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Educational Research Applications

Review Article

Catalano H. Educ Res Appl: ERCA-150.
DOI: 10.29011/2575-7032/100050

The Importance of Free Play in Early Childhood and Primary School Education: Critical Analysis for RomaniaA

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Citation: Catalano H (2018) The Importance of Free Play in Early Childhood and Primary School Education: Critical Analysis for Romania. Educ Res Appl: ERCA-150. DOI: 10.29011/2575-7032/100050

Received Date: 11 May, 2018; **Accepted Date:** 21 May, 2018; **Published Date:** 28 May, 2018

Abstract

Play is the most important activity for a child. Through play he develops social, emotional and cognitive skills. The value of play is recognised by researchers because of the intellectual achievement and emotional well-being. From all types of play, unfortunately, free play is the least used in the daily program in kindergartens and primary schools in most of the European countries. When the child is free to play, he develops all his personality traits during it. He learns how to communicate with peers, to act or react in different situations, to respect some rules, etc. All these reasons determined us to study the most important theoretical approaches and data about free play and to initiate a theoretical study concerning a critical analysis of using free play in early childhood and primary school education in Romania. The aims of the study were to define and to list some of the most important characteristics of free play, to highlight the advantages and limits of this type of play and to encourage practitioners to use it in their educational program in kindergartens and primary schools. Even if there are a lot of benefits of free play, and children enjoy it, this type of play has been replaced with structured activities, based on teaching. All these, due to the fact that in preschool, teachers have to prepare children for school requirements, providing academic skills.

Keywords: Childhood; Development; Free play; Learning; Social skills; Well-being

Introduction

Most researchers, early theorists and practitioners claim that play is at the heart of the child's development. This is the main means by which to develop intrinsic motivation, ability to make decisions, solve problems, follow their own rules, control their emotions, make friends and interact with them, and also experience joy.

One of the great psychologists, supporters of play, Frobel, claims that play is the form of an outward manifestation of the inner feelings of children. Where else than in free play, does the child manifest his inner feelings more clearly? In this sense, we argue that "Reconsideration of free play is not only the most valuable gift we can give to children, but it is also an essential gift if we want them to develop physically, mentally and emotionally as future competent adults" [1].

Although the advantages of play in general and of the free play, in particular, are obvious, in the last half century we notice a "detouring of it, in favor of learning" [2]. According to the studies, during the same period, anxiety, depression, feeling of helplessness and narcissism grew dramatically among children, adolescents and young people. These situations are also supported by American psychologist Peter Gray (2014) who states that the decline of play has led to the emergence of psychopathology in these age groups. It is not proven that the main cause of these problems is the lack of play, but certainly one of the main causes is this. Play is found in human specific activity from birth, when the child is playing freely, or by imitation. With the aging, play is developing, new variants and types are being introduced, more or less directed by adults and its content is more comprehensive. Unfortunately, however, free play diminishes as time and importance while the child follows an institutionalized form of education: children play freely in the first 6 years of life and then, during school program, learning becomes the main activity for kids.

In order to support this type of play, we will first try to achieve a theoretical delimitation of it. Thus, for this term, in the literature of early childhood education, the following names have been identified: self-play / unstructured play / practical play / opened play / intentional or self-initiated play. In the documents

specific to early education in Romania, the term used is that of *free play*. In order to identify the many valences it has in the life of the child from birth to primary school age, but also further on, we will present a series of definitions, identified in literature at national and international level.

According to the *Good Practice Guidelines for Early Childhood Education for 3-6 / 7-year-olds* (2008), free play is "the type of play the child uses throughout the day in various forms. Free plays are the chosen, proposed, child-initiated plays without adult intervention. He alone chooses the place, the toys and the type of play he/ she wants " [3].

In the work *From Play to Learning*, where the authors support free-play learning, it is defined as a "natural learning process that ensures the individual, whether child or adult, total meaning and deep learning" (Nell, Drew, 2016, p. 10) [1].

In *Pedagogy Dictionary*, Schaub and Zenke (2001) define free play as "a form of play in which children freely choose their teammates, content and learning objectives. It is not a fixed program, and the activity is not directed by adults. Children go from the spatial and social learning conditions that are offered to them and organize various plays with materials or circles, whispering, role-play, kites, etc. " [4].

Renowned British teacher, Ken Robinson, in *Creative Schools*, defines free play as "the means by which children learn to make friends, overcome their fears, solve their problems, and generally take control of their own lives. It is also the primary means by which children practice and acquire physical and intellectual skills. Things that children learn through their own initiatives in free play cannot be taught in other ways "[5,6].

Free play is one of the main types of activities used in the pedagogy of Waldorf and Montessori, both of which being based on respecting child's freedom. In the Waldorf kindergarten daily program, free play lasts about 1.5-2 hours a day, giving it special importance because through it, the child's personality develops. The created atmosphere is based on harmony, quietness, but also action and involvement. The role of the educator is to create and sustain this atmosphere, but also to ensure that each child is involved in a meaningful activity. Here, the child perceives reality, understands the experiences he or she lives and learns about life facts. The subject and its action are gradually being built by transfiguring reality into the imaginary plane, the child thus creating a world of his own, with his proper rules and his chosen playmates. Free play can be developed individual or in groups, can be initiated by a child or a group of children. The fact is that if it seems interesting, many children will join.

As far as the educational environment specific to the Montessori education is concerned, it is necessary for it to provide the preschooler with all the materials he needs in order to be used freely in all kinds of activities that the children carry out.

Analyzing the offered definitions and the specific aspects of play in the specified educational alternatives, we note that most of them refer to the benefits it has to the development of the child, the stages of development, the way of adult involvement and the materials used. In order to address this issue in a comprehensive way, we consider that the following aspects are related to the free play: the socio-cultural background of the child, the gender differences, the affinities for different colleagues, or the dependence / independence of the adult present in the created environment. We will explain the specifications, through a brief presentation of the basic ideas related to the stated ones. Thus, the preschooler or pupil's socio-cultural background determines the choice of play type, family routines and cultural artefacts, clearly determining how he/she plays. So that there are differences between the free plays of children in urban and rural areas, but also according to the social status of the families they come from. So, the day-to-day activities of every child's family members will cause his childish play. However, there may be minor behavioral changes due to the imitation of the behavior of others, so social dynamics is encouraged. In rural areas, for example, children's plays develop outside with toys made by them in a large play zone nearby the house. However, free play is affected by different working activities that these children have to do (feeding the animals, help parents to do the cleaning/household, etc). In urban areas, nowadays playing often takes place indoor because the play zones near blocks of flats are not secure (in parents' opinion) and there are few situations in which children can get outside, in the park or another play zones.

Also, gender differences make a major contribution to children's options for the games they choose. Blaise (2005) examined the ways in which preschool children in a kindergarten in the urban environment were self-defining behaviorally as boys and girls. They have demonstrated that there are individual precepts of what each must play, according to gender, thus setting up boys' specific games and girls-specific games. The choices are due to family customs, in particular, but also to instinctive tendencies. Rare are situations where a boy will play "girls" games or vice versa [7]. Usually, boys advocate for construction plays, role-plays, daily life plays, while girls would chose role-playing, drawing or painting activities, etc., but rarely construction plays (except for special legos for girls).

As a result of these, we assert that the valences of the free play are numerous, depending on the aspects pursued by the teacher. So, we will present them as a result of his theoretical and practical study, but also expressing our point of view. Regarding the chosen analysis criteria, we believe to have referred to areas of development specific to preschool education, with an extension to primary school pupils, given that the finalities are based on varied competences. From the point of view of **socio-emotional development**, free play:

- Reduces anxiety;
- Creates good-mood;
- Determines emotional flexibility;
- Develops calmness, resilience, adaptability and ability to cope with unexpected changes and events;
- Promote collaboration and cooperation;
- Cultivate perseverance and concentration;
- Determines self-discipline;
- Allows the child to make mistakes; learning from mistakes, through play, will not feel the pressure of loss.
- Promotes compassion;
- Develops the ability to make choices;
- Forms skills for planning and organizing an activity;
- Shaping relationships based on trust;
- "The child who plays carefully on his own initiative and persists until he physically becomes physically tired will definitely be a determined person capable of sacrificing to promote himself or herself own and others" [1].

From a cognitive point of view, we identify the benefits of this type of play on intellectual development because:

- It is based on *playful learning*;
- Encourages divergent thinking;
- Supports learning through research that children do during free play [2];
- Strengthens brain neural connections [8];
- Develops independent thinking [9];
- Determines learning based on test and error [9];
- Contributes to the development of multiple intelligences through the type of activity initiated in the play;
- Cultivate talent;
- Develops thinking operations;
- Supports research-based learning;
- Surely assures the development of creativity flow, transforming creative sensory experience into thinking [10]. Children "imagine, interpret and make predictions, expressing their thoughts through words and images, and perhaps even through actions that go beyond experiencing the play. The creativity thus generated enhances their ability to think, feel, and engage in more complex communication with others " [1].
- Develops the intrinsic motivation (the child plays to meet his play needs) and therefore the need for self-satisfaction, the child being in the *flow* state, involving total engagement in the play [10];
- Cultivates the will as a result of the disappearance of the barrier between autonomy and shame in the playing state [10], the child dares to carry out various actions or activities, as long as it does not endanger his safety, which needs to be ensured by the adult;
- Develops language and implicitly intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. Most children start talking to others during free play, without constraints or the sentiment of being tracked and corrected by someone. Children also share with parents what they have played freely in kindergarten or school.

From a physical point of view, free play has the following attributes:

- Positive emotions during play determine the health of the immune system, the endocrine and the cardiovascular system;
- Reduces fatigue and stress;
- Develops agility, coordination and flexibility;
- According to the *American Academy of Pediatricians* (2011), free play causes the child to delight, which indicates its value.

Although the play's attributes are special for the harmonious development of the individual, an obstacle to his development is also the electronic toys and devices (the "free play" being present and within them, according to their creators, an assertion that we disagree with, because everything is monitored, verified, charged or appreciated, the play being individual, not free) that blocks socialization. In order to diminish their negative consequences, it is necessary to judge judiciously the time allocated by the adult and to emphasize the importance of the play in the spare time.

Ways of Organizing and Developing Free Play

Free play can be found in both preschool and primary education. If at the preschool level, the time allocated to this play is higher, primary school pupils can play freely during school breaks, in the classroom or in the yard. Games initiated by them are not based on a rich material, but they are aimed in particular at team games, co-operation, socializing, and role-playing games. How students play free plays can provide information about their personality. To this extent, the teacher of primary or school education will attempt to observe these activities with a certain frequency in the preparatory class, being a real help in completing the student assessment report at the end of the preparatory class.

It is necessary for the teacher to allocate some free time during the daily program, given that the teaching-learning-evaluation activities cover 30-35 minutes of the class, the rest of the time being for free-chosen recreational activities. Also, in Class II, III and IV, teaching-learning-evaluation activities cover 45 minutes, while the remaining time is beneficial for such activity. In this situation, the teacher should allow students to use the materials in the classroom for optimal performance of the play. At young school age, children's interest focuses on artistic, literary, reading, or writing activities, role play, or free discussion on certain topics.

Another good time to introduce free play would be the *Morning meeting*. Thus, children become relaxed and get better outcomes in learning activities. In this sense, I initiated a concluding experiment within the class that I am guiding (in the educational alternative Step by Step): throughout a week, during the *Morning meeting*, I allocated 15 minutes of free play, after which the students were engaged in learning activities in open centers. In a proportion of 85%, students focused their attention more on their work tasks compared to the same time period in which free play was not introduced. These positive results were confirmed by the students, who claimed that they liked more to work in centers because they played and had fun before. It is necessary to specify that, as a teacher, I did not intervene directly in the play, unless I was asked to do so, the activities being chosen by the child, depending on their own interests or provisions. Instead, students were allowed to use all the materials in the classroom, providing they put them in place after the play ended and to "share" them with the others. We also asked children to use indoor voice throughout the play. As a result of the above, it is obvious that the free play of young school children is one of the most popular types of play.

Regarding the daily schedule of the child in the kindergarten, free play can be found in the first part of the day but also after the resting period. In the first case, we mean the time the child spends from his arrival at kindergarten until breakfast is served, during which he chooses what and how he wants to play. During the afternoon activities, this type of play is used before leaving home. However, the time allocated to free play in the kindergarten program is insufficient, given the multiple aspects it possesses.

Within the preschool education curriculum, this type of play is integrated into the category of learning activities, alongside didactic play, storytelling, experiment and exercises with individual material, but "Learning activities are a set of actions with a planned character, systematically, methodically, intensively, organized and led by the teaching staff, in order to achieve the finalities provided in the curriculum "(Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2008, p.18). Analyzing this first approach, we argue that free play is NOT a learning activity because it is not based on learning objectives established by the educator, being initiated, deployed and driven by the child only, not planned. Free play is based on the choice of children to do what they want, as they wish, when and as much as they wish, not focusing on the objectives and content of the curriculum. Even if adults provide the right space and resources, children are the ones who take the lead, and adults respond to their requirements [11]. Through it, children manipulate different objects, perform certain movements, experiment, all these actions causing satisfaction in the play. Due to the fact that there are no imposed tasks, the child learns more quickly about the world around him, about the effects of his action on objects and at the same time about him, what he is capable or not able to do.

Free play gives the teacher a real knowledge of the personality of the preschooler because all the knowledge, abilities and skills he possesses are manifested spontaneously, freely and without constraints, their manifestation being as natural as possible. All his actions prove the knowledge of the world, their attitudes towards different situations, things or people. Depending on the type of play chosen, construction, role play or symbolic, it is easy to see his inclinations or how the child translates real situations into his or her life. For example, if we see him playing with a car, we'll see what things he knows about cars, what scenarios inspired by real life he invents, what characters, events, or actions appear during the play. Depending on how he perceived them, we can see the types of relationships he sets between the characters and the language used. The internal language is outlined, the child speaks with the objects and the toys, so it is important that the teacher also follows this aspect. Also, if he plays a game like "To ...", we will see how the child translates his own experiences into play, either as a spectator of the events around him or as the main character. There are situations where the child does not need materials to play freely. He imagines animated situations and realizes a scenario without too many objects. Although play is perceived by the adult as an effortless activity, the child makes a sustained effort to get it done. Even if he is free, creative, he develops the subject of the play, looks for partners, plays roles that he assumes, sets and respects his own rules, the play activity becomes work for him. In this regard, if instructed, the educator / adult can intervene in complicating the play, integrate in the play, interpret a character, appreciate the child's behavior and encourage co-operation in the play.

Although free play is much enjoyed by children, it has been diminished by structured activities (based on learning activities) involving children, parents' anxiety about children's school success, excessive preschool / school education structuring etc. A simple observation of children's daily activities leads us to claim that all these are structured by "adult coaches", rare being the situations when children play in the neighborhood ("behind the block"), parents organizing their daily schedule according to their own desires and aspirations. Overworking children with structured, internalized or outsourced activities, along with shorter free time, has long-lasting effects on children's development, including lack of sleep, inattention, irritability, sudden mood swings, etc.

Although all researchers support the importance of play in children's development and especially free play, the early education practitioners' tendency is to eliminate the playing time of the daily program and to introduce and increasingly use learning activities structured on scientific content (see normal / extended daily kindergarten program from *Curriculum for early childhood education for 3-6 / 7-year-olds*). The same document proposes, besides free play activities, free-choice activities. The subject of free-choice activities in the current daily program is chosen by the educator, the goals being clearly set before, these being aimed at learning and preparing the learning activities within the experiential areas. The preschooler can only freely choose the center he / she wants to *work in* (in the most fortunate situations). According to their name, we think that it is necessary for the preschooler to be left to freely choose what he wants to do, the theme to be freely chosen, the manifestation to be free, to develop the subject of the play according to his own desire, to look for play partners, but at the same time adhere to good rules. It is advisable, however, that they be induced progressively, first allowing the child to play by their own rules and, if necessary, to introduce others by the adult, explaining the reasons for this.

As I have previously argued, at both preschool and primary levels, the preparation of free play does not require any particular effort on the part of the teacher. Being elected and deployed by children according to their own interests, provisions and inclinations, the teacher intervenes to a very small extent. However, in order to ensure its effectiveness, it is necessary for preschool children to be provided with materials with various uses and the educational space to be well-arranged. The *Playful habitat* seen as the ensemble of human, material, ergonomic and temporal resources determines the efficiency of organizing and unfolding free play [12]. The plays, toys and objects in the group room and the specific centers of interest can be effective tools for doing it (cubes, mugs, plastic glasses, different vessels, boxes, construction pieces, etc.). The use of toys can be the classic one, but also a new, innovative one that indicates the child's creativity. For example, from a box and a few grains from the role play center, the child can get a musical instrument to use in his free play. This situation was reported during a doctoral internship held in Hungary, where I noticed the efficiency of using free play in the kindergarten, but also a number of aspects regarding its development. Thus, the duration of the exercise was at the choice of the children, in some cases the educator suggesting by his behavior the completion of the free play period. The teacher did not intervene in the children's play, except when requested or when a certain situation arose. Also, the educational space was arranged to suggest a miniature house with specific furnishings and facilities. This is why children skillfully used toys that were household items (dishes, sweatshirts, vacuum cleaners, clothing racks etc.), which obviously contribute to the formation of practical household skills. An atmosphere of well-being characterized the whole team, so that the group room was dominated by smiles and good-mood. In the daily program, free play was compulsory, outside the kindergarten too, regardless of weather conditions, and the educator ensured the physical integrity of the children. In each group room, there was a doorway to the outside courtyard where a "play area" [13] was established, which children respected in order to avoid dangers.

Setting up a playful habitat determines the enjoyment of the play, involving children in this activity being dependent on this aspect. Therefore, we consider that regardless of the national specificity of the curriculum for early education, the way of arranging the educational space, the role of the teaching staff, but also the interest it gives to the free play, determines the establishment of the flow state at the level of the children, state indicating their total involvement in activity.

Ways of Promoting Free Play in Early Childhood Education

Having the successful pattern of free play organization in kindergartens in Hungary and the United States of America, where the Ministry of Education recommends learning through play during the first years of life (1-5 years) and especially through play at the child's initiative [9], we believe that there can be a call to action to promote free play in early education, as follows:

- Organizing surveys conducted as a questionnaire survey on the place and role of free play in the daily schedule of children in the kindergarten;
- Allocating 60 minutes a day for free play (especially at preschool level);
- Teacher training at all levels of education in order to know how free play can be used by children;
- Organizing "play workshops" [1] for teachers, which may appear as "a series of experiences based on each other, each contributing to the development of new knowledge about teaching and learning" [1]. These workshops require participants to choose how to play based on the materials made available. "Those who can play with the various possibilities ... will be more alive than those who are waiting to be told what to do " [2].
- Organizing play workshops for parents by teacher trainers;
- Organizing free afterschool playing centers in which parents and their children are integrated;
- Campaigns to promote the free play of children in the family, as well as to organize joint activities at school (plays evenings, play centers, etc.), at home and, last but not least, in the outdoor environment, because in this environment the child explores the environment, discovers, tries, tests, fails, climbs and runs.

Conclusions

In this study, we've emphasized some theoretical and practical aspects of free play. No doubt, that this is the most important type of play, because of its benefits for the future adult. Taking into consideration all the information from our study, but also primary and preschool teachers' opinions, the time for free play is more and more reduced during kindergarten/school time. Even if they all agree that free play occupies an important role in child's development, they assert that the curriculum requirements and standardized test don't allow them to use it as long as they would like to. The major problem concerning free play in private, and play in general, stands in the "seriousness" of teaching and learning act. If teachers and parents don't have enough time and space for playing, children lose interest for this activity, because they were born "digital" being "native digital generation" [14]. These are the reasons why children's free time is conquered by digital devices. At the same time, at the school age, there is a lack of interest for free play caused by the precariousness of ludic habitat [12]. The cited author claims the importance of adults in sustaining child's desire of play. If they do not ensure a secure place for playing and a series of toys or different materials to play with, then playing is not considered very interesting in this situation. This generation of children need dynamic activities, to keep them busy all the time, this is the reason why, in some situations, playing is different from the previous period of time. This doesn't means that children don't like to play, but they enjoy different kind of games, that's why it's important for adults to leave them to play freely indoor or outdoor for a minimum period of 60 minutes a day.

Because free play gives teachers and parents important information about children's abilities, knowledge, skills, affiliation and even attitudes towards person and things we think that it is necessary to place free play on top of the pyramid of types of play. At the same time, during free play, we have to focus our attention on the aspects that create the well-being status of the children and to support them in the activity of play.

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