

Some reflections on the state of art of research on children's play

This text will be an introduction to the other texts on the CD-Rom, containing all the presentations at the ICCP-conference in Brno (Czech Republic). It will help not to lose the way within the labyrinth of contributions and to keep an overview.

An international conference such as the ICCP-conference in Brno (Czech Republic) brings a lot of international experts together and thus a lot of information that challenges to make some general reflections on children's play. In the first place these reflections will focus on research on children's play. What is going on in the academic world as far as it concerns children's play? What are the themes they are focussing on, what are the general concerns of the scientists? This learns us a lot about how our society today looks at children's play.

But a conference contains more than the exchange of knowledge. It is also an event in which several people from different places and organisations meet each other to discuss their experiences and their concerns. It is an opportunity to explore new possibilities to co-operate, especially when organisations with similar objectives are looking for more effective actions. So a small part of these reflections will be dedicated to this theme.

The topics of scientific research

A theme running through many of the presentations was the attitudes teachers and play leaders have towards play and its potential beneficial or harmful effects. An underlying discussion is about their concepts of play. Do they conceive play as a very authentic characteristic of children that offers them the tools to self-development, or do they see play as a pedagogical tool they can use to educate children in a way that is very well adapted to children? Of course both approaches will meet each other in daily play practice; people don't have to choose either one or the other approach, rather it is about the balance between both of them. Arguments that are influencing these balance are: the respect for children's play, the importance of educating children, the belief in children's capacities for self-development, the ideas about the effects of play versus or within education etc.

In the conference a lot of attention went to preschool education and the place of 'play' in this setting: much attention was given to the relation between literacy and play in preschool education. Many of presentations focused on the need for unstructured play, others on the role of didactic material, support of the parents and of play leaders. There was also discussion on the relation of play to learning: is play's most important goal to learn, or just to play?

There were a lot of complaints about the lack of play in primary school. Recess time (or play time) is more and more seen as unnecessary and even annoying. In this discussion the right to play was stressed and nice illustrations were given of how offering good and open play opportunities to children can change the climate in the whole school. In these cases, a repressive culture has been replaced by a co-operative culture of which not only the children take profit, but in which the job of the teacher becomes more pleasant as well. In the end it also has a positive influence on children's concentration in the classroom.

A totally different item was a plea for play because of its impact on children's health: the problem of obesity was often mentioned. Since obesity is linked to the food culture and to the sedentary lifestyle in the western society, the interest in the motor aspects of play is growing. Similar to the discussion about the relation of play to learning, a debate was developed about play and health. But since health is a sensible topic now, there should be no hesitation to use this argument as well in the plea for play. If children have more appropriate opportunities to play, they will engage more in physical activities; it will contribute to the prevention of children's obesity.

Common actions can be developed on this theme since there is comparative research in several cities and countries at the same time.

Another theme, mostly related to the primary school, is 'violence'. Bullying has had attention since about 10 years already; now play fighting and real fights are on the agenda, and of course the influence of videogames a.o. on violence. There is a lot of understanding for children's play fighting as a way to explore their physical capacities as compared to others, but also as a manner to imitate what happens in the world (and on television and videogames etc.): imitating as an activity of sense giving.

Interesting too was the attention to children's play in very hard situations, such as children living in asylum centres and in war-affected areas. It takes a lot of time for children to pass from very active, fast-changing and even destructive play to a play climate in which they feel comfortable, happy, relaxed.

Calls for more research on children's play

In most scientific presentations, the research methodology was not explicitly focused upon. Methodological issues were absent in most discussions as well. However, much research was quantitative research but on quite small groups; for that reason it can be called explorative research or even qualitative research because of its relevance on the level of development of concepts and in the search for coherence between some factors. These projects are explorative because they are asking for feedback and by this, they stimulate the development of theories.

There were a lot of calls for more scientific research, and these calls were quite unanimous. So special attention was asked for construction play, more especially for its effects on the further development of the child; this category of play seems to be neglected both in practice and in science even though there are good reasons to stress its importance.

A relatively new aspect is the effect of play on health and of course on obesity, so the calls for research are following current interests. It can be a pitfall when the researcher is not attentive to the broader context of children's lifestyles.

Besides the research on the effects of play, there was also the call for qualitative research on children's perspectives on play. Of course it is very difficult to investigate children's viewpoints on such a complex behaviour, so very specific methods have to be developed.

But the results of this research will be very useful to evaluate several projects also from the viewpoint of the actors. Such viewpoints cannot be neglected taking into account the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Possibly they will help us to learn more about the essence of children's play.

The international co-operation on the promotion of children's play

The presence at the ICCP-conference of representatives from both IPA (International Play Association, promoting the child's right to play) and the International Toy Library Centre was a nice opportunity to discuss the co-operation to stimulate children's play opportunities. The three organisations decided to co-operate on a document asking for more attention for the UN-Convention on the Rights of the Child, more specifically for the right to play. First of all we can insist that the Committee on the Rights of the Child should pay more attention to play for example by choosing it as a theme for the yearly discussion day. Another way is to develop a format which can be used in all countries while making their five-yearly progress report for the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This format will be a tool that stimulates countries to report on their progress

in the right to play. It will at least help them to collect the necessary data to evaluate the situation of children at play and to report about it. On the other side, if countries are using similar data on children's play, it will be possible to make world wide comparisons on the situation of children's play.

In such a tool, the scientific and the political approach are meeting each other. Therefore the three organisations will co-operate on it during the next months.

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