Chapter 10

Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education: The Contribution of High Scope, Reggio Emilia, and Montessori Pedagogical Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The key role of toys and play in early years education has been highlighted by several childhood pedagogues such as Froebel, Montessori, Weikart, and Malaguzzi, among many others. It is consensual among the international educational community that children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration exercising their bodies and using their imagination. This chapter aims to reflect on the power of play for children’s learning and development and to analyze how three pedagogical models—the High Scope, Reggio Emilia, and Montessori—integrate play through their curriculum development. The chapter is organized in several topics, namely (1) the role of play in early childhood education (0 to 6 years); (2) the High Scope curriculum and opportunities given to children to engage in free play and play with purposes; (3) the Reggio Emilia approach: play through 100 languages; (4) the Montessori method, from hands-on activity and self-directed activity to collaborative play; (5) final remarks.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Play is valued worldwide and has been researched and written about by scholars from different theoretical disciplines, from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, anthropology, to medicine among others, and for that reason it is difficult to come up to a single definition of play. Nonetheless, there are several features
that are common to different definitions of play. Thus, play can be defined as a freely chosen, voluntary, intrinsic motivated, pleasurable and flexible activity, involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Whitebread, 2012).

Play is an essential activity of early childhood as it contributes to the cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development of children. Through play, children are able to explore and create a world they can master. Moreover, within the context of play, children learn, develop, and practice innovative behaviors and construct new knowledge (Bruner 1972; Pellegrini 2009; Pellis & Pellis, 2009).

Acknowledging the power of play for children’s learning and development it is of vital importance to reflect on the teachers’ role to promote early childhood playful contexts. Early childhood teachers must know how to create a learning environment that foster children’s play and be skilled players. They must recognize that even when the exact role of play in learning is still debated, children everywhere play, regardless of culture and place. Thus, the teachers must create a space for playful activities and should allow the child to play freely. They have a mediating role between play and children’s development. According to Pecci (2010), early childhood teachers should create a relaxed and comfortable environment in which children feel safe to explore and experience new playful experiences. They organize contexts for play based on real life situations and according to the characteristics of children’s cultural and social contexts; usually children like to reproduce in their play situations the actions and activities they observe adults do in their daily life. The careful observation of each child and the group allows teachers to adjust the play situations to the individual child, following their natural development and personal rhythm.

The power of play for learning and development in early childhood education is beyond question. Contemporary research reveals that play and playful activities are losing their vital role in many early childhood curricula nowadays (Ginsburg, 2007; Singer, D’Agostino & DeLong, 2009). Several studies conducted by researchers from the education sphere conclude that: (1) there is a relationship between the decrease of the time for playing in school and the increasing of extreme aggressive behavior (Gilliham, 2015); (2) there are no long-term gains from teaching children to read at age 5 compared to age 7 (Suggate, 2010); (3) when ‘at-risk’ children get inappropriate early education it has a lasting negative effect. These methods are intensifying the problems and not reducing the learning gap (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005); (4) when schools focus on drilling literacy and math skills into young children it only produces a lack of creativity and curiosity (Engel, 2010). Research has shown that when children have opportunities to engage in different types of play, and to learn through active exploration of materials and toys, they have better results in school in both the short and long term. They also have more success in their personal and social life in adolescence and adulthood (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield & Nores, 2005).

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Researchers and experts call action on the education of young children, and they express their deep concern that current trends in early education, fueled by political pressure, are leading to an emphasis on unproven methods of academic instruction and unreliable standardized testing that can undermine learning and damage young children’s healthy development (Miller & Almon, 2009). Given this scenario it is of vital importance to analyze the contribution of childhood pedagogy, and reflect how play is integrated throughout as an effective means to support all domains of development and promote learning in all curriculum areas in three curriculum models: High Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori.