

The Scarfe Papers
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Chapter 2
Play is Education

While we are prepared to accept play in preschool education, we neglect at our peril to ensure that the spirit of play continues throughout all school and adult educational studies.

Introduction

It will be the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that play is vital to childhood and that the spirit of play is an essential ingredient in mature adulthood. It is also hoped to show that play is the most complete educational process of the mind, and is Nature's ingenious device for ensuring that each individual achieves knowledge and wisdom. Some emphasis will be given to the teacher's role in promoting play.

Definition

Play may be described as a spontaneous, creative, desired research activity carried out for its own sake. Because it is entirely natural, it is not necessarily moral when judged by the cultural or social ethics of particular people at particular times. A desired, spontaneous, creative activity may seem to some to be anti-social, even though not unnatural, and it is for this reason that people question whether play should be directed or self-chosen. To what degree should a teacher guide children's activity?

Theory

Play is, in no sense, a simple thing; nor is it explained or interpreted with reference to one or two criteria only. Play, in fact, is a very complex thing, as complex as human beings themselves. There have, therefore, been many theories of play and many criticisms of those theories. The rehearsal theory of Karl Groos, which was derived from his study of animals, has much to commend it because it postulates play as the means of growth and development and puts great value on it. Groos noted that play varied according to the level on the scale of evolution at which the various animals stood. The higher animals seemed to have longer periods of infancy and, associated with that, longer periods of more extensive play. Karl Groos's theory is, however, inadequate for the human child, for rehearsal of the complex activity of adulthood is impossible. Furthermore, it did not explain play by adults. Nevertheless, the idea of Karl Groos, that play is a growth mechanism, is still fundamental.

The recapitulation theory of G. Stanley Hall was also an attractive, partial explanation of play, but both child and adult play have an important creative element, in addition to a repetitive one.

The superfluous energy theory was the least able to explain the function of play satisfactorily. While children obviously let off steam at play, the energy expended is simply an incidental concomitant of the pleasure and enthusiasm that play engenders.

The only satisfactory theory is that which views play as an educational research activity, but before that theory is expounded at greater length it is necessary to discuss the confusions that exist in people's minds about play and work. The play being discussed here is not the same as relaxation, pastime or exuberant fun. We are not concerned with frivolity or mischief or humorous tricks; nor do the comments that follow bear very heavily on organized games. The play described here is serious effort applied to an absorbing and desired activity.

Work

When deprived of any emotional overtone, the word "work" is related to energy output, to effort, to physical exertion. An engineer is capable of measuring effort and energy output, even in the human being. It may range from almost nothing in the human being, as when we are asleep, to almost superman exertions put forth by athletes or by great thinkers of our time. We could, in fact, represent work output diagrammatically, by extending the measure on a lineal scale from zero almost to infinity

Play

Play, however, is not measured in this way at all. Nevertheless, we could set it out on a continuous scale and it would range from one extreme, which might be ecstatic pleasure through a neutral zero point to an opposite extreme, which could be complete boredom and distaste. The measure of play, therefore, is the degree to which it gives pleasure, or better still, the degree to which it is desired. Some forms of play require enormous expenditure of effort or work. Other forms of play, like day-dreaming on the beach, may not require expenditure of any large amounts of effort at all, but they may be equally desirable, equally pleasurable, equally educative and equally valuable for personality growth.

Furthermore, the same amount of energy expenditure may be for one person a desired activity, or pleasure, and for another the opposite, or boredom. For some women the exertions of a shopping expedition may be a pure delight and often creative. For me, shopping is entirely boring, and the effort makes me feel utterly tired and dejected. My wife may return home completely revitalized and still exuberantly happy despite expending much more energy than I have in the shop. For one man, the heavy exertions of gardening may be entirely pleasing; to another, gardening may seem like a menial, despicable chore. My daughter thoroughly enjoys a day loafing on the beach. My mother would consider such an activity wholly deplorable.

Play and work are, therefore, measured in entirely different terms. They are different kinds of things. Work is measured by quantity of physical exertion. Play is measured by quality of emotional involvement. Unfortunately, "work" in public parlance seems to have borrowed emotional connotations. Work apparently is a serious and important activity that ought to be done. Play is thought of as a frivolous and worthless waste of time in which weak characters indulge. This is a gross misrepresentation of the facts.

Work and Play Scales

If we put these two things together in one diagram, we shall see that some forms of play are associated with large amounts of effort or work, and some with small amounts.

The amount of effort expended has no necessary relation to the value of play to the child or to the personality growth of the individual. The amount of work effort expended may have beneficial effects on the physical tone of the body and the muscular development but it has no obvious relation to the the emotional satisfaction or to the mental gain to the individual. What matters most in play is the freedom, absorption and concentration with which it is carried on.

The significant point that educators have learned, however, is that when an activity takes on the characteristics of desired play, normally more effort is expended and more work done. The point to emphasize here, however, is that work and play are not opposites, despite the general opinion of the public to the contrary. The sooner it is understood that thorough education goes on only when considerable effort is expended in the spirit of serious play, the better it will be for our whole education system.

Morality

It is , nevertheless, important to refer back to the statement already made that neither play nor work is necessarily moral. Cat burglars are almost certainly thoroughly absorbed in their “work”; they certainly concentrate all their efforts on their activities; their plans are certainly imaginative and creative; and if we are to judge from the zeal with which they pursue their nefarious activities, they certainly enjoy the effort and gain satisfaction from it. Many of the elements of play, and certainly much of the effort of work, go into anti-social acts as well as into pro-social acts.

Moreover, different societies have different standards of moral behaviour; they may, in fact, have opposing standards, and it is therefore necessary for children to have some kind of teaching or guidance, even in play activities, to satisfy their learning needs about what is socially acceptable. This would be all the more necessary if we believed, as Freud did, that all of us have inborn sadistic tendencies.

Not everyone, however, would agree with his view, for there is evidence to show that we all need creative expansion and tend to seek what is good. Many believe that children have a bias towards good because good things tend to grow, whereas evil things tend to lead towards their own decay. Whitehead has said, “In this fact about the instability of evil lies the moral order of the world.”

Even Plato seemed to have faith in the innate goodness of children, but like all the Greeks never entirely disregarded regulation. Plato said, “Our children from their earliest years must take part in all the more lawful forms of play, for if they are not surrounded by such an atmosphere, they can never grow up to be well conducted and virtuous citizens.” Aristotle took a more negative attitude towards play, for he states, “Play should be introduced, under proper regulation, as a medicine.” Both, therefore, thought of play as important and likely to lead to good, but not without some guidance.

Therapy

Reference to the positive and negative values of play makes it necessary to state that in the past too much emphasis has been put on the therapeutic value of play in helping to understand the fears, the anxieties and the disturbances of mentally ill children. This emphasis has led some people to suppose that play is necessary only for those who are mentally disturbed or maladjusted as a kind of curative or therapeutic medicine. They overlook the fact that children become ill very largely because they have been deprived of the freedom and opportunity to play, for play is as necessary to the mental health of the child as food is to physical well-being.

Education

This paper, therefore, is concerned mainly with the positive values of play to the normal, well child, or put in another way, it is concerned with the great value of play in education and with the importance that a teacher should attach to using this built-in provision for individual self-education.

Play is the finest form of education because it is, as Dr. L. Frand of the Caroline Zachry Institute of New York, says, "... essentially personality development, whereby the individual organism becomes a human being willing to live in a social order and in a symbolic cultural world." (American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, July 1955, Vol. XXV, No. 3, pp. 576-590) Personality is a highly individualized way of carrying on idiomatically patterned processes through which each people continually maintain their life space, guard their private worlds while participating more or less adequately in maintaining social lives. Children's play is, therefore, their way of exploring and experimenting while they build up relations with the world and with themselves.

In play, they are learning to learn. They are also discovering how to come to terms with the world, to cope with life's tasks, to master skills. In particular, they are learning how to gain confidence. In play children are continually discovering themselves anew, for it is not easy for children to accept the patterned conduct of the social cultural living and in many cases they must escape somehow into fantasy. Thus, children learn through play to live overtly in the adult consensual world. But they also maintain their own private worlds of the meanings of values, feelings and emotional actions that they increasingly guard from others.

Play is the means by which children mature, by continually altering their awareness of the world, continually patterning their perceptions of people and situations according to their changing meanings and significance for them. Play also enables children to free themselves from their conflicts, their terrors, their rages, and enables them to discover the permissible outlets for their primary impulses.

Play is a learning activity. With young children, it serves the function of a non-verbal mode of communication or a figurative language that satisfies a felt need. Play is educative because while thus employed, the child is self-directed, wholly involved and completely absorbed. In play, children can completely lose themselves.

Play serves a social function because it is the means by which the child animal learns to accept the social-cultural living of the group. It has, in fact, all the characteristics of a fine and complete educational process.

It secures concentration for a great length of time. It develops initiative, imagination and intense interest. There is tremendous intellectual ferment and complete emotional involvement. No activity motivates repetition more thoroughly. No activity improves the personality so markedly. No other activity calls so fully on the resources of effort and energy that lie latent in the human being. Play is, in fact, the most complete of all the educational processes, for it influences the intellect, the emotions and the body of the child. It is the only activity in which the whole educational process is fully consummated, when experience induces learning, and learning produces wisdom and character.

Creativity

Since experimental research, creative activity and emotional maturity are the essential elements in the best forms of education, as they are in the highest forms of play and work, it seems important to spend a few minutes discussing education.

While we are prepared to accept play in pre-school education we neglect at our peril to ensure that the spirit of play continues throughout all school and adult educational studies. To be effective and lasting, all ideas in the mind must somehow be expressed creatively in some concrete form. This is sometimes called recreation, but it is never exact imitation. All recreation has injected into it the personal creativeness of the doer.

When young children aged eight or nine are taken on their first real visit to an airfield they are entranced by the experience. There is no lack of interest. An enormous number of facts are taken in and a multitude of questions are asked as their minds try to understand the whole complex operation of air travel. Thinking and understanding proceed at a very rapid rate. On the return home it will not be long before ominous noises indicate that the kitchen or the basement are being rapidly transformed into a miniature airfield crowded with imaginary aircraft and people. Learning about air transport is still going on. The children are recreating the original scene in their own way. The many impressions that were obtained at the airport would be lost if they were allowed to remain for long as abstract impressions only. The children clearly want to remember and learn, and, in order to make the original learning effective and lasting, they must put the experiences into more concrete form by re-enacting some of those scenes.

Other children will sit down and use plasticine or clay to remake the airport. Others will draw and paint, but whatever each child feels impelled to do, the recreated scene will never be an exact replica of the original. The process of thought will have selected and rearranged the experiences. Still more important the imaginative play or the clay models or the paintings will have the added element of the child's own feelings and emotions. The painting will, in fact, be both original and creative as well as recreative.

The feelings of the children when they first visited the airport were a very important part of their learning. Their understanding was partly intellectual and partly emotional. Their play at home is again an expression of their emotional and intellectual learning.

It may be true, that on the original visit to the airport the children's battery of questions seemed highly tinged with a purely intellectual element as if they were bent on a scientific enquiry or a voyage of exploration. Their questions were often searching and their curiosity was essentially the same as scientific research.

*It may be true, therefore, that when new things are first learned the mind operates largely on the purely intellectual level and follows a scientific research procedure. It may be that people are relatively unaware of the emotional impressions they are also receiving through their senses, but it is certainly true that unless they do have some emotional feelings as well as an intellectual impact from initial experiences then learning is likely to be shallow and incomplete. The thought processes, and the understanding that follows thought, should help to make people aware of the feelings associated with experience, but, in order that the awareness of feeling is fully conscious and that the intellect completes its mastery of ideas, it is necessary to provide opportunities for the recreation or expression, in visible or audible form, of the original experiences. In this way the mind grows and in this way a child develops civilized mature behaviour and desirable personal qualities**

**A Philosophy of Education, N.V, Scarfe, University of Manitoba Press, 1952.*

An educated person is one whose intellectual efforts have carried over to character formation, attitude development and aesthetic sensitivity - or as Aristotle would have said, "to wisdom and virtue." The late Boyd Bode is quoted as saying, "It is agreed on all hands that education is more than just a matter of learning facts and skills. Public interest is poorly served if attitudes and appreciations do not receive at least equal consideration. The things that are learned must translate themselves into terms of emotion and conduct if they are to be significant." Only by using the spirit and characteristics of play can this be achieved.

Unless learning affects the attitudes and emotions it is not good or complete education. The great thing about play is that it totally involves the whole personality of the child, and, in particular, modifies attitudes, character and emotions. It is the carry over from intellectual activity to emotional involvement that is the true characteristic of a complete education and of play. It is only in creative and artistic activity that this important carry over takes place. That is why the artistic and creative element of play is so important.

Research

Play, then, is much more than a rehearsal, or a recapitulation or vigorous exuberance, although it may contain all three. Play is essentially a research activity - an adventure, an experiment, a transactional process. It is motivated by innate curiosity and enquiry. It is the expression of children's urges to find out and discover for themselves how to live, how to be. Play has the joy of discovery, the satisfaction of creativity.

Artistry

Sufficient has been said to prove that play is nature's research activity, nature's experimental mechanism for enabling a child to discover how to live, and how to grow up.

But the glory of play is that it is also artistic, spontaneous and often independent of external needs and stimuli. It leads to increasing perfection of form, to more complete expressiveness and to a higher degree of unity in diversity.

It is probably the spontaneity of play that has caused the general public to use the term "work" as its antithesis, because work in the popular mind is effort required or imposed from outside or an activity determined by someone else. Play is free, because the child's activities in play are still a little tentative and uncommitted, are still capable of exploration and revision, of renunciation and replacement. In play he or she can manipulate objects, events, and even people with less restriction than is imposed on an adult. It is, nevertheless, equally possible for work to have all the felt qualities of play. Shaw's definition of an educational utopia was a place where work was play and play was life.

Shiller said, "The nature of a people's play will foreshadow the quality and value of its art." The soul of art is the joyous exercise of spontaneity. As for art, so for play; freedom is entirely necessary. A child's fantasy is essentially inventive and fancy-free. It is a high handed treatment of inconvenient facts. Nevertheless, a great deal of spiritual and intellectual vigour comes from make-believe. Children investigate the world of things around them by manipulation and direct experiment, whereas they investigate the world of society by a mental experiment called fantasy or make-believe drama.

Thinking

Piaget emphasizes the thought values of play. He says that symbolic play is egocentric thought in its pure state. He adds that a child wishes to enjoy a private reality of his or her own. This reality is believed in spontaneously without effort, merely because it is the universe of the ego, and the function of play is to protect this universe against forced accommodation to ordinary reality. All play is associated with intense thought activity and rapid intellectual growth.

The highest form of research is essentially play. Einstein is quoted as saying, "The desire to arrive finally at logically connected concepts is the emotional basis of a vague play with basic ideas. This combinatory or associative play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought." From the artistic point of view, Mozart said, "All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasing, lively dream." He says, "I do not study or aim at any originality. It just happens spontaneously."

Teacher

If play is nature's means of individual education, how should a teacher act? Where, in practice, is the line to be drawn between direct teaching and the child's discovery of the

value of a moral order by free experimentation? How, in fact, can we get discipline or morality into play activity?

Obviously, teaching methods in schools must aim deliberately at feeding the impulse to intellectual play, to experimentation and to the development of concrete modes of self-assertion. It can never be stressed too much that children must find their ways to maturity, at their own rates, with their individualized capacity and limitation. We must provide adequately for play and at the same time respect the dignity of children so that we do not invade their integrity either by neglect or coercion. A teacher must not stunt or distort personality development, or overdevelop it prematurely. How does a teacher encourage animal behaviour to become social conduct?

The teacher's task is not that of directing play, but of removing obstacles to constructive freedom. Put more practically, the teacher provides materials, space, opportunities and experience, and does this by knowing the children's abilities and interests at different stages of growth. Teaching should exploit the spontaneity of the individual, and the teacher should act by suggestion and example, not by precept and command. "In school," Sir Percy Nunn says, "a teacher is a perpetual president who must exercise the duties of citizenship all the more assiduously and scrupulously by reason of the exceptional power his position gives him."

The teacher, therefore, provides materials, such as building blocks, modelling clay, paint, water, sand and paper, space, time, freedom and affection - or in other words, arranges conditions so that children naturally want to learn and want to play, or arranges conditions so that nature can effect an education. The teacher tries his or her best not to interfere with the spontaneity, the search, the intellectual curiosity, the creativity or the freedom but encourages dramatic self-expression and artistic growth in a moral atmosphere created by his or her own example and personality.

Many great teachers in the past have advocated the play way in education, notably, of course, Caldwell Cook, Montessori and all those who have believed in learning by doing and who have wished to turn classrooms into experimental laboratories and artistic studios.

Conclusion

The spirit of play is vital to all humanity, the basis of most of the happiness of humanity, the means by which humanity advances creatively, scientifically, intellectually and socially. The spirit of play is vital not only to childhood but to people of all ages. In understanding children's play, we shall have understood the key to the processes that educate the whole child. Because we live in a highly civilized world, all play activities need the kindly, sympathetic, understanding teacher who will provide materials, suggestions, kindness, freedom and space, and who, by example, will set standards of behaviour and discipline with which children can experiment creatively to their own advantage.