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1 The Need for Play for the Sake of Play

Put more simply, play as we know it is primarily a fortification
against the disabilities of life
Brian Sutton-Smith

1.1 Defining Play[1]

"I believed that, when most of [the] scholars talked about play, they fundamentally presupposed it to be either a form of progress, an exercise in power, a reliance on fate, a claim for identity, a form of frivolity, an issue of the imagination, or a manifestation of personal experience. My argument held that play was ambiguous, and the evidence for that ambiguity lay in these quite different scholarly ways of viewing play. Further, over the years it became clear to me that much of play was by itself—in its very nature, we might say—intentionally ambiguous (as, for example, is teasing) regardless of [...] general cultural frames" (Sutton-Smith, 2008:112).

So, what is play, then? It is seriousness and frivolity: reality and make-believe: rules and freedom. Within these antinomies lies the human experience of play, which must cope with a frustrating dichotomy that is always resolved through action. This duality is so deeply rooted in the phenomenon of play that Sutton-Smith based his last 'theory of play' on it—called 'coevolutionary multiplex of functions'—where play is described along five adaptive layers of 'dualudics'.

Rivers of ink have been spilled in an attempt to find a universally accepted definition of play, especially in different cultural environments. A now old but fascinating definition is provided by Fink: "Play resembles an oasis of happiness that we happen upon in the desert of our Tantalus-like seeking and pursuit of happiness. We are abducted by play. By playing we are released a bit from the mechanism of life—as if we were transported to another celestial body, where life appears easier, more ethereal, happier" (Fink, 1986).[2]

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1 For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to stress here again that, within the LUDI framework, for children with disabilities, play has the same meaning and the same value that it has for all the children. This fact has one main consequence: all discourse surrounding play and children with disabilities must derive from and be strictly connected to the discourse concerning play in general. For this reason, the reflection on play here is developed from the overall immeasurable literature on play.
2 This paragraph has been inspired by Besio (2008).

Since ancient Greece, play has been recognised as a peculiar activity of the human being, at any age.[3] According to Aristotle, it should be distinguished from work, because it lacks necessity, and like virtue and happiness, it is rather characterised by freedom and self-sufficiency. Centuries later, Kant associated it to an aesthetic condition, because it is able to make imagination and intellect act together.

But since it began to be studied and analysed in an effort to recognise and understand it, play escaped any definition that tried to fix it, define it, encode it.

A fundamental attempt to find a comprehensive definition of play is offered by Huizinga in his famous book *Homo Ludens*, where it is described as the driving force of all human activities, a sort of primordial big bang from which civilisation itself comes from: "culture arises in the form of play, [...] it is played from the very beginning" (1967:46). While fulfilling the physiological and biological functions, according to the author, play can be defined as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (1967:13).

In literature, from the educational, psychological and legal fields,[4] different and overlapping definitions have been proposed that focus attention on certain aspects.

Each of them gives a sense of fulfilment and seems both to compensate for a lack of interpretation and to underline an absence. After all, as stated by Bondioli (2002), each of these models seems only to reduce a huge theme to one of its small and basically limited aspects.

In short, play is indefinably play, to the point that Miller (1973) proposes to abandon the challenge of finding a single definition. In front of the baboon cage at the

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3 Play, according to Gily, "is not a right for only a few men, if anything younger people, but it is a necessity for all. It interprets taking action according to spontaneity, originality, and the free exercise of one's faculties. Depressed by prolonged labor, the play instinct remains on the edges of ordinary human life, but emerges as soon as ease and hope liberate a space for its insurmountable need, such an obvious and recognizable need that man did not lose time to explain or to deify it. Its meaning is so clear that it does not require arguments, so urgent to overcome poverty and sadness: it has only end in itself, it justifies by itself" (2006:16).

4 The International Play Association Declaration on the child's rights to play maintains that "play is an essential part of childhood. All children have a right to experience play which, in the words of the Declaration, is free, open, boundless, sometimes chaotic, sometimes transformative. Play is a right which all adults have a responsibility to uphold. [...] The IPA Declaration highlights the growing evidence of the effects of lack of time and space for play and the serious and life-long effects on children's bodies and minds. IPA wishes to alert the wider community to this evidence and call for action to address this deprivation before the effects cause lifelong damage to more children". Theresa Casey, President, IPA, http://www.ipaworld.org.

zoo, people know—and there is general agreement on it—if the animals are playing, but they cannot explain why, and on what criteria they base their assertion. Similarly, Bundy (1993; 2000), who introduced an interesting *test of playfulness*,[5] concludes: "everyone knows whether a child or some children are playing. That is play: what is recognized as such by common observers".

To develop its project, the COST Action LUDI—Play for Children with Disabilities chose to adopt the definition proposed by Garvey: "Play is a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities normally associated with recreational pleasure and enjoyment" (1990:4).

Even if the identification of a definition establishes an important point of agreement and sharing for researchers in the network, this is not enough, for the same reasons discussed earlier, to exhaust the discussion on the theme of play.

In what follows, some in-depth proposals are presented on certain aspects of play that have been considered important to study this phenomenon and its development in children with various types of impairments: in particular, the characteristics of play, its fundamentals, and the main functions it accomplishes.

It is believed that these elements can be useful for analysing, on the one hand, the difficulties that children with disabilities may encounter in their play activities and, on the other, the specific consequences that any deprivation of fun activities may cause to their development as a whole.

1.2 Play Characteristics

There are numerous proposals of 'essential traits' or 'characteristics' of play in literature in this field. According to Bateson (1956), they can be summarised in: *unfinalisation*, *creativity*, *not literalness*, *flexibility*, *pleasure*. Levy's proposal (1978) includes the following three traits: *intrinsic motivation* (motivation for the activity for the sake of the activity itself), *suspension of reality* (putting reality aside), and *internal locus of control* (the child has self-control); and Lillemyr (2009) adds *interactions in play*.

Within LUDI, play characteristics are the distinctive qualities of play, common to all its types, which contribute to giving the phenomenon its special peculiarity; only some proposals—among those highlighted by the various authors who have studied play—are presented as follows: they have been chosen as important elements of attention, harbingers of reflections and developments when it comes to play and children with disabilities. These qualities, shortly described in what follows, are: the feeling of *freedom*, its association with *concentration* and *intensity* (rather than with laziness), as well as with *pleasure* and/or with *fun*; in addition, the fact that

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5 See also Bundy et al. (2001); Meakins et al. (2005).

play is always conducted in *serious* ways, driven by *curiosity* and *surprise*, *intrinsic motivation,* and finally, by *challenge*.

The first feature that infant play brings to everyone's mind is the *freedom* it allows to experiment and express.[6] It is also the first of the traits marked by Caillois, who here is influenced by Huizinga. He stresses that as controlled play is no longer play, it loses its nature of attractive and joyful fun. Interestingly for the purposes of LUDI, Caillois gives to the construct of freedom, more properly, the meaning of spontaneity, immediacy, carefreeness, means of desire and action: "a basic freedom is central to play in order to stimulate distraction and fantasy. This liberty is its indispensable motive power and is basic to the most complex and carefully organized forms of play. Such a primary power of improvisation and joy, which I call *paidia*, is allied to the taste for gratuitous difficulty that I propose to call *ludus*" (Caillois, 2001:27). But to Caillois, play is free also because it can only belong to free men: "it is a luxury activity and it belongs to free men. Hungry people don't play" (ibid:14).

Freedom in play has also overlooked implications, perhaps slightly embarrassing, in field studies; in fact, it also means license and licentiousness: in play gestures and words, and in jokes and diatribes. Sutton-Smith, in this regard, underlines the extreme aspect that these kinds of play may show: "At the very least, they suggest that for the children who take part in the jokery, there need be no limit to the shocks they can include in this kind of unorthodox play—so long as they make them funny" (Sutton-Smith, 2008: 91).

The characteristic of freedom often made it possible to counterpoise play to work, both in the case of the activities of children and adults, and in the case of leisure time and organised time, for example, through pedagogical activities. However, freedom is never associated with laziness or boredom, but rather with *concentration*, *intensity*, and *density*; and these are additional notable features of our object of study. Poetic expressions have been used to describe the condition in which a child plays: if Fink (1960) talks about dense reality, where life is highly concentrated and children appear to be totally absorbed by it, Huizinga talks about tension, that is the desire to achieve, to be successful, and to interrupt that same tension. But these are conditions that are both powerful and knowledgeable: "Play demonstrates that two different attitudes co-exist: to be fully involved in what one is doing and to be aware of the fact that we are within a relative, delimited and conditioned dimension" (Besio, 2008: 1).

According to Huizinga, "this intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play" (Huizinga, 1938:3). Nature might have given to her children the power of "discharging superabundant

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6 Vygotskij (1967) contrasts this interpretation by putting the bond, the limit, at the basis of the pleasure inherent to play.

energy, of relaxing after exertion"; but "no, she gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun" (ibidem).

Here is another important characteristic of play: it is, in fact, always associated with *fun* and/or *pleasure*. According to Freud (1920), play responds, is led by the "principle of pleasure", which first appears in the children's ludic activities: in his famous example of the nephew who enjoys playing toss and catch with a spool whenever the mother leaves the room, he sees the proof that the child feels joy in anticipating or representing the possible, desired, return of his mother. The active role exercised by the child acting on the spool allows the desire to materialise, and the child to dominate an unpleasant emotion—which is no longer passively suffered—and replacing it with a pleasant one. [7]

The pleasure produced by play does not seem to run out spontaneously in the excitement of the moment, an end in itself; on the contrary, it seems to leave traces, an imprint on the individual's feelings in relation to life itself: "[play's positive pleasure] makes it possible to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful or even dangerous ordinary reality might seem" (Sutton-Smith, 2008:95).

Although sometimes play, in its beautiful swing between opposites, positively makes use of the scheme, the repetition, the use of known and familiar, its underlying backbone lies in what is new, in discontinuity.[8] In fact, it pursues and uses flexibility: not only does it tend towards reproduction, imitation, but it constantly seeks changes, "in form or in content. Play is a phenomenon to the extent of what is possible" (Bondioli, 2002:55).[9]

Fun comes often from the unexpected, from *surprise* (Eberle, 2014): here are some of the attributes of play listed by Sutton-Smith: chanciness, fluidity, ambiguity, particularity, diversity of perspective (Henricks, 2015:117). Teasing, a specific type of play studied by this author, seems to be specifically related to the feeling of surprise or even shock; it takes different forms according to the cultures in which it can be found, and it seems relevant in the play relationship between the child and the adult, becoming a means of social learning.

Even if it happens often, fun does not necessarily, however, become laughter, joy, relief, or cheerfulness, or even sometimes excitement: "Of course, it must be stressed that the pleasure of play is not always manifested in delight or glee or laughter. Play, as Huizinga (1967) points out at great length, can be a very *serious* business but still

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7 This wish, according to Freud, is a wish to be adults and to act like them (Metra, 2006).

8 With reference to a sociological perspective, Sutton-Smith adds: "The challenge for scholars is to explain the social, personal and cultural implications of this quest for disorder, excitement, and dis-connection. [...] One can also look at all kinds of games [...], as well as at all of the play in the arts [...] and see that in all of them the world is a more exciting place in which to live for a player or spectator, at least for a time" (Sutton-Smith, 2015: 249).

9 All quotations of Italian authors have been translated by the author of this chapter.

within play the act of doing is clearly rewarding in the sense that it incites its own repetition" (Miller, 1973:91).

The play in which the child is involved is always seriously *challenging*,[10] driven by *intrinsic motivation* not only or not so much to achieve a result, but rather to keep alive the play process itself and to continue to belong to it, along with fellow players, if any. According to Miller, both the practice play and rule-based play or team game provide the same pleasure of 'being in' the play, rather than to achieve a result. Winning a game or achieving a result is "important insofar as they are symbols for the dynamics and the challenge that were involved in their attainment" (ibid:93).

Play ends and finds meaning in itself, therefore, in the pleasure of doing and the process of playing;[11] "The interest of the subject is addressed to the process rather than to the product; the usual means-ends relationship is reversed. In other words, the game is intrinsically motivated, does not tend to satisfy primary physical needs, and does not depend on external rules or social obligations. The presence of rules does not contradict the principle of freedom, as submission to the ludic conventions takes place thanks to autonomous choice" (Bondioli, 2002:55).

Play is a challenging process and from the player—child or adult—demands commitment and seriousness (a careless player is reprimanded by his or her companions and is asked to 'play for real'). But, notes Bondioli, the dividing line between play, especially that of fiction, and reality must always be clearly maintained: "The seriousness with which the child or the adult takes their games and their pastimes, the fact that play often requires compliance with detailed rules and procedures, does not eliminate the 'not serious' quality of these activities in relation to ordinary life. The confusion between the two plans is not allowed: the children are reprimanded or reassured if they take their play too seriously; they are reminded that *it is just a game*"(ibid:40). In fiction or in playful concentration, several 'make-believe' acts are accomplished 'seriously', but the realism of such acts must never let the two contexts overlap.

1.3 Fundamentals of Play

A ludic activity has many facets and has been described under many aspects. In this section, an attempt is made to identify and describe some essential parameters of

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10 It seems important to point out that Milner (1952), quoted by Winnicott (1971), proposed a connection between children's play and adults' concentration.

11 Some authors speak of 'autotelic activities'. In his well-known *theory of flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (1990; 1997) increasingly uses the term 'autotelic activity' instead of 'playful activities' or play. And, Suits proposes one of the shortest existing definitions of play as follows: "a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes" (Suits, 1977:124).

the phenomenon, as it manifests in childhood that should be considered crucial for studying play by children with disabilities.

Six fundamental have been identified in the related fields and will be discussed in their various facets, in what follows, with respect to the existing literature, they are: the concept of *frame* and of *being involved*, the need of *doing*, the role of *imagination* and *fantasy*, the importance of the *rules*, the *social aspects* of play, its *capacity to evolve* in childhood.

The first fundamental of play to be considered is the special condition of life that is experienced and acted during this activity: this experience can be defined as *being in the game*, or *in-lusio* (Huizinga, 1967). Play, as inlusio—Latin origin of the word—is "a transformation of reality into a hypothetical connection, without claims to objectivity: it moves away from reality, but it does not transcend it" (Gily, 2006).

Bateson (1956) identified and highlighted this feature of play as a *frame* better and before other authors. "Play is a context, or what Bateson calls a 'frame'. It is a mode of organization of behaviour—one way of fitting pieces of activity together" (Miller, 1973:92).

The essence of play is in its being a meta-communication; a player must be able to state: "This is play". This message creates a frame, a psychological framework, serving as a filter for the interpretation of what there is inside. By playing, one gets into a context and into a dimension different from reality, governed by specific rules, shared by and known to players; play implies a change of perspective, or rather, of paradigm.[12]

By playing, one makes a logical leap, from learning a content (a 'type one' learning) to 'deutero learning', which concerns contexts, relationships, and their modes of functioning. It is in this sense that Bateson can highlight the *paradoxical feature* of play: it requires an agreement among players on what 'is true' and what 'is make believe'; the parties must agree on the framework within which they find themselves, by defining the ludic status of their activity, and maintaining it as it is during its development (Bondioli, 2002).

The players agree willingly and quickly, and show a common desire to inhabit that frame, to indeed 'be in play'; they defend their ludic activity against intruders, who would like to introduce a coherence criterion, unrelated to the proposed rules, because they don't want play to distort into something different. If a child violates the rules and does not seem really involved in play, he or she is considered a troublemaker,[13] and is, in fact, ruled out, or play disappears. But play is not totally an illusion, because it is not confused with the real data, thus generating misunderstandings; to

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12 Bateson himself refers to the notion of paradigm in Kuhn.

13 Bondioli (2002) refers to a story—entitled *Childhood*—by Tolstoj, in which he vividly describes his brother's listless participation in collective play.

stop it, another meta-communication should happen—"I won't play any more"—that dissolves the frame, the previously established scenario.

A second fundamental aspect that is necessary to highlight concerns the theme of *doing*, and its relationships between means and ends, within the play activity. It was Winnicott who declared the game inseparable from doing. Postulating an indeterminate place between an 'inside' of the child—without further defining it— and an 'outside' where what for him or her is a 'not-me', the author points out that "to control what is outside, one has to *do things*, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing" (1971:41).[14] Winnicott refers here to a third potential space between the mother and the child, which is not the inside or the outside, in which the objects and the transitional phenomena may be acted out and do their job of separation. This area is indeed experiential.[15]

What is interesting to point out here is the emphasis Winnicott places on doing, on action, in a space and a time that are specifically created; this 'doing' has very specific characteristics, which have been well studied by Miller (1973) and concern the relationship between means and ends.

Focussing first on practice play,[16] the author highlights three important aspects, related to his notion of 'galumphing'[17]: a) "a lack of streamlining or task oriented efficiency" (ibid:91), it seems that children deliberately complicate their play activities, they make things difficult for themselves;[18] b) play "is pre-exercise of undeveloped skills that will be needed later. The skills used in practice play are played with after they are acquired. They may not have been completely mastered, but some amount of competence must already have been attained. Practice play can certainly be exercise, but it is more often post-exercise than pre-exercise" (ibid:91); and c) when activities appear in the learning or in the task mode, they are "under the control of goals: means are marshalled at the service of ends. In play, the means are given much freer sway. The process becomes play when it becomes interesting in itself. It is repeated and repeated, and then some part or new consequence of the process becomes the object of interest and is elaborated in its turn. The distinction between process and end state is an important one" (ibid:91).

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14 This assertion of Winnicott, in particular, has triggered numerous applicative studies of play, in psychotherapy, but also in education, based precisely on the ludic value of 'doing'.

15 It is the "third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external both contribute" (Winnicott, 1971:3).

16 With reference to the first developmental stage of play proposed by Piaget (1972).

17 The author admits to use the "appropriately ridiculous term 'galumphing' [...] as an onomatopoetic description of a baboon's flailing in play fights. [...] I will use 'galumphing' as a shorthand term for 'patterned, voluntary elaboration or complication of process, where the pattern is not under the dominant control of goals'" (Miller, 1973:92).

18 This is underlined also by Groos (1901), who speaks about "a process in which the player sets obstacles in his path to prolong and increase the enjoyment of his play" (cited in Miller, 1973:91).

Fun solicited by practice play—one of the main characteristics of play mentioned in the previous paragraph—is a sort of gratification pleasure: "The fun of practice play is most concisely described by Buhler (1930) as Funktionslust—functional pleasure. It is a pleasure of doing, of the act of producing an effect, not of attaining the effect or result itself" (ibid:91).

Afterwards, in his study, the author maintains that the other two Piagetian types of play, that is, rule-based play and symbolic play, cause the same functional pleasure in relation to the process rather than the goals. In fact: "the goal of a game like baseball or chess is by itself meaningless—it attains meaning and motivational value as it is magnified by the lengthening and elaboration of the path that leads to it". Since, according to him, "the difference between symbolic and rule-bound games is one of form and of the source of the patterns along which the player elaborates his action", the assumption also applies to symbolic play. The thesis maintained by the author on the reversal of the means/ends relationship in the ludic activity is not only particularly attractive for the underlining feature of autotelic play, but also because from here, Miller draws arguments for the role play can assume as an adaptive function.

But another crucial aspect of the action in play is that children usually impose constraints, obstacles, limitations to their play activities, in order to make them more interesting, more fun. Acting is more desirable if it is imposed by oneself: "But clearly there is somehow something very desirable about acting, at least for a time, in a framework designed by ourselves rather than by the existential forces that run most of our life" (ibid:97).

Ellis views play as a word useful to "categorize behaviours that elevate arousal" (Ellis, 1973:107); but individuals try to assure themselves that they are in control of those arousal-seeking processes. According to White (1959), in fact, creatures try to position themselves within "a protected occasion that contains both familiar and unfamiliar elements and that possesses problems or challenges they consider intriguing or significant. In this light, play activities seem self-motivated attempts to create and solve problems" (Henricks, 2015:2).

This is true at every level and in every type of play, ending up an interesting element of the feeling of challenge that pertains to play, and constituting for some authors, first of all Sutton-Smith (2008), one of the numerous 'dual' or better yet 'dualudic' elements that form the 'multiplex functions' of play.

A fundamental factor of play of huge significance, perhaps the first one that comes immediately to mind when talking about children's play, is the role of *imagination* and *fantasy*, of the 'pretend', or the symbol if you want. In short, we might say, the relationship between the real and the unreal; or, in Erikson's words, "a step sidewards into another reality"[19] (Erikson, 1963:221-222).

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19 Actually, this sentence refers to the play of adults; the author, in fact, continues: "The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery".

The importance of symbolic in play for Piaget is well known, and so much so as to induce him to devote an entire stage of child's play; he considers it as an inevitable consequence of the fact that play is driven by the process of assimilation,[20] and that among the attributes of the latter, there is distortion: "as soon as we leave the sensorimotor level to the representational thought" (Piaget, 1976:679) the phenomenon of symbolism manifests itself.

Unlike the previous stage—practice play—symbolic play gradually disengages from the frequent link with repetition, and some daily behaviours appear unrelated to their original purpose, simply by evocation. Repetition without a purpose is used to disengage the representation from the evocative situation, and then to be free to combine the representations in a form that anticipates thought.

The schemes drawn from real life are first applied to inadequate objects and later evoked, up to the consciousness of 'pretend'; symbolic play "marks the primacy of the representation both on the action and on the perception as well as of the meaning on the object" (Bondioli, 2002:411). There cannot be pretence before the birth of the representation; it is from pretend play that the real symbol, the language, as well as human creativity, a free combination of symbols, metaphorical transformation of reality, will arise.

However, there is an undeniable relationship, for Piaget, between practice play and symbolic play: "symbolic play is to practice play how the representative intelligence is to sensorimotor intelligence. This matching at two different levels should be added to another at the same level: symbolic play is to representative intelligence how practice play is to sensorimotor intelligence" (Piaget, 1976:690).

Vygotskij (1967; 2004) does not like the expression 'symbolic play' because it is too tied to the semiotic meaning of 'sign', which tends to intellectualise the construct and overly emphasises the cognitive aspects of play, while neglecting the circumstances and motivation. He rather prefers to use the concept of imagination: in establishing some criteria for distinguishing the play of a child from other forms of activity, he concludes that, in play, the child creates an imaginary situation; this is not considered a type of play, but the peculiar characteristic of play in general.

Play is a 'transitional stage' in the development of imagination; in this way, Vygotskij totally reverses a common previous belief that imagination precedes play: "Imagination is a new formation that is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specific human form of

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20 Assimilation and accommodation are, for Piaget, the two processes that govern the child's adaptation to the environment. Assimilation is the incorporation of an event or an object in a behavioural or cognitive pattern already acquired (for example, the child uses the tail of a puppet like a pillow to lean his or her head on and pretend to sleep). Accommodation guides the modification of the cognitive structure or of the behavioural pattern to include new objects or events yet unknown (e.g., to change a gripping method, to change an approach to a problem). Assimilation and accommodation take turns in search of the necessary homeostasis in the relationship with the environment.

conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action. The old adage that children's play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action" (Vygotskij, 1967:8).

Play is not driven by the symbol, but by desires; the child realises them, puts them into practice, and in this way, the basic categories of reality pass through his or her experience. While thinking, desiring, the child acts. Internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are the internal processes brought about by external action; soon the child will not need an object to play, the meaning of the action will become dominant over the real action. This is the way to develop abstract thinking, but also of the will and the ability to choose.

Some objects, however, at least according to Winnicott (1971), are not like the others because they play a special role in the child's development: these objects are symbols, in the sense that they are for something else, namely they 'stand for' the child's mother. They are called transitional objects, and during early childhood, are treated by the child in a special way: they cannot be changed or removed, must be concrete, have a separate existence for the child, but at the same time, they are part of that child. With these objects, the child establishes a relationship, consisting actions that, on the one hand, lets him or her enter the play world, and on the other, allows him or her to experience separation and distance from his or her mother, by representing her through this symbol. It is an object of 'transition', in fact, between self and non-self, between the real and the imagined, just like in make-believe play, where objects are something different and are animated. For Winnicott "the symbolic act is a creative one, that defines a particular dimension of the experience, somewhere between purely subjective reality and objective reality" (Bondioli, 2002:72). The symbolic makes it possible to separate these two worlds and to create a third one, called by Winnicott 'play space' and 'illusion space' (once again in-lusio), a space of the experience that is not given, but is created by the child, as a product of his or her mental activity and of his or her action on reality.

Rules are the fourth fundamental factor of play to be considered: how they arise, their detection, and their role in the child's play development.

One of the basic lines of demarcation in the interpretation of play between the two giants of the field, Piaget and Vygotskij, for example, is placed precisely on this point. For Piaget, according to his theory of child development, pretend play or symbolic play is not based on rules, because the rule is grafted on social skills—for example of bargaining and mediation—which occur only when the phase of egocentrism has been surpassed. Consistently, the author singles out 'rule-based play' as a standalone play stage, the last one in the hierarchy he proposes.

One rule, for Piaget, can exist on an individual basis—thus, it can be changed at will—and has an objectual content (e.g., making a certain number of steps before throwing a ball), or it can have a social basis and result from an agreement between the players, who find a compromise between different wills and intentions—and

therefore, it has a binding value. Both types of rules are based on conventionality; thus, they are not compatible with pretend play, which cannot be guided by rules, as it has a subjective nature.

However, Piaget seems to remain isolated with respect to other scholars: in fact, according to Huizinga, for example, every type of play, even pretend play, is characterised by rules: "Rule creates the typical magic circle of play, it allows you to separate the ludic actions from the not-ludic ones, thus creating the inlusio, the feeling of "being in play" (Bondioli, 2002). And Caillois, who keeps the Piagetian meaning of a rule as a convention, however, considers that, in make-believe play, the meaning of 'as if' is to replace the rule and to fulfil the same function.

Vygotskij's position is completely antithetical to Piaget's: the rule is intrinsic to both rule-based play and pretend play;[21] it has an important psycho-developmental function, but also a critical and direct influence on the effectiveness and success of the ludic activity. In fact, it obliges the child not to follow his or her immediate impulses, even by acting against them: within competition games, one must submit to data constraints, in pretend play "the action is subject to the meaning, while, in real life, the action wins out over meaning" (Vygotskij, 1976:552). Thus, Vygotskij can state that, in play, freedom is only illusory: "While playing, children are free, they determine their actions starting from their self. But [...] their actions are subject to a well-defined meaning, and they act according to the meanings of things" (ibidem). For example, the child does not eat a piece of candy if within the play activity it is considered poisoned.

However, self-control of the immediate impulses has a direct consequence on the play activity: "It is in fact through the line of maximum resistance—self-submitting to the rule of giving up spontaneous and impulsive actions—that the maximum of pleasure is achieved in play" (Bondioli, 2002:31). For Vygotskij, "the essential attribute in play is a rule that has become a desire. Spinoza's notion of 'an idea that has become a desire, a concept that has turned into a passion' has its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom" (Garvey, 1976:580). Play gives the child a new form of desires, it shows him or her how to relate his or her desires with a dummy 'I', with its role in the play activity and with the play rules.

Obviously, the theme of the rule recalls the classical division between play and game. For Geertz (1973) and Caillois, play could result in the game being predominantly made up of rules: "Tout jeux est système de règles... ces conventions sont à la fois arbitraires, impératives et sans appel. Elles ne peuvent être violées sous aucun prétexte, sous peine que le jeu prenne fin sur-le-champ et se trouve détruit par le fait même" (Caillois, 1967; préface). Bateson and Winnicott, however, were primarily interested in the playful dimension of play: "Let's look at what is good and what is bad about 'playing' and 'games'. First of all, I don't mind—not much—about winning

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21 Instead, the sensorimotor play of the child's first 3 years remains, according to Vygotskij, without rules.

or losing" (Bateson, 1972:14). Bateson does not play to win, but to create; rules exist because they can be broken and put us in trouble: this is the gist of play, trying to get out of it and finding out which rules are obeyed while playing.

Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971) described play as a behaviour characterised by the interest in the actions *in se*, *per se*, in which the goal is secondary, individual and not durable; games, on the contrary, have rules and specific purposes and are characterised by repeatable patterns and predictable results. Between game and play, there isn't a relationship during human development because at any age, the child can be involved in play or in games.

Bettelheim (1972; 1984) instead makes a separation; first comes play with self-imposed rules, which does not produce intentional results in the external reality, then the games, which are characterised by agreed-upon rules, often imposed externally, by the need to use tools for their intended use and not by imagination. If the examples of play and games made by Bettelheim make reference to the distinction between pretend play and rule-based play, their respective characteristics are similar to those of Avedon and Sutton-Smith. Also, the transition from play to game seems to be inspired, according to Vygotskij, by an increase in impulse control, by the acquisition of the sense of reality, and social adaptation. Finally, for Bettelheim, games are social materials with an institutional existence; they are a part of tradition and culture.

The fifth characteristic of play concerns the *social aspects* of play, that were already mentioned here, and in particular, were introduced by the Batesonian construct of 'frame'. This theme opens at least two lines of study: on the one hand, the fact that children learn to play, in dual relationships or in group: with siblings, peers, but also with parents and adults.[22] On the other, because most of the types and modes of play create and require social contexts.

Starting from this last aspect, Coplan et al. suggest that play involving dyads or groups can be defined 'social' when the child "(a) is motivated to engage others in playful activities; (b) is able to regulate emotional arousal; (c) possesses the skills necessarily to initiate interactions with another child, such that; (d) the social overtures are accepted in kind" (Coplan et al., 2015:96). Any possible type of play can take place with a social mode; "it also comprises active conversations between children as they go about interacting with each other, negotiating play roles and game rules". On the contrary, "non-social play is defined as the display of solitary activities and behaviours in the presence of other potential play partners". Taxonomies of social play exist; the best known and used in the field have been developed by Parten (1932).[23]

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22 Including education in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts, for example, the available means of communication.

23 It is based on the following four categories: (1) unoccupied behaviour; (2) onlooker behaviour; (3) solitary play; (4) parallel play.

The importance of the involvement of peers has always been valued in the sector studies; Piaget, for example, "suggested exposure to instances of interpersonal differences of opinion and thought with one's peers (as opposed to interactions with adults) and opportunities for discussion and negotiation about these differences, aided children in the acquisition and development of sensitive perspective-taking skills in interpersonal relationships" (Coplan et al., 2015:99).

This somehow echoes Garvey's definition, which states the social game as "a condition of commitment, in which the successive and abstract behaviours of a partner are contingent to the abstract behaviours of the other. [...] This means leaving space in one's behaviour to the reactions of the other and changing one's own behaviours as a result of the actions of the other" (Garvey, 1976:697).[24]

Peer interaction through play has been considered crucial also for the development of the self-system: "exchanges among peers, in the contexts of cooperation, competition, conflict, and friendly discussion, allowed the child to gain an understanding of the self as both subject and object (the notion of 'looking glass self')" (Coplan et al., 2015:99).[25]

Sullivan (1953) proposed that experiences within the peer group are essential for the development of skills of cooperation, compromise, empathy, and altruism and for the acquisition and maintenance of important social skills of the adult's life. Recent research perspectives focus on the development of children who rarely engage others in social play (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011).

There are marked differences among children in their willingness to engage in social play and in the degree to which they are motivated to take part in peer play. Individual differences are influenced by increasing age, but also by "dispositional characteristics (e.g., temperament, sex), social motivations, social competence" (Coplan et al., 2015:100) and by culture and parental influence.

The influence of a good, supportive, and loving family environment is vital for play to appear in a child's life: Spitz's studies on orphanages (1945) showed that contexts lacking meaningful relationships, care, and emotional support caused serious deprivations in children, even in play. Caring parents know immediately that their child feels pleasure in being stimulated, so they propose the game of 'Cuckoo'; they throw him or her in the air; they surprise him or her with unexpected playful gestures; later they inspire him or her to play, so that he or she can learn; they offer him or her suitable objects, new, different in shape and colour (Petrie, 1987); they also

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24 According to him, four possible conditions can be drawn when only two children are together: the non-social game (both can work together to mend a broken toy); the non-game non-social (one or both of them may independently examine an object); playing non-social (one or both can engage in imaginative activity independently); the social game (both are mutually engaged in a shared activity).
25 The reference here is to C. H. Cooley's notion of 'looking glass self' as reported in Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

present them as animating characters; thus, providing an opportunity for starting the pretend play.

Many studies (Schaffer, 1977) led to the belief that children learn to play, especially "by playing with an adult who shows to share the play and the inherent pleasure" (Bondioli, 2002:105). Adults, mothers in the first place, convey to the child the idea that actions can be carried out in many ways, including the pretend one, that objects can represent something else, and that it is possible to do something just to take pleasure in doing it together.

The child's first play activities, ritualised and repetitive, are common in many cultures (playing to hide parts of one's face or objects, performing a series of rhythmic actions on the child's body up to a fast closing and full of excitement, capturing the child's interest and increasing his or her attention time, and so on).

If, at first, the adult is the protagonist and the child the spectator, the roles are reversed quite quickly;[26] this process takes place, thanks to the gradual withdrawal of the adults from their preeminent role, while in the meantime, the child becomes able to promote the ludic activity. Then finally, the adult acts as a mediator of a ludic contact with other children, suggesting and facilitating connections among peers in play.

One of the areas in which the role of the adult as a prompter in play that has been studied in the literature, is role-playing,[27] which is founded and managed on the transmission of scripts; according to Garvey (1982), the required skills in social role-playing are suggested following a modelling procedure that takes place in the home environment: children "in this way should have the occasion to learn: conventional sounds associated with certain gestures of 'pretend play', personification and animation of dolls, specific communication techniques to indicate the make-believe, a processing in a non-literal perspective of roles, scripts and ludic plots" (Bondioli, 2002:111). Also, in this case, the adult gradually disengages from play, becoming just a spectator and intervening if anything to provide new scripts and to introduce more complex ideas (e.g., a state of health of the doll, an unexpected event).

Haight carried out an interesting study on the direct and indirect influence of adults on child's play, and pretend play in particular. Her literature analysis on this theme makes it possible to assert that "parent-child pretend play is a potentially rich context for the socialization and acquisition of cultural meaning" (Haight, 1998:262); parents follow different ways to support their children's play: they can teach them

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26 Sutton-Smith (1979) indicated the following: 1) routine of exchange, the adult imitates the child and vice versa; 2) the central person's routine: the adult acts, the child serves as co-actor and routine in unison, the actions happen together; 3) the child does something on adult who pretends to withdraw offended, surprised, or scared.

27 Role-playing is an expression that can correspond to different meanings and techniques. In the case of children's play, make-believe can be considered a kind of role playing, whereas they adopt a role—a teacher, a doctor, and so on—and act out as characters in this role.

how to pretend, introduce the pretend mode, elaborate "upon their toddlers early forays into the non-literal"; they also used to encourage children to be enthusiastic about pretend play. However, she also found significant cultural differences, so she concludes: "before advocating parent-child play, practitioners must consider the cultural appropriateness of adult-child play, adults' own preferences for interaction with children, as well as other play and nonplay contexts that may promote similar developmental outcomes" (ibidem).

The research of O'Connell and Bretherton (1984) indicates that children's play is less repetitive, more advanced, and less fragmented initially when they play with an adult rather than with a peer; furthermore, in this case, play can be enriched as to its variety, level, and duration.

In particular, it is interesting to note that though mothers cannot tailor their proposals to the child's potential, they naturally offer a range of possibilities from which the child draws freely, according to his or her wishes and possibilities.

Indispensible elements to support the child's play seems to be emotional support, encouragement, effective participation in recreational settings; furthermore, the interaction style must maintain a delicate balance between stimulation and non-interference.

The last, but really not the least, characteristic of play considered here concerns the fact that its *capacity to evolve* in childhood; the child's play modalities, the proposals he or she advances or to whom he or she is able to answer, the areas of interest he or she develops, and in correlation, the ludic activities he or she does, change over time, from birth to 18 years.[28] The study of this evolution has involved all scholars in the field, who have proposed different classifications, identifying types and categories of play in correlation with the respective epistemological frameworks of reference.

A careful and detailed examination of proposed classifications of play is presented in this text, Chapter 3, which should be consulted for a more in-depth analysis.

Therefore, the development of play is still considered a useful indicator of a child's development, and to such a degree that it is also used as a diagnostic tool in some cases to identify growth-related problems.

What is worth noting here is the contrast between two main approaches: on the one hand, that of the successive stages of play—of which the Piagetian one is certainly the best known—which proposes a hierarchical alternation between the stages of play; each stage develops and grows in complexity, then exhausts its developmental function for the individual and is replaced by the following one, which in turn

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28 The theme of the relationship between the concepts of play and the concepts of time was discussed in an original way by Henricks (2009). According to this approach, we are undoubtedly referring here to the concept of 'play as progress'. A detailed examination of studies about the evolution of play is presented in Chapter 3.

maintains with the previous one more or less direct and recognisable relationship; and on the other hand, there is the approach inspired by cultural psychology and then by constructivism, that while identifying an evolution—not rigidly hierarchical— in characteristics, types, and degrees of complexity of children's play, enhances the value of inter-individual variability, avoids the correlation between type of play, and predefined chronological ages of the child and does not support the idea of a linear progression between stages (Rubin et al., 1983). Moreover, it points out the influence of many concomitant factors, and not only of the cognitive ones: desires, volitions, emotions, experiences, and social contexts of life.[29]

In the first case, play is connected to an epistemology which provides "invariant and qualitative different stages of development; such stages are typically cumulative, in that later ones build off earlier levels. Furthermore, later stages are thought to be more complex, rationally controlled and abstract. Indeed, human development itself is sometimes equated to the creation and maintenance of personal schemas that feature increasing degrees of integration and control" (Henricks, 2009:16).

Play develops and proceeds from stage to stage, according to Piaget, substantially thanks to intellectual development, with which it is considered closely related, since its inception.

The practice play of infancy becomes "more sophisticated as the child's ability to act intelligently develops. When children's sensory-motor schemes become sufficiently coordinated to construct the concept of object permanence, the ability to represent absent realities becomes possible" (De Lisi, 2015:235). During growth, "intellectual development from early to late childhood includes an increasing ability to mentally coordinate concepts that are needed to adapt to the natural, physical and social worlds. These changes have an effect on children's symbolic play. As children come to understand the importance of reciprocity in relationships (especially as experienced in peer relationships), they develop a deeper understanding of the necessity to conform to social rules and conventions, including following the rules in games" (ibidem).

The second case can be found typically in Vygotskij's original interpretation. His core idea is that "the history of human development is a complex interplay between the processes of natural development that are determined biologically and the processes of cultural development brought about by the interaction of the growing individual with other people" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015:204).

Vygotskij explains exactly this way the birth and development of high mental functions, in his view poorly studied by earlier theories: they appear and are built first within social relations in which the child is immersed, and secondly, they become psychological and biological functions of the individual. To put it directly in

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29 An interesting analysis of the concept of 'stage' in the constructivist epistemology can be found in Marshall (2009).

his own words: "Every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an 'inter' mental category, then within the child as 'intra' mental category. This pertains equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, to the formation of concepts and to the development of will" (Vygotskij, 1997:136).

It is exactly the role played by the social context and relationships that belong to it that allows Vygotskij to lay the foundations for one of the most famous and compelling concepts of his entire theoretical framework: "the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [which is] the distance between the level of independent performance and the level of assisted performance" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015:206). Vygotskij's idea is that play creates the ZPD of a child, and that play is the leading activity for children of preschool and kindergarten age.[30] Within the ZPD, the entire child's development takes place, and in this sense, it is possible to state that it is play that creates development.

The study of the evolutionary nature of play and the analysis of its effective evolution in subsequent stages have always attracted scholars in the field. The three typologies proposed by Piaget have formed an essential basis for everyone, to break it away and articulate it, making it more comprehensive and complex. The classifications of the types of play, whether or not included in the frameworks of child development, are now numerous, and are treated in more detail in Chapter 3.

The flourishing of these proposals appears to be due to a latent dissatisfaction with the completeness of the existing classifications; thanks to the careful observation of children's play lasting decades, radical ruptures between one stage (or type) and another cannot be acceptable, because they seem rather to merge, each feeding the other, to resurrect in different forms, in different times of life; and yet educators, psychologists, and experts in general in the play field feel the need to have, know, and distinguish them.

Some examples may be useful to highlight these aspects.

The baby's body is certainly one of the first objects with which he or she plays (Garner & Bergen, 2015), during the stage of practice play: his or her own feet, his or her own hands assume for him or her a special interest, because they can act, set in motion, and provoke interesting feelings; this play becomes more complex in the following months, as the body comes in contact with the world that must be explored, crossed. But later, much later, the body itself will become a symbol, when it will be used to imitate the actions of the adults at a distance, or even later when it is masked or brought on a stage, moving towards a more frankly symbolic phase.

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30 "This laid the foundation of the theories of play developed by the so-called post-Vygotskian scholars. [...] all these theories put emphasis on play not as a reflection of past experiences but rather as the activity essential for the development of a 'future child'" (Bodrova & Leong, 2015:207).

The constructive game, from Smilansky on (1968), has acquired—despite some controversy—the dignity of a special type of play, creeping in between practice play and symbolic play: it requires complex psychomotor skills—both for precisely managing small elements to be assembled as in the case of Lego bricks, and for giving life to toys and real worlds, for example, a rudimentary canoe, a platform on a tree—which cannot be included within the group of the approximate abilities of practice play; and it also, very often, requires an ability to hypothesise work plans, monitor their implementation, if necessary, undo and redo again. In the case of creating worlds with their own characters and stories, constructive play intertwines with symbolic play and adopts the peculiarities of this play type, becoming, perhaps, something else.

Another possible example is exercise, exploratory and gym play with the abilities of the body that the child demonstrates on the playground: this can only be classified as practice play, because new psychomotor skills are continuously refined during actions and in relationship with objects of different shapes and nature; yet, it engages children of all ages, sometimes it even becomes an enticement for adults. When it assumes the form of a race or a competition, it also makes use of rules that can be agreed upon or the result of mediation.

Moreover, most of the video games, and some so-called 'educational games' for early childhood, are merely practice play applied to a task: to perfectly carry out coordinated fine, sometimes minimal movements; from the cognitive point of view, they propose the endless repetition of the solution to the same problem.[31] In some cases, these over-specialised psychomotor skills can be used to play video games with rules and strategies.

Caillois' proposal (1958) can be considered, at least partially, consonant with the need not to consider the types of play as rigidly determined; certainly it stands out among other proposals for its originality and impressive reach. His well-known taxonomy does not concern the types of play, but rather the player's disposition. The four identified dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but rather can be present together and aspire to exhaust all possible types of play: *agon*, or competition (the play done by two or more participants, where there is someone who wins and someone who loses: running, playing ball, wrestling, billiards, chess); *alea*, or chance (again, play involving a number of persons, but based on the role of chance: to see who is going to be 'it', bingo, lottery, gambling); *mimos*, or imitation, simulacrum (pretending, masks, theatre); *ilinx*, or vertigo, vortex (the swing, dancing, mountain climbing). These four dimensions are moving, however,

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31 This is the case of toys like 'Sapientino', which awards the association between the same pairs—for example, of images—but also of many electronic games and the so-called educational software based merely on the relationship between cause and effect (push a button, turn a lever, select an area of the monitor to achieve a given and known scope).

along two fundamental and different levels of tension, to 'being in the play': they are *paidia*—a 'first, primary freedom', the unrestrained imagination typical of younger children, but existing in varying degrees in any recreational activity—and *ludus*—rule-based play, more related to adulthood; however, the two levels are placed at opposite ends of a continuum, and all play activities will include different grades of these dimensions, mixing them.

The proposal of Caillois offers a series of elements that can be combined in various sizes and degrees of intensity of the personal involvement. But it does not take into account directly and specifically the issue of play development, of the changes it undergoes during the individual's life.

The identification of different types of play, their emergence in different periods of the individual's development, together with their growing complexities and intertwining over time are matters of specific interest for those wishing to explore play as a specific topic of interest in the field of education—and in case of children with disabilities, also of rehabilitation. A deeper awareness on the play development, in fact, gives the educators and the adults in general the opportunity to knowingly extend the proposals of play activities, as to the settings, the mediators, the relationships, and of course, the type and the complexity.

Summarising here the strengths of the existing proposals and the analysed criticisms, one might conclude that a model of interpretation and classification organised in stages, while having the advantage of identifying types, with perspicuity, that are now consolidated in the literature, also introduces a rigidity in the analysis of the phenomenon—for example, the clearly defined stages associated with a specific chronological age, stable and unique over time—for which it is not possible to really understand it and to use it effectively.

It seems more effective and productive to adopt a model that, based on the four main types today—in principle—shared in the field,[32] makes it possible to respect and safeguard the following data: a) in case of regular conditions of development, and environmental or socio-cultural contexts, each type has a peculiar onset in a precise developmental age; b) there is a characteristic progression between the types of play, during development; c) environmental contexts or other technological innovations may give rise to new types of play, which are an amalgam between those already known, with varying degrees of involvement of their characteristics, or different degrees of use of the related skills; d) the types of play can coexist in different stages of life; e) each type of play can be reactivated, reveal itself anew, in different developmental stages, remodelled and recontextualised or simply reproduced by pure ludic spirit.

Play requires, claims, and builds up different competences and abilities during development; it manifests immediately, co-evolves with the child, benefits from new

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32 The framework adopted by LUDI is presented in Chapter 3.

skills becoming more and more complex, offering increasingly greater challenges, and stimulating the construction of new—cognitive and social—skills.

It is for this reason that the play classifications 'in separate stages' do not work. They never prove there is a real separation of competences and activities between stages because a new play stage involves the competences of the previous one without exhausting them: on the contrary, it re-elaborates and readjusts them at a new level. At that point, those competences are no longer the same; they are contaminated, more complex, and new.[33]

A graphical representation of this proposed model would probably not be a continuum of a unidirectional timeline, but rather a spiral line, showing the different periods of onset, the progression of the types, their possible coexistence in time, but also the possible contaminations between them and even the somewhat reworked reactivations of some of them, in other periods.

1.4 Functions of Play

But why do people play? To which needs does this activity respond? Which adaptive functions does it support, being so deeply rooted—in time and in space—stable but also changing, transmitted, known?

Scholars have always wondered about the meaning and purpose of this activity, and have advanced explanations on its ultimate meaning, particularly on its role in child's development, where it seems to take precedence and have special meaning. The ludic activity has been mainly studied not "'as such', but as a 'symptom' or a sign of the peculiarity of the infant psyche or mind; play is a paradigmatic phenomenon that sheds light into the world of childhood" (Bondioli, 2009:19).

From time to time, according to an essentially reductionist approach,[34] various functions of play have been highlighted (and will be shortly presented in this paragraph): the biological-adaptive, the cognitive, and the socio-relational, the psycho-emotional.

Some functions of play will now be described and analysed: understanding the possible reasons of play, perceiving the functions it performs in human development,

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33 A reference to the representational redescription proposed by Karmiloff Smith (1992) can be found in this description of the evolution of play, as in other expressions of human development, it is possible here to recognise the role played by this process: an alternation between the acquisition of competences, their representative metabolisation and their re-use with a new awareness and new effectiveness.

34 According to Bondioli, the assumption of play within the theories of development meets the criticism of reductionism; in fact, some aspects of the phenomenon are emphasised and used so as to show or prove, following an analogical procedure, some aspects of the epistemological and interpretative models that the different authors would adopt (Bondioli, 2009:19).

can provide support and nourishment to the educational field, including the area of disability.

Almost all researchers mention that the ludic activity does not belong only to human beings, and that some classes of animals[35] devote part of their time, especially puppies, to play in pairs or in groups, with adults and peers. Often these kinds of play involve the carrying out—but in a less precise, less powerful, and less realistic manner—of the animals' daily life movements and actions: fighting, taking care of their puppies, and so on.

These considerations suggested to many authors the idea that play should have a *useful role in ontogenesis*, and also *in phylogeny*; for Kant, it would serve to train the child in activities that ensure preservation of the organism; for Claparède, it is a sort of preparatory exercise; for Groos, an activity able to test skills useful for environmental adaptation; for Fröbel, the expression of the innate creative attitude of human beings—thus almost already a job—and for Carr, a complementary exercise to maintain useful habits that otherwise would disappear.

According to Lorenz, play has an *adaptive function* to explore new situations in new environments, looking for optimal solutions. Miller, in a more systematic way, comes to a similar conclusion: starting from the study of baboons, he claims that play serves to provide a flexible substrate to the individual's cognitive system: "a general ability to produce the novel, an ability that is surely as important to survival as the ability to produce the expected". When people spend their time immersed in a game, "they are creating novelty, however unimposing it might be [...]. It is the habit of occasionally creating novelty, rather than specific preparation, that makes us seem intelligent when, confronted with a new problem, a new contingency in 'reality', we have more than a random chance of marshalling the means at our disposal in a hitherto useless but now adaptive way" (Miller, 1973:96). It cannot be overlooked that Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that "as a form of mental feedback, play might nullify the rigidity that sets in after successful adaption, thus reinforcing animal and human variability".

Also, Huizinga (1938) starts his discourse from the animal experience, noting, however, that play goes beyond the limits of biological experience, as it is a function that contains a meaning; it characterises the *homo ludens*, as a cultural animal: culture itself rises in a playful shape, culture is first played. Play would have the original function of being *a creator of culture*; it opens up the possibility, exquisitely human,

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35 Today, ethologists claim that only in the classes of mammals and birds, it is possible to find play as such. Social play is the most common among animals (grapple fights, chases, forms of sexual behaviours, rearing offspring, and so on). Individual play consists exploration and manipulation of objects, motor acrobatics, and pursuits of preys (real and fictional). Apes, if raised in contact with human beings, play in an unusual manner, such as making funny faces in front of a mirror, walking while covering their eyes with a hand to make it more difficult to walk on suspended logs, and doing complex play activities with objects.

to attribute meanings, to comment, making it possible to develop art, science, history, humour. "Not so much rules, behaviour and social roles would be learned through play, but rather the fact that any behaviour has its own context, that it is culturally determined" (Bondioli, 2002:56).

This cultural context, seen, however, exactly as a frame of roles and behaviours, is the interpretation proposed by Bateson: what the child learns from play is not how to behave according to certain rules or roles, but rather that there are types of roles and categories of rules. The child acquires knowledge about the possible roles and styles of behaviour and acquires flexibility regarding the ability to choose and adopt different styles in relation to different frameworks or contexts of behaviour.

The function of play to *support sensorimotor development* has been emphasised since the earliest field studies: the exploration and use of objects—including one's own body—typical of the *practice play* stage, allow the child to refine sensorimotor coordination and its control, through feedback, hence stabilising processes that gradually become automatic; manipulation and construction of objects become gradually more and more linked to the achievement of objectives and to the action on the surrounding world, thus promoting the use of mental patterns of planning, while manual coordination becomes refined and precise, quickly opening the road to constructive play. Exploration and action on objects create a new mobility of knowledge patterns, which is of great importance for psychological growth.

In these activities, the child always tends to reach greater skills in using objects that attract his or her attention and interest, and for this purpose, he or she constantly alternates tireless repetition of the same gestures and voluntary introduction of constraints, obstacles, and new ways to do things, thus checking the possible changes in the gestures themselves.

Play has also been seen as an engine for *cognitive development*, in all its facets. *Symbolic play* carries out, in this regard, an important function, because it is the evidence of the birth of thought, which detaches from the concrete and the real to start imagination and fancy; it forms the substrate for the development of higher symbolic functions: language, graphical representation, narrative ability.

An interesting aspect of symbolic play—highlighted by Vygotskij—is the fact that it is already sensitive to the effects of rules: players adhere to the constraints of the 'pretend', enter in a scheme that is 'other' than reality: and this requires the control of two different contexts—reality and pretending—with their respective differences in roles and behavioural patterns; "pretending or not pretending is an experiential duality; [...] these pretend ludic worlds will educate the players in the semantics of the subjective-objective duality destined to occupy their minds forever afterwards" (Sutton-Smith, 2008:119).

Important consequences derive from the symbolic transformation of the real; in particular, the nature and function of play conventions can be learned or reinvented: rule-based play becomes gradually, among the other types of play, the more complex and abstract one, with regard to the cognitive domain; play turns into games, until it

is possible to manage entire systems of rules, including strategy and planning games. Moreover, according to Bruner (1986), while teaching, conventions play can teach skills useful for growth and becoming an adult.

However, symbolic play and rule-based play also highlight another fundamental aspect of play, the *development of social skills*. More than the others, these types of play, in fact, open up to social relationships, dual or in group, thus to the ability to share, mediate, recognise, and adhere to social conventions; at this stage, social adaptation is also accompanied by a greater ability to control impulses and a sense of reality.

But play is certainly not just reasoning, social life, real life. Play also belongs, and not for a small part, to the individual's intrapsychic world; indeed, most of the scholars at the beginning of the last century focused on this influence of play on the child's *psychological and emotional development*, and has rekindled the interest of researchers in recent years.[36]

While many authors have seen in play the natural outburst of an overload of emotions carried by the child, for Vygotskij, on the contrary, it gives the child exactly an opportunity to act and experiment the ability to control emotions; imagination itself arises when it is time to ask the child to delay the achievement of immediate pleasure. Again, rules and constraints become extraordinarily important in this case: the pleasure associated with play, in fact, is exactly due to the restrictions voluntarily imposed on the ludic activity. "Play would represent the ideal of Spinoza's 'inner rule', or, to quote Piaget, a rule of self-restraint and self-determination" (Bondioli, 2002:36).

Far removed from these interpretations of the function of play, in relation to the individual's intrapsychic development, comes from the psychoanalytic line of research. Fear, anger, desire, love, ambition, conflict, rivalry are, according to the psychoanalytic theory, the dynamic elements of play, without which it would have no reason to exist. The symbolic act is a substitution act; when the young child sucks his or her thumb even if not hungry, he or she shows one of the primitive phenomena of transient symbolisation, which creates a bridge between the child and the mother when their separation starts. The transitional object—a blanket, a small toy, an object of real life—according to Winnicott's well-known analysis, 'stands for' the mother without being her: it is the first symbol in the child's life, who perceives it at the same time as part of him or her or self, and as separate from him or her or self, independent; by acting on and with the object the separation process starts and proceeds.

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36 Fein, for example, offers a synthesis between approaches to play oriented towards cognitive development and emotional development; in her opinion, around 3 years of age, a representative system in two layers has begun developing, one for practical knowledge and the other for affective knowledge, which "makes it possible for the individual to become aware of his/her own inner life and to acquire control on the way to express it" (Fein, 1987:287).

Many other scholars faced this issue, which could be called the relationship between 'identification' and 'separation'; for them, play is not interesting as a form, or as a function, rather its contents should be the subject of interest and study, because they consist of feelings and emotions: "play is a theatre, an enactment, in which an attempt to integrate the emotional experience, thus the self and the world, is implemented. [...] It is a way to cope, to control, to give meaning to the process of growth, seen as dramatically uneven and painful" (Bondioli, 2002:77). These feelings and emotions help the child to adapt to reality and deal with the problems that he or she encounters in real life: "This is an experience that allows the child to check his/her phantasmal events and vicissitudes, on a manipulated and controlled reality, in an illusory dimension (and real together), which favours both an examination of reality and the exercise of concrete skills with a focus on adaptation" (Fornari, 1988:138).

Winnicott describes this path, which develops through the exploration, the knowledge and the use of objects, but above all, through transactional objects, as a passage from "a state of total fusion with the mother to one in which the child begins to be aware of his/her individuality; [...] from a state of primary integration, in which everything that will became later an 'I' is a set of fragmented and disconnected sensations, to a state of integration, characterized by the perception of having an 'inside' and an 'outside'; [...] from a state of absolute dependence (viewed nonetheless as omnipotence) to a state of independence (which involves awareness of limits and dependence). It is a journey which, while leading to the construction and the discovery of the self, also enables the discovery and the construction of the Other from many points of view: social (the one/s with whom it is possible to relate), intellectual (the object of knowledge), affective (the source of pleasure or displeasure)" (Bondioli, 2002:67).

It was Sutton-Smith to push this interpretation—in his usual 'irreverent' style— up to reflecting on the consequences that the ludic activity may have in building the individual's feeling of independence; by playing, perhaps, the children "are protecting themselves against varying hegemonic physical and human realities by making fun of them with these relatively obnoxious representations. There is a kind of courageous parody here", to come to watch play "as at heart a kind of transcendence" (Sutton-Smith, 2008:96).

1.5 Play and Education: the Need for Play for the Sake of Play

Play is a pedagogical topos and an explanation of childhood. The time a child devotes to it, the intensity of his or her concentration while playing, the absoluteness of the emotions that this activity visibly stimulates, the flexibility it demonstrates in changing according to the variation in ages, environmental conditions, companions and constraints, the stability with which it occurs in every geographical area, in every era and every culture, all these features have given play a special status in this unique period of human life called *childhood*.

1.5.1 A Short Historical Overview[37]

Children and adults of all periods have played and have made toys. Egyptians made dolls from cloth or majolica, as well as wooden or stone toys, while Romans made sweets in the form of letters and invented games involving imitation and comparison. Play was used by the Greeks and Romans as a prize following educational activities, and the close link between school and play is also etymologically demonstrated by the two words *skholé* ('fun', 'leisure time' but also 'school' for the Greeks) and *ludus* ('fun' but also 'school'—*ludus schola*—for the Romans).

According to Plato, to be educational, play involving children had to: favour movement, be done in a group—in a place consecrated to the gods—mix males and females and be supervised by nursemaids to moderate the liveliness. Furthermore, it also must have a set of fixed rules, which make it possible to test and specify the socialisation processes. This is a very modern attitude, and within the experimentation of these mutual relationships among play participants lies the possibility of moral growth.

Basically, however, in ancient times, educational attention on play focused mainly on the development of gymnastic and sport skills and to prepare for war.[38]

In the Middle Ages, it was the Church that provided a strong orientation regarding the area of play, that was considered an activity to be controlled, since it was a possible source of moral promiscuity and some games may be dangerous for moral development;[39] play was kept under control: if on one hand, it was necessary to educate, on the other, it was necessary to allow to vent itself because—as Fénelon asserts—children have their own innate 'great heat'.

Locke's idea of play can be considered a precursor of modern pedagogy; according to him, toys must not be purchased, but made by the children themselves: "little stones, a pack of cards, a mother's keys, and other similar items that they can't hurt themselves with are fun for children just as much as those things that are bought at such a dear price in stores and that go bad or break in a very short time" (Locke, 1918, orig. ed. 1693). Study should be just as fun as play, and if a child wants to continue

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37 This paragraph is largely inspired by Besio (2008).

38 In more modern times, motor play has been studied mainly by Parlebas (1990), who emphasised its relationship with specific cultural models, including rules (e.g., the game of tag). It combines affectivity and the fantasies of the child and not only the motor coordination abilities, and is capable of reaching conscious and unconscious levels. Comparative studies have been developed between different types of games, such as football and baseball, about how they are structured from a motor viewpoint, the role that they identify, the type of relationships that they suggest and create, and not only because of their rules.

39 Around the 1400s, distinguishing features were making headway within the general attitude of condemnation: there was a focus on ludus licitus, ludus tolerabilis, ludus indifferens, ludus ricreation, up to ludus laudabilis that consists of the holy representations of the life of saints.

to play, it's a sign that he or she is not yet ready to study. There is a pedagogical advantage in the efforts children make while playing: "I thus thought that if games were invented with a certain contrivance it would be possible to find many ways to teach kids to read in a way that would seem almost like playing to them" (Locke, cit.).

For Fénelon (cit.), play can be functional to the needs of education, making study more pleasurable—"let's hide study behind the appearance of freedom and pleasure"—then from games, we must remove everything that can make children overly excited, or that permits the simultaneous presence of males and females: in other words, play can make you lose your head or can be a source of sinful thoughts.[40]

The era of Illuminism represents the great turning point in the European history regarding education, because pedagogy put the focus on creating citizens and disseminating social values. The educational process must move towards the illuminist project of citizens, who must not only understand and adapt to laws, but be possibly capable of developing new ones.

The educational utility of play is clearer at this point: Basedow (1914, orig. ed. 1768) was the first to knowingly link play with educational activity, for example, inventing school competitions—and many linguistic ones—in which children could try to beat the other peers in the group and with which they could have a lot of fun; and fun—conceived in this case mainly as a joke—was an integral part of the education project through play.

However, it is only with Fröbel (1967, orig. ed. 1826) that play acquires its full educational value: it stimulates the imagination and allows the child to relate with himself or herself and with the world. To carry out these functions, play cannot be solitary, but with a group, and must allow children to practice skills and roles that they can adopt and do as adults. As known, Fröbel invented the mechanism of 'gifts' to offer to children to favour their growth that is seen as total, of body and mind ("the body and its parts must be made capable of obeying the spirit at any time"), growth that must take place at the same pace, following the same path (Provenzo, 2009). Thus, recreational education requires particular attention: movement and play must be developed together and gradually at different ages. Physical strength and moral and spiritual determination exist in a direct relationship that, through play, can be taught. He encouraged children to engage in self-directed manipulations of the material world, so that they can join scientific knowledge with an aesthetic experience (Henricks, 2014).

Fröbel's educational project is based on some fundamental features that are still quite interesting: a) play is a planned part of the school day; the adult must not act

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[40] Piaget himself was interested in play as the source of moral thought, because it leads to awareness of moral relationships in society: :The individual by himself remains egocentric. The solution lies in a comparison among children, in their playing and working together, in the negotiation of meanings and rules and in cooperation" (Piaget, 1980, orig. ed. 1932).

in an authoritative manner; b) the use of structured educational materials that carry out the explicit function of teachings; c) play must be correlated to the environment in which it is carried out and be open to contact with nature; d) the creative and cognitive aspects present in play must be safeguarded and nurtured at the same time; e) the link between play and life is explicit; the recreational behaviour can become a social behaviour.

Since Fröbel opened history's first kindergarten in 1837 and wrote that play is the highest phase of child development, incorporating play into early childhood programmes has almost been synonymous with the pedagogy of the field. The progressive school educator of the first quarter of the 20th century then built upon Fröbel's emphasis on the importance of play.

Then, Maria Montessori's (1936; 1949) famous method encourages children to play with elements that have implications for adult life, such as toy hammers, dishes, and ovens. According to her, children desire self-guided activity with culturally valued items instead of fantasy-based role play; they also enjoy the social validation that comes from sharing their activities with peers. The entire educational system of Montessori is based on the seriousness of adult work. The play impulse in children is really a work impulse; its two main characteristics—the tendency to be active and the tendency to be experimental—can be assets of education.

For Dewey (1910), the relationship with materials is of great importance: materials are seen as real tools, if the situation is governed by playful spirit, which commits them to the inherent value of what they are doing and excites their creativity. The value of play was greatly emphasised, as something that builds the person, through experiences but also by habits of self-directed enquiry: "In short, the grounds for assigning play a definite place in the curriculum are intellectual and social not matters of temporary expediency and momentary agreeableness. Without something of the kind, it is not possible to secure the normal estate of effective learning; namely, that knowledge-getting be an outgrowth of activities having their own end instead of a school task" (1944:195).

Also, to Piaget, play is a way to engage children in the learning process: "This is why play is such a powerful lever in the learning process of very young children and to such an extent that whenever anyone can succeed in transforming their first steps in reading, arithmetic or spelling into a game, you will see they become passionately absorbed in these occupations which are ordinarily presented as dreary chores" (Piaget, 1972:155).

The consequences of adopting play in the educational process are, for Vygotskij, not so subservient to fragmented aspects of learning, but rather related to the child's development 'per se', as play is a leading factor in development: "Children's great achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become their basic level of real action and morality" (Vygotskij, 1978:100).

1.5.2 The Difficult Relationship Between Play and Education: Controlling Play[41]

Where does the relationship between infant play activity and learning begin? Is it possible to have fun while learning? Can teaching be made fun? And, is it beneficial to make learning fun? What is the difference between play in other contexts and play in educational contexts? Is it possible to teach how to play, without having in mind teaching something other than play?

In what follows, an attempt is made to track the most important steps of the relationship between play and education, which has been more controversial than what might be expected; and it is still in this way.

Generally speaking, the scholastic context can take advantage of the instructional-educational values shared with play: in fact, it has the ability to positively interfere with the child's growth factors identified as always as pedagogic objectives.

–   *Cognitive* development a) increases the mental reprocessing of reality (abstraction, imagination, fantasy); b) favours the exploration of the world of possibilities and hypotheses; c) develops creative and inventive skills and decentralisation capacities through symbolic play; d) requires the adoption and experimentation of *planning* and *problem-solving* strategies.
–   *Emotive-affective* development permits and develops: a) the expression and control of emotions; b) a realistic awareness of self; c) personal independence.
–   *Socio-relational skills* favour: a) respect for the rules; b) ability to cooperate; c) ability to mediate and negotiate.
–   *Socio-cognitive* development (Ashman & Conway, 1989; Bandura, 2001) influences structuring and consolidation of a) motivation; b) self-efficiency; c) self-esteem; d) prosociality; e) agentivity.

As seen in the previous paragraph, 'historic' pedagogy has focused on the value and role of play in education and considers it as a learning mediator, even when it was bestowed the role of a protagonist; it is since the first years of the 1900s that play became a significant part of the early childhood school curriculum.

In the contemporary literature of the field, there is a greater awareness, which corresponds to an important amount of studies, about the role of play as the main

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41 The study of the role that play has taken in time in the pedagogical field, and above all, that it has now in education, forms the basis for reflecting on the role that play has for the education of children with disabilities. It should not be forgotten anyway that children with disabilities spend most of their time in rehabilitation activities and settings. The relationship between education and the rehabilitation frameworks has not been addressed clearly until now; what is clear enough is that both—education and rehabilitation—aim for the same goal: give the child an opportunity to make positive and useful experiences, for training new effective abilities, so positively influencing the structure of the brain and consolidating new learning. This possibility is recently supported and deepened by neuroscience studies (Sandman & Kemp, 2007).

activity of the developing child, as well as a more clear consciousness about the different types of educational settings—formal, informal, non-formal[42]—with which the child comes into contact. Moreover, one could say that for each of the different functions of play highlighted by scholars, there is an educational-didactic or rehabilitative-therapeutical application: so, play can become a tool to foster learning, the privileged means to encourage socialisation, and to promote the expression of feelings as well as their control, while in some cases, it becomes the main road to get into the child's inner world, providing an instrument for cure and assessment.

1.5.2.1 Play and Play-like Activities

Inevitably, however, all these interpretations and uses of play are, to some extent, dominated by the objective for which the play activity is proposed and programmed; while play has extraordinary educational value and can be used as an incomparable educational 'hook', it undoubtedly loses some of its play features: for example, freedom, pure ludic spirit, transgression, autonomous initiative, and autotelism.

It was the Italian pedagogist Aldo Visalberghi (1958) who systematised these issues clearly, in a way that is still productive today for a critical reading of the existing research in the field and for future directions. Indeed, according to him, the play activity has the following characteristics: a) it is *demanding*, it requires a complete commitment by the player;[43] b) it is *continuative*, it develops continuously in a child's life;[44] c) it is *progressive*, because it can become gradually and increasingly complex; no play activity is exclusively repetitive and equal to itself;[45] d) it envisages the *end* of an activity, not requiring a continuation once the game has ended.[46]

Many activities carried out in schools or in educational contexts that include learning objectives can have the appearance and even the structure of play activities and can, of course, have amusing and fun characteristics. For these activities and programmes, Visalberghi proposes the expression *play-like*. They have the same

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42 According to OECD (2010): a) *formal* learning is always organised and structured, and has learning objectives; from the learner's standpoint, it is always intentional; b) *informal* learning is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes, and is never intentional from the learner's standpoint; often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience; c) *non-formal* learning is rather organised and can have learning objectives. Such learning may occur at the initiative of the individual, but also happens as a byproduct of more organised activities, whether or not the activities themselves have learning objectives.
43 This point can be considered in analogy with the characteristics of commitment, intrinsic motivation, and intensity, but also with the fundamental of doing, which creates and requires continuous challenges.
44 This theme can be connected with the evolutivity of play and with its characteristic of freedom that permeates it entirely.
45 This aspect can be seen in relation to the fundamental of evolutivity of play and with its characteristic of flexibility.
46 This argument is directly associated with 'being in play', the in-lusio and the framework of Bateson.

first three characteristics as the play activities, but not the fourth one, since they do not end in themselves, but have educational objectives and a final scope, that of learning.

Play-like activities and educational games are an integral part of the educational life and process, which start from nursery school, and according to Scurati, can be found also in the play-like games of pre-adolescence, which must be understood as an authentically autotelic event (or as a phenomenon that has in itself its own scope) and "as a mere hetero-formative device, understood as a kind of sophisticated adultistic camouflage, a trick device" (Scurati, 2000, cited in Besio, 2008:23). In fact, in this case, the intentionality of giving cultural contents would be so open as to impede the real involvement of the learner, preventing him or her from getting into the play atmosphere.

Useful signals indicating that one is in a context of 'controlled playfulness' or 'goal-oriented playfulness' are given by: well-structured relational rapports, presence of expressed rules, and a stable guide provided by adults or educators who, in fact, are familiar with and declare the end of the activity, and thus define its times and procedures.

In these cases, the adult or educator can also act as a mediator between the relationships of children to modulate the complexity of the game so that it will match the varying level of capacities of each person, to guide the movement of the activity if necessary by referring to the defined rules, and so on. Examples of play-like activities and programmes can be:

a) Activities intentionally created and materials expressly used to give a fun and pleasant form to certain types of learning actions that are considered complex—thus requiring special concentration and reasoning—or boring because of their repetitive nature (e.g. games such as domino or bingo to learn multiplication tables; nursery rhymes to learn automatic series such as the alphabet or the months of the year; attractive and fun toys to support the accomplishment of psychomotor or cognitive activities that would be difficult otherwise).

b) Learning contexts[47] and programmes proposed to groups of children—but also to individuals—informed in a playful manner, so that the educational objectives are part of the play situation itself even if they remain extrinsic to play (e.g., symbolic play sessions proposed to develop the pragmatic aspects of verbal language or to monitor the concomitant development of other symbolic competences; construction play planned to test the child's memory span or competence in operating the technical aspects of building with blocks—dimensions, weights, and so on—practice play in the playground designed to verify and improve the child's psychomotor abilities or balance); in other words, the play situation becomes the best way to convey and pursue the educational objective, in any field it belongs.

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47 For different contexts of learning, see also Note 38.

c) Learning contexts and programmes created for the purpose of giving the group of children the possibility to explore and actively adopt co-operative approaches and techniques in working and playing together; social competence is mainly addressed in this case for creating worthy societies: "play is inquiry into the challenges and responsibilities of social living" (Henricks, 2015:4).

Today, the commitment to play can be found in early childhood programmes in many different countries (Wood & Artfield, 2005). "Many programs today organize the space, materials and time of the curriculum around a focus on children's play (Frost et al., 2005; Sluss, 2005). The space of the modern classroom is divided and arranged into activity areas or centres, defining the type of play that will occur within the particular space of the classroom. These areas or centres are then stocked with the materials needed to support the type of play that is to occur. The typical daily schedule of early childhood programs now also provides a designated amount of time for play, often labelled free play time, activity time or choice time. In most cases, this is a time of the day during which children are free to choose the area or centre in which they want to play, and once there they are free to choose what they do with the materials available for them in that area" (Kuschner, 2015:288-289).

Adopting Visalberghi's systematisation, we could say that on the one hand, play-like activities and contexts have taken the field and spread at least in the young child's education, while the space of play as such has been transferred and included into the denomination 'free play': during free play time, the child is left free to do what he or she wants, but this somehow weakens the play's educational value, because it is only considered as a free outburst (Bredekamp, 2004).[48]

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[48] An examination of the contemporary relationship between play and early childhood education reveals, however, a paradoxical tension: "On the one hand, children's play has long been regarded as strengthening the fabric of early childhood education at child-care centers, nursery schools, preschools, kindergartens, and the first three grades of elementary schools. Yet on the other hand, educators of children between the ages of three to seven have sharply contested how to weave play into classroom practice. And further, many schools now shrink from play" (Kuschner, 2015:287). The disagreements and tensions concerning play and early childhood education are still with us today, especially in Northern European countries; it has been noted that "in recent years, children's play has come under serious attack. Many preschools and elementary schools have reduced or even eliminated playtime from their schedules" (Zigler & Bishop-Joseph, 2004:1). It seems that didactic instruction and testing are pushing play out of the kindergarten; most forms of schooling or education are "less interested in what comes out of the child than they are in what can be put into or transmitted to the child" (Kuschner, 2015:287). Thus, as children play is "not just in response to external stimuli but also in accord with internal ideas" (Berk, 1994:32), they become less curious about play. Kindergartens are now under intense pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards. These expectations and policies that result from them have greatly reduced, and in some cases, obliterated opportunities for imaginative child initiated play in kindergarten.

1.5.2.2 The Role of Adults in Supporting a Child's Play

Two aspects of the play-curriculum relationship have been addressed within the research on play in the context of early childhood education. Within these studies, play is primarily viewed as a means to foster child development in disciplinary domains. They also gave rise to practical suggestions on "how to create math- or literacy-rich play environments and on how to incorporate math, science or literacy language into children's play (Van Oers & Wardekker, 1999)" (Bodrova & Leong, 2010:2).[49]

Another line of play research has been done in naturalistic settings with children engaged in free play with little or no adult guidance; it focusses on the multiple forms that play might assume (e.g., social, pretend, or object), stressing the fact that it is like a child-initiated activity; "these contributions are associated with the development of broader competencies such as theory of mind (Berk et al., 2006), symbolic representation (Rogers & Evans: 2007), and self-regulation (Miller & Almon, 2009) that not only affect child development in early years but have a long-lasting effect in the school years and beyond" (Bodrova & Leong, 2010:2).

Recommendations for the curriculum coming from these studies emphasise both "the provision of adequate physical spaces and props to support play" and "the need to allow ample time for children's free play in the preschool daily schedule and preserve or increase recess time for kindergartners and children in the primary grades (Farran & Son-Yarbrough, 2001; Smirnova & Gudareva, 2004)" (Bodrova & Leong 2010:2).

This clear separation between the study of play in educational settings and for educational goals from one hand and the study of free play and of its possible developmental consequences on the other is also affected by what Wood (2008) calls "ideological commitment to free play and free choice".

This has, however, largely lost sight of the substantial role of the adult within the playful situations; in field studies, "while there is substantial evidence on learning through play, there is less evidence on teaching through play" (Wood, 2009:27). The focus should, on the contrary, shift to better understanding the distinctive purposes and nature of play in educational settings and the role of adults in planning for play and playfulness in child-initiated or teacher-directed activities.

The pedagogy of play "is defined broadly as the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and

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49 "One set of researchers look into the use of play elements, play environments, or play motivation as a way to enhance instruction in core subjects such as literacy (Saracho & Spodek, 2006; Ginsburg, 2006), mathematics (Fleer, 2009; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009) or science (Dickinson, 2001), or as a way to promote specific areas of development such as the development of children's social-emotional competencies (Connor et al., 2006), oral language (Pellegrini 2009; Pullen & Justice 2003) or gross and fine motor skills (Lillard, 2001), etc." (Bodrova & Leong 2010:1).

teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play" (Wood, 2009:27).

However, the importance of home-based pedagogies of play and the ways in which children teach themselves how to play during their self-initiated activities should not be underestimated. According to an English large-scale longitudinal study,[50] which explored the specific pedagogical actions linking play with positive learning outcomes (Sylva et al., 2007), it is necessary to distinguish between "pedagogical interactions (specific behaviours on the part of adults) and pedagogical framing (the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy which include planning resources and routines)" (Wood, 2009:29). According to the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) scholars, "the most effective (excellent) settings provide both and achieve a balance between the opportunities provided for children to benefit from teacher-initiated group work and the provision of freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities" (EPPE, 2002:43).

"Indicators of effective pedagogy include opportunities for co-construction between children and adults, including 'sustained shared thinking', joint involvement in child and adult-initiated activities and informed interactions in children's self-initiated and free-play activities. The practitioner's role is conceptualized as proactive in creating play/learning environments, as well as responsive to children's choices, interests and patterns of learning" (Wood, 2009:29).

This means that learning through play should not be left to improvisation nor to incident; pedagogical models should be developed and adopted for sustaining 'complex and reciprocal relationships' and organising 'socially constructed and mediated' activities; play should be 'endorsed within integrated pedagogical approaches', but the current situation is not homogeneous all over the world. While in the UK, for example, achieving good-quality play in practice remains a considerable challenge, as teachers face competing demands for accountability, performance and achievement, the experience of the Reggio Children school model in Italy has been acclaimed worldwide for being significant. Teachers and children are here engaged, together with families, in applying and developing an educational model based on participation, observation, mediation, and discussion, according to the constructivist approach. "The physical environment (the 'amiable' school) receives much attention and supports exchange and relationships through physical qualities of transparency, reflectiveness, openness, harmony, softness, and light (Ceppi & Zini, 1998; Gandini, 1993). A classroom atmosphere of playfulness and joy pervades. The school and surrounding community welcome the children into

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50 The study, conducted in the UK in 2004 and named EPPE (Effective Provision for Preschool Education; www.ioe.ac.uk/RB_Final_Report_3-7.pdf) "has provided detailed evidence of the impact of pre-school education and family background on children's development" (Wood, 2009:28).

their culture and toward democratic participation" (Pope Edwards, 2002:9). Play is here considered a source of identity, imagination, freedom; this "makes the idea of play as freedom a natural assumption in the Reggio experience. The will of an individual, if fully nourished and multilaterally expressed within a community, is regarded as a positive and creative force. With the folk memory of totalitarianism lingering in the Reggio consciousness, this makes the 'right to play' more than just a fashionable assertion" (Kane, 2004:282-283).

1.5.2.3 Need for Clarity: Roles, Terminology, Activities

These reflections help to understand the level of awareness the debate on play and education reached, though with some contrasts, in recent decades.

The use of play for educational purposes—or rather, the organisation of ludic activities and programmes that directly influence the educational and developmental levels—made it possible to state useful considerations about the role of the adults in play, on how their collaboration can be less directive, more collaborative, more available to listen to the child's playful initiative, which is instead usually left to a phase of free play, for which the adults decide not to participate. Furthermore, the convincing results of ad hoc research projects made it possible to contrast that 'ideological commitment' that wanted to preserve a certain idea of 'freedom' in play, according to which its introduction in educational settings, or even the participation of adults, eventually pollute its natural evolution and inherent creativity, even influencing a child's development.

According to a research by Bennet et al. (1997), "where children follow their own interests and agendas the teachers realize the need to understand the meaning of play in children's own terms, rather than in relation to predetermined learning objectives. [...] In particular, they realized that children need more time to develop sustained bouts of play, and to return to their own themes and ongoing interests" (Wood, 2009:30).

"Miller and Almon (2009) recommend that neither laissez-faire free play nor didactic highly structured classrooms are the answer, but rather classrooms that are rich in child-initiated play and activities initiated playfully by teachers. They believe that young children need a balance of child-initiated play and more structured and focused experiential learning activities, all occurring in the presence of skilled and engaged teachers" (Kuschner, 2015:289).

"However, the lack of a common definition of play makes it hard to provide specific recommendations for curriculum designers and to advocate for preserving play in early childhood classrooms in the face of increasing demands for a focus on academic skills. One way to solve this dilemma is to use more specific terms like 'playful learning' to make a distinction between child initiated play and adult-initiated activities that make use of play elements in one form or another. This may help to avoid confusions that lead to certain curricula to be labelled as 'play-based'

when in reality they leave no time for children to initiate play on their own. However, the distinction between play and playful learning has to be made clear both in the description of their objectives and the specific pedagogies associated with each of them. In addition, this also calls for more in-depth analysis of how exactly play elements are used in instruction and whether their use is perceived as 'playful' by children themselves or only by the teachers" (Bodrova & Leong, 2009:3).

So, interesting and promising studies and researches are starting, aimed at achieving greater pedagogical awareness in educators, practitioners, if possible in adults 'tout court', about specific modes of interaction and cooperation to be adopted within the play framework and activity, in order to promote the child's development in certain areas.

Among these, some proposals try to establish connections between the children and their teachers, with regard to their attitude about play. In support of the idea that the dichotomy between learning and play is a false one, researchers of NAEYC[51] argue that both direct instruction and play have roles in high-quality early childhood education. Some studies compared children's behaviour when provided with direct instruction (of a sort) about how to activate a novel toy, and when allowed to explore the toy without explicit instruction (a sort of free-play condition). Both children given direct instruction and children in the free play mode learnt the intended use of the toy, but the latter also discovered additional uses of the toy or its pieces; only this group of children showed creativity and problem-solving skills not necessary in the direct instruction condition (Hirsh-Paseck et al., 2009). After the publication of these studies, Snow (2011) proposed that a new strategy to find "the middle ground between play and direct instruction is to view instruction and play as two ways of defining activity in classrooms" (Figure 1.1.). In it, the degrees of child activity and teacher activity are mapped onto each other. The resulting four quadrants show the overlap between teacher instructional strategies (as more or less actively directing) and child play activities. Both of these approaches challenge us to think about the roles of teacher and child, and of play and instruction, in more complex and more intentional ways.

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[51] It is the acronym of the US National Association for the Education of Young Children, www. naeyc.org.
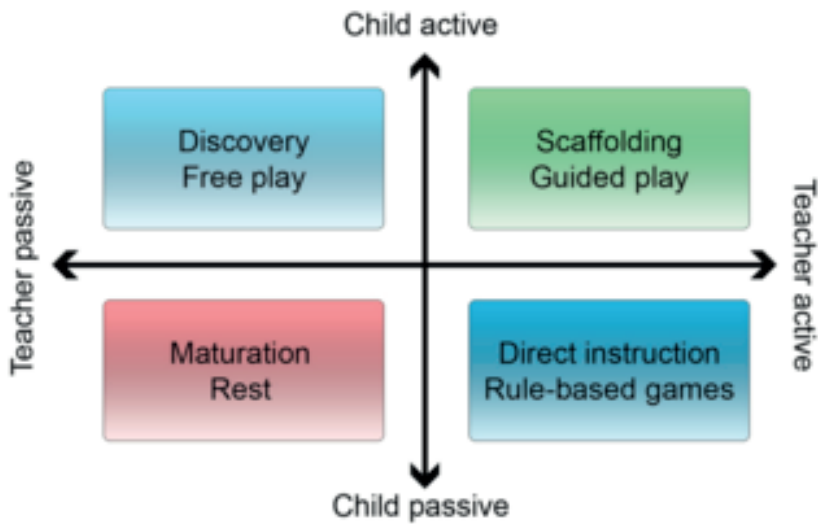
Figure 1.1. Instructed and free play: relationships between teachers and children (Snow, 2011)

1.5.2.4 Play for the Sake of Play

It must be said, however, that these considerations are mainly related, rather than to play itself, to play-like activities and contexts: activities and contexts of play based on programmatically clear educational goals, demanding not only precise planning, but also a different and more complex, participation of the adult.

There is an additional area of reflection and analysis that until now has been overlooked, and is the subject of the development of play as such, for the purpose and objectives of the play itself: what in this section has been called 'play for the sake of play'.

Play, as we have seen, cannot have extrinsic preordained goals—it lives, arises, develops, and stops, only for itself; it is free, but not without limits, and indeed seeks out and constructs by itself the constraint to become more exciting, compelling, and challenging. It resorts to the use of routines and requires rapid changes, evolving towards new and more promising types, and then intertwining the new types with the previous ones, that are already known.

It definitely 'produces' learning on a large scale and in many areas of the individual's development, but it never patently pursues such a purpose. While playing with adults, a child shows play levels of greater complexity and appears more concentrated; this also happens in the case of play with more experienced peers— even if to a different extent and in different ways. These play relationships activate the proximal zone of development.

Play for the sake of play can also be learnt. An educator or a practitioner can enter the child's play to improve, increase, and develop it. not for reaching external goals, not to turn it into a play-like activity, but only to pursue objectives inherent to the play itself.

This awareness is not yet clearly shared in the field sciences: it's about learning to enter play, to play with children, with full awareness of one's own adulthood and educational competence, but maintaining and respecting the constraints and limitations of play itself and taking action to consolidate it, change it, and increase its complexity and flexibility as play, not as a means of learning or development. Bondioli noted already some years ago: "the child is the 'teacher' of play and the adult who plays with the child should not have other intention than play itself, neither to instruct, nor to train. It is a 'negative' role which becomes a positive behaviour [...]. The scope of this ludic action is neither therapeutic nor strictly 'educational', but simply ludic: happy sharing is simultaneously its meaning and its purpose" (Bondioli, 2002:86).

The adult who plays with a child shares his or her own ludic experience with that child, and this interaction will become more advantageous the more the adult's infancy has been richly, extensively, and broadly playful. Playing with a child also means losing the typical adult/child asymmetry, becoming immersed in reciprocity and sharing. It is also a form of sentimental education as it paves the way to listening to the infant's innerness, sharing the emotional reality that appears in play.

This can only be achieved if the adult has in mind a clear developmental model of play, to sustain the child's action, and to 'work with and through play': its characteristics, its mechanisms, its rhythms, its times and needs. In other words, the adult would greatly benefit of having in mind the evolutionary spiral on which any type of play is grafted, as well as the need to indulge both unpredictability and rigorousness.

It is not a simple goal to achieve, and probably, specific training will be needed. In fact, "teachers and practitioners strive to constrain and manage the unpredictability of play that is truly free and aim instead to engineer children's play choices and behaviours in ways that promote educational outcomes. And, if play is to be purposeful, then whose purposes are privileged, and whose purposes are being served: those of the child, the practitioners or the curriculum?" (Wood, 2009:32).

Practitioners need to understand better and more deeply the meaning of children's play activities, and they should know and adopt the appropriate scaffolding strategies to support the interactions between children and between the child and the adult. They should also become more aware of how to plan the educational curricula in order to combine activities that are directed by themselves and those that are initiated by the children. "These integrated approaches require high levels of pedagogical knowledge and skills, flexibility in curriculum planning assessment and evaluation" (Wood, 2009:33).

According to Wood, "further conceptual advances can be facilitated through socio-cultural and activity theories which propose that play is a social practice and is situated in communities of practice" (ibidem). If learning is socially mediated and constructed within an everyday 'real world' mixed with the 'play world', "play activities may facilitate the transfer of knowledge across different contexts, with the distinction that play occurs in imagined situations. Players become part of a discourse community in which meanings, intentions and activities are communicated through mediating means: imagined situations, tools, symbolic actions, scripts, roles and rules" (ibidem).

In this sense, play also becomes the privileged means for creating inclusive contexts and adopting inclusive styles, with respect to any kind of differences, including those related to the possible impairments and to human functioning.

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