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Learning and Play at Early Childhood

Mihaela PĂIȘI-LĂZĂRESCU¹

Abstract

The play facilitates the understanding, assignation, and strengthening of the learning outcomes, influences the development and maturity of personality, allowing the elaboration of more and more balanced cognitive structures and contributes to intellectual development. Didactic strategies of learning through play, which, without well-grounded reasons are considered to be less necessary along with ageing, are essentially euristic strategies ensuring an active learning as they situate the pupil in the centre of the learning activities. Having a direct contact with reality, looking for solutions, experiencing, making mistakes, etc., the child learns to build a reality he understands and he can use in very diverse situations. For the child, the play is not superficial and trifling, but, on the contrary, is a chance for learning. In play, the child finds himself as a protagonist of learning and not a simple receiver of information. Through its characteristics (the need for performance, risk, uncertainty, symbolism, intrinsic motivation, etc.) the didactic play as well as the role play claims a full deployment of all pupils' psychical resources, ensuring a creative participation, elaborating its own cognition strategies, stimulating the initiative, capturing interest, involving emotion and attitude. The play offers the pupil the possibility to learn in a personal rhythm, to understand the surrounding reality to the best of his abilities. Learning through play is a constructivist learning in which pupils/children become active participants in building their own cognizance, improve their research and organizational abilities and communicate their personal ideas and affective condition.

Keywords: Play, learning, didactic play, role play.

1. Introduction

Nowadays when fundamental types of learning have grown from the simple „to learn to know for yourself” to „learn to live with the others” and „to learn to be”, the whole undertaking of the learning situations changed; the teacher aims at backing up his pupils to know themselves, to take autonomous decisions, to interact with others, to develop their creativity to face the most diverse life challenges.

According to the pupil-centered educational approach, promoted tenaciously by the French pedagogue C. Freinet which determined a real „Copernican revolution”, instead of the school which placed „in the centre

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of its preoccupations the content of learning and the teacher, leaving aside both pupil's and society needs" (Stanciu, 1983) the new movement promoted a school which would take into consideration pupil's interests and needs. Placing the pupil in the centre of the learning activity does not mean he is left to follow regressive wishes but to take into account pupils' needs and interests, the stimulation of his intellectual capacities, the development of imagination and creativity, participation to the group activities, etc. Even if he is not in the centre of the instructive –educational activities in the classroom, the teacher organizes the class, chooses the didactic strategies necessary for learning according to both pupil and group needs, and not to a single and equal program.

A proverb ascribed to Confucius „I hear and I forget I see and I remember”, but also a series of statistical results (we remember 20% of what we read, 30% of what we hear, 40% of what we see, 50% of what we say, 60% of what we do and 90% of what we see, hear, say and do at the same time) confirms the quality of pupil-centered educational activities.

2. The play-the keystone of childhood

As a specific human activity the play constitutes the fundamental type of activity in childhood by the agency of which psychical development is achieved to the utmost extent through psycho-motor, sensory, intellectual and affective training. Through play, the child satisfies his own needs immediately, according to his abilities, acting consciously and freely in the imaginary world he creates by himself. The play is at the same time relaxation and recreation but also a vital need to reconstruct reality which makes adults believe that a child who play is puerile. The child who plays builds a world of his own, moves towards it, analyses it and tries to understand it.

The play introduces the child in the specific of the imaginary world which will help him to build his image about the world as well as the mechanisms to adapt to it. The scope of play is the action in itself through which individual aspirations and wishes are immediately satisfied. That is why the attainment of scope in play leads to a balance in the psychical life and stimulates the functionality on the whole. The products of the play are valuable for the child and constitute his need for transfiguration of reality. The development process of the play is made up of a series of mental or practical operations, developed as actions which underlie the interiorization of intellectual operations.

From the psychogenetic point of view the play is circumscribed to a stage development in accordance with the formation and development of intelligent behaviours specified by J. Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1971). Considering intelligence a product of the socio-cultural environment in which the child grows, from this perspective the play at early ages represents a concrete, direct and observable form of expressing intelligent behaviours. Having a symbolical character the play transfigures objective reality which implies a certain capacity of generalization and typification, a first stage in the interiorization of mental actions.

Another characteristic of the play which constitutes the assumption of an efficient learning is its internal motivation. In play the child does not need an „external” reinforcement, the reinforcement is „internal”, namely it lies in the developed activity itself. The child who plays does not need a reward to be determined to play, he finds the best reward in the play proper. We can speak about a certain „gratuitousness” in the sense that man plays „for the sake of playing”, not for the results brought up by this activity (Elkonin, 1980).

Through play, the child knows himself, knows his power and exerts his forces, interests and needs. By acting through play, he has the possibility to discover the surrounding reality, to give things different usages, training his imagination and creative capacities. Through play, children show their knowledge, clarify their concepts, organize their own cognition strategies. Information belonging to different knowledge domains are used and integrated, concepts are formed, etc. The play offers the child the possibility to learn in his own rhythm, to understand the surrounding reality to the best of his abilities.

Considering the play-competition a detached action based on a personal order Huizinga (Huizinga, 2006) emphasizes the fact that he presupposes the participants’ free assumption of certain rules, „the essence of play is that rules are obeyed”, accepted and respected by those who take part in it. The presence and the observance within the play is absolute: „The smallest divergence from this order cripples the play, deforms its character and suppresses its value”. (Huizinga, 2006) If the rules are broken or only mimicked, the play is compromised.

From a psychological point of view, the play answers some innate needs of activity, of acquiring experience, of assertion through behavioural performances. The play is the keystone and the reason to be of childhood. Through play the child aims at being an adult, triggering and maintaining the mechanisms of socialization, „it prepares him for future, satisfying present needs”(Claparede, 1975). In play, the child learns, trains his creativity with no effort and tiredness does not lead to exhaustion and monotony. The

child has the possibility and liberty to try to do different things in his own way, the play being pleasure and satisfaction at the same time.

The play is the child's mode of existence, his world of fiction and symbols, with deep significances for his development, is „an institution of the people of children” (Chateau, 1970). In play and through play reality can be experienced, psycho-motor and socio-affective functions can be exerted; the play is an agent of experience, transfer and socialization concurrently. For the child, almost any activity is a play which puts into effect functions that social environment may leave non-activated. The play triggers virtual, latent, assimilated, unaware potencies which combine and develop in some activity, structured also on the player which coordinates it according to the particular aspects of his personality (Claparede, 1975).

The play is „somewhat of a neuter field on which the child's whole experience about world and life is poured, this becoming more subtle, more accessible due to it”(Şchiopu, 1970).

3. Learning through play from the perspective of the pupil-centered learning

The complexity of the learning activity results from its multiple facets. Learning is a formative process which ensures acquisition and consolidation of information, of intellectual and psycho-motor abilities and the development of personality. Within the educational process, the child learns not only to adapt to the environment, to strike a balance in it but also to acquire modalities to do, to think and to feel and to interiorize behavioural rules and norms.

Pupils' education, to be one for another and not one against another, the development of their abilities to solve potential conflicts constructively can be achieved by promoting *learning through play* at all educational levels.

The essential characteristics of learning through play is that it places the pupil in the centre of the didactic activity ensuring a real correlation between learning and thinking. Pupils are implied in complex learning experiences, individually and in group, in real life projects, which develop both the capacities to select, combine, to understand and achieve authentic reasoning and the system of concepts specific to the age. Thus, this form of learning operates the transition from the traditional models that sometimes limit the cognitive achievement, to cognition within some close to life situations which offer the possibility to exploit new domains in depth, to accumulate information independently or in interaction with the others and

to develop competences such as the spirit of initiative, creativity, communication capacity, the ability to work in a team, etc.

Through play learning is experiential (is achieved through personal experiences) and social (it depends on the social relations of the child with adults and with peers) (Vrăsmaş, 2002, Clipa, 2014).

The use of the learning through play creates a space which favours active, participative learning, stimulating pupil's initiative and creativity. The educational objectives will be better attained through play because the elements of the play – discovery, guess, simulation, emulation, surprise, waiting, etc. – ensures the mobilization of own effort in discovering solutions, in solving some problems, stimulating the power of investigation and continuous incentive.

At early ages, the contempt for play as an active element in the structure of other forms of activity creates the danger of perceiving the learning activity as a boring and peculiarly difficult one. The beginning of schooling means the gradual transfer of the weight of the play activities towards the learning activity, so that play justifies its existence not only as a mode of adaptation to school life but also as a form of learning. By using play as a didactic activity, the educator appears less and less as a source of knowledge and more and more as a moderator of pupils' formation and cognition activity. He does not stand in front of the group but within it, he belongs to it and has the duty to ensure its efficient activity. Due to the content and to their development mode, didactic plays become efficient ways of activating the whole class, they develop a team friendly spirit, train and develop elementary practical and organized activity skills. They contribute to the development of self-control, self-possession, independence spirit, conscious discipline, perseverance, willingness to cooperate and other qualities of will and character. Through play children learn to help one another, to rejoice over peers' successful activities, to appreciate others' progress objectively.

A parallel between classical learning and learning through play emphasizes the efficiency of using these organizational modalities of learning both at early ages and during adolescence:

Classical learning	Learning through play
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The pupil is passive, he receives information, memorizes, reproduces, accepts information offered by the educator or by textbooks, he is a receiver;- The educator exposes,	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The pupil is an active participant, discovers the new, expresses personal opinions, cooperates with others in the elaboration and exchange of new ideas in task solving, he brings arguments, asks, is self-assertive;

<p>teaches, explains, demonstrates; imposes ready-made opinions, he considers himself as the sole expert in the issues to be learned, he plays first fiddle, offers an intellectualist orientation;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pupil has little responsibility; - At early ages the learning motivation is extrinsic and it hardly becomes intrinsic; - The emphasis is laid on the quantitative aspect, on measuring and appreciation of knowledge, on „what the pupil knows“; - Didactic activities are largely characterized by routine; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The educator organizes learning as a leader, a conductor, he is a facilitator, moderator, he helps children understand, accepts and stimulates the expression of personal ideas, of emotions and feelings, etc. - The pupil is responsible for what happens during play; - The emphasis is laid on the qualitative aspect, on positive feed-back, on measuring and appreciation of competences; - Independence, openness to innovation, democratic thinking are cultivated; - The motivation is intrinsic, the participant discovers the benefits of the learned material, manifests disponibility to react positively to change- as a premise of personal development;
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At early ages, the learning process presents some characteristics as a result of the interlinks between the play activities and learning. This correlation between two forms of activity does not remain stable. It is mainly conditioned by the general level of the child's psychical development.

As the learning elements are gradually introduced, changes appear in the child's psychical activity. The child manifests the tendency to transform the programmed learning activities into play: he handles the pencil on paper with pleasure, but without the intention of „drawing“ something, as a learning outcome. The process of operating with the pencil captivates and brings him pleasure, the fact that he draws different sinuous lines on paper without a precise settled finality. However, by practising, he acquires tracing skills which constitutes the basis for writing, drawing, etc.

By combining the learning elements with those of play the child acquires some knowledge and gets the first base for intellectual work skills.

4. Conclusions

We have to point out the fact that for the child, even if its practice determines a certain level of tiredness, the play does not appear as a burden. The child continues playing even if he is tired, sometimes until exhaustion,

which does not happen in a real learning situation, when defection appears at the smallest sign of tiredness. First, educators must take into consideration that, by losing its character of unimpeded action the play ceases to exist as such and to have the already mentioned formative values.

Unlike scholarly learning which is imposed, where goals are enforced from the exterior, the authentic play does not have this necessity. The child plays for the sake of the play and if he set goals which would exceed its action, he would not play. Educators must take into account the fact that play can serve certain purposes the pupil is not aware of actually, but which are inherent to play, without his intention and intervention.

The child's deprivation of the play or of the necessary resources for its development (time, space, the opportunity to repeat the play themes, toys, adult approval and assistance) determines the apparition of deficiencies in the personality development even if the lack of play has been counterbalanced by other activities.

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