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Playing - Medium for Understanding, Interpreting and Transforming Immediate Reality

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Abstract

The fundamental study or conceptualization of the development and learning of early and preschool aged children necessarily takes into consideration children's play as a medium that allows imaginative transformation of the child's observation and understanding of immediate reality. While playing, the reality is metaphorically interpreted and presented with the help of alternative scenarios, while the actual events and experiences are being re-transformed and they vary from the child's perspective. Playing is a social practice (it occurs in cooperation with others and/or with the help of conditions that others create), and as such it is a specific mode of a socio-cultural reality in which the child, due to its incapability of total understanding and only partial participation, objectively reflects its real space and it interprets and "changes" it a lot more. A child reconstructs its experience and day to day reality in an imaginary world of play, but almost always including recognizable social rules and under control of events.

The daily authentic institutional context should be arranged in a way that it allows free elaboration and expression of children's experiences and which builds and develops social capacities that will allow better participation in various social groups.

Key words: *context of a preschool institution; early and preschool aged children's play; learning and playing.*

Understanding Children's Play

It is necessary to re-conceptualize objective, normative, and rational multi-theoretical perspectives and constructive games. Its re-thinking starts with idealizing the status of playing over instrumentalization in the frame of carrying out the educational tasks. It is most often defined as a specific, irrational, sometimes even confusing, chaotic and above all fun activity and as such it is in opposition with the real world. Such a dominant perception of playing, which is in a "cognitive dissonance" with the perception of other "serious" activities of early and preschool aged children originates from elementary ignorance considering the ways of learning (experimenting, discovering, researching) and development of children at an early and preschool age. In pedagogical theory and pedagogical practice, one can find views which vary from considering play to be significant, meaningful and creative activities with a high level of intrinsic motivation to considering it non-meaningful and even trivial activities.

The most important characteristic and the universal aspect of a child is play which means that it is closely connected to the phenomena of childhood and the child, regardless of the company, society or culture that the child functions in. It is a basic element of the developmentally appropriate and constructive practice (De Vries, 2002).

Often, a large number of various activities are being defined as playful behavior not reflecting the specifics of playing. Playing is a central and authentic childhood activity where knowledge, abilities, experience, skills and certain values are holistically integrated.

"While playing, a child is engaged in complex actions and interactions that uncover intentions in communication with others, taking into consideration the needs and perspectives of others, studying the scenario in a frame of an open wonder filled world of imagination, along with using logical, rational and realistic experience and knowledge" (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 53).

Various theories on child's play have helped understand it and they themselves in a larger measure define the activities that do not belong to the field of playful behavior. In that sense, what is not playing is emphasized, e.g. work, real life, non-direction to the product, and highly significant (Edmintston, 2008).

Playing itself is complex, developmentally moving, unpredictable; a diverse activity of children of early and preschool ages. It is, therefore, essential for children's development and learning (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2007). It can encompass very differentiated and rich forms of behavior, yet its potentials can stay at a declarative level. Therefore tensions between rhetoric remain between the present (playing is a significant children's activity of the early and preschool ages) and reality (how much we secure the conditions for its initiation and enrichment). Declaratively speaking, playing is a medium of learning, directed to progression and efficiency, however, in building and developing curriculum we notice an individual dimension of practitioners whose implicit educational philosophy determines optimal conditions.

Dominant discourse on playing is bounded to its reflection through developmental perspective and social practice which occurs inside a culture of a determined institution. Fundamental observation of children's play occurs through a prism of positive effects on a cognitive, emotional, social and physical - motor dimension. During play, a child uses semiotic forms of opinion and communication using signs, symbols, gestures, facial expressions and body language in a very sophisticated way.

A high degree of connection between playing and complex cognitive capabilities, development of social skills, misalignment and de-contextualization, symbolic capabilities and verbal competences is indeed existent. The maximum learning capacity in children is existent during cooperative play, during interaction with the environment, material and other people (children or adults). During this time children show a very high degree of initiative.

While playing, children use language far more complex than the one used with adults. By taking roles, children try to reproduce replicas of their role as clear as possible to the other participants. Cooperation with other children, taking into consideration their perspectives too, interaction in which they are all an equal part makes playing a challenging medium that looks for much more engagement than communication with adults who most often comply to children's needs and desires.

Certain types of games (such as: role playing, symbolical games, initiative games) make for excellent training for participating in situations that are complex and that the children will come across in everyday life. Playtime scenarios are replicas of the immediate reality and the surroundings become a polygon for learning techniques and strategies which can comply with a very broad range of different situations. When they play, children do what they have not done before, they take the risk consisting of trials and experimentation under different roles and actions, they solve developed verbal conflicts using strategies of invention and creativity. Therefore, playing is a dialogue between reality and imagination.

At the same time, play represents emotional catharsis, because it is one of the dominant forms of expression by which children can be a part of the adult's world (in which they insufficiently participate). By repeating various scenarios and representations of certain events, children can greatly reduce their lack of competence or negative emotions such as fear.

Elkonjin (according to Curtis & Carter, 2008) has identified the four basic principles toward which playing effects success in school:

- 1) motivation for engagement in complex situations regarding exact possibilities
- 2) decentering – by taking on various roles a child looks upon life's phenomena through different perspectives and leaves his/her own stand point regarding the subject
- 3) mental representation – separation from the physical form of an object and advancing to a symbolic level
- 4) rules – children learn to follow rules and by this they direct their attention to a relevant activity.

De Vries (2002) emphasizes that defining playing is most often exhausted with the following designations:

1. playing is active
2. it encompasses manipulation with material
3. raises interest in children
4. playing is a form of children's work.

Meckley (as cited in Wood & Attfield, 2007) defines playing using some very basic features:

- 1) Playing is children's choice.

Children freely choose the material, playmates and actions. Playmates' consensus and adherence to specific rule sets in a chosen scenario are especially relevant in cooperative play. While playing, children show a high degree of intrinsic motivation and pleasure.

- 2) Playing is a result of children's inventions.

Playing is not merely chosen by children, but from their inventive and creational capabilities as well. Even if the same content is used in play, children create new situations, constructions and ideas based on it.

- 3) Playing is imagination carried out as a real activity.

During symbolic play, a large part of the activities occurs as child's imagination that functions in a way in which the child is supposed to participate in real world activities.

A part of the ideas and the activities are followed by experiences from everyday reality, but the child is deeply aware that those are imaginary.

- 4) Playing is focused on action, the process and not the very product of it.

It is a dominant activity of childhood where learning, communication, complex language, and exploration characterize the process of playing.

- 5) A specific game is developed by a child (player/players), not an adult.

A game has to remain a child's activity, intrinsically motivated and directed by the child and not adults.

- 6) Playing requires deep significant engagement.

All aspects of a specific child's personality are active during playtime.

Fromberd (as cited in Edminston, 2008) states similar characteristics of playing, highlighting that playing is a symbolic activity (that it represents reality from the position of "as if"), significant for a child (encompasses its experience), in which a child is active and engaged, feels a high level of pleasure and fulfillment, is free and intrinsically motivated, containing rules (implicit or explicit) and is characterized by spontaneous development of episodes depending on a specific child's motivation, actual social and material designations and the game scenario.

With various theories on play that try to define its purpose and its importance in the best way possible (theory of excess energy, theory of recreation, theory of

recapitulation and theory of practice) some theorists differentiate between two basic modern theories - psychoanalytical and cognitive (Lowell Krogh, 1994).

Child play, no matter whether a constructive game with rules or a symbolic game ("as if" imaginative game, role play, fantasy, dramatization, etc.) represents an activity with a very high level of intrinsic motivation which a child freely enters, sets the duration, flexibly structures the rules, decides who it will play with, etc.

Conditions for Initiation, Development and Enrichment of Child's Play

Playing is a part of the cultural reality. Wood & Attfield (2007) find that the paradox of post-modern life restricts some forms of games and reduces the opportunities for playing, discovering, trying out new things and varying different actions and strategies. By defining socio-cultural space we help children to create meaning in different relations that exist in everyday life and varying divergent forms without risk of failure. Playing does not occur in a vacuum, but in multi-contextual conditions that will determine the level of its complexity and its developmental potentials.

The very fact that in a preschool institution context playing is not as frequent as we could expect, even though we are all becoming witnesses of growing interventions with the aim of creating such a pedagogical context which would allow quality and effective changes in the field of child's play (Craft, 1996; Šagud, 2002; Edminston, 2008; Miljak, 2009).

Children (especially in structural programs) have limited playtime which is often not regarded by professionals as a vital source of life teaching (Curtis & Carter, 2008).

Game itself is a natural curriculum by which a preschool child learns and develops (Piaget, as cited in Lancy, 2008); it is a medium in which the most natural way of learning for a preschool child dominates - free from concrete situations and whose repeated practice of its capacities and capabilities is allowed.

Pedagogics of children's play comes from a curriculum based on creating optimal material and social conditions in which children could be free to explore, solve problems in complex situations, to build their own scenarios (Anning, Cullen & Fleeer, 2004, Curtis & Carter, 2008). A divergent and for a child, relevant curriculum allows a broad range of different possibilities of playing. Creating such an environment would provide the necessary support so the creation of meaning is made possible (Barth, 2004).

Playing provides plentiful possibilities unless it is not instrumentalized by adults and directed to academic achievements.

Playing in Understanding and Transforming Reality

"Paradox of natural play is that it separates the child from reality, yet at the same time prepares him for real life conditions."

Wood & Attfield (2007)

A child elaborates, varies and transforms social and material environment while playing games. Playing is a personal transmission and projection of culture and social

interactions of each individual child. Through play, a child controls events, scenarios, different roles and their realization. Playful activities are deep and complex structures. Children are not passive recipients of a culture they live in; rather, they create their personal culture based on experience, its perception and understanding. They experiment with different forms of representation, they vary symbolic development of what is real and build competency for further life (Wood & Attfield, 2007).

Playing allows deep thought and transformation of self-observations, experiences and brings forward a possible feeling of participation in real life in a way that the social rules in the game are understandable and the events at all times controlled from the side of the players.

Miljak (2009) emphasizes the meaning of symbolic play as a natural form of child's learning and understanding the world around it. With symbolic processing, using substitutes and imaginative actions the game at the same time enables separation from reality and the concrete. Through play a child transfers ideas, materials, roles, rules, actions and at the same time transfers his or her personal experience and knowledge in different material and social contexts. While playing, children incorporate personal meaning of the real world (they create a new original meaning) which is in one part recognizable and can substitute their actions and roles. Any aspect of play should be an authorized child's activity (a child in play is a protagonist) which can in less direct segments be encouraged from an adult (creation of necessary organizational, spatial, material, content and social conditions). These very contextual variables will in great measure define the contextual and social direction in which the game will be headed.

Edminston (2008) states the possibility of conceptualization of play under three socio-cultural spaces: everyday, imaginary and authorized space. Everyday space is that in which participation occurs in the real socio-cultural context and positioning of a child in that context especially in relation to adults, its evaluation and projection partly determine the game itself.

Imaginary space gives the child an ability to incorporate elements from real life into the unreal, narrative world and in that way makes it better, more acceptable or less frustrating. Authorization, according to the author occurs in a perspective - reflexive environment in which the child, together with other playmates represents personal meaning and understanding of events, objects and actions.

Play is a social practice (it happens in cooperation with others or by the help of conditions that others create) and as such is a specific sight of a socio-cultural reality in which a child due to incapability of complete understanding and participating in the world of adults only partially objectively reflects its personal space and is less interpreted and changed. Playing allows social participation in a very broad specter of social relations that are represented while playing in a way that the child builds significant social capacities necessary for the process of growing up. Therefore playing can be observed as a "workshop for life" and not an escape from reality (Edminston, 2008; Curtis & Carter, 2008). In it a child internalizes its own experience or a special

perception of an objective reality in an authorized imaginary and narrative world of playing.

Formation of a cooperative playful environment enables a child to be conscious of itself as an individual, but also as a social being along with creating concepts and generalization of a standpoint that the child and the others have on children (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2008).

Different factors determine the need for engaging into play. These are primarily interest and motivation, the social dynamics of a group and developmental designations.

Adults and Playing

Play, as a basic activity of a preschool aged child represents its authentic program or conception that is freed from pressure and domination of an “outer program” of an adult (Šagud, 2002). While playing, a child gives meaning to information and experiences; it “cannot set a certain understanding, only support can be offered thanks to which it will be able to succeed in formulating the meaning” (Barth, 2004, p. 31).

A child has the possibility of choosing whether it will play or not and adults need to ensure enough time, material and experience so the child would participate in the content and socially condensed game. Adults do not define, nor do they assert a plan of playing, do not evaluate the success of playing, relationship or realization of the subject. An adult provides help, motivates the child, shows support and tries to make a game challenging (in the developmental sense). For adults, a game should represent a respectable activity without trivialization and banality.

The educator creates and designs a rich and an encouraging context (ensures quality resources) that will initiate, develop, enrich and sustain a playful activity. For a content and socially complex game, apart from the stated interventions of an adult, it is of significant value to ensure a rich experience in real social relations, relevant content for a child so the child can represent and vary them in different aspects of a game and differentiated model of research. Educators should not force playing upon children and direct it towards their own scenarios; rather, an educator should help the child in using various strategies to contribute to its richness (Šagud, 2002; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2008; Beaty, 2009; Miljak, 2009). In the same way, if an educator notices that a child has certain difficulties in understanding joint scenarios and/or in the child’s development, he can help a child in understanding the meaning and in search for adequate solutions.

It is expected from the educator to regularly estimate the time and level of intervention and the adequacy of the role based on the game’s development. In certain moments an educator can offer support to the child (verbal or non-verbal), stimulus or support, in some sequences of play he or she can suggest altering of game development. Educators often do not understand certain games (due to the content, nature of representation, social relationships etc.), they need to know that in a game, their role is not observation (Šagud, 2002; Wood & Attfield, 2007; Beaty, 2009) and

degrading of the game with outside goals and assignments, but to ensure conditions for maximal efficiency of the potential of this specific activity. The utilitarian character of a game and its instrumentalisation for the purpose of a study in a traditional sense is an intention that adults often have (more or less conscious), which brings to its degradation and derogates developmental potentials that a game carries within. Pelo (2008) considers that unless a child is emotionally engaged in a game and research of materials due to a rigid role of the educator who provides and leads the game, they will not experience possible intellectual challenges. On the contrary, with indirect leadership and encouragement we secure an integrated social, emotional and intellectual challenge.

The role of an educator as an active observer offers divergent and rich information on various aspects of actual child development and it enables reflection that will direct future initiatives and interventions of an educator.

Reflection based on careful observation enables an educator to:

1. synthesize child's reactions that become clearer to both the child and the educator
2. motivate a child to a specific answer connected to an actual game problem
3. provide feedback to a child on the significance of the child's activity for the educator which additionally motivates a child to a more meaningful game that is represented over a longer time period
4. indirectly achieve continuity of playing.

It is highly significant to direct practitioners in education to the perception and analysis of two basic phases in the development of children's play. The first is exploration or research of new experiences (objects, phenomena, relations etc.) that create a new level of knowledge integrated into already existent ones. At this level a child has a need to discover some characteristics and legalities that they will later on be capable of elaborating and processing holistically. After this individual phase (according to strategies, ways of processing and construction of knowledge) in which a child is in open interaction with its material and social ambience and in which a child immediately gets to know the reality, we can expect a phase of creation.

Conclusions

The most important characteristic and the universal aspect of a child is play, which means that it is closely connected to the phenomena of childhood and children regardless of the company or culture that it functions in. What separates it from the rest of the children's activities is freedom and imaginary situations. Analyzing the anthropologic approach to playing, it is clearly evident that the relations of adults toward this dominant children's activity has changed and it has evolved from an insignificant and infantile activity (dominant traditional approach to playing) into a standpoint from which playing is looked upon as a very significant activity in the developmental process of children. It is a natural curriculum by which a preschool child learns and develops (Piaget, as cited in Lancy, 2008); it is a medium in which

the most natural way of educating a preschool child dominates. While playing a child is free from a concrete situation. It is a medium in which a child varies its actions that were perceived in its real life and that will later be used for complex mastering of materialistic and social surroundings in which the child will later participate in. Therefore, playing represents an area of practicing and mastering certain actions without fear of failure.

Educational effects of play (that are potentially plentiful and long termed) cannot be a priority of adults so that they can control or direct child's play towards specific areas of learning. Otherwise, playing loses its basic purposes which are: inner motivation and higher activity level of an individual.

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Igra – medij razumijevanja, interpretacije i transformacije neposredne stvarnosti

Sažetak

Fundamentalno proučavanje ili konceptualizacija razvoja i učenja djece rane i predškolske dobi nužno uzima u obzir dječju igru kao medij koji dopušta imaginarnu transformaciju djetetovih opservacija i razumijevanja neposredne stvarnosti. U igri se stvarnost metaforički interpretira i prezentira uz pomoć alternativnih scenarija, a aktualna događanja i iskustva djece nanovo se transformiraju i variraju. Igra je socijalna praksa (događa se u kooperaciji s drugima ili uz pomoć uvjeta koje drugi stvaraju) i kao takva specifičan je oblik socio-kulturne stvarnosti u kojoj dijete zbog nemogućnosti potpunog razumijevanja i participiranja samo djelomično objektivno reflektira svoj realni prostor, a više ga interpretira i „mijenja“. Dijete restrukturira iskustvo i svakodnevnu stvarnost u imaginarnom svijetu igre, ali gotovo uvijek s prepoznatljivim socijalnim pravilima i uz kontrolu događanja.

Svakodnevni realni kontekst ustanove trebao bi biti uređen tako da omogućuje slobodno izražavanje i ekspresiju dječjih iskustava, kao i izgrađivanje socijalnih kapaciteta koji će omogućiti bolju participaciju u različitim socijalnim grupama.

Ključne riječi: igra djece rane i predškolske dobi; kontekst predškolske ustanove; učenje i igra.