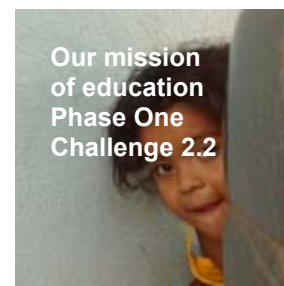


PLAY, TOOL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Some reflection notes



Maria Lopez Matallan*

The following reflection is in response to Challenge 2.2., “Promote an education that helps a person grow in all that she/he is and helps commit her/himself to the transformation of society,” This and others proposed by the Company of Mary in the Work Document prepared for reflection on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of its existence. Aspects of Challenge 2.1. are also touched upon.⁶

In this paper I draw from the research I have been doing for more than 15 years on young children’s the games: the importance of a child’s development, the enormous educational potential contained in the school, and above all, the informal learning environment. Many people have collaborated in this work, at times without knowing it: children, parents, grandparents, teachers, educators, and of course, institutions, such as the recreational spaces that form part of the educational program of the Company of Mary school in Madrid. Thank you to all.

My reflection paper begins with the definition of game. I then present some ideas on the inseparable relationship between game and development, the role of the adult who teaches games and the “space”, time and place in which this can happen in such a way that it becomes an education for social transformation.

1. DEFINITION OF PLAY

“When we speak of game we refer to a very special activity that has a series of distinctive characteristics capable of converting it, from the point of view of the one who plays, into a unique form of understanding reality:

- Free and voluntary. *No one can be forced to play, being coerced implies displeasure. The nature of games makes it incompatible with any form of imposition. One cannot play without desire or pleasure: Whoever plays because he/she is ordered to do so is doing something by force.*
- Entertainment, pleasure, and/or satisfaction for the player. *Games imply laughter, enjoyment, a happy feeling. When a game is played conscientiously there is no room for boredom or dissatisfaction.*
- Free and non-productive. *One plays only for the fun and pleasure of playing. When playing there is no intention of accomplishing anything in particular, other intentions are invalid. Keeping this in mind, the rules intrinsic to games should be different from the external objectives we wish to accomplish. The true significance lies in the process, not the final goal. For a real player, winning or losing is immaterial, it’s not important.*

* Professor in the Department of Social Education, Center for Advanced Studies, La Salle, Madrid, Spain.

⁶ Challenge 2.1 “Seek from “below”, from the needy in this world, new ways of extending our hand.”

- Interactive and implying a certain degree of communication among the players. *In a game what most stands out are the interactive, communicative, social components. All games call for an experience of encounter and cooperation. The most interesting games are those that we share with people akin to us. He/she who plays with us is already a friend. On the other hand, the game played by a child reaches a level of intensity when they have shared this experience with an adult and know that in every moment this person is physically and affectively close.*
- For the one consciously living in the world of fiction, outside the real world. *Games provide the possibility of going beyond inhibitions and overcoming the limitations of daily life. Playing totally enters the realm of the subjective, everything seems “as if...” and because of it, everything is delightfully filled with the sense of being the truth without it being necessarily so. Being a fool does not exist in playing and it easily supercedes what is prohibited; error does not lead to punishment: anyone has the option to make corrections and learn because, “We are playing...”*
- Limited to time and space. *Different kinds of “spaces” are favorable to different types of games. Each game has its predetermined duration within a time frame (it usually responds, in a subjective way, to the degree of interest in the game itself). It is also subjected to the development level of the players: We grow up playing and we complicate the games because we have grown up.*
- Global, Encompassing. *When one really plays, the person is completely involved: body, mind and soul are active in each match.*

*These extraordinary conditions exist simultaneously each time someone plays. Given this perspective, **we can define the GAME as AN ATTITUDE**, that is to say, an activity qualitatively different from any other action. This takes us to differentiate between the Game as a subjective personal experience (that is, the manner, values and attitudes integrated in the act of playing,) and from what we objectively call, “a game” (to run, play hide-and-seek, to pursue, etc..) These “standard games” may be used or not in virtue of a set of attitudes with which each person accepts them at a given moment.” (from the introductory chapter of the book entitled, Organización y Animación de ludotecas, ed. CCS, Madrid)*

Playing permits the growing child to develop and exercise his/her personal skills (movement, cognitive, social, affective), gradually learning new forms of understanding the world and his/her self as part of it. This makes of the game an indispensable component in the complete and optimum development of the child.²

2. ESSENTIAL NOTES ON GAMES AND DEVELOPMENT

According to UNESCO (1968,) playing is necessary for the proper development of the child, in that it is significantly related to the process of the physical growth that takes place during the first 7 years of the child; that is to say, together with the process of cognitive and physical development. Various studies on play indicate the results of the game in the different stages of development: movement, cognitive, affective, social and personality. These studies invite us to appreciate play as something more than infantile entertainment or a teaching tool. They urge us to penetrate the meaning and importance in the personal and group development of children and its significance in the educational process.

² Infantile will refer to infancy and childhood

I will not elaborate on this theme, but I would like to make some very important comments in order to understand what has thus far been stated and the suggestions that can be deduced from them.³ Play and development are continually interwoven in an integral way: the world of emotions, social learning and cognitive development (of course, the physical and motor coordination development as well, though they are not essential requirements) manifest themselves in play, and thus the child grows in the very act of playing.

2.1 REQUIREMENTS FOR PLAY.

To play, the child has to have established *strong bonds* with the adults around him/her, he/she needs to **feel emotionally secure**, to have the opportunity to explore his/her body, that of the adult, and his/her surroundings; learn to enjoy his/her sensations, actions, experiences (that these be pleasant, loving;) feel good, loved and accepted. This is possible in the measure that the adults with whom he/she is linked enjoy themselves with him/her, laugh, play, affirm his/her successes and set limits. Only on a foundation created by those adults with whom he/she lives and relates, will he/she be able to grow and develop fully, integrally and in a balanced manner.

Secondly, play is a **social activity**. Play is the model in which the first social behaviors take place: begun together with the adult and afterwards developed with peers. It is the specific stage in which one can practice and develop basic social skills.⁴ In this sense, there are two fundamental premises on which rest a child's playing with others: first of all, it is necessary for the adult who is the point of reference for the child to introduce him/her to the dynamics of play by actually "playing" (creating the features that are or will be common to the play activity with other children;) secondly, the child should have sufficient cognitive skills to coordinate his/her actions with those of other children playing with him/her.

Finally, the child needs a **game "repertoire"**: knowledge of various kind of games, getting to know life directly or through other means (audiovisual, stories, narrations, drawings...) have play objects (specific or not.) No child can play what he/she does not know. Similarly, if he/she has never gone shopping, he/she will not know how to play at shopping, given that this game is very interesting in the development of mental skills such a calculation and negotiation. That is why it is important to offer interesting experiences that will broaden the child's world.

2.2 THE BENEFITS OF PLAY IN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

We observe *cognitive development* in play through various behaviors: interaction with peers (how to engage with others in team games;) the number of actions the child is capable of successfully coordinating, (e.g. solely feeding a doll, or engaging in buying, preparing and giving it the food prepared, etc.) or simultaneously (play with one or with various rules). The complexity of responses to the social or affective conflicts that arise during the game, (I go off crying; I insult/hit you; I ask for help; negotiate, I work out an alternative response—"If all parents have to wash the dishes, I want to be a

³ I include some bibliographical referentes for those who wish to read further on the characteristics of "play-development" ELKONIN (1980) *Psicología del juego*. Pablo del Río. Madrid // ORTEGA, R. (1992) *El juego infantil y la construcción social del conocimiento*. Alfar Sevilla. // GUTTON. (1976) *El juego de los niños*. Ed. Nova Terra. Barcelona // WINNICOTT. (1986) *Realidad y juego*. Ed. Gedisa. Barcelona

⁴ The hypotheses that only the child who plays with others (freely, with a spirit of gratitude, etc.) obliged to learn how to be empathetic, to listen, to negotiate, to defend his/her own ideas, to be assertive, to reach a consensus... will be capable of developing attitudes (virtues) like generosity and other-centeredness.

grandparent.”)⁵ These behaviors speak of the level of the thought process that has been achieved, of learned strategies “put into practice.”

We can, therefore, stimulate the development and training of cognitive skills through recreational activities, the enrichment of free group games and the shared reflection on what has taken place during the game by also providing interesting experiences which expand the child’s knowledge.

Social and cognitive skills are also developed as they are interwoven within the framework of play. It is necessary to broaden the scope of play in the understanding of the world through the development of different forms of an increased complexity of thought processes. One must also take into account the *other* in that process of understanding. This means that different points of view, experiences, etc., which end up modifying our own vision of the world must be appropriated.

2.3 THE BENEFITS OF PLAY IN EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The greatest contribution of play to emotional development is that through play conflictive, emotional situations are worked out:

- daily life experiences in which the small child tries to have a better understanding of the world around him/her from the affective-emotional level: *What is sadness? Why does my mother worry so much about my food? Why does all the world order me around? Why do I have to share my things?*
- those of a specific nature in which the child tries to work through authentic affective-emotional conflicts: *abandonment, death of a loved one, separation of parents, etc.*

From the emotional point of view, to play with others is directly related to the growth of friendship: from a positive point of view, the companion in the game is a friend and through the game strategies of acceptance, understanding, intimate communication and adaptation to the other, and other possibilities, are exercised. There is also the possibility of a systematic rejection in the game: How do they work through the concept of friendship?

2.4 BENEFITS OF PLAY IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The contributions of the game to social development are essentially manifested in the symbolic game and in rules. In the first one it is so because of its cultural and intercultural character. The child expresses his/her manner of understanding the world around him/her (the family, the school, the street, the stories...) and should define the way in which he/she sees him/herself in it.

- The symbolic game constitutes an authentic social exercise, a laboratory to practice behaviors, attitudes and roles;
- The game has a cultural quality in two ways: first of all, in that the traditional games form part of the inherited culture of a community, and secondly, in that the specific cultural traits manifest themselves through games: *rituals, as in a*

⁵ While observing a child at play we have often noted fundamental aspects brought about failure in school or learning difficulties, being able to identify basic skills which are necessary in order to resolve problems.

wedding; peculiarities, as in celebrations with bulls, the gathering of...(grain, grapes, olives,) or the processions of holy week.

- It has an inter-cultural quality when we play similar games in different ways (*circle, hide and seek, a wedding,*) it is necessary to expand our knowledge of the world or the capacity for tolerance.

The games with rules presuppose an initiation into social norms, putting into perspective the spirit of competition (what is important is to play,)⁶ likewise the practice, learning and integration of values such as cooperation, solidarity, and the meaning of equality or teamwork.

3. THE ROLE OF THE ADULT IN PLAY

What is the role of the adult/educator in play so that by fulfilling these characteristics (freely, gratuitously, etc.,) we can maximize their benefits? As a premise, and summarizing what we have already commented upon, the adult should:

- Establish a bond with the child so that he/she feels emotionally secure.
- Teach the child the fundamentals of each type of game (sensory, symbolic, regarding rules,) while playing with him/her.
- Serve as “mediator” in the first recreational encounters with peers
- Allow (generate or facilitate,) time for free play.

Secondly, the role of the educator in play can be specified in the following functions:

- Evaluate the individual and group needs of the children involved in order to help the children in their development, providing them with elements that enrich their recreational activity: adaptation of resources/means, selection of suggestions, etc.
 - Observing the game – individual and group activity
 - Attending to the child’s demands
 - Asking and listening when the play-activity has finished
- Promote *free* participation in play and activities.
- Allow the child to act out – to play, being attentive. This attitude gives the players a sense of freedom, as well as that of security.
- Intervene in the child’s play only when it is absolutely necessary, (an emergency or dangerous situation) or we are asked to do so, (“*Play with me in...;*” “*Can you help me to...;?*”)
- To reflect afterwards on what took place during the game: conflicts, consensus, use of material, etc.
- Provide strategies for the resolution of conflicts among peers.

⁶ The competitive nature of sports does not exist in play as such; what each of these activities has to offer to the development of the child are different, and for that reason it is beneficial to provide for them both.

- Suggest recreational activities that allow for the incorporation of new components in free play. For example: *We build something with boxes, we sing and organize a group dramatization...*
- Select appropriate games and toys, search for new materials, occasionally change the ones we have, teach how to use recycled material for games, encourage group games without toys...; adapt with flexibility the play area.

Provide experiences that expand the child's universe, generating new scenarios for personal development so that later on they can incorporate themselves into the game, and thus into the child's understanding of the world. For example, *visiting different professionals permits the child to have a better idea of what can he/she contribute to society through work; attending cultural performances also helps to expand the concept of beauty, and sensitivity.*

- Be tolerant with the culture and customs expressed through play, (the educator as model.)
- Participate with the players in creating a joyful environment, satisfactory and interesting for all.

Definitely, OBSERVE (not simply look or watch.) FACILITATE: in creating a space and motivation and a pleasant environment. ENCOURAGE: inviting, initiating new games, sharing them, giving guidelines for autonomy in the game. ENRICH: through various suggestions in the teaching of new games, and... *paint, tell stories, construct, walk, go the theatre, visit a market, participate in sport activities...* Each space offers distinct possibilities for enrichment adapted to the activity itself and its objectives.

4. EDUCATIONAL SPACES FOR PLAY

Finally, we need to approach the areas in which it is possible to encourage play, from an educational point of view, optimizing its effect. I will now present some areas in which play can take place: in school, social programs and in the community.

4.1 THE ROLE OF PLAYTIME IN FORMAL EDUCATION

- **In the classroom.** Free play time should have a role in the classroom where infants and small children are involved (0 – 6); infants need to play in order to situate themselves within their surroundings, to develop their skills, and to resolve their conflicts. On the other hand, the creative uses of fantasy or diversion in order to train skills or strengthen concepts are a very important didactic instruments (motivators) in their future elementary and high school classes.
- **In the playground area.** As towns and cities have grown and become modernized, children may lose common playground areas, the place where they can come together “cross-generationally” ... this makes it difficult, among other consequences, to teach games with rules. Children do not know what to play in playgrounds, other than football (soccer) but their developmental need for group playing, comparing themselves with others, showing off to the smaller children, still stands. Consequently, we are helping create gangs, fostering aggressiveness and grave disrespect, all of which could otherwise be avoided (and worked with) by engaging in specific games proper to each age level and for mixed ages. Regulated games allows them: to “compete” in a normal setting; to interiorize progressively the norms (rules) and the need to respect them in order to better co-exist; to

strengthen the best in each other – even though it’s not my “personal” the best because it now forms part of “my team”. And something that is very important in having a good time, the playground supervisor needs be an agent for change, an educator.

4.2 INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATED WITH PLAY

- **The free-time club.** Free time should always include making time for free play. This is based on understanding how this is one more activity of great importance in infant development, especially in the following aspects: social, autonomy and values. We cannot organize ALL the child’s time, as children also need to be “really free” to go over what they have learned, their capacity for leadership, assertiveness, conflict resolution, arriving at a consensus ... these play activities should be fostered, observed and optimized by all educators (they cannot be relegated only to their rest time)
- **The playroom.** Without a doubt, it is a privileged area for play in which the organization of the surroundings and materials is essential to facilitating fantasy activities in all the participants.⁷ The educator who is specialized in the field of play has multiple recourses at hand in promoting child development in all aspects. The educator must be a help in resolving their personal conflicts (affective, social and cognitive) and, among them as peers; be a guide in the progressive exercise of cognitive skills, by means of selected play activities aiding in the learning of values. All this depends on the motivation of the children participating. The Playroom can go beyond being a space for free time and a place for social interchange among parents and children. Responsible educators and appropriate programs can convert the playroom into an educational environment where each child can grow, acquiring their own resources for life in society, in a comfortable setting.
- **The playroom – infant stage.** For children 4 years old and younger, it is an area where mothers (or other familiar adults) go with their child. There, the benefits of infant playtime are strengthened by the function of family formation (puericultural, -the science which deals with the healthy development of child- education and inspiration.)
- **Residence for guardians of minors.** (Orphanage) besides facilitating the integration and the social development of these children, play fulfills a therapeutic function in these centers. If they are well executed they are space sin which the child can express the emotional conflicts he/she experiences and which prepare him/her for a place in the world.

4.3 PLAY – A RESOURCE FOR COMMUNITY DYNAMISM

Play also contributes to the development of the community. In the first place, we are talking about a non-competitive space in which these activities ensure a positive environment. On the other hand, the entire community can be integrated in game playing since we adults in general like to re-live our ties to our early childhood. Game playing forms part of the collective memory, not only from the cultural aspect, but from the

⁷ For further information: LOPEZ MATALLANA, M., y VILLEGAS, J. (1995/ 5th ed. revised 2004)

common experience out of which it blossoms into cross-generational activities par excellence: we all play.

- **The street, park, common spaces . . .**Reclaiming (or not losing) the street as a social-space, neighbors being co-responsible for our infant education, promoting the participation of all adults in the cultural and social life of the neighborhood, is an essential goal in social education. The feeling of belonging to a community is a most necessary foundation for the development of positive attitudes such as integration, respect, solidarity with.
 - Celebration of games in the neighborhood: for the beginning or end of the school year, associated with traditional events, with a thematic character, surprise.
 - Inter-generational projects: celebrations and family contests, let us teach our grandchildren or children games from our childhood, “recreational programs” sharing with the family, looking into the use of toys for different age groups.. .
 - Promoting recreational-cultural activities: Weeks of promoting a game (one kind or many), 24 solid hours of games, a toy exchange marketplace, day for recreational records, large board games, playing games on holidays, (International Day for Peace, Day of the Woman, etc.)

5. PLAYTIME - IS IT AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?

Challenge 2.2 dares us to wager on *an integral education which prepares us for the present and for learning how to face the future in “simple ways”, explicitly uniting an integral education and the transformation of reality.* The enormous educational transformational potential of **play** serves as the background for the ideas, content and suggestions found in these pages. It addresses the world of the child in the “here and now” as well as how they will face the future as the adults they will become.

- At the same instant that we allow and facilitate play for the child, expressing himself/herself through recreational activities, his/her world is already changing; he/she feels secure and consequently:
 - he/she can work through his/her emotions and create his/her vision of the world in an environment of internal freedom
 - he/she can find him/herself among other children without having to compete, and, consequently, he can exercise his/her behavior and attitudes, the effect of trying out different roles....

Furthermore, if the adult intervenes by offering different kinds of materials for play, new challenges, strategies for different situations, experiences that broaden his universe, settings for the participation and tolerant reflection concerning daily happenings, the fact of playing in an educational environment implies the transformation of his actual reality, as well as that of the group that plays together.

- On the other hand, games are an educational tool of great potential, not only because the child who plays will be a healthy adult, but also because it underscores the social dimension,
 - Given that in playing it is possible to educate in values which can bring about social transformation in everyday life: in the very foundations of family and social life, of community involvement, etc.
 - Since playing can become a socially dynamic instrument in which laughter, personal freedom, participation and gratitude are the framework within which different members of a community come together: parents and children, neighbors of all ages... Is not the possibility of bringing about the transformation of society in everyday life a challenging proposal?

Madrid, July, 2005