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Leisure Time of Children at the Preschool and Early-School Ages: Organization and Forms : Pedagogical Reflections

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Leisure Time of Children at the Preschool and Early-School Ages: Organization and Forms – Pedagogical Reflections

Czas wolny dzieci
w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym.
Organizacja i formy – refleksje pedagogiczne

*A child can teach an adult three things:
to be happy for no reason,
to always be busy with something,
and to know how to demand – with all his might
– that what he desires.*

Paulo Coelho

Introduction

Childhood is an important time in life, during which human beings acquire certain habits and shape their tastes, interests and passions. It is the time when they are supposed to develop the ability to make proper use of their leisure time, and to attend to their health, fitness and family ties. In all of these respects, free time becomes an integral part of the life of individuals – especially children, who as pupils are themselves in a state

of constant development throughout the stage of their education corresponding to their preschool and early-school years.

It must be remembered, however, that the world of a child's feelings is a completely different one from ours: that is to say, it diverges fundamentally from any ideas we may have about how mature adults function in relation to their reality. For the latter, free time is in a state of constant juxtaposition with working time, studying, and all of the duties to be fulfilled in everyday life. K. Migdał rightly highlights the fact that “[...] work and free time are two inseparable sides of the life of modern man. Quality of life depends on the quality of work and free time (leisure-time behaviour)”¹. Professional work and studying are not the only elements affecting a human being's quality of life. The real measure of human value lies in academic and work achievements, taken together with how we pursue our lives in our leisure time.

Unfortunately, for some people leisure time only counts as time intended for entertainment and relaxation – as something inessential to one's life or even, to put it colloquially, “a total waste of time”. For most people, leisure time is associated with rest and relaxation – the ability to do what you like, what feels good. One can use one's time off in accordance with one's interests and preferences, giving one the opportunity to relax and regenerate one's physical and mental vigour. Activities pursued in leisure time prevent fatigue and monotony, enabling a certain detachment from everyday life, and also provide many of the experiences and much of the energy needed for daily work and the fulfilment of one's duties.

The modern world, with its dynamism, opens up a completely new path for reflections about free time. This is very important, because it concerns the instilling of healthy habits for organizing free time into children from an early age, in environments that are well-known (i.e. the family) and recognised (e.g. school). This, in turn, leads to the observation that children, at a certain stage of development, need a certain measure of value, by which they can evaluate and select the most advantageous forms of active leisure for themselves. One only need ensure that this uninhibited activity on the part of children remains entirely an effect of their free but rational actions, rather than being something imposed or forced upon them².

Establishing Terminology

Free time, because of its interdisciplinary nature, is subject to consideration by a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, education and psy-

¹ K. Migdał, *Psychologia czasu wolnego*, Warsaw 2011, p. 42; cf. H. Bee, *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka*, Poznań 2004.

² T. Banaszkiewicz, *Wychowanie dzieci i młodzieży do rekreacji na progu reformy oświaty*, Częstochowa 2005, p. 21–63, M. Gwozda, *Czas wolny*, [w:] *Mały Leksykon Pedagoga Wczesnoszkolnego*, (red.) J. Karbowiczek, Warsaw 2014, p. 49.

chology. Defining this term in all its aspects can lead us to the conclusion that the problem of leisure time is a major issue within the sphere of educational and social activities.

The term “leisure” can have multiple meanings, and under the influence of social transformations its perception has changed in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In the literature, to quote the virtually classic definition of the French sociologist J. Dumazedier, by “free time” we understand “[...] that set of activities which the individual can pursue with absolute freedom, for leisure or for fun, or to augment existing information, or in the form of selfless and voluntary social activities – once released from professional, family and social obligations”³.

In the above approach, it is clearly apparent that the actions taken in one’s spare time should be completely voluntary, should give pleasure and be free of commercial purposes. Only the time remaining after the completion of family, social and further training-related duties counts as free time – as time that can be disposed of in ways subject only to one’s own discretion. The meaning of “leisure time” was similarly captured by the Polish sociologist E. Wnuk-Lipinski, who describes it as “[...] the time remaining for the personal disposal of a man after fulfilling his professional, family, and school-related duties, and after meeting the biological needs of his organism”⁴. Hence, leisure time can be described in terms of a certain budgeting of one’s time, as that part which is not fulfilled by work, study, housework, or the meeting of one’s physiological needs, and which instead is a time filled with freedom, family life and social activities, conferring more immediate forms of benefit and satisfaction.

A. Kaminski believes that free time should be “[...] free of the following: basic professional work, including school activities amongst pupils and students, work paid as overtime, work in other professions, homework (for students), commuting to work (university), meeting the basic needs of one’s body (sleep, personal hygiene and eating), household and family responsibilities, and the university education of the employed”⁵.

D. Mroczkowska points to an important issue, writing that “[...] free time is an issue that relates individually to each person. One establishes independently of others the times that will count for oneself as free, in that they are when one can relax and unwind. But this is a relative matter,

³ Z. Dąbrowski, *Czas wolny dzieci i młodzieży*, Warszawa 1966, p. 13.

⁴ E. Wnuk-Lipiński, *Praca i wypoczynek w budzenie czasu*, Gdańsk 1972, p. 10–11; cf. K. Denek, *Pedagogika czasu wolnego*, „Lider” 2006, no. 12, J. Dyszkowska, *Pedagogika czasu wolnego wokół tradycyjnych funkcji i nowych zadań*, „Kwartalnik Edukacyjny” 2006, no. 4.

⁵ A. Kamiński, *Czas wolny i jego problematyka społeczno-wychowawcza*, Wrocław 1965, p. 69–70.

says the author: activities carried out during work can give pleasure to one person, while being nothing other than a duty for another”⁶.

Brief analysis of this issue confirms what a broad-ranging concept “leisure” must be. Most definitions insist that it is the period of time which a person can have solely under their own discretion, and that it creates the right conditions for rest, recuperation and personal development. It should also be noted that a lack of free time has a very negative impact on the health of human beings, on their achievements, on their contacts with others, as well as on their image of themselves and the world around them. Properly spent, free time makes a positive contribution to the process of education, and to that of developing one’s personality and of cultivating one’s sensibility, not only in respect of individuals but also where the whole of society is concerned. Therefore, it is important to teach children self-management of free time from an early age, as this will prove essential to their formation as young persons.

The way children utilize their leisure time is another important aspect of this, because it is significantly different from how adults use theirs. This situation is observable due to the fact that “[...] the socio-economic situation of children differs from that of adults. Children are characterized by a lack of life experience, and by mental immaturity”⁷.

The functions and aspects of leisure time

Leisure time allows the diverse needs of a human being, which are often pushed aside or even completely ignored in everyday life because of one’s job or one’s responsibilities, to be met. With free time constituting such a substantial portion of the overall budgeting out of one’s time between activities of one sort or another, we have the opportunity to fulfil a number of needs, including the following:

- rest and relaxation;
- mental and physical activity;
- changes in lifestyle and environment;
- emotions;
- reduction of the level of self-constraint;
- control of aggression;
- ambition;
- cognitive needs;
- development and self-realization;
- aesthetic needs⁸.

⁶ D. Mroczkowska, *Czas wolny. Refleksje, dylematy, perspektywy*, Warszawa 2011, p. 7.

⁷ T. Banaszkiwicz, *Wychowanie dzieci i młodzież*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸ D. Mroczkowska, *Czas wolny. Refleksje, dylematy, perspektywy*, op. cit., passim.

In the life of a human being, then, free time may be said to fulfil a range of diverse and interpenetrating functions. Among scholars who have studied the issue, we may mention T. Wujek, who distinguishes two main functions for free time: namely, “[...] leisure and entertainment, and personality development”⁹.

The first of these two functions enables the regeneration of the human body, restoring the strength used by a human being when at work and while fulfilling their daily duties. This feature allows the biological balance of the body to be maintained. We can distinguish passive and active relaxation. Generally, our preferred form of rest is active leisure, consisting in the pursuit of activities which involve one both mentally and physically, for example, cycle touring or walking in the fresh air. Passive recreation, on the other hand, is aimed primarily at rejuvenating the body, through mainly passive activities such as sleeping and lying down. This kind of rest is essential for the proper functioning of the body, but should not be the dominant form of leisure. The second function, meanwhile, is that of developing one’s personality, expanding one’s interests, acquiring new passions and hobbies, together with one’s cultural development.

Z. Dąbrowski likewise recognizes the functions of leisure time, listing its four main functions as follows: “[...] leisure, entertainment, the development of interests and skills, and the search for one’s place in society”¹⁰. According to the author, the main function of free time is relaxation, meaning the renewal of one’s mental and physical strength. Tiredness resulting from prolonged exercise causes difficulties in learning and work, problems with concentration and mental association, and a diminished level of interest in one’s surroundings. Among children, tiredness not only reduces activity, but also has a negative impact on their development. Tiredness is usually combatted by improving one’s conditions of work or study, while relaxation remains an indispensable way to re-balance the body. During leisure, one can satisfy one’s need for sleep, and one’s hunger and thirst, taking a break from the duties and requirements of everyday life in order to calm down and relax. If we undertake any activities, then these will be quiet and will not require additional energy.

This function is very important for small children, who are especially susceptible to rapidly developing physical imbalances resulting from the sheer dynamism of their involvement in their activities, as well as from inappropriate management of their energy resources. A child’s body quickly loses energy, but at the same time quickly regenerates and returns to

⁹ T. Wujek, *Praca domowa i czynny wypoczynek ucznia*, Warszawa 1974, p. 13.

¹⁰ Z. Dąbrowski, *Czas wolny dzieci i młodzieży*, op. cit., p. 16.

a state of mental and physical balance. Rest can take various forms, which depend, inter alia, on the needs, habits, and conditions of life.

With respect to its first three functions, it can be stated that leisure, entertainment and development satisfy some of the most important human needs: namely, rejuvenation of one's strength through leisure, the need for relaxation, the enjoyment of pleasure through being entertained, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills through participation in training classes. The fourth function pertains to social tasks that do not themselves satisfy human needs directly, in that these activities relate to the public, the society in which the individual lives. The effects of the effort that a man undertakes for the good of society can also be a source of satisfaction for that individual – one that derives from their actions and activities. This feature allows man to enter into and participate in social life, and we may assert that it is important that free time complies with all four mutually complementary forms of functionality. Should any be lacking, this will mean that leisure time is not being pursued and developed fully, or in the manner most beneficial to human beings.

Among the many functions of free time, most researchers consider the most important to be relaxation, understood as the rejuvenation of the body after extended work, where the latter is a source of fatigue.

When considering the characteristics of free time, we should also pay attention to certain closely related aspects of leisure time. In the literature, we find that leisure is seen as exhibiting the following aspects: socio-economic, psychological, hygiene and health and educational¹¹.

Our main interest here is the pedagogical aspect. From this perspective, free time gives the child the opportunity to demonstrate activity, creativity and skill in managing the part of the day that is free from duties. When organising the child's free time we must remember to ensure their freedom, not forcing anything upon them. We should allow the child to demonstrate their independence and initiative in planning their own free time. In this part of the day, a child participates in classes in which he or she is fully engaged, and which create ideal conditions for his or her development. A significant advantage of leisure time, in educational terms, is the possibility of children deciding for themselves about the form and content of classes that are supposed to fulfil their needs and interests. The independence of a small child is, and must necessarily remain, quite limited, but with age they can be granted greater freedom. A child has a limited amount of free time, but can use it in various ways: e.g. playing at home or outside, walking, going to the cinema. The forms of leisure cho-

sen by the child allow them to be taught proper management of free time, and to be shown how one can ensure proper rest for one's body. Through the experience of fun and joy, free time motivates the child to discover ever new forms and approaches with respect to leisure activities – activities that are there just for them to make use of as they wish¹².

In the context of the above considerations, the rational organisation of a child's leisure time at pre-school and early-school ages emerges as an important problem. (We may add that children's free time also includes any period in which they fulfil voluntarily accepted social obligations.)

Ways for children to spend their free time

A child's free time, unlike that of youths or adults, is above all more extended, and characterised by a narrower range of forms and places for spending it, along with a higher proportion of passive recreation, and greater levels of supervision and care on the part of adults.

The following factors play an essential role in influencing how children spend their free time:

- education of parents;
- environmental traditions;
- level of wealth;
- type of place and location¹³.

An extremely important consideration is the level of education of those carers who, in the initial phase of the child's life, are supposed to carefully direct the latter's spare-time behaviour. Environmental traditions shape attitudes and norms of behaviour, and wealth can improve the quality of organisation of activities and their implementation. Type of place and location often determines the amount of free time available to the child.

Czajkowski has divided appropriate and valuable free-time activities into several groups:

- creative activities;
- those which develop social activity;
- cultural and scientific activities;
- physical motor-activities¹⁴.

Z. Dąbrowski has categorized children's usage of free time with reference to the different methods of organization involved. The researcher

¹² Ibidem, p. 43–53; cf. J. Pięta, *Pedagogika czasu wolnego*, Warszawa 2004; R. Winiarski, *Rekreacja i czas wolny*, Warszawa 2011.

¹³ S. Tabot, *Wpływ rodziny na wykorzystanie czasu wolnego*, „Życie Szkoły” 2002, no. 3, p. 150–151; cf. H. Marzec, *Czas wolny dzieci w rodzinie*, „Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze” 2000, no. 6; A. Skreczko, *Czas wolny dziecka*, „Czas Miłosierdzia” 2004, no. 8.

¹⁴ K. Czajkowski, *Wychowanie do rekreacji*, Warszawa 1979, p. 74.

has identified three groups. The first consists of children who mainly fill up their free time with playground activities. Parents who allow for this type of free-time usage, and who do the household chores for their children, aim to give them a childhood that will be as long-lasting and care-free as possible. Such children, however, often become clumsy and think only about themselves in adulthood. The second group is made up of those children who, in addition to studying, from time to time actually perform some small chores themselves; because of this, later in life such children will be non-systematic and clumsy. The third group consists of those children who also have after-school responsibilities at home: only after they have fulfilled their chores do they have time for their own activities. When they grow up, they will be able to take care of themselves and their environment, making fewer mistakes; they also know how to properly manage their and others' free time¹⁵.

Following his or her own interests, each individual pupil must choose from the many ways of spending leisure time on offer, selecting the activities that will produce a sense of rest, joy and curiosity in him or her. Currently the media are very popular, as an increasing number of children prefer television over books. The survey carried out by Małgorzata Drost shows that TV does not require any "intellectual effort" from a child. Slowly, bit by bit, television reduces free time, coming to dominate the daily schedule of a child. Computers have a similar effect, coming second in rankings of the most common sorts of fun. The researcher also lists art classes and reading books, but these are among the activities least pursued by students¹⁶.

It is worth noting that in the pre-school period, a child is raised mostly through a system of rewards and punishments, so that they can clearly distinguish good from bad behaviour. With the onset of education, the norms and values adopted by them begin to correspond to their personality, and the child matures, gaining many new skills. The task of parents is to praise the child for his or her achievements and strengthen his or her self-esteem, as this lends valuable support to the operations and activities performed during the child's free time. If families and schools encourage children to be rationally involved in learning how to properly plan their own free time, this will enable the latter to have a stable system in place during their adult lives.

On entering first grade at primary school, the child encounters a new model to follow: their teacher. He or she will either strengthen the exi-

sting behavioural attitudes of the pupil, as shaped by the parents, or will seek to build new, better values. Many changes can also be observed in respect of the development of children: they start to plan the actions they are going to perform in the near future, and their ability to focus also increases. A child is able to assess his or her own behaviour, mainly through the results of educational activities, and by making comparisons with peers.

School, in addition to educating students, is designed to support upbringing, personality development and social life. Hence numerous activities are organised there that are aimed at broadening social contacts with peers and teaching what is involved in teamwork.

The family environment and the organisation of a child's free time

The modern, dynamically changing world has contributed to an increase in leisure time, and at the same time set parents and carers a double challenge: firstly, to provide children with appropriate conditions for recreation, entertainment and proper development, and secondly, to prepare them for the proper management of leisure time, which means educating children in the autonomous and skilful employment of their free time. It is important to teach children proper time-management from an early age, so that this does not become a negative factor, such as may sometimes affect the still-forming personality of the child for the worse. For many parents, raising children means not only providing for care-related and material needs, but also is concerned primarily with character formation and personality development. Parents who do not wish to leave their children to cope with that alone often make use of the advice of educators, taking advantage of the available literature – and thanks to this they are able to achieve a greater measure of educational success. Many parents seek to justify themselves in neglecting the education of children by pointing to their own lack of time and excessive duties, and often seek to shift responsibility onto others: e.g., onto the child's kindergarten or school. Sometimes parenting mistakes result from their ignorance and inability to plan their child's daily schedule. Some put too high demands on their child: they organize many hours of activities in addition to those at kindergarten or at school, not leaving the child any decent amount of time for rest. On the other hand, there are parents who leave their child's free time entirely at the latter's disposal. They do not take an interest in what the child is doing, and so underestimate the influence of free time on the personality of the child.

The social and emotional development of the child, at kindergarten age and at the stage of pre-school education, takes place primarily in the family. The parents, with their attitudes, serve as an example for them of

how to manage free time. Parents make up the child's closest environment, and it is from them, through imitation, that a child takes many of their behaviour patterns.

In today's world, it often happens that from an early age a child spends part of their day outside of the family environment. It is important, therefore, that the part of the day when the family remain together is put to maximum use, pursuing such shared activities as will help strengthen the bonds within the family.

What matters here is not just that the social environment provides a variety of examples of the ways in which free time could be spent: it is also that children themselves should become a source of these, and be able to create them without the help and participation of others. The most important thing is the free, unlimited activity of the child. Free time cannot be severed from freedom – a universal good. It should, therefore, enable the child to exercise their right to freedom in at least that part of the day entrusted to them. Only in this way will children be able to create their own personal behaviour-patterns for free time – ones that will enable them to meet own needs.

The acknowledgement of the subjectivity of children, and of the corresponding dimension of their behaviour, by adults, will not stifle their spontaneity and naturalness – qualities so characteristic of this period of their lives. However, as T. Banaszkiwicz explains, with this in mind parents and carers must limit the restrictions they would seek to place on children's freedom to dispose of their own free time as they themselves wish, anticipating as far as possible free activity on the part of a child and taking on the role of initiators or organisers of leisure, responsible for demonstrating ideas about how free time can be best utilized. Parents should also serve as advisors for their children, helping them in the event of difficulties with the proper selection of leisure activities. They should strive to ensure the best possible conditions for development for their child and, above all, offer hospitality, making him or her feel safe and secure¹⁷. If parents and caregivers can help children to direct their own activities, so intense in the early years of development, in the right way, it will certainly improve the latter's health and well-being, and ensure their development in a right and proper direction.

Conclusion

In speaking about free time, or the time reserved only for oneself, one cannot help thinking of a human being who knows his or her needs and satisfies them in accordance with his or her own interests and prefe-

rences. But this would be a mature adult adept at fulfilling social roles, with a rich resource of life experiences and a certain worldview. The problem needs to be considered in a quite different light when seen from the perspective of a child at preschool or early-school age.

The kindergarten and early-school ages represent a period characterized by volatility in respect of interests and tastes, with all too little in the way of a grasp of the consequence of actions, or of choices being made to meet specific desires and goals. To prompt a child to engage in their own valuable and thoughtful decision-making with respect to the management of their free time, they must be shown how to live through the unfolding moment-to-moment situations of this particular stage in their lives in an intelligent and sensible way.

Thus it is “that the way of spending leisure time is one of the most important factors influencing the culture of adolescent generations... [and] contemporary education should also consider promoting the idea of healthy recreation, alongside the implementation of the rich potential of the child’s intellectual capacities”¹⁸.

Finally, we might say that the valuable use of leisure time by a child will result in the formation of a valuable adult.

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¹⁸ Cf. On this topic: E. Sadowska, E. Skoczylas-Krotla, *Czas wolny dziecka – wybrane aspekty zagadnienia*, „Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce” 2007, no. 3, p. 29; cf. S. Toczek-Werner, *Czas wolny ucznia – nowe wyzwania dla działalności edukacyjnej w szkole*, „Wychowanie na co Dzień” 2007, no. 7–8.

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Summary

Free time is one of the fundamental concepts of pedagogy. The modern world, in all its dynamism, requires that we take a reflective and responsible look at the question of the organisation of free time. In the literature pertaining to this field of study, it is usually assumed that free time is time at the disposal of the individual after any obligatory tasks have been performed. It is usually used in order to relax, recharge one's physical and mental health, for entertainment and for pursuing voluntary or disinterested social activities, to develop interests, passions and talents, or for the self-education of the individual. Thus formulated, our definition of it is multidimensional, as it involves many aspects of human functioning and draws attention to both the individual and social dimensions of leisure time.

Problems connected with free time constitute an important aspect of the work of the kindergarten or early-school teacher, because they concern the development of rational habits connected with how a child's free time is to be organized and spent, in both preschool and early-school environments. The kindergarten and early-school ages represent a period characterized by volatility in respect of interests and tastes, with all too little in the way of a grasp of the consequence of actions, or of choices being

made to meet specific desires and goals. This is due to the fact that children, at a certain stage of their development, need practice if they are to choose the most suitable forms of active leisure for themselves and for each other. In encouraging valuable and thoughtful decision-making in children with respect to their management of their own free time, the latter need to be shown wise and rational ways of spending it. It should also be kept in mind that leisure time greatly influences the development of attitudes and value systems amongst both children and young people.

Keywords: free time, leisure activities, preschool-age and early-school-age children, teacher, family environment.

Czas wolny dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym. Organizacja i formy – refleksje pedagogiczne

Streszczenie

Czas wolny należy do podstawowych pojęć pedagogicznych. Współczesny świat, w swoim dynamicznym wymiarze, wymaga refleksyjnego i odpowiedzialnego spojrzenia na kwestię organizacji czasu wolnego. W literaturze przedmiotu przyjmuje się najczęściej, że czas wolny to czas pozostający do dyspozycji jednostki, po wykonaniu przez nią zadań obowiązkowych. Służy on do wypoczynku, regeneracji sił fizycznych i psychicznych, rozrywki, działalności społecznej o charakterze dobrowolnym i bezinteresownym, rozwoju zainteresowań, pasji, uzdolnień; przeznaczony jest również na samowychowanie i samokształcenie jednostki. Tak sformułowana definicja przyjmuje charakter wielowymiarowy, ponieważ obejmuje wiele aspektów funkcjonowania człowieka, a także zwraca uwagę na indywidualny i społeczny wymiar czasu wolnego.

Zagadnienie czasu wolnego stanowi ważny aspekt pracy nauczyciela przedszkola i klas I–III, gdyż dotyczy kształtowania racjonalnych nawyków związanych z jego spędzaniem i organizacją zarówno w środowisku przedszkolnym, jak i szkolnym. Wiek przedszkolny i wczesnoszkolny to okres cechujący się zmiennością zainteresowań i upodobań, małą konsekwencją działań i wyborów podjętych dla zaspokojenia pragnień i osiągnięcia celów. Wynika to z faktu, że na tym etapie rozwojowym jednostka potrzebuje dobrych wzorców, dzięki którym będzie mogła wybrać najbardziej korzystne dla siebie formy aktywnego spędzania czasu wolnego. Aby umożliwić podjęcie wartościowych i przemyślanych decyzji w jego zagospodarowaniu należy wskazać jej sposoby mądrego i rozsądnego spędzania czasu wolnego.

Słowa kluczowe: czas wolny, formy spędzania czasu wolnego, dziecko w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym, nauczyciel, środowisko rodzinne.

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