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ABSTRACT
        This paper describes two projects analyzing forms of
appearance and the characteristics of symbolic play, that is,
spontaneous play free from adult intervention. The paper highlights
some characteristics and theoretical orientations and discusses
preliminary findings. The theoretical framework includes using
evolutive cognitive and psychoanalytical theories as theories which
consider play an environment in which to construct identity and
experiment with the social world. Evidence from the first project
shows that: (1) free play, mostly symbolic, occupies most of a
child's time at nursery school; (2) children often play alone, or
with their mothers, without the participation of an educator; (3)
symbolic play increases with a child's age; and (4) classroom play
centers encourage activity in children over the age of 3. Results
from the second project include: (1) the strong presence of themes
such as death and bodily functions indicate a strong relation between
play and the child's needs; (2) play takes up most of children's
nursery school time, and most play is "make believe"; (3) knowledge,
feelings, and relationship modalities meet in play; and (4) children
start school at varying degrees of development and with varying
capacities for symbolization. Contains 12 references. (JW)

THE COMPREHENSION OF SYMBOLIC PLAY IN

THE NURSERY SCHOOL

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1. SYMBOLIC PLAY AT SCHOOL

Frequently, teachers express a certain feeling of discomfort with regard to children's spontaneous play. They say that they do not know what to do or what to expect when the children are playing , or they are worried about giving the impression of time wasting if they allow the children to play freely without intervention.

These feelings are probably related to:

a) to the difficulties involved in making particular characteristics of the school practice compatible with play,

b) to the co-existence of different and heterogeneous theoretical references in the understanding of play at school.

a) The spontaneous character and the relative absence of rules and cognitive control of the play does not fit in easily with school dynamics. It involves the development of intentional activity by the teacher that guarantees the acquisition of certain knowledge and skills and the evaluation of results.

The fact of not exactly knowing how to handle play often, frequently, gives way to two extreme positions which are either an ignorance of play on the part of the teachers or an abusive pedagogical exploitation of the same.

b) these doubts have to do with the complexity of the subject. Symbolic play has interested different disciplines and orientations. Each of them has tended to give priority to either the cognitive, or the emotional or the social aspects offered by play.

The result is a great diversity of ways of approaching the investigation and understanding the function of play in the child's development.

In the world of Psychology, the two great groups of theories, i.e. cognitive or psychoanalytic, which divide it, show substantial differences in relation to symbolic play:

They both consider symbolic play as a mechanism that allows the child to integrate his personal reality with the outside world by pretending and creating subjunctive realities. Nevertheless, the cognitive and psychoanalitical theories have very different paradigms and different theories of significance. Consequently, they imply very different positions with respect to:

a) the function of play in the adaptation of the individual,
b) what is observed in play
c) the role that the adult (parent or teacher) can assume in the child's play (Sellarès, 1994) .

The proposals of these theories, along with references from the "active school" movement and from the teacher's personal experience of play provide the basis for, implicit or explicit, theories. The role of play in children's development, and consequently, that of the school in play, will be contemplated with these theories in mind.

2. THE STUDY OF SYMBOLIC PLAY AT SCHOOL

In our opinion, work and research has to be done in order to answer the following two questions:

1) how much priority should be given to free play among the set of activities in day nurseries and nursery schools

2) what must the teacher observe in children at play.

We have initiated two projects with which we intend to analyse the forms of appearance and the characteristics of symbolic play in school. Some characteristics and theoretical orientations will be mentioned briefly before going on to comment on some of the initial findings, which we will duly illustrate with fragments of a play session and take as reference for some suggestions for the school.

2.1 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regarding the theoretical framework, we have particularly kept in mind the proposals that suggest approaching the positions of evolutive cognitive and psychoanalytical theories for the analysis of play and also those proposals that consider play as a privileged environment in which to construct identity and to experiment with the mysteries of the social world.

In a critical review of the investigation on play and cognitive development Nicolopoulou (1993) points out that play has tended to be analysed in a partial manner. She points out the following: Piaget (1945), and even more so his followers, has tended to give little importance to elements of emotion and social life. Studies inspired by Vygotsky have tended to focus attention on interaction without really taking into account socio-cultural elements which define and adjust the play context. They did not seriously consider the examination of the symbolic content.

Nicolopoulou defends "the interest of studying play as an imaginative activity which depicts and reflects the inter-related domains of emotional, social and intellectual life" (Nicolopoulou, 1993, p.16) and proposes re-connecting some of the proposals of these cognitive theories with some others coming from psychoanalysis (Freud)and sociology (Durkheim, Geertz).

Furth is one of these authors who is interested in the approximation of cognitive (piagetian) and psychoanalytical proposals .Furth,1987) and offers interesting perspectives for the comprehension of play at school . Some of his ideas to be stressed are the following:

4

a) play as an invention of the social world

Furth, defender of the endogenic origin of society (1994) sees in co-operative group play not only imitation and knowledge of reality, but also the co-construction of the imaginary reality, and the children's awareness about living in a collective order.

b) play as a first co-construction of what adults experience as established social frames (1993).

When children play in a group, they establish a social framework (Goffman, 1974) which includes the management of shared suppositions, values, traditions, stories and rules. The framework has to be continously re-negotiated in order to assure a coherent imaginary context which permits the introduction of new elements and the maintenance of consensus.

On the basis of the varying degrees of engrossment in the in-frame activity designated by Goffman, Furth distinguishes different levels of reality in children's at-play speech : play, framing of the play, partial exit of the play and non-play.

The interest should be focused not only on the forms or contents of the pretending, but also in the interaction as a whole. This enriches the observer's perspective of play. It allows him to observe how the children not only reach agreement in relation to the meanings and the subjunctive realities, but also how they assess themselves, establish relationships of power and make the values and symbols of their culture their own, without them actually being aware of what is happening.

2.2 THE PROJECTS

The starting point for our projects comes from our interest in studying play, in an empirical manner in a school context which, in our culture, is the natural meeting place for children.

We adopt an open point of view which takes into account the characteristics and content of the meanings produced by each child, as much as the interactions and negotiations from which they emerge.
Two projects have been initiated recently.

2.2.1 The characteristics of educational activity in the day nursery .

A first project (Bassedas 1995), dedicated to the study of the characteristics of the educational activity at a day nursery (0-3 years), has provided evidence which shows:

- free play is the activity which occupies first place in relation to time spent at school, with   35% of all activities developed at school.
- 31% of this free play is clearly symbolic play
- the child usually plays alone or with a nother without the participation of the educator
- the child is very active in these moments of play
- free play appears in the playground and in the classroom.
- symbolic play increases with a child's age. So, the eldest play more than the youngest.
- over the age of three directed play activities are proposed, generally through "play corners" organised in the classroom.

This project must be continued in order to study the time dedicated to different activities at the nursery school (3-6 years), and in particular, the adults role in the leisure activity, whether it be directed or not.

2.2.2   Characteristics and individual differences in group "make believe" play at nursery school.

A second study is dedicated entirely to the study of symbolic play at nursery school (3-6). It is concerned with studying the characteristics, content, and individual differences which can be observed in the play which children display in group during scheduled periods.

This has commenced with an exploratory study consisting of a systematic observation of three consecutive play sessions of a duration betwen 10 and 20 minutes, of three groups of children aged 3, 4 and 5. We observed three groups of each age. The children were not previously selected. (The play session which we will make reference later is based on a particular session of this exploratory study).
During the following course we will continue with the study of individual and group play of three children in particular, from each age group.

2.2.2.1   The variables taken into account in the analysis of play

Play sessions are analysed for 20 minutes from the start. As units of analysis, we take sequences or units of meaning which are established according to clear changes in relation to the content.

Each child's performance is analysed by taking into account the following:

1. The **activity characteristics**, bearing in mind whether it deals with an activity of :

    a) **manipulative nature**, i.e, destined towards exploration, distribution, selection
    b)**symbolic nature** (Bates, 1979)

2. The **linguistic production**

In the analysis of verbal behaviour we take i...o account:

a) the **presence or non-presence of language** accompanying the manipulative
    or symbolic activity.

b) the **modality in** which the language is employed:

    in the "here and now" of the situation (in the form of commentaries)
    in drama form, attributing language to the characters
    in narrative form,

c) the children's utterances are considered in relation to the afore mentioned
    Furth's **differentiations with respect to a more or less external positioning to
    the play.** We distinguish between:

        A) **Play in action**, that is characteristic, properly framed play activity
        B) **Framing of the play.** It is characterised by metacommunicative comments
        like: "Let's pretend ...."
        C) **Partial exit from the play** with arguments that are partly out of the frame
        and link play context with reality.
        D) **Non play**, when comments not connected with the play take place.

(for a detailed description of Furth's coding, see Kane and Furth, 1994)

3. **The Interaction**

We analyse all the children's interventions and evaluate whether the interaction is verbal
or not, and consider each utterance in relation to the interaction. In this way, we consider
whether the child asks, answers, convinces, gives orders, agrees or not, initiates,
proposes or imitates activity.

4. **The content**

With regard to content, we take into account the manifests content and classify under a
serie of general categories like: nourishing, hygiene activities, family scenes, human
activities, animal activities, scenes from stories or films,etc...which we maintain open and
subject to change.

2.2.2.2 Comments on a play session involving 4 year olds.

We will make a few comments on some aspects of what we observed during the exploratory study taken from one of several play sessions. (see figure 1: Description of the situation, and figure 2 : Summary of the session, duration of the sequences and proportion of the different levels of reality in children's discourse)

1. With respect to **content** we would like to emphasize the following:
The **difficulty involved in establishing clear stages** in the continuity of play when the associative processes of the children and the destination and modifications suffered by the meanings are analysed.
The themes tend to appear repeatedly and to be re-used with some variations or with other materials when children extend the context of the meaning.

(In the selected session,for instance, what draws one's attention is the repetition of the action of "flying" at different times and with different characters)

2. The influence of **particular characteristics of the material** in the sense that it favours associations. The evoking of certain knowledge is evident. Material of figurative type with miniatures figures seems (specially in the 4 to 5 age group) to afford a greater richness of play than unespecific material does.

3. The **strong presence of themes** such as death, bodily functions, aggression,etc.. tends to place the principle function of play in relation to the child's needs: To intergrate himself into a symbolic framework which has preceded him as well as into a group with which he will share cultural symbolic systems and fundamental themes to sustain the symbolisation processes: birth, death, relationships with close family members etc...
(Castoriadis- Aulagnier, 1975) (Laplanche, 1980)

In relation to these contents, one should stress the role that stories, tales, films, etc... play in the facilitation of symbols, narrative schemes and shared knowledge.

(In our example we find Lion King and other characters from tales as principal characters.)

4. With regard to the **different levels of reality** showed in children's discourse, we would like to point out the following. Going back to our example and the differentiations established by Furth, and observing the distribution of the reality modalities in the all play session, we see that although play, which is the use of "make believe in the context of subjunctive situations" takes up the most time, much of it is also dedicated to the constant re-negotiation of the meanings .

5. Play is a melting pot where knowledge, feelings and relationship modalities meet. The play situation offers a scenario in which to express fantasies, desires, and worries and in which knowledge can be constructed and shared. Feelings of solidarity, domination and submission can also be expressed, not only when negotiating the meaning, but also when pretending.

Often "make believe" can be seen at the service of exhibition, and negotiation of the framework only pursues the possession or defense of certain toys or personal objects.

(For instance, a child's interest in conserving the possession of a special bear which causes him to suggest another child to be Peter Pan and to fly off with an elephant.)

Similarly, the consensual acceptance of crazy proposals (such as for example, Tarzan flying while attached to a cowboy's rope) can emerge from the prestige of the one who makes the proposal.

6. Children arrive at school with different degrees of development and capacity of symbolisation. Their **personal characteristics** also influence play dynamics. It is possible to distinguish children depending on the role they play in relation to the different ways of being absorbed into the play.

(In our example, one particular child introduced the pretending more often,, another tended to imitate the other children, and a third stayed as a spectator most of the time...)

The impression that a group of children play "well" however, is furnished by the fact that they are all capable of "make believe", of re-locating the frame of the play, and of producing novelties by enlarging the context of meaning.

3. THE TREATMENT OF SYMBOLIC PLAY AT SCHOOL

The importance of the role of play in the formation of the mind, in the construction of identity, and in the perpetuation of culture seems beyond question.

What can school do, however, to encourage play?
The answer lies in relation to how it conceives play. From our point of view, it should be promoted, attended, observed and appreciated.
The school gives the children the opportunity to freely compare themselves, to share fantasies and discoveries and to construct a social world.
School should distinguish free play areas from those others that we called "leisure activities" that is, those where the teacher's objective is to get the children to obtain certain knowledge or skills while playing.

Some of these of activities can be useful in order to stimulate their creativity. Teacher-led playful activities, for instance, role-playing, encouraging children to identify ordinary objects for what they are or they might be (Glaubsman, 1992) or inviting children to invent the beginning or the end of stories, can have some influence in the quality of childrens' play.

But, when children play spontaneously, it is better to leave them alone.

Group free-play involves constant learning of the rules which guide it, of oneself, of others and of reality. The teacher can also learn from it and get substantial information as to the children's worries, relationships and notions (for instance, in our example, from the discussion on where animals have udders)
However it is not necessary to intervene. Our observations have allowed us to verify how often an adult's interruption of children's play causes disruption.

It would appear to us that in group free - play periods the adult should limit himself to providing material, to being attentive to the childrens' requirements, to making sure that all the children integrate and to learning to observe, leaving him or her free to watch children's play.

Besides this it would be no small thing if it were possible to create an environment in the classroom which, far from academic rigidity, permitted the construction of shared knowledge and which encouraged and promoted individual and group symbolic expression.

Sequence	Time	Proportion of time dedicated to			
		A	B	C	D
1.-	80"	68'8	31'2		20"
2.1.-	118"	66	34		
2.2.-	199"	37'2	55'3	7'5	
2.3.-	44"	36'3		63'7	
3.-	82"	69'5		30'5	
4.-	55"	100			
5.-	146"	67		33	
6.-	151"	55'6		44'4	
Total	895"	57'8	16'8	23'2	2'2

The second child pretends to cat the panther.
The same child that has initiated the eating action mentions a TV programme
in which a piglet eats everything up.
Superman flies up to a child's face.
Discussion about the characters in a TV series and about the colour of their
clothes: red and bluelike the Barcelona football team, red and yellow
like the Spanish flag.
Superman flies and asks the elephant to hold his head with its tusks.
The three children in the session each make figures fly on their own account.

Summary of the session, duration of the sequences and proportion of the
different levels of reality in
childrens discourse: Play (A), Framing (B), Comments (C), Non play (D)

1.- Discussion on what dangerous animals are like and whether they should be
kept in cages or not.
Incorporation of a new child. Monopolisation and assignment of material.

2.- The coming into contact with animals and characters-models. Introduction of
them from fiction.

2.1 Analysis of the ones that fly (Superman) and those that don't (warrior).
They make the animals and characters-models fly.
Distribution of roles (one is Superman, the other Tarzan)

2.2 Proposal to incorporate the Lion King. Introduction of other characters:
Mufasa, Simba, Tanto (elephant).
Incorporation of Peter Pan. They make him fly together with Tanto (elephant)
and the bear.

2.3 Comparison of the characteristics of the bear and elephant. (size, ability to wet
people with the trunk...)
Discussion, while looking at the elephant, on where animals have their
udders, whether on top or underneath.

3.- Re-appearance of Tarzan. They make him fly together with a warrior. Search
for a rope for Tarzan. Discussion as to whether that of the cowboy can be cut
or not.
They make Tarzan fly while tied to a cowboy's rope. One child makes Tanto
(elephant) wet Tarzan.

4.- A child opens the cage. Between all of them, they make the animals come out
and they say they have broken everything.
(The teacher intervenes: she shows them an Indian hut and asks them if the
Indians were friends of Peter Pan).

5.- Discussion on Peter Pan. Incorporation of the "lost children" into the game.
Discussion on whether in their respective Peter Pan films the children fly
or not.

6.- Eating. One child pretends that the panther is approaching another child and
is going to eat him.

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15