communication, self and culture – are not separate entities, but each one is a facet of the developing individual and they interact directly with each other (each facet defines and creates the other).

"Infants learn to communicate as they define themselves. They create culture for themselves as they communicate with more culturally skilled individuals. They define others in the process of defining themselves. Development arises from being a part in a dynamic discourse with other people." (p. 16)

Corsaro (1997) proposes a new notion of *interpretive reproduction*, instead of the old term socialization, which traditionally meant adaptation and internalization.

“The term *interpretive* captures the innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society. (...) The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction.” (p. 18)

According to the *reproductive view*, children do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them, but they strive to make sense of the adult world and to participate in it. In doing this they come to collectively produce their own peer worlds and cultures.

My hypothesis about the development on the most general level is that creative “drive” is the moving force of the development, and the aim of the development is to accomplish creative potential of the individual. *Self-development is the cornerstone of human development as it is the only way to build unique consciousness.* In his notebooks, Vygotsky (as cited in Zavershneva, 2010, p. 26) concluded that “consciousness is a dialog with oneself” and that this internal dialogue has its beginning in a *co-created joint act of mediation*.

From the perspective of cultural-historical theory the true unit of development is an integrative whole that includes the child, the adult and the symbolic tool provided by the culture (Kozulin, 1998). We should add that the space of development is the zone between the actual and potential development, and the mechanism of development is the act of mediation.

Kudriavtsev (1997) points out that the unit of development should not be an individual child taken in isolation but an integral system of adult-child interaction. Initially such a psychological unit is formed between the infant and the mother. The unit ‘child-adult’ presents the *poly-subject* of development.

Adult mediation in play

Play activity is one of the first cultural activities that children become involved in at an early age. El’konin (1978, 2005) describes play as a ‘cultural activity,’ which means that the ability to play is not ingrained in human biological nature, but is ‘learned’ from the social environment. Today, adults are more ‘responsible’ for an appropriate developmental environment for children than earlier. Recent research in systemic psychophysiology (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Aleksandrov & Aleksandrova, 2004; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; McCaine, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007) provides evidence about the impact of culture and societal forms of life on the *architecture of the human brain*.

Consequently, professionals working with young children not only have to support the development of ongoing play among children but also often have to initiate it: to present and model higher forms of play for young children. At the beginning of play age (around 2-years) *adult initiative* is very important. The continuity of role

actions and understanding of the conventionality of play has to be supported by the adults (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008).

Block building – is a typical play activity in early childhood. It is one that was already introduced by Friedrich Froebel in 1837 as one of the most developmentally appropriate play activities of young children. The case of *Tower building activity* analyzed in the article is a prototypical example of how the adult can mediate young child's steps toward play activity. This case captures typical aspects of child-adult interactions revealing the main features of optimal adult help.

From the point of view of adult mediation in block building play a joint adult-child play was organized as a part of university course of play. The task of the student was to observe the child's play initiatives and elaborate more holistic play events in cooperation with the child. We were interested in dialogic interactions between the adult and the child and how this interaction promoted mediational acts. The following research questions were formulated:

1. How the play event is constructed through dialogic interactions between the child and the adult?
2. What are the main steps of successful mediational act?

CASE STUDY

The general frame

The setting of the play environment is a small, cozy house on university campus. There are seven rooms, including a kitchen and a space in the basement that can be used for creative activities. Once a week a group of 13-17 children (between the ages of 6 weeks to 5 years) attend the club for creative play and participate in specific activities with the university students. Children come with one of their parents and stay for 4 hours. During each session about 15 students, a music teacher and a university teacher/researcher are also present.

At the beginning of each study year all the participants sign a form giving permission for videotaping and otherwise documenting the activities. We obtain the right to use the data for teaching and research purposes.

Unit of analysis

One of the defining features of cultural-historical psychology is the method by which developmental processes are studied. Vygotsky (1987) proposed to study psychological processes by dividing them into 'holistic' units, which retain all the basic properties of the whole and cannot be further divided without losing the whole.

The subject of development in a cultural-historical theoretical framework is a poly-subject – namely, adult-child dyads or children's groups. This definition implies that an adult should be included in the unit of analysis. Zinchenko (2000, p. 27) proposed that "actions in the real human world" could be seen as a unit of analysis, not only of

behavior or activity but of the human psyche as well. In his opinion, real action is a condition, a mechanism, and a source of energy for psychic development. How can we define real actions in play activity? This must not be merely any action but only such *actions of a subject that brings play activity into motion*.

I defined the *unit of analysis of play activity as actions of a subject (poly-subject) that construct play events* and move the activity forward. Chosen unit of analysis defined the unit of observation and types of data for the analysis. Five types of data were used for the analysis of the tower building play session: video records, field notes, written observations, student's group report including reflections and group discussions.

The field notes, individual and group reports were written independently by the participants of the sessions and later compared and discussed in joint seminars with all participants (students & researcher). All reports include reflection at the end.

Student's reflections were used as an important resource for analyzing play session and interpreting the data. Experiences of direct participation in play helped to capture the inner state of an adult player in addition to the changes in children's participation.

The analysis of play sessions and student interventions started with writing explicit narrative of the session. Transcripts from chosen video play episodes were made using the Inqscribe program. Data from the different types of reports were included in the final written narrative of play session.

Analysis of the tower building case: from play actions to play event with adult help

In this case adult help through direct intervention in a young child's activity is analyzed. The focus is on how the play event is constructed through dialogic interactions between the child and the adult. The activity takes place in the block center. The center is located in a big room that is divided into two spaces by a low shelf. One half of the room is the dramatic play area and the other one is for building, blocks, wooden railroad, etc. There are two students, two young boys and a mother in the room.

A young boy (1.8) is playing with the railroad and a student is supporting him. Another boy (2.1) is walking around taking some toys and looking around. A student is observing him and writing notes.

During the whole activity, which lasted about 1 hour, children and adults were coming and leaving. I am analyzing joint tower building activity lasting about 45 minutes. A male student, Marko, is responsible for the activities in the block-building center. His task is to help every child who wants to play in the center. This time the student played with Ville (2.1). During the planning seminar we discussed that the boy was experiencing some difficulties and needs help.

1. Trying to join the child's play

When Ville came to the block center, he wanted to reach a big plastic bucket with small cars, ships and planes, which was standing high on the shelf. Marko helped him to get the bucket. Ville started exploring the content.

He took a tractor and started attaching different cars to it one by one, like carriages in a toy train. He made a long tractor-car caravan and started driving around the block center. Marko took three ships, attached them to each other making a similar construction and made car sounds. Ville watched him smiling and kept on playing.

The play lasted about 10 minutes and then the boy disappeared to the kitchen, where his mother was drinking coffee and chatting with other mothers. Marko followed the boy and found him under the table. The boy's mother suggested that he should go and play with the friend and the boy eagerly returned to the block center. Marko and Ville continued playing with the tractor and cars. The boy started moving with the tractor among the big light cardboard blocks lying everywhere on the floor. He was colliding the blocks with the tractor.

2. Stepping into child's play, expanding the initial child's idea (Episode 1)

The first play episode lasted about 1 minute. The student initiated the activity by proposing to the child that he build a tower and then to hit it with the tractor. The student repeated his proposal three times and all the time he was building a tower and following the child's reactions. The child was observing carefully and listening attentively, but did not join the building.

When the tower was six-blocks high the boy collided with his whole body into the tower and destroyed it. Almost at once he got up from the floor shouting excitedly: "Oho!" The boy stretched his hand to the "ruins" and asked to build a new tower saying: "More!" This means that he not only understood, but also accepted the student's idea of play.

The student did not interpret the child's falling on and destroying the tower as "bad behavior". He was able to see the situation from the child's point of view and guess a deeper meaning of the child's action. Further development of their joint activity revealed that this particular episode of *falling on the tower* became a very important part of their interaction. Based on the child's behavior during the following episodes we would interpret that by falling with his whole body on the tower and ruining it the child was illustrating the concept of falling. Vygotsky (1997) describes such phenomena as gesture language pointing to the fact that only the child's *own concrete actions* are *imparting the meaning* to the objects and words.

We can say that the student introduced the concept of building to the child and implemented the idea through action. It is possible to interpret the activity as shared because both participants were active and attentive both to the actions and to the words of each other, and "took turns" in two constituent parts of the activity: building and destroying the tower.

3. Involvement in construction: taking turns (Episode 2)

The episode lasted almost two minutes. This time the child initiated shared activity by proposing to build a tower right after he destroyed the first tower: "more!" – he announced. The student started building a new tower but this time he is *directing* and *helping* the child. The boy is very active and eager to build and the student is helping

him. He is placing one block, giving another block to the child, waiting, watching and making positive comments.

In this episode the student initiates the tower collapse. When the tower is eight-blocks high he stops the building activity and proposes: “And now try to drive the tractor towards the side”. The student is following carefully the child’s actions, giving advice and showing where to hit. The child is trying to hit the tower from six different positions. When finally the tower collapses, both are very happy and laughing from their hearts.

We can summarize that the student was “teaching” the child not only to build the tower but also to destroy it very carefully. This episode reveals that the child became an *active participant* in the activity but he also closely follows the student’s directions.

4. Guided building (Episode 3)

The episode lasted about a minute and a half. The activity started from the student’s question: “Are we going to build a new [tower]?” “New!” repeated the boy, taking a block and starting to build; he looks very enthusiastic and active. The child brings new blocks and the student only shows where he can get more. Both are *working hand in hand* and *taking turns*. The child is speaking a lot, trying to repeat some words after the student, but the words are not clear. He is supporting his actions with words and exclamations. The student is very attentive: observing the child’s movements and actions, looking to his face and especially when speaking, trying to “understand” the child’s thinking and intentions. He managed to notice the moment when the boy almost destroyed the 4-block high tower and at that point he stopped asking for more blocks.

The student provoked tower destruction a bit later looking into the child’s eyes, smiling and asking: “And what now?” The boy responds by looking back at the student’s face and falling on the tower; the student is catching him and commenting: “The whole fella [fellow] crumbled down there.” The tower is destroyed and both are laughing.

5. The student becomes involved in play (Episode 4)

The activity lasted about 2 minutes. The child again initiated the activity. He started running around and bringing blocks one by one. The student is sitting on the floor and instructing the boy how to place the blocks. He is putting one block at a time, waiting for the child to put his block. They are not speaking much, only some “well”, “yeah”, “right” can be heard.

When the child destroys the tower he at once then turns to the student and looking straight into his face falls on the student’s knees. The student catches the boy and turns him in the air. This time a child destroyed the tower with a tractor but then fell down on the student’s knees. The child is repeating the similar action for the third time (he destroyed the tower by falling in Episodes 1 and 3). But this time the boy falls *intentionally* into the student’s lap after destroying the tower with the tractor. This is clear because the tower is on the child’s left side and the student is sitting at his right

side, so after destroying the tower the child turns to the student, looks at his face and falls into his lap, but not on the tower.

Previous falling episodes can be interpreted as destroying the tower, but this time there is something new. In Episode 1 the child just fell down on the tower and destroyed it. In Episode 3 he was falling close to the student and the student caught him because he was afraid that the boy might get hurt. In this episode the child *provoked* the student to play by falling on his knees. We may think that the boy wanted to be 'caught' by the student just as it happened in Episode 3. This time the student understood the boys falling as an intentional invitation to play and turned him in the air, thereby *fulfilling the child's expectations* and as if saying: "Yes we are playing and having fun together!"

The child is not able to verbally describe his thoughts yet, but demonstrates the fall of the tower with his own body by falling down himself on the tower. We can interpret this as a meta-communicative message, "this is play" (Bateson, 1978). Falling down like a tower was earlier more an embodiment of the thought, now it was an invitation to play.

6. Enriching joint play activity with reflection (Episode 10)

This is a very rich episode where new aspects of the child's behavior are manifested. The boy is quite active and free. He is noticing a "hill" – a few blocks lying to one side like a hill, showing holes in the blocks and as if *initiating dialogue* with the student, introducing additional topics to their play. The student responds and comments.

This time the boy tried to destroy the tower quite early and the student stops him from doing this twice. After the tower collapsed the boy, again for the second time, fell down *intentionally* on the student's knees! The student again turns him in the air.

After that a totally new activity started. The child was trying to tell what happened: he is bending down with his body several times as if demonstrating how the tower fell and supporting his movements with exclamations and facial expressions. The student was listening and adding more comments to this gesture story. This is in principle a new activity in the child's behavior – a *reflection*. The child is not only supporting his actions by gestures and words as he did in previous episodes but also trying to tell what happened after the event. The student is very supportive, helping to tell the story of their play in words. The child is listening, carefully adding movements, gestures and words. He is bending down with his body several times as if demonstrating how the tower fell and supporting his movements with exclamations: pum, pam; his face is very expressive, the student is listening and adding some more comments to his gesture story. This is a *joint narrative reflection* initiated by the child. Both participants are creating a narrative of their play. Here we can speak about the *actions in the zone of proximal development* of the child. Without a more competent partner the child would not be able to do this, although he is ready for such activity! The same kind of reflection is repeated in Episodes 11 and 13.

7. Reaching togetherness and flow experience (Episode 13)

This is one of the most playful episodes of the whole activity. The student introduced a new strategy of building and spontaneously made a “funny face” (big eyes and a very surprised face expression). The child interpreted this as an invitation for face-making play and at once made a funny face by showing his tongue. The student, in response, also showed his tongue. The boy was very satisfied and initiated face-making play a few more times, interrupting the tower building. Both participants seemed totally involved in the activity and their interactions were very spontaneous and improvised. Both felt confident and relaxed.

This time they built a tower 15 blocks high. The boy managed to put his last block as high as the 14th storey! This time the child had enough patience and the student did not have to stop him from destroying the tower before it was high enough. After the tower collision the boy initiated a short reflection by demonstrating with a few blocks what had just happened. The student supported him and after that proposed to build a new tower. “JOOOOO!” [yees] shouted the boy.

This episode indicates that both participants are flexible, relaxed and involved in *spontaneous* and *creative interactions*, which can be described as flow experiences (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). They are laughing a lot, look really happy and are not paying attention to other children and adults around.

INTERPRETATION OF THE ACTIVITY

The whole activity lasted about 45 minutes, the tower building activity itself about 33 minutes. From the beginning the student was observing the child and looking for the chance to play together. First he tried to join the boy’s play actions and their joint activities lasted for about 10 minutes. When the activities stopped the mother proposed to the boy to play with the student, naming him “a friend”. The boy returned to the block center and then their tower building activity started.

The mother’s suggestion was the *starting point* for joint play. The next step was the student’s proposal to build a tower together and then to hit it with the tractor. The original idea of the child – hitting the blocks – was enriched by the student’s idea of building a tower. During the whole activity these two ideas became united into a tower building and ruining play.

The child became involved in the activity: after the first episode, when the tower was built and destroyed the child asked for “more”. During a period of 33 minutes they were building a tower 15 times and only 3 times did the student propose the activity. In all other cases the child initiated tower building. The child was eager to go on but the activity stopped because the student left for lunch. When the student stepped into the child’s activity it can be described as going around with a “tractor” and hitting things available in the block center, mainly blocks. We can presuppose that the child took the role (not consciously) of a tractor or tractor driver himself. Most probably he could remember a tractor he saw some time ago. He might have been imitating his brother’s actions with the tractor during their play at home. The boy was not adding

any other events, only repeating on and on one single action – collision. For that purpose he used the existing environment and concrete objects available. This is the typical behavior of a young child.

In a strict sense this is not a play activity but only the first step towards it. According to Vygotsky (2003), play starts when an imaginary situation appears. The next requirement further developed by E'lkonin (1989) is roles and plot.

When the student entered the child's activity he proposed building and transformed separate actions into "two stroke" play: first you build and then you demolish. The student's actions constructed a *play event – the basic unit of analysis* of play activity. The same basic unit was repeated fifteen times during the whole joint activity. Every repeated episode was richer, more advanced and was adding new features to the child's behavior. I would define Episode 13 as the most free and creative and would apply a very nice term used by Bruce (1991, 1996, 2005) – *free flow play*.

1. Reaching the mutuality

At first sight play is activity organized and guided by the adult. But we have to ask: is this play for the child and how much are they implementing their own ideas? Careful analysis of the child's involvement and participation in the activity revealed that he was playing.

At the beginning of the interaction the student tried to follow the child's actions. When the boy made a long tractor-car caravan and started driving around the block center the student made a similar construction and imitated the child's car sounds. Ville watched the student's actions, smiled and kept on playing, only commenting on his own actions to the student but did not start more active cooperation (looks like parallel play). This kind of play lasted about 10 minutes and then the boy left for the kitchen. In this short episode the student was the follower and the child was the leader.

In most cases students would behave in a similar way. They would try to follow the child's actions and sometimes add some new play actions. The students explain that they don't want to destroy a child's play by proposing their own ideas. We think it is not enough just to follow the child and not add anything essential to the activity. It is important to initiate the exchange of ideas and create something new together. The starting point is the child's *initiative* but skills to cooperate and participate in shared activity should also be developed.

In this particular case, the student made the right guess about the child's *intention* and chose the right *strategy of interaction* with the child.

2. Child's intentions

Revelation of the child's intentions is a precondition of a successful adult intervention in children's play. In other words it is necessary to find the idea, which the child is trying to explore in play. Only on the basis of this idea is a successful joint play activity possible. The child's intentions can be revealed only in action, which means that the adult has to start interacting with the child. There is still a very strong tradition among early childhood professionals and parents that play is the children's own business.

Many teachers believe that adults spoil children's play if they interfere. A strong belief is that other children would not do that. We think that there is no difference who joins the activity. The activity will be "spoiled" or becomes different in any case. Still, a professional adult might help to develop the activity better than an inexperienced child. An adult might help to preserve and clarify the intentions of the participants and at the same time demonstrate novel and flexible behavior models.

How do we know what the child's idea or intention is? The child can't tell us because they themselves are not aware of their intentions and not able to express them in words. Older children (4-5-years-old) can often say what they want to play, like family, robbers, princess, etc., but the topic does not reveal which aspects of human relations the child is exploring. Is it danger or safety, fear or bravery, protection and the fight against evil robbers? Young children are often interested in playing with certain objects or things but from our point of view something more is always behind the interest.

Long term observations can reveal more about the child's interests and intentions because they are best revealed in actions and behavior. In order to reveal the child's ideas an adult has to create situations in which the child's intentions become visible.

The idea of building a tower and then hitting it with the tractor was quite spontaneous but as the student pointed out in his reflections, this was the result of careful observation of the child's previous activities. The student mentioned that he noticed many other boys of similar age interested in playing different kinds of crashes, collisions, etc. He remembered that as a young child he was also very much interested in all kind of 'dangerous' situations. Typically an adult would 'teach' the child to play nicely with a car or to build a tower and try to eliminate any destructive actions. We have two other cases of tower building when a boy and a girl were involved in tower building with their grandmothers.

The girl (2.9) entered the block center with her grandmother. Grandmother proposed her to build a tower from big blocks. She started building and her grandmother was guiding her all the time. The grandma was commenting on every action like "yes, that's right" or "no, not like this" and so on. The activity lasted about 5 minutes and then the girl stopped saying that she didn't want to build any more. Grandmother told her to use more blocks but the girl did not listen and moved to another activity.

A similar process was observed when a grandmother was teaching a young boy (2.3) to build a tower. The grandmother started building the tower and the boy wanted to ruin it. The grandmother did not let him but asked him to build further. The boy added a few blocks but then again wanted to destroy the tower. This activity lasted no longer than 5 minutes.

Comparison of the three cases can lend us insights into play activity. In all cases adults proposed building a tower but only in one case the activity lasted 33 minutes, the other two less than 5 minutes. Only in the first case the child did not want to stop playing. How can we explain the difference?

If we try to define *the object* of all *activities* we might get some answer. The object was *building actions* in the short time ply proposed by grandmothers. In both cases

adults were teaching children how to build. This is a typical situation. Adults often see blocks the same as many other toys, as tools for teaching the right ways to use them. They don't take time to find out how the child wants to use the object.

In the tower building and destroying play the object of activity was the exploration of the concepts of *falling*, *destroying* and *building* and the *connections between them*. Through physical actions and emotional *perezhivanie* the boy was exploring the state of falling, crashing, colliding and then building again and again. This is a familiar and emotionally affective experience for the small child. To fall down and get hurt, to ruin something, to split or to break is an everyday experience. No wonder that the child became so involved in the play activity proposed by the student. The student managed to grasp the child's intention probably because he had chosen the right strategy for their interaction.

3. Strategy for joint interaction

From the very beginning the student became a *participant* in the activity and was trying to find out the child's interests. For a while, observing the boy hitting big blocks on the floor, he guessed that to hit a tower would be more exciting. After making this successful proposal he mainly followed the child's reactions and responded to them. He was not acting as a 'teacher' but more as a co-player. The student admitted afterwards that as soon as he managed to establish living contact and mutual understanding with the child the whole activity and all other interactions came much more easily. Their activity was total improvisation: in a dialogue they were exchanging the ideas and building common understanding and a shared sense of the play activity.

After the first tower building and crashing episode the child became the *leader* of the activity and the student took his role as a *helper*, *supporter* and a *model for imitation*. The student is not just 'demonstrating' certain basic skills essential for successful participation in play activity. He is involving the child in activity where he gets the opportunity to practice the basic skills. They were practicing the model of *turn taking* or *dialogue* both in actions and in oral language (learning to build a shared activity): the student is very careful and attentive, responding to every word and action of the boy. Their dialogue proceeds all the time on two levels: (1) in spoken language and (2) in actions or "gesture language". The entire time the student introduces "key words" for this particular activity repeating them several times, "showing" the meaning of the words through actions and using appropriate words while commenting upon the actions of the child. Already after the first episode the child starts repeating some of the words after the student and later he is using more and more words supporting his own actions.

On the other hand, the student starts repeating some words and exclamations after the child, showing his support, appreciation and understanding, thus building *togetherness*.

The student was constantly enriching the child's language by introducing some literary techniques such as descriptive language and comparisons. He was even *describing his own thinking* to the child, *predicting*, *planning* and so on.

On the one hand, the student was trying to speak in short sentences using simple “known” words but, at the same time, he introduced examples of “developed” adult language. The meaning of these expressions is not clear and can be only “guessed” by the child. But they set up the developmental perspective for child’s language, the domain of unclear knowing according to Podd’yakov (1996).

The student also supported the slightest initiatives of the child, for example in Episode 10 when a new ‘tool’ – *reflection* – appeared. Careful observation of the episode reveals that it was the child who initiated the reflection. Of course this was just a short pause and a few words and a very thoughtful expression on his face. The student noticed this tiny episode and elaborated it to an explicit shared reflection. He started describing the events and the child kept illustrating them with his body movements, facial expressions and exclamations. The child initiated the reflection two more times (Episodes 11 and 13) and the student again supported him.

4. Teaching by doing and free learning

It is evident that there is a lot of teaching in the student’s activity, but this is very specific “teaching”. It can be described as active demonstration and employment of certain skills, but it is up to the child to imitate and start using some of them or not. This is *active teaching* in the *context of ongoing play*. Learning, which takes place, is necessary to move the play activity forward. A play situation creates the need and motivation for the child to learn new skills.

This kind of learning can be called “free” learning. This is very typical of young children’s learning, which is holistic and participatory and proceeds through careful observation and gradual imitation. We call it *free learning* because the child imitates only what he is able to understand and is ready for. This kind of learning is the same or very close to what Rogoff at el. (1998, 2003) defines as “intent participation” when describing children’s learning in natural settings in traditional societies.

I want to stress that the student is not teaching the child directly; he is focused on *developing their joint play activity*. The *child’s learning proceeds in the context of play and through play*. The child became deeply involved in the activity, which required a higher level of functioning. The child demonstrated certain skills, which were not present in everyday situations only because he participated in this concrete play activity. His *learning* was contextual, embedded in the activity and came as *a result of participation in play activity*. But it will take time before all the skills and abilities become visible and stable in non-play situations.

As a result of successfully organized joint activities the student managed to help with the child’s communication and interactions with others, turn taking, block building, use of language, and expanded the vocabulary. Together they were explicitly exploring such concepts as: high, higher, tremendously high, more, again, collision, building, destroying, etc. The whole organized intervention of the adult helped the child to move to a more developed level of play.

Optimal adult help is of a very specific nature; the adult should always adjust his actions to the child’s abilities. In other words, an adult’s activeness should be inversely

proportional to the activeness of the child. Suvorov described (2003, p. 76) the universal law of interiorization: “the law of graduated shared activity” that could be defined as “first together and then by oneself”. The essence of the law is that an adult should notice the first signs of a child’s attempts towards independence and gradually weaken his help/support thus providing the space for his/her self-development.

CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude that the act of cultural mediation is a very complex process constructed through *emotional ‘soperezhivanie’* and *dialogic interactions between the participants*.

- » The main steps of successful mediation of play activity:
- » Genuine interest and careful observation,
- » Stepping into child’s activity with the aim to revealing child’s intentions, clarifying and expanding child’s ideas,
- » Involvement in construction of play events, taking turns,
- » Reaching the mutuality – togetherness,
- » Emotional involvement – flow experience.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis revealed that mediational act proceeds in the zone of proximal development of the participants or better to say that mediating activity creates the zones of proximal development for the participants.

When the student *transformed separate play actions into cultural play activity* the child was able to comprehend and follow the idea because it was in the zone of his proximal development. This is the reason why the boy was motivated to participate in the activity. He was not able to construct this level of play just by himself but he was able to participate and even to become an active leader of it. The student’s actions created the next step and opened *new developmental possibilities* for the child.

For the student, the activity became a ‘turning point’ in his ability to support children’s play and a *developmental step in his professional growth*. The student admitted that this was probably the first time during his studies when he was really playing and totally involved (in flow) in the activity. The student noticed that he managed to communicate and understand the child very well and was surprised how significantly adult actions affected the child’s performance. He concluded that it was a big challenge and a pleasure to play with the boy.

My conclusion about the effects of this play activity is that both *participants were teaching each other and learning* at the same time. They were fostering each other’s development. The student was not an expert in play and was all the time searching for the best possible step to improve the activity. These are the main characteristics of the activity that produced developmental effects in both participants.

The activity was spontaneous, creative, improvised, and co-constructed. The initial idea of play the student got from observing the child's play actions. A simple story line was constructed during the play: building and destroying the tower. Dramatic tension was created through the falling of the tower. The activity is co-constructed through dialogic interactions. Participants have not declared their roles openly but they might be guessed. Both participants were emotionally involved. Flow experiences are evident almost during the whole play activity. The activity was challenging and motivating, it became a developmental act for the student's professional growth and an important step in the child's ability to participate in joint play activity with other people.

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AKT KULTUROWEGO UPOŚREDNIANIA W ZABAWIE DZIECI

ABSTRAKT: Klasyczna (i nie tylko klasyczna) teoria kulturowo-historyczna poświęca stosunkowo niewiele miejsca zabawom dzieci, a wiele z jej podstawowych założeń nie stosuje się do zabaw dziecięcych. Jednym z takich założeń jest upośrednianie kulturowe, a szczególnie mechanizm upośredniania: relacja między idealnymi a rzeczywistymi formami działania. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia studium przypadku: wspólną zabawę dorosłego i dziecka w ramach badań nad długofalową interwencją. Analiza tego przykładu (wspólne budowanie wieży z klocków) wskazuje, jakie są konkretne uwarunkowania efektywnego upośredniania przez dorosłego w sytuacji zabawy. Artykuł definiuje główne etapy skutecznego procesu upośredniania przez dorosłego w kontekście zabawy.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: jedność wieloosobowa (poly-subject), teoria kulturowo-historyczna, upośrednianie kulturowe, zabawa dzieci