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Play to learn, Learn to play. Creating better opportunities for learning in early childhood

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Abstract

New trends are emerging in learning and development at early ages, as children characteristics are changing in contemporary social environment; the main challenge for early childhood educators will be to initiate innovative learning experiences, according to these new treats of the kids.

Design and implement creative and beneficial learning settings / opportunities for early ages is becoming a key competence of early educators, that should be consistently reflected in their initial and continuing training programs.

Learning through playing is not a new topic anymore in the pedagogical debate, especially when it comes to early childhood education. Nevertheless, new trends and challenges in the area appeared lately, showing how keeping a learning purpose in mind, young children can really benefit from meaningful learning situations, carefully designed and implemented in practice.

In this paper, the inter-changing between learning to play and playing to learn is analyzed, from the perspective of the impact on child development and increase of their learning capabilities at the early age. New life in contemporary societies brought new behaviors and daily practices in children's life. The professionals working in early childhood education, care and development should benefit from mentioned approaches, but should also be very aware of all the new trends n learning environments at early ages. The new pace of family life, the new technological world, the new games kids are likely to play from very early ages are all bringing into attention specific challenges for adults organizing their learning.

How all these impact on learning processes themselves, but also on the training of new educators for early ages is the central reflection point for this paper, based both on systematic observation of the processes in place, but also on a great deal of secondary data analysis, coming directly from specialized institutions.

Multiple stimulation and challenging learning experiences / scenarios according to the brain and social development of contemporary children is a key for success in early childhood education. This will have to directly impact on teacher training programs design and development.

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1. Early childhood education in context. Why playing while educating?

There is no doubt anymore, and the specialized literature fully supports this perspective, that early childhood education is a key stage of human development, bringing significant contributions to the personal, social, emotional and cultural development of the child. Moreover, it has already been proved that investing in this stage of education bring a return of investment even higher that investment in universities.

But all the social and economic changes registered lately, brought about transformations in the characteristics of learners and their way of entering participating in learning experiences. New challenges are arising in pedagogical thinking, one of the most important being related exactly to the relationship between pedagogy and play.

"Global concerns about the nature and purpose of education for young children inevitably raise questions about the extent to which and how play is valued as a vehicle for early learning. In many ways the coupling of play with pedagogy is problematic, not least because traditionally in Western discourse on early childhood, the concept of play has been positioned in opposition to its apparently more worthwhile counterpart, work." [1].

Learning has been seen overwhelmingly as rather a “work” endeavor, while “play” was defined as opposite, as free time, merely unstructured and leading to emotional positive feelings, and not necessarily to learning. Learning through play, not conceived as accidental, but as well intentioned, planned activity, contributed to the creation of a whole theoretical and methodological orientation in pedagogy, namely pedagogy of play. Thus, play to learn became a legitimate approach in early childhood, valuing the direct contribution of well-designed learning activities based on play and games to the development of different sides of personality.

Early childhood education represents a segment of the educational system which combines different areas related to the life and evolution of the child of early age: health and nutrition, family and community life and development, woman development and psychology, social and cultural anthropology, developmental psychology, early education etc.

The rising interest for this integrated field of research and development comes from the conviction that health, intellectual development, emotional, physical and spiritual development as well as cultural socialization are interacting from the perspective of their effects and are affecting in a global way the life of the child. If we are willing to support the child in the development process, we have to understand the multiple aspects of growth process, including those belonging to the wider context in which the child develops.

Child development is a highly complex process, determined by a wide range of factors, from the very beginning of the life. Development process includes mobility, the language acquisition, cognitive development, and, incrementally, the development of unique human capacities (imagination, creativity, critical judgments etc.).

Early childhood education includes, as a practice, all types of support that a child needs for explicitly exercise his right to life, to protection and care that he needs for optimal development according to the age. Therefore, early childhood education could be understood as:

• Functional and global education, in an integrated perspective;
• Education adapted to the needs and characteristics of the child;
• Pedagogy of action and communication, child-centred and dialogic in nature;
• Complex relationship between early educators – children – parents;
• Balanced mixture between formalization and “oriented freedom”

Still, the tension between classical pedagogy and the strong inclusion of play as learning tool and learning experience, especially in formalized educational institution, where there is a clear tendency to over-structure the time and program of the child and to capture it in the same terms with later ages (official curriculum, testing and assessment, discipline etc.), is present. As shown by S. Dockett (2011, p. 43), “Internationally, as well as nationally, there is much focus on early childhood education both as a means of promoting equitable life outcomes and ensuring an appropriately skilled future workforce […]. One consequence is that what happens in early childhood education is under considerable scrutiny. School systems – and the teachers within them – are
eager to demonstrate that the education they provide is of high quality and that all children are indeed learning. Consequences have already included the role and place of play and the need for teachers to articulate their use and justification of play. “[2].

2. Quality early childhood education. From principles to practice

We consider play as an intrinsic condition for quality early childhood education. But as logical and common-sense as it sounds, this idea needs to be further emphasized and explained. And not let to be forgotten and lost in the formalism of the educational settings / institutions.

Among key principles of early childhood education, worth mentioning here are:
- Recognizing each child as unique personality;
- Respecting of natural development characteristics;
- Individualizing the educational activity;
- Organization of the educational environment on stimulation areas;
- Focusing on play as main / basic activity;
- Reconsidering the relation between child, adult and early education institution.

Planning and delivering a high quality early childhood education means to answer the multiple needs of the child, concerning different aspects of the development process: health, nutrition, psycho-social development, emotional well being, and contact with the external environment. The success of early childhood education programs involves also, along with the already mentioned factors, multiple other elements, such as:

- Cooperation with parents for improving their capacity to grow, care and educate children;
- Cooperation with different institutions in the community, having a stake in child and / or family life;
- Integrating in development of early education programs the results of the most recent scientific research on child development and education, as well as on the evolution of human behavior and action in at different ages and in different social and cultural contexts;
- Promoting social and individual equity, making a contribution to diminishing disparities and offering equal chances to all.
- Accepting and taking into account the generational changes and the new ways of understating reality specific to the new generation of kids, already labeled as digikids, digital natives, Net generation etc.

On this last issue, there is still a challenging task for early educators and for teachers in general to understand that life of the learners changed so much and their way of understanding reality changed so much, that organizing relevant and captivating learning for them was never such an issue. As shown by D. Tapscott (2011, p. 219) “The “boring” factor is not a surprising one, if you look to the high difference between the thinking mode of Net generation and the way of teaching of our teachers. Those from Net generation are not happy to stay quiet and to listen to the discourse of a teacher. Children who grew in this digital environment would like to participate with answers and to get involved in the conversation with the teacher. They would like to have a say in their own education, regarding what they would like to learn, when they would like to learn, where and how.” [3].

And here we have a new reason to reconsider not only the role of play in early pedagogy, but the inner game, the play as (learning) activity in itself. Playing is now so much different, and even though technology and digitalization is a key cause, is not only about that. Going back to Lowenfeld (1935), quoted in a recent book of Cathy Nutbrown (2011, p. 114), “play in childhood is an exceedingly complex phenomenon. It is an activity which combines into a single whole, very different strands of thought and experience. Many of these persist in adult life.” [4].

Integrating play into the revised functions of an early education institution remains a serious task. But when talking about these functions, to what do we refer to?

a. Social function: including in early education programs the new social development and the social requirements towards early education, as well as the skills to function in social groups (socialization);
b. Development function: taking into account the pace and style of development specific to every child, as well as the complex articulation of personality at individual level;

c. Education function: creating disposition for learning and reflection, building a sense of responsibility and cultivating the global development of the child;

d. Care function: maintain nutrition and care at required parameters, stimulating healthy development of the body and promoting care for own and others well being;

e. Adaptive function: understanding, valuing and adapting to changing and often challenging physical, social and cultural environments.

f. Imaginative function: nurturing taste for trying, experimenting and innovating, for being creative as an asset in a knowledge based and learning based society.

Education in general, but early education in special, are facing tremendous challenges, unprecedented in nature and intensity. As life changes, educational institutions and key players inside are changing. Working and delivering performance became a challenge in itself, as expectations are higher and higher and involvement of other stakeholders and resource allocation does not go accordingly. Anyway, revisiting the relation between learning and play in early education could bring about one necessary and sometimes lost ingredient for the success of education: and that is motivation.

Instead of any tentative conclusion to all this reflection, we would just go for another reflection, pointed brilliantly by B. Sullo (2007, p. 154): “student (i.e. children) motivation is the most important issue in education today. Although teachers are underpaid and class size is increasing, a room full of highly motivated students achieves admirably. We just have to figure how to increase student motivation. […] Higher standards, a well designed curriculum, and exemplary instruction are of limited value unless students are engaged and motivated to learn…” [5].

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