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Subject Area - Childcare

Early Childhood

Not only play therapists, early interventionists, social workers or sociocultural researchers like for example Göncü (1999) have focused in the last four decades on child play but also all major developmental theorists like Piaget, (1962), Vygotsky, (1976), Bruner (1972) or Erikson, (1977). Today, therefore the essential role that play possesses in the development of an infant during childhood has been acknowledged by most theorists and developmental psychologists strive to help mentally ill children with different play therapy techniques.

Despite the fact that there is neither a satisfactory definition of play nor consent about its purpose, as maintained by Bundy (2001), one can describe and define children's play behaviour as pleasurable, personally directed, intrinsically motivated and voluntary activities which are conducted in a safe, spontaneous, goalless context (Hughes, 2001) and which involve "much repetition and variation as the child explores the range of possibilities of behaviour" (Butterworth & Harris, 1998, p.140) in contents and intents where the child possess a sense of control. Child play is both performed in solitary or in social groups and it is always more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated even when children are eagerly and seriously engaged in play activities which are rule governed. It also may to serve to explore inanimate objects or to explore human relationships and social roles (see Butterworth & Harris, 1998).

Thus, child play is not only a straightforward term for simple actions but includes manifold activities with manifold purposes. It also has many diverse facets as it for, instance, represents reality in as-if or what-if term (symbolic nature of play) while at the same time connecting or linking different experiences (meaningful nature of play). As it includes so many diverse aspects many definitions have arose in the past with each definition providing a different understanding and interpretation of children's play. In general, the play theories are divided into classical theories of play (e.g. Hall's Recapitulation Theory, 1920; Groos' Pre-Exercise Theory, 1984) and modern theories of play (Mellou, 1994). Classical theories of play originated in the nineteenth century and tried to explain the existence and purpose of play (Mellou, 1994). However, this brief paper intends to investigate and discuss the nature and role of play in early childhood with reference to theories of development and will focus on contemporary theories (e.g. Psychoanalytic theory, Cognitive theories) which were mainly devised after the 1920s and which try to explain the role of play in child development (Saracho and Spodek, 1995).

Psychoanalytic Theory

Freud (1938) and colleagues developed the Psychoanalytic theory of play which arose through therapies which examined repressed memories of patients. In this sense, Freud concluded that child play is a way of replacing negative feelings and emotions in a cathartic way with positive emotions. Thus, accordingly, children who do not play sufficiently will remain traumatized and possess destructively negative feelings throughout the rest of their lives.

Freud (1938) believed that playing represents not only a catalyst of negative feelings but serves also as a facilitator for grasping and comprehending unpleasant and agonizing experiences and represents, additionally, a tool for children to express their feelings and emotions (Wehman and Abramson, 1976). Psychotherapists like Takhvar (1988) or Erikson (1963) have modified and altered Freud's initial theory by relating ego processes, fear, anxiety, and wish fulfillment to play activities in children. Conflict solving and the dramatisation of both past, present and future were, additionally,

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identified by Erikson (1950) as the main characteristics of play and he, consequently, transformed Freud's psychosexual development stages into psychosocially relevant stages. Peller (1952) concluded that adult roles are imitated in children's fantasy play which, in turn, provides children with a sense of mastery that empowers them to deal with difficult real life situations and experiences. It was Murphy (1962) who concluded that in addition to all the mentioned benefits of child play, the acting out elements of play enable children not only to understand negative experiences from the past but allow for processing of positive or everyday experiences (see Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Play Therapy

Acting out is one of the pivotal elements of play therapy which can be regarded as an offspring of these psychoanalytic ideas (Axline, 1974). Play therapy has been predominantly employed in children with emotional difficulties and distortions and intends to minimise and diminish children's mainly destructive emotions (e.g. anxiety, fear, insecurity) through acting out these emotions. Observation of a child during guided play situations provides the therapists with insights about the emotional problems and difficulties faced by the child and enables the therapists to explore ways for reestablishing the child's security and mastery of self, situation and sentiments.

Cognitive Theories - From Piaget to Vygotski

The most influential figures for cognitive theories are Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) who both attempted to comprehend the precise relationship between cognitive developments and play behaviour in a child. In order to understand Piaget's ideas on child play one has to be first acquainted with his cognitive development theory in which assimilation and accommodation are the two most important and prevailing factors. Assimilation involves the process of a child assimilating and integrating external information from the outside world into pre-existent mental structures while the ultimate goal is to obtain a state of equilibrium where the cognitive balance is maintained. This is reached by children continuously adapting and accommodating their imperfect and imbalanced mental structures in order to improve their reception of real world information.

This explains partly why children enjoy playing as they do not need to adapt their cognitive schemes to the world anymore when they play but rather the world has to accommodate to the universe which they have created according to their own simple rules. Playing can be consequently seen as opposed by imitating where in contrast assimilation predominates over accommodation.

Piaget (1962) has, in total, identified three stages of play and has described the sensorimotor stage as the first followed by the symbolic and games with rules stages.

A child experiences the different stages in a sequential order while every single stage includes different types of play (see Stagnitti, 2004).

According to Piaget (1964) children indulge more in physical activities (e.g. play fighting) in the sensorimotor stage which often involve objects but since playing with objects is too practical as to be concerned for the symbolic stage it solely occurs in the first stage of play development. The second stage evolves when children are approximately two years old and involves symbolic or making-believe play. One object representing another is a characteristic of symbolic play and represents a qualitatively new form of behaviour which is a pivotal evidence for the transition from early childhood to a new stage. Symbolic processes also enter into the playful exploration of social roles, as when children play at being bus drivers, nurses, teachers, or mothers and fathers. Unlike the simple practice of physical skills, symbolic

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play therefore involves imaginary reality. According to Baldwin (1905; in Butterworth and Harris, 1998), imagination is the general power of having mental images. Baldwin distinguished reconstructive imagination (as when one imagines a man on a horse from previous experience) from compounded imagination (as when one imagines a centaur from the previously separate memories of a man and a horse). Children enter the "games with rules" stage when they are about seven years old and this end stage of child play is complementary to Piaget's concrete operational stage of development. In this stage, children become more and more interested in having social interactions while playing (e.g. chess, cards), according to Piaget (1968), and choose writing down fictional stories instead of dramatic play. Physical or symbolic games are still played throughout one's life although one chooses predominantly to play games which have tangible rules and which also satisfy the need in everyone to socialise and which come as close as possible to reality (see Goldman, 1998).

Nevertheless, referring to Lloyd and Howe (2003) one of today's principal and chief theoretical debates in the study of play is whether solitary play represents either an advanced or immature type of play. As a matter of fact, Piaget's (1968) view that the frequency of solitary play does significantly decline with age is not supported anymore. Moore and colleagues (1974) have rather discovered that solitary play persists throughout different stages and becomes even more mentally mature with age. In a similar vein, Rubin and collaborators (1983) reported that children below 5 years of age were yet not able to engage themselves in sophisticated solitary games as much as 5-year-olds were and while children going to kindergarten were found to prefer solitary-constructive play, preschoolers play observably more functional solitary games. Consequently, in contrast to what has been assumed by Piaget (1968) one can impossible one's social maturity by purely looking at the amount of social interaction and neglecting relevant cognitive aspects (Lloyd and Howe, 2003, Stagnitti and Unsworth, 2000).

In sum, Piaget (1968) believed that changes in cognitive development underlie changes in forms of play with only mirroring the achieved cognitive developmental stage but without play helping to lead to more mature cognitive developmental stages. He was recently criticised by Elkonin (2005) as he did not offer any details about the essential child-adult interactions during his experiments but completely omitted them.

Piaget's (1968) viewpoint stands in stark contrast to Vygotsky (1976) who strongly believed that play facilitates and accelerates cognitive development in children. Vygotski's approach was not only dissimilar to that of Piaget but also to those of Freud as he focused on normal problems in children's development whereas Freud took more the extreme cases of traumatised children into consideration. His ideas were, nevertheless, in accordance with many other well-known theorists like for instance Bruner (1972, 1999) or Russ (1995) who like him saw sociodramatic play which is discovered by 2-year-olds as essential for emotional, cognitive and emotional development. In his eyes, sociodramatic play serves as a tool to imitate the adults and thus enabled children to experience situations and activities for which they were actually too immature in order to experience them in real life situations. "In play the child functions above his average age, above his usual everyday behaviour, in play he is head high above himself" (Vygotsky, 1976, p.552). Similarly, in sociodramatically play situations objects can be better defined by children and social norms are more successfully internalised and behaviour can be steadily accommodated according to these norms. An existing imaginary situation and rules are the two factors that distinguish this self-regulatory play from other early childhood behaviour (see Elias and Berk, 2001).

The imaginary situation includes children acquiring the skill to make a distinction between cognitive mind and physical

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action from external stimuli. As a consequence, children control external stimuli and objects in play situations as they voluntarily determine the significance and identity of the situations and stimuli. The child, for example, decides independently whether a stick represents a telephone, a sparrow, a snake or anything else which he or she uses in make-believe situations. This independent power to select and create one's own universe above the existing reality transforms impulsive actions of a child into self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Elias and Berk (2002) with increased age the children's imagination becomes stronger and stronger and the more they grow up the less they need an object to be as similar as possible to the real world in play situations and thus they can correspond in more self-regulatory ways with both the real and fantasy world.

The obeying of rules during play is congruent with the child's desire to adapt to the social environment which demands acting alongside socially accepted and internalised norms and values. Hence, Vygotsky (1978) concluded that the adherence to rules during play is a central catalyst of satisfaction which children gain from playing. In sum, one conclude that sociodramatic play provides children with the "greatest self-control" possible (Vygotski, 1978, p. 99) as it demands from children to steadily fight against prompt and incarnated impulses while stressing "social rules and coordination of goals and behaviour with those of others" (Elias and Berk, 2002, p. 218).

Many researchers have attempted to test Vygotsky's (1978) sociodramatic play theory. The results of Elias and Berk's (2001) study, for instance, in which they investigated complex sociodramatic play (CSD), solitary dramatic play, and dramatic play in preschool children, demonstrated that those infants are benefiting significantly from CSD play who are most in need of improving their self-regulatory abilities. This finding was congruent to Vygotsky's claim that self-restraint is very strongly related to sociodramatic play and that playing children constantly resist present impulses in order to adhere social norms that exists in the make-believe context.

Kraft and Berk (1998) offered more support for this theory in revealing that infants try to control their behaviour to act according to their thoughts and mental images as CSD was positively correlated to the utilisation of self-guiding private speech.

In sum, one can say that today Vygotsky's notions about play in early childhood have received significantly more support than Piaget's ideas. However these are by far not the only influential figures in developmental psychology and many theorists hypothesis about child play had to be left out due to the brief nature of this paper (Göncü, 1999).

Another major idea of Vygotski (1978) which had great influence on child play research concerns the so-called zone of proximal development (ZND) which can be described as the difference between what a child can achieve with and without the help of parents (adults or peer groups). Vygotski viewed the adults as facilitating and potentialising opportunities for the child to learn quicker and more effective in play situations as infants' knowledge evolves much better through experience of parents leading and directing the child towards more ideal and mature solutions to problems (see Butterworth and Harris, 1998). However cognitive development is limited to a limited time span in one's life which falls precisely into the ZND. This theory has been very influential in the language acquisition research. As children interact and play with peers particular models of expression, explanation and communication are developed. This generated language use is regarded by many (e.g. Goodman and Goodman, 1990, Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) as the foundation for literacy.

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Jerome Bruner (1973, 1999) basically agrees with this notion that cognitive development is highly related to the systematic social interaction between a child and a parent, peer or teacher. Nevertheless, Bruner's theory of cognitive development can be more linked to Piaget's theory. Bruner's postulated the idea that children evolve through different modes of representation in their intellectual development. He introduced three modes of representing understanding, namely, enactive, iconic and symbolic. The iconic representation stage involves using images, pictures or photos that encapsulate or outline action to represent knowledge while the more primitive enactive mode involves representing knowledge solely through physical actions and thus is very compatible to Piaget's sensorimotor stage. The symbolic mode, however, includes using, for example, symbolic or pretend play for representing cognitive advancement. Bruner's theories have been very influential in child play and music instructing sessions and represent a conclusive bridge between Piaget and Vygotski's theories (Atterbury and Richardson, 1995).

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