

Michele Mainardi

## **13 Contribution of Special Education to the Promotion of Play for the Sake of Play**

### **13.1 Introduction**

Thanks to play, a child, for what concerns his or her personality as well as learning and self-assertion tools, can develop his or her identity and discover and exert his or her own power of free and intentional action on the environment and on persons, on relationships between subjects who play and on things. Play situations are certainly one of the opportunities where the child enjoys the pleasure of competence. Discovery, emergence, and differentiation of interests and abilities are some of the basic factors in the play activity and of its intrinsic underlying motivation (Santer et al., 2007). Success and pleasure provide incentives for and orient motivation. Conversely, 'resistance to assimilation', 'difficult access', and failure can be first factors of exclusion and dependence, and then, of anger, frustration or resignation, and renouncement (learned helplessness).

### **13.2 Development of the Child, Developmental Disability, Special Education**

Every child has innate and early skills that allow him or her to have certain forms of interaction with the surrounding physical and social world (Vygotskij, 1978). The 'state of development' of a person depends on countless factors. It is the end result of his or her behaviours, internal events (such as beliefs, expectations, self-perception, goals, intentions, physical structures, sensory and neural systems), and the effect of external factors, including social influences, roles in society, and the physical environment (Bandura, 1992).

The results and manifestations of development are the product of an indefinable quantity of processes. All individuals develop continually in their own way and at their own pace (Shaffer et al., 2002); consequently, "everyone has a unique developmental trajectory and outcome" (Skelton & Rosenbaum, 2010: 1).

This concept of development, and of the numerous factors influencing such growth, has led special education to focus increasingly on how and under what conditions an ability can be developed, and on how a disability can be managed in the interest of a person's global development, acting independently on the facilitators, and obstacles to development and to the opportunity of doing something, so that each person can develop and act to the best of his or her abilities, regardless of his or her distance from or reference to standards (World Health Organisation, 2002).

Special education operates where the concepts of development disability and child development intersect, but there are still many unanswered questions about such an intersection (Rosenbaum, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2009; Skelton & Rosenbaum, 2010).

### 13.3 Development and Play in Special Education

Play must be considered a process that embraces a wide range of abilities, motivations, behaviours, social situations, environments, contexts, and opportunities (Moyles, 2005).

A child who plays draws great benefit from this activity (Caffari-Viallon, 1988; Hewes, 2006; Selleck, 2001; Sheridan, 1977); however, not all have the same play opportunities at either a quantitative or qualitative level. This depends on the various obstacles or facilitators encountered in the context where the person develops. These obstacles and facilitators, interacting with a person's abilities and developmental disabilities, can disturb or favour the play activities just like they disturb or favour his or her daily habits, placing the child in a situation offering complete opportunity or, on the contrary, a handicap (Fougeyrollas, 1995; Rosenbaum, 2008).

In special education, more than anywhere else, play is often subordinated to other education or developmental priorities, or proposed according to forms and modalities that with regard to the ludic activity traditionally recognise strengths that can be used to enhance the attractiveness and effectiveness of rehabilitative or compensatory learning activities (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, 2003).

Less frequently than others, a child with disabilities finds himself or herself in situations that put him or her in the condition to play spontaneously, with pleasure and in complete freedom (with regard to time and method). Rubin et al. (1983) summarise the distinctive criteria of the play activity as follows. Play is: (1) intrinsically motivated (not governed by appetitive drives, compliance with social demands, or by inducements external to the behaviour itself); (2) controlled by the players (spontaneous, free from external sanctions, its goals are self-imposed); (3) concerned with a process rather than product (play asks "What can I do with this object or person?", and this question differentiates play from exploration that asks, "What is this object/person and what I do with it/him/her?"); (4) non-literal (play activities can be labelled as pretence); (5) free of externally imposed rules (this distinguishes play from games with rules); and (6) characterised by active engagement of the players (this distinguishes play from daydreaming, lounging, and aimless loafing). Therefore, it is not enough that an activity has the characteristic features of play to be considered as ludic.

What makes play unique and richer is the simultaneous presence of each of the factors indicated in this definition; their impact on the development of a

child with a development disability, on his or her experience in taking action in different situations, and on the freedom to undertake such action; the emergence of subjectivity and differentiation of the intrinsic motivation in taking action; testing the possibility of playing. In education, attention aimed at the uniqueness of the child with some impairments in his or her relationships with the world and with learning qualifies special education. The attention focused on the characteristics of the child with disabilities, on the educational environment, and on the play opportunities (adequacy and accessibility) by special education qualify the consideration that the latter has for play by children with disabilities.

### 13.4 Spontaneous Play in Special Education

An absolute priority in special education is to concentrate on free and spontaneous play as a learning and development factor and on accessibility of experience opportunities as a condition of the experience (Aufauvre, 1980; Loos & Hoinkis, 2001; Mainardi, 2010; Santer et al., 2007). Play is important for all children. Special education must ensure that children with disabilities have the same opportunities to play as everyone else: “Self-determination is an educational outcome” (Wehmeyer, 1996). The studies that focus on this issue (Nankervis & Stancliffe, 2006; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2003) show that self-determination is directly correlated to the opportunities to make choices supported by the environment.

Educational contexts within which children with special education needs develop must take into account that “Self-initiated free play experiences are vital for the normal growth and development of all children” (Missiuna & Pollock, 1991: 882). The adequacy of the environment, the accessibility of the situations and of the play opportunities, and the frequency of the experience affect the possibility of experiencing play and oneself in play.

The specific educational context with special consideration for (1) the individual child, (2) accessibility of the living and development environment, and (3) the predisposition of opportunities for choice and free action determine the play opportunities and must be the focus of attention of education professionals and education consultants of families of children with disabilities. The child who due to endogenous, educational, or environmental reasons cannot carry out active roles in play situations, involving responsibility of choice and management of activities, is a child with a disadvantage (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1992), personal attributes have the power to influence psychological and social development (“developmentally instigative personal characteristics”) just like the “hierarchical environmental system of influence” in which the person is inserted, as well as time.

Sontag (1996), based on the considerations by Shonkoff et al. (1992), states that the influence on the development by exogenous factors at the base of a disability

(organic causes of genetic or environmental origin) is important, but it has been proven that the environmental characteristics contribute significantly to a child's skills. The psychomotor competences of the child significantly affect the behavioural manifestations, and in particular, spontaneous play, adaptive behaviours, and mother-child interactions.

The type and degree of disabilities, as such, are not predictive indicators of instigator characteristics of a person's specific development. The characteristics of a child generally associated with development include health problems (heart and neurological disorders), personality traits, and their behavioural manifestations; the convictions of family members as far as how and what influences the enrichment of a child's development; instead, neither gender nor general family characteristics (family structure, economic situation, profession, health, ethnic group, etc.) would seem to have an influence as specific instigator factors.

Other studies (Zetlin et al., 1987) report how some adults (parents or education professional) exert too much control on the child (hyperprotection, priority on interventions based on education, and development purposes aimed at acquiring specific instrumental skills), while others assume different attitudes, more open to the independent and self-initiated experience. Other research studies confirm the reduction in expectations towards independent activity of the child with disabilities by the adult in relation with the decreased initiative and reaction times (Eheart, 1982; Gunn et al., 1982; Jones, 1977; Serpa & Meneres, 2003).

Physical, social, personal, and environmental barriers that limit the play experiences of children with disabilities must be delineated and considered in a facilitatory approach to the promotion of free play at home and at school (Missiuna & Pollock, 1991). Children with disabilities may find themselves in a situation with an accumulation of difficulties due to (1) greater dependence on their caregivers compared to other children; (2) spending more time than their peers at home; (3) passive involvement in activities made necessary by possible requests to provide the person with assistance. In addition, parents who are called on to act as a therapist with the child have less time and are less inclined to prepare and accompany free play situations, especially if they are not considered as particularly significant activities within the PEP (Personalised Education Plan).

Special education must consider that children with developmental disabilities may have a disadvantage in the exploration, interaction, and use of experience and play opportunities. There may be an impairment in the activity that allows the child to discriminate play, and therefore, take full advantage of the experiences through the senses and movement (Goldschmied & Jackson, 1994; Hutt et al., 1989; Karrer et al., 1979; Mainardi 1988; Ryan & Jones, 1975).

With respect to spontaneous and free play opportunities, special education must prevent the additional accumulation of difficulties (secondary impairments) in children with disabilities (Mainardi, 2013). To do this, special education must

consider the ‘handicap’,<sup>1</sup> that the child must or can cope with (Mainardi, 2010). Attention with regard to the accessibility of opportunities and the adequacy of toys, situations, and play materials must be focused on the child’s deficits and subsequent functional limitations. The presence of disabilities has a more or less direct effect on the quality and quantity of play opportunities and on their possible impact on a child’s development.

The objective difficulties that the child encounters in the development process represent the source, that is, the initial stimulus of the manifestation of compensatory processes (Barisnikov & Petitpierre, 1994), but at the same time, the objective disabilities of the child motivate the compensatory activities also with his or her entourage.

The presence of disabilities in a child must not, in any case whatsoever, lower the level of expectations with respect to the importance of play, the inherent pleasure of play, and the opportunities of playing. The caregivers (from parents to professionals) must force themselves to allow the child to play and must intervene with caution in moments perceived as impasses in the play activity not to compensate, but to respect and promote the child’s intentionality and action.

It is of little importance if a child has a disability or not, the child must play. To do this, it is important that the child has time, that there are playmates, and that he or she is given space and accessibility to the environment; that the surrounding social entourage enjoys playing, watching someone play, teaching to play, and considers the importance of play for the development of the person who is playing.

### **13.5 “Let me (them) Really Play”: a Priority in Special Education**

The risk that play is suffocated by other concerns or by ‘compensatory’ activities that, with regard to play are merely instigative without having other important and specific characteristics, exists to the extent in which the educational professional, the family, and peers act as if it were enough to let children play. A child’s play must be motivated, safeguarded, and developed in all cases, but even more so, for the case involving children with a handicap.

It is of vital importance that whoever is close to the child should not only focus on compensating for a deficiency or a disability (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). It is crucial to think of the child. The impairment must be bypassed, so that the child can take full advantage of his or her condition, just like any other child:

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<sup>1</sup> In special education, the purpose behind the notion of handicap is to be able to distinguish, in operative terms, the influencing factors that make it possible to provide specific references to the mediation and support activity to facilitate accessibility of experience opportunities, from the general condition of the person with a disability (Mainardi, 2010).

1. Free and spontaneous play is the right of every child, as is the possibility of being able to fully exploit adequate and accessible play opportunities (at a physical, cognitive, affective, and social level).
2. The child with some type of impairment must be able to have the chance to play with satisfaction and success: he or she must be able to distinguish the opportunities and the specific characteristics of the free play situations and to experience and to exercise his or her abilities to intervene on the development and management phases of the play sequence as a fact and event in his or her life.
3. Play situations must be adapted and made accessible (Mainardi, 2010) and must allow the child with some type of impairment to be included within his or her natural social context and his or her group of peers.

Special education must have the following educational priority: “Of prime importance for play, however, are the relationships that the adult develops, which give children the confidence to act autonomously, make choices, follow their interests and interact with peers. In other words, creating a context in which children feel psychologically safe and socially included” (Santer et al., 2007:59).

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