

## **PLAY - EXPERIENCE - LEARNING, IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

### **Abstract**

Children's play has come to enjoy a vital role in early childhood education. This can be seen today in curriculums in Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway. However, how the school and the teachers are establishing this vital role for play to take place in educational programs, is not so clear-cut to figure out. Above all this has to do with play as a complex phenomenon. For that reason the concept of play is hard to delineate into a common conceptual platform, shared by preschool teachers and primary school teachers alike. Though being quite a different concept, play is often related to learning. Reaching a common understanding of play and learning as key concepts, represents a challenge in modern education. In this paper the case of Norway is presented, in perspective of international research.

In Norway's latest reforms play and learning are contended central issues in preschool as well as in comprehensive school. In the paper it is claimed that *experience* is a needed mediating component between the concept and phenomenon of play and the concept and phenomenon of learning. Moreover, taking play as a point of departure, opens up for a broad, holistic understanding of learning; learning seen as increased capacity, a positive value of its own for children. This requires two main perspectives of play to be considered: the value of play as such for all children, and learning through play.

Postmodern perspectives of childhood easily lead into a priority of affective and social aspects of learning and development, as fundamental to cognitive and value-oriented aspects. In current theories in the field of early childhood care and education, perspectives like experience, empathy, experimentation and participation are central, basic elements. Furthermore, these aspects are highlighted in objectives and curriculum content. Recent research studies in Scandinavia, Great Britain and Australia indicate that teachers are somewhat ambivalent to the employment of play in the classroom. The research results so far do have certain consequences for practice. Research indicates that certain aspects of play represent a challenge, even if play is seen as important in attaining momentous educational objectives. Many teachers and leaders in preschools and schools now seem to be accepting play as a vital element for future education. Though, an important perspective often seems to be missed out: *the perspective of student motivation*. So far, not too many research studies focusing play and learning in the transition to school, have related thoroughly to the motivation aspects.

### **Introduction**

As a consequence of the fact that children's play has come to enjoy a vital role in early childhood education, one of the great challenges now is how the teacher should relate to children's play. No doubt, learning is the overall aim at school. Taken learning in a broad sense of meaning, that's also the case for child care institutions like day care centers and preschools, even if developmental objectives are momentous as well.

But what should be the role of play in relation to the aim of learning? Does play disrupt the learning process, or is it an important contribution to it? At school one has to realize today the relation play - learning must be taken into account in the educational program.

Recommendations and methods for taking play as an integral part of the educational program can now be seen in curriculums in Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, but of course can be found in other countries as well (Broström 1999a; Samuelsson & Sheridan 1999; Lillemyr 1999; Dockett & Flear 1999). However, how the school and the teachers are establishing this vital role for play in the educational program, is far from clear-cut to figure out. Why is it so? Above all this has to do with play as a complex human phenomenon being difficult to define. Or is a definition of play possible at all? Several are advocating that to accomplish one fully agreed upon definition is not suitable or even impossible. For that reason some are suggesting a dialectical understanding of play, by others called a dimensional understanding of play. The complexity of play has also been discussed from a rethorical approach, outlining the ambiguity of play on a large scale base (Sutton-Smith 1997; Dockett & Flear 1999; Lillemyr 1999; Broström 2000).

First of all let me make it clear, that I am understanding early childhood education as encompassing all kinds of educational offers for children between the age of 0 to 1 year and up to around 9 or 10 years of age, including day care institutions as well as the early years of school. A broad perspective like this is defended by a growing amount of researchers and practitioners. For this reason the tradition of early childhood education is now commonly considered to have actuality outside its own region, for the primary school, for children at hospitals, and with children in multicultural contexts (Klugman 1990; Wood and Attfield 1996; Lillemyr, Fagerli & Søbstad, in press). Although, the extent to which early childhood theory is realized in recent school reforms differs from one country to the other. It is not until recently play in some Western countries is really becoming an integral part of the school's curriculum.

Furthermore, in Norway preschool teachers and primary school teachers are both working in primary schools, according to 'Reform 97' for the 10-year contemporary school (Curriculum Guidelines 1997). The new curriculum emphasizes heavily children's play as an integral part of the educational program, a fact that might be considered rather unique in an international perspective. Furthermore, the intention is to obtain an integration of the best from both the early childhood education tradition and the tradition of the primary school education. For this to happen, preschool teachers and primary school teachers alike, by law are entitled to a position as teacher in primary school, provided that the preschool teachers have a primary school-directed postgraduate course. This situation will of course have certain consequences for the development of the educational program during the first years at school in the future. Early childhood education theory then, is consciously conceived as contributing strongly to the school's curriculum, as a supplement to the influence of the primary education tradition itself. One important consequence assumed from this would be a development of a more holistic perspective in the school's education in the future.

### **Conceptualizations**

The concept of play is hard to delineate from a common conceptual platform, shared by preschool teachers and primary school teachers alike, or by researchers and theoreticians with different approaches to play theory. Though being quite a different concept, play is often related to learning. However, learning turns out to be a troublesome concept to define, too. Learning has often been defined according to a certain theory of learning, but since there are various theories, learning is defined accordingly. For many years learning has been seen from a behavioristic perspective, as changes in a person's behavior caused by experience or training. To conclude, reaching a common understanding of play and learning as key concepts, represents considerable challenges in modern education.

### ***A holistic understanding of play***

In Norway's latest reforms play and learning are emphasized as central issues in preschool as well as in comprehensive school. For years attempts at outlining a common understanding of **play** has been made. Levy (1978) discussed three dimensions as fundamental to our understanding of children's play: intrinsic motivation, suspension of reality, and internal locus of control. Pellegrini (1991) has come to define play according to three dimensions: play as disposition, play as context, and play as observable behavior. Typically, these kinds of definitions are multidimensional as it is generally considered that no one perspective is satisfactory (Dockett & Fler 1999: 17). For that reason it has become more common to delineate dimensions for our *understanding* of the phenomenon of play, as seen in the expression of "homo ludens" (Huizinga 1955; Berg 1992; Fromberg 1992; Pellegrini & Smith 1998). Some even go so far as to maintain that play typically withdraw from our attempts at a definition. Still, understanding play according to dimensions seems to be a meaningful undertaking (Lillemyr 1999; Lillemyr, Fagerli & Søbstad, in press). Others conceive of play as an important quality of life as such or see play as the highest form of human expression (Levy 1997; Kibsgaard 1999).

On this background I would like to present a holistic perspective on play, relating to different theories, and according to four main dimensions, drawing on Levy's three dimensions as a point of departure (Levy 1978; Lillemyr 1990; 1999; 2001):

- intrinsic motivation
- children's suspension of reality
- internal base of control
- play as social interaction or as communication at different levels

I am finding these four dimensions useful in our understanding of play. Still, play typically withholds from being defined.

Several scholars in the field call attention to the strength of play as such, as well as see play as a societal and cultural phenomenon. Based upon these facts, it is important for educational purposes to assert two perspectives of play to be recognized:

- the unique value of play for its own sake
- learning through play

### ***A new understanding of learning***

In an educational context, it is hard to understand play without referring to learning. In this paper **learning** is understood in a broad sense in correspondence with perspectives and discussions recently presented (Bjørngen 1997; Schoenfeld 1999). Here I would be relating to five main points for the understanding of learning (Lillemyr 1999; 2001):

1. Learning is internal processes caused by training/experiences, providing increased capacity to comprehend, experience, feel, reflect and act.
2. Learning includes acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as applications, as in experimentation and creativity.
3. Learning comprises individual processes, but influenced by social competence, feelings of relatedness, and sociocultural aspects.
4. Learning affects personality, and vice versa. Not least, learning affects the whole child.
5. Learning changes the child's competence, and hence its sense of competence.

Based on these main components it can be argued for a new and broader concept of learning in day care institutions and schools alike. Therefore, it will be necessary to get rid of the old-fashioned concept of learning, in particular regarding our understanding of school learning.

### ***The concept of experience***

As far as the concepts of play and learning are concerned, I will claim that **experience** is a necessary *mediating component*. The Experience will be mediating between the concept and phenomenon of play and the concept and phenomenon of learning. Moreover, taking play as a point of departure, opens up for a broad, holistic understanding of learning, with learning seen as increased capacity, a positive value of its own for the child.

One aspect of the concept experience seems to be of particular interest when we want to see it from its mediating role: experience as the subjective aspects of behavior. As an example, children are often seeking experiences in the meaning that they are looking for challenges, excitement and affective involvement that can provide them with a richness of feelings or phenomenological aspects of behavior. They yearn for these subjective aspects of behavior, which are a result of organic changes and sensations, as they are perceived and interpreted by the child. The phenomenological aspects of behavior are a result of the internal processing of impressions and organic changes in the body. They are involving all aspects of the personality. As the phenomenological aspects can imply a change in a child's behavior, they will be merging into the process of learning. Moreover, these aspects are tied to the moment, as feelings are perceived at the very moment (Lillemyr & Søbstad 1993: 31ff.).

In English, experience are covering partly the subjective (or phenomenological) aspects of the behavior, and partly the more objective aspects understood as the knowledge and the skills obtained in one situation and to be applied in another situation. In Norwegian, as in German, there are two different concepts to cover these two distinct sets of aspects. In German we have the concept "Erlebnis" to cover the subjective, affective aspects, and "Erfahrung" to cover the more objective, cognitive aspects.

The phenomenological aspects of behavior have to be understood in light of phenomenology, and therefore constitute unique and individualistic phenomena. These aspects can not be planned, there's no guarantee for them to happen, although it is possible to prepare for them or to lay a platform for them to take place.

Often, the phenomenological aspects of behavior (experience) are first of all characterized by "a flow", "a here and now - experience", also called a holistic feeling like when the individual are engaging totally in the situation of the moment (Csikszentmihalyi 1985). An aesthetic experience would be a good example, as the child is sensing and feeling an aesthetic expression, perceiving and mediating the structure and meaning in the expression. Other experiences are attached to nature, to literature or to social interactions.

### ***The challenge - providing a common understanding of the key concepts***

The different educational traditions understand key concepts like play, learning, and experience differently, in accordance with the fundamental values and philosophy they are admitting to. Still, there ought to be some kind of common conceptual platform for preschool teachers, primary school teachers, and day care- and school-leaders, in understanding play and learning as phenomena. Furthermore, it is essential for them to have a conscious mind directed to the importance of experience as phenomenological aspects of behavior; either if it is concerning play activities or learning processes.

In conclusion, both play and learning can be more or less colored by an individual (phenomenological) experience for the child. For that reason I see experience as "a bridge" between the concepts of play and learning (Lillemyr 1999: 21). Through observation it is easy to find examples of experience-colored play, for example when the children are absorbed by

the play activities; a holistic kind of experience as we can see in what is termed “deep play”. Unfortunately, it is often found that learning does not automatically attach to experience, although everyone knows that the very best learning situation is learning as a personal, involved and intrinsically motivated activity. It is in an intense learning situation like this experimentation, innovation and creativity are typical, and what is learned is really causing solid skills and knowledge for later occasions. The main point I would like to make here is, that varied activities of play and learning in day care institutions and schools, will stimulate a personal experiential kind of learning, if we highlight the mediating role of experience. We need both learning as teacher-directed activities as well as free learning tied to personal experience to take place, to obtain what has been called *personal investment in learning* (Maehr & Braskamp 1986; Maehr & Midgley 1996).

The variation between play and learning, in terms of the extent to which children are allowed to make decisions about the activity, either being play or learning is important, and quite necessary in both day care institutions and schools. The concept “educational play” is applied by some researchers, because intentions like literacy is often strongly emphasized. A conception like this might imply dangers, however. For example, it has been warned about the danger of making children’s play too much education-oriented and teacher-directed, on the expense of a child-oriented kind of play. “Frame play” has also been introduced to open for a third possibility, where students and the teacher plan and play together, making decisions in a combination (Broström 1996; 2000). No doubt, the application of play as an integral part of the curriculum in day care institutions and schools, will result in certain changes in the early childhood education (Broström 1999b). Accordingly, in early childhood education it is meaningful to apply the two conceptions “learning through play” and “playful learning”, leading over to *meaning making* where the child to some extent construct its own knowledge. Above all this concerns taking the perspective of the child in our development of early childhood programs (Ceglowsky 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999; Samuelsson & Sheridan 1999; Broström & Vejleskov 1999).

### **The teacher role**

Typically, play has been related to different areas of relevance for schooling, like language literacy (Vedeler 1997; Einarsdottir 2000), creativity (Vandenberg 1990), humor (Søbstad 1999) and art and aesthetics (Eisner 1990; Lindqvist 1995). A core issue in the discussion of the function and legitimacy of play in school, has been if free play is at all suitable or useful in a school setting (Wasserman 1990; Bennett, Wood & Rogers 1997; Lillemyr, in press). As a matter of fact what has been called the play/work or play/learning divide, reflects the dilemmas connected to the teacher role in play. The aim is first of all a level of independent learning, but is this really obtained within a free play setting in school? Some recommend a social-constructivist model based on “tutorial dialogue”, others suggest what is called “scaffolding”, others argue for the application of frame play (Meadows & Cashdan 1988; Broström 1998; Dockett & Fleer 1999). In any case, the purpose seems to be to bring together children’s and teachers’ intentions in a reciprocal relationship.

Anyhow, several studies have documented that children’s activity span during the play session increase when an adult is present as well as when children are offered alternative solutions and choices of activity. The studies furthermore indicate that teachers need support in their application of play in the classroom (Bennett, Wood & Rogers 1997; Lillemyr et al. 1998). Obviously, such support will function to secure their development of “theories of play”. (Cf. the use of the concept “practice theory”, applied by the two Norwegian researchers Lauvås and Handal; see Lauvås & Handal 1983.) To conclude, teachers’ attitudes and competence in play and learning as basic to the development of the teacher role, is important if we reach for an optimal balance between play and learning activities, organized to stimulate students’ personal involvement.

Recent research studies from different countries are documenting that teachers are somewhat ambivalent to the employment of play in the classroom. Still, the research results so far do have certain consequences for practice. Clearly, research indicates that certain aspects of play represent a challenge, even if play is seen as important in attaining momentous educational objectives. So, one of the most challenging dilemmas connected with play in day care institutions and primary schools is how the teacher role should be performed and developed in relation to children's play (Smilansky & Shefatya 1990; Hellendoorn, van der Kooij & Sutton-Smith 1994; Bennett, Wood & Rogers 1997; Dockett & Fleer 1999; Lillemyr, in press). It has been found that children's play and the teacher interventions can have positive effects upon the students' motivation and well-being at school. It has turned out that play can both be an arena for elaboration and application of skills and knowledge, and moreover contribute to innovative thinking based on acquired knowledge (Smilansky & Shefatya 1990; Hartmann & Rollett 1994; Sutton-Smith 1994).

This seems to fit well into the tendency today to focus on social competence and emphasize the close relation between the social and scholastic lives of students, especially in the early school years. In order to attain a total understanding of children's school adjustment at different grade levels, a social perspective on motivation seems fundamental (Juvonen & Wentzel 1996; Backe-Hansen & Ogden 1998; Ladd, Birch & Buhs 1999; Ladd, Buhs & Seid 2000). In New Zealand it was clearly documented in a study among 5-year-old school starters (Patrick & Townsend 1995) that their sense of social competence clearly affected their perception of academic competence. But play and social competence are often ignored in teaching, at the expense of teacher-directed activities (Wood & Attfield 1996). Since play often have clear social elements, the inclusion of play in the curriculum seems natural to ensure a harmonic school start and a sociocultural perspective on schooling (Broström 1999a; Lillemyr 1999; 2001).

It was found in a study in Great Britain that teachers emphasized social skills and the importance of choice among students, but in reality most of the activities were directed by the teachers themselves. The practice of rotating play and formal learning activities, turned out in practice to be somewhat hindered by the teachers being involved in play for a sustained period (Bennett, Wood & Rogers 1997). The researchers concluded (Op.cit.: 75):

"In their theories most teachers adhered strongly to the view that play and learning are interrelated through a variety of processes. These included promoting children's interests, choice and ownership, developing autonomy and control and fostering intrinsic motivation, engagement and concentration. .... In general, play was far more structured in practice than teachers' theoretical accounts indicated."

More than half the teachers said play activities were largely determined by themselves with little choice allowed for the children. In the teacher's reasons given for these contradictions of theory and practice, a key issue was their assumptions about the teacher role in relation to a broad knowledge base, comprising ideology, values, child development, pedagogy, curriculum content, and classroom processes. Still, the teachers' theories indicated a strong commitment to play as an integral part of the curriculum, as play was seen as contributing to "quality learning" providing the ideal conditions in which to learn were met. One of the registered constraints was the pressures of the National Curriculum concerning the assessment of children's learning through play.

A recent study among teachers in the first and the second year of school in Australia revealed a strong interest for the teacher role in play, and according to the recommendations in the curriculum documents (Jones, Dockett, Westcott & Perry 2000). Attitudes and approaches towards play among six Kindergarten and first grade teachers were examined. The teachers applied play in the classroom, but still had diverse understandings of the potential role of play in school. The results disclosed that the teachers were committed to the value of play for children, preferred teamwork concerning their use of play, and were able to

support and encourage each other when colleagues and parents questioned the value of play in school. Teachers interviewed revealed that they:

- regarded their prime role in play as a respondent to, rather than an initiator of play
- emphasized that play was based upon children's choice, to help them develop independence
- were focused on their role in managing play
- emphasized the importance of team work among the school staff in promoting a play approach in the school
- applied play as a means of 'revisiting' concepts or topics previously introduced in class, rather than for exploring new and different areas
- regarded play as primarily providing opportunities for children to develop language, and social and motor skills

In connection with the focus on children's choice in play, it was found that they needed a range of adult interventions in order to explore the available choices. In other words, adult involvement in play and the development of children's independence need not to be mutually exclusive. Issues like if play is providing a chance for refining understandings or to generate new understandings, were raised. These researchers find both forms of learning existent in play. Despite considering their play program as successful, these teachers saw themselves as observers rather than participants in play (Dockett 2000; Jones, Dockett, Westcott & Perry 2000). In terms of the teacher role in play, the concept of 'scaffolding' has been used, as an effective way of helping children enhance and extend their knowledge, understanding and skills (Dockett & Fleer 1999). Scaffolding is utilized not only as a means to enhance learning, but to mediate to the child something about their competencies and interests, that is, their worth as a human being. Thus, effective scaffolding is ensuring children's activity as well as the teacher's extent of involvement. A delicate balance was found between supporting children's play and overtaking it, it was concluded (Dockett & Fleer 1999: 188 ff.).

In a Norwegian study teachers perspectives on play was investigated (Zachrisen 2000). It was found that teachers see play as a source of social learning, an activity suitable to strengthen students' self-esteem, and as a source of motivation. However, they did not see play tied to professional learning within subjects. She maintain that this may be caused by the fact that teachers hold a traditional view on the concepts of play and learning. In addition the teachers seemed to lack experiences from applications with play in subjects. She also found that teachers hesitate to direct the play activity and to interfere with children's roleplay, unless it is to help a child that is having problems. Though, she found teachers often gave students a lot of freedom to develop the play content or the play context.

A study in Oslo, Norway (Germeten 1999) analyzed answers from 1. grade and 8. grade teachers concerning the new reform (Reform 97) and more specifically on play and new methods. Surprisingly, great overlapping were found in preschool teachers and primary school teachers at 1. grade regarding opinions about play. They also agreed very much in emphasizing the two components learning through play and the value of play as such for the child. Still, both categories of teachers considered the differences between the two educational traditions to be substantial. However, as preschool teachers did not think it was much difference between play in day care institutions and play in school, primary school teachers to a greater extent meant there was a difference. Teachers in 1. grade often tied play to creativity and exploration, contrary to 8. grade teachers who rather tied creativity and exploration to learning in the subjects. Still, some teachers at 8. grade were asking for more ideas of how to use play at the lower secondary stage in school (the youth level).

The selected research results presented here more or less indicate what other studies also have documented, for example that teachers are more supportive than interactive to children's play. The teachers, either being preschool teachers or primary school teachers, seem to consider play in school both as an inspiration and a challenge. Although, there

seems to be a general lack of play competence among many teachers (Lillemyr et al. 1998; Tangen 1998; Aspaas 1999; Hanssen 1999). There have also in this country, in accordance with studies from other countries, been suggested that teachers first of all see play in school as related to objectives of stimulating social learning and self esteem. Some finds that the teacher role in play often to be conceived as passive, as opposed to the teacher role during learning, which has been seen far more active and stronger connected to teaching (Vejleskov 2000).

Based on recent research and development it is possible to outline something about the future teacher role. Certain consequences in this concern, I have sketched out elsewhere (Lillemyr, in press) for which reason I will not present them here. Obviously, the recent research results will have certain indications for the changes of the teacher role, as well as for the teaching in general.

### **The motivational element of play - an appreciated aspect?**

Many teachers and leaders in day care institutions and schools now seem to be accepting play as a vital element in the future education. Though, an important perspective often seems to be missed out: *the perspective of student motivation*. So far, not too many research studies focusing play and learning in the transition to school, have related thoroughly to the motivation aspects. In my opinion this is a necessary relation to pursue consciously in research. Characteristically, in play children are intrinsically motivated, resulting in a strong involvement on the personal level. The challenge seem to be through an emphasis on social and phenomenological aspects, to promote students personal involved learning. The question of motivation is absolutely necessary to focus in this concern.

In a study sense of competence, intrinsic motivation and interests in play and learning were investigated among students aged 5 to 9 years, in 6 preschools and 6 primary schools in urban and rural districts in Mid-Norway (Lillemyr et al. 1998; Lillemyr 2001). Interests in play and learning were examined according to four categories, relating the extent to which students could decide the what and how of play and learning activities at school:

- interest in teacher - directed play
- interest in free play
- interest in teacher - directed learning
- interest in free learning

"Free" in this sense meant relatively free as to the child's possibility of choice about what kind of activity and what methods to use in the chosen activity.

Comparing the interest profiles of 5-, 6-, 7- and 8-year olds resulted in the following picture:

- students' interest in play, particularly free play, were found to represent an important educational potential,
- free play was found to be a treasured activity from the last year before school up to 4. grade in school,
- with the youngest ones (5 and 6 year olds) free learning were of substantial interest, but this dropped dramatically with 7 and 8 year olds,
- students' interest in teacher - directed learning showed a steady increase with age,
- it was found a strong tendency for the teachers to overestimate students' interests in play and learning, with students 6 and 7 years of age (Lillemyr et al. 1998: 443 ff.).

The drop in interest for free learning must be considered somewhat sensational. From 60 % of the students very much interested in free learning at 5 years, to 5 % of the students very much interested at 8 years. Results for 9 year olds are unsure because of a low amount of units (N=13), but it is a fact that no one of the 9 year olds were very much interested in free learning. These results were interpreted as follows: Students do not expect much free

learning to take place at school, for which reason they do not have high interest in free learning (Lillemyr 2001). As free learning first of all is characterized by experimentation, invention and creativity, objectives emphasized strongly by the curriculum guidelines, this must be said to represent a serious shortcoming of the latest school reform in Norway (Curriculum Guidelines 1997).

In this study it was also found a marked decrease in children's social sense of competence around the time of school start (with 6 or 7 year olds), and it seemed to increase again at age 7 or 8. The decrease in sense of social competence around the time of school start, was found to correspond with a small, but significant decline in intrinsic motivation between 5 and 7 years. In general the three criteria on intrinsic motivation showed a declining curve with increasing age from 5 to 7, but the increase from 7 to 9 years was insignificant. A steady increase in students' interest in teacher-directed learning did not correspond with the picture of students' decrease in intrinsic motivation. In general this can be taken as a picture of the intrinsic motivation being rather in this age span. In conclusion, it can be assumed that students raise in interest for teacher-directed learning is primarily caused by extrinsic motivational effects. Anyhow, the result of an opposite picture for interest in free learning and interest in teacher-directed learning, must be seen as alarming for the intentions of 'Reform 97' in Norway.

In conclusion the results indicate an impairment in sense of social competence and a significant decline in intrinsic motivation at the age of school entrance. Theoretically, the drop in sense of social competence was assumed to be the reason for the decline in intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan 1991; 1994; Maehr & Midgley 1996). Interest profiles indicated that play represents a great potential for teachers and schools to obtain intrinsic motivation and personal investment in learning among students, a potential not exploited in the schools examined. It was concluded that there is a need for the schools to provide rich opportunities of play and free learning for students a lot more than today. If not the school can in fact be inhibiting creativity and personal involvement in learning among students.

### **Education and care - what are the central issues?**

As a conclusion, I would like to attend to the question: what are the central issues in education and care today? Postmodern perspectives of childhood are easily leading into a priority of affective and social aspects of learning and development, as fundamental supplements to a cognitive and value-oriented perspective. As a matter of fact, such aspects laced into the learning context, actually are strengthening the learning processes, implying positive consequences for experiences, knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the affective and social aspects and the elaboration, as in a play setting, are implying participation with engagement and generating creativity.

Accordingly, perspectives like *experience*, *empathy*, *experimentation* and *participation* are central and fundamental components in current theories in the field of early childhood care and education. These components are also highlighted in objectives and curriculum content in day care institutions and schools alike, particularly in reforms from the 90's, where reforms to a great extent aimed at some kind of comprehensiveness and coherence. The early childhood education tradition will in my opinion, fit well into this picture of school development (Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions 1996; Curriculum Guidelines 1997; Block 1999). To be able to ensure these components in the curriculum, the inclusion of play in the educational program will be of high importance. Including play provide a potential for experimentation, creativity and the unfolding of individual capabilities at a low risk, and will enhance students' intrinsic motivation and personal investment in learning in the long run.

Some research studies have been directing the sociocultural influences on school motivation, but surprisingly found diverse cultural groups to be more similar than different (McInerney

1998). However, few research studies examined play in relation to learning, which should be important when looking at student motivation in a sociocultural perspective (Cooney 1995; Eide & Winger 1996; Broström 1998; Lillemyr 2001). Based on several research studies, it is clear that in the first years of school children will have to build a platform of competencies to be prepared to meet challenges in and outside school. Experiences in play and learning must be seen as closely related to children's desires for independent mastery, participation in decisions, and making choices among alternatives, in order to feel self-determined and to ensure personal investment in learning. According to the new motivational approach to education in Norway, opening up for play in the curriculum is strongly emphasized. But the school has seldom been seriously concerned about children's play, when self-regarded, personal or task-oriented learning is at stake. For this to happen we will need to direct more research attention to student interests in play and learning activities and student-appreciative teacher attitudes. In the Nordic countries this has now become a compelling and challenging task, based on the integration of the best from early childhood education theory and the educational tradition of the school. The two traditions of education will hopefully merge into a better, more adaptable and flexible educational program for the youngsters trying to adjust to the school system, or maybe it should be the other way around?

The contribution of play in the curriculum does make a difference in this concern, in my opinion. Among a set of causes why play is important, I think it will to a substantial degree help to pave the way for a new and better understanding of school learning. Play is probably the most task-oriented and intrinsically motivated activity a child can attend to, and the self-worth perspective or self-determined aspect is of course normally included in children's play. Play is first of all a phenomenon originating from an internal interest. This is the reason why play contains great educational potential. The child is *in* the play, a phenomenological state or a here-and-now situation, much like Csikszentmihalyi's (1985) understanding of flow, a state that generates intrinsic motivation. The phenomenological aspects of experience, as often is normally seen in children's play, is essential as a mediating factor to personal engaged learning - the kind of learning that is based upon intrinsic motivation.

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