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Play, Identity and Inclusion

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Abstract

This paper describes play pedagogy and its importance for children's development of identity. Play pedagogy is of great importance for the development of security, satisfaction and joy. This method is particularly important for children in need of special support to aid their ability to learn and to work with others. An undeveloped sense of play is associated with loneliness and difficulties in participation in preschool and school activities. Data from a questionnaire given to play pedagogues is used to identify three major factors; cognitive, emotional and social. The article focuses on the concept of identity, and the possibility of becoming part of the school community and society and obtaining a feeling of inclusion and participation.

As a prelude I feel free to rewrite a Latin sentence. I think this one about "ludare" (play) might be as true as the old one about "navigare" (sail)

Ludare neccese est vivere non est neccese

In this paper I want to describe the method Play pedagogy and, using different theories, outline how and in what ways the method can be of importance for children's development, regarding identity and inclusion. The age of the children attending Play pedagogy is between three and twelve years.

As has been found in earlier studies and research projects (Berg, 1992; Erikson, 1986; Garvey, 1990; Macintyre, 2002; Olofsson, 1987; Paley, 2004; Vygotsky, 1980; Winnicott, 1983; Öhman, 2001) the ability to play is of great importance for the child's development in many areas. For quite a lot of children, who for different reasons have not in their homes or preschools, developed the sense of play and the ability to play, which requires security, satisfaction and joy, the method Play pedagogy has appeared to be of great help (Borg, 2001; Elfving & Sandén, 1992; Lindberg, 2004; Sandén, 1994; 1999, 2005; Tähkäaho, 2003). In their works, they found that the method was important for children in need of special support and for their ability to learn to be able to play and work with others. A child who lacks, or has an undeveloped sense of, or ability to play, is often a lonely child and has difficulties to take part in several different activities in preschools and schools.

To show the effects of Play pedagogy I will in this paper, by way of introduction, use my data from one study mentioned above (Sandén, 2005), where a questionnaire with 44 items was distributed to 320 'play pedagogues' with a return rate of 78%, n = 250. I found through factor analysis concerning development and learning, three major factors; a cognitive factor, an emotional factor and a social factor.

In this article I focus on the same development and learning but with focus on the concepts *identity*, and the possibilities to become part of the school community and society and obtain a *feeling of inclusion and participation*. Secondly, in this paper, I will tell the story about Philip, a boy I met in Play pedagogy and finally I will relate two

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cases, from an ongoing study, where young children have got support and reconciliation through Play pedagogy.

Play Pedagogy

Play pedagogy has in Sweden been used as a method for children in need of special support since 1976 – 1977 when Gildebrand (1984), Licentiate of Philosophy, was in charge of a project at the University of Umea, named “Children with emotional disturbances develop through play and creative activities”.

Children in need of Play pedagogy

Gildebrand (1984) writes that the idea with Play pedagogy in short is, that children who are so anxious that they have difficulties in coping with activities in groups, go with the play-pedagogue to a special room to play and work with creative materials under conditions which the child will, on the whole, decide for him-/herself.

That was the start of this method. During the following years the method developed into a pedagogy for many young children, not only those who in the past, were called children with emotional disturbances, but those who are in need of special support for many different reasons, and where Play pedagogy helps the child to keep concentration in their thoughts and in their activities.

The areas where these children often have difficulties are, amongst others, the following:

- Capacity to imagine and keep concentration;
- Ability to understand own experiences and feelings;
- Ability to control own behaviour;
- Ability to plan actions;
- Experience of self (assertiveness), and;
- Experience of competence.

The method Play pedagogy

Play pedagogy is seen as a kind of special tuition and action and is, according to its theories, built with strict rules regarding the Play pedagogues way of being and acting in different situations in the playroom.

When the Pupil Social Welfare staff has taken the decision to offer Play pedagogy to a child the offer goes first to the child’s parents. If they accept, the offer goes to the child, who decides if he/she wants to come to the Play pedagogy. The child says almost always yes, but naturally it is a free choice. Play is, depending on its nature, always voluntary.

On the child’s first play session it must first get acquainted to the room, which is equipped with toys that stimulate fantasy play and creativeness. In the room the child finds doll’s house with dolls, play services for food and coffee, telephones, doctoral outfits, tame and wild animals, toy soldiers and lots of other things. In the room there is also a sandpit, water, crayons, water colour pens and clay. Each child chooses its own way to play and play on the level he/she has reached. The child is invited to the playroom for 30 minutes once a week on a fixed day and time.

The child is informed about the rules in the playroom

- That the child chooses by him-/herself what to play and how to use the materials

- That the child makes all decisions over toys and material but not over the pedagogue
- That the child can invite the pedagogue in fantasy play to take roles
- That time must be obeyed
- That the playtime shall be used for play and creative activity and nothing else.

The acting of the play pedagogue

During the play session the pedagogue follows the rules below. The pedagogue:

- Asks no questions;
- Does not always answer questions from the child, but refer the question back unanswered;
- Has no fostering or rebuking attitude;
- Never tells the child what to do or gives suggestions;
- Does not explain or make tasks easier;
- Does not give praise or criticism;
- Only describes in words what the child makes and creates in play and creating activity.

The method of Play pedagogy described here and grounded on the following theories leads to development and learning, as mentioned above in both cognitive and emotional areas as well as in social areas (Sandén, 2005).

In short

Words, that might illustrate the kind of play that is included in Play Pedagogy, are

- *Having fun*
- *Feeling safe*
- *Satisfaction*
- *As if* – you can act as if you were somebody else.
- *In make believe* and *fantasy play* you can for example, make yourself believe that you are a superstar or a hero who can rescue the world
- *In role playing* you can get a feeling and an understanding of how it can be to be another person.

Play Theories

Theories with great significance for Play pedagogy are the following

Mead and Berg

Mead (1969) uses the term *self* for *identity*. The sense of self is the view one has of oneself: one's appearance, one's gestures, words and actions. In the concept there is also an emotional aspect and a judgement of one's own actions. When Mead explains how the identity is strengthened he writes that there is a strong connection between *identity* and *memory* and he uses the concept "I" and "me" to elucidate this relation. Mead names the first self "I". The "I" is the self just now (the present tense) the experiencing subject. The other part of self is named "me", which already exists in the child's memory.

The “I” reacts to the self, which arises through the taking of attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the “me” and we react to it as an “I” (ibid., p. 174).

To make a child’s sense of self awaken and develop, much attention from and confirmation by the child’s “significant others” is vital. Significant others are those who are most important in the child’s life. The self develops in that the child takes the others attitudes towards it.

The significant others will later in the child’s life be replaced by the general other, that is persons in preschools, schools and society, who are important in the child’s life.

Taking of attitudes is a concept also being used about play. In role playing the child pretends to be someone else and gets his or her first identity when being the other and seeing oneself.

In their writing about how Habermas view Mead’s theory, Eriksen and Weigård (2000) reason that taking attitudes lays the base for a normatively controlled social behaviour. Why do the norms of the significant others tend to be regarded as *valid* norms? The answer is that they do not always do that. The “I” embraces individuality with an independent critical attitude, which means that the individual has ability to judge if social expectations should be regarded or not.

Play can help the child deny false interpretation of itself because play can both strengthen the “I” and increase critical attitude.

Berg, (1992) argues that in order to strengthen development, play must have a significant place in the child’s life. During play, the child’s “I” plays with its “me”. The individual builds up his or her psychological backbone, early in life through play, by reliving important events. Individual means indivisible. A child becomes indivisible by repeating over and over and reaffirming events in play. Without play there will be no identity (ibid.).

Winnicott

Winnicott (1983) stresses that play is a universal activity that is linked with health. He emphasizes that the child, in order to be able to play, must have experienced a reliable relation. If it has, a special psychic area grows in the child. This zone is neither reality nor fantasy. Play lives there, and not only play but man’s entire creativity. To this inner room the child and the grownups can always return and collect strength and memories of who I am and who I want to be. Winnicott (ibid.) also names this room the inner theatre. There you can act-out memories and hopes and get into the direction which is yours. You can also let this inner theatre give you consolation, in hard times. It is important that you look after this psychic area and have it well equipped. You do that through playing, listening to music, writing books, reading books, painting and so on. That is through different kinds of creativity that the area is kept vivid and can give you health and strength. In these ways you can say that you find and protect your identity. Play has a great importance for everybody’s life because it also leads to development and to group relations. The playing child gets playmates and children who play together learn to live together and inclusion may become a reality. Winnicott underlines further that all play

can work as therapy, if children get the opportunity to play, under conditions that are safe. These safe conditions are offered in Play pedagogy.

Erikson

Erikson (1986) expresses that play is a function of I and that man is man only when he is playing and there he is in his true identity. Play is for the growing child a way to handle inner conflicts. In play the child creates models where it learns to handle different situations that meet the child in real life. Through play a child can get command over him-/herself and his/her surroundings.

Play with others promote fellowship and social development but sometimes children need help from grown-ups in order to learn to play and to come into the playing affinity. This help is offered in Play pedagogy.

Both Winnicott (1983) and Erikson (1986) view play as a phenomenon that follows man during life. Adult persons have their play in for example, cultural experiences, artistic creating or in researching.

Garvey

Playing and friendship are tightly attached to each other. Garvey (1990) means that playing together remains a salient property of friendship. And having friends is an important condition for inclusion as I see it. If a child has nobody to play with, it is a serious and sad state of affairs.

In their very first years of life, most children learn certain basic rules for social interaction (*ibid.*), and they learn them through play. The adult shows the child what is play and what is reality and teaches the child that certain rules must be applied if the play is to continue and give content and joy.

The child practises future social skills through social play (Garvey 1976). The rules that must apply are:

Accordance, which means that the children understand the play in the same way;

Reciprocity, which means that children listen to each other's suggestions and can adjust their behaviour accordingly;

Turn taking, which means that children share the initiative equally. The play assumes the form of a dialogue between two people, who for the moment are equals.

But if the child has not learnt these rules in his/her home or in his/her early preschool time, these social rules can be learnt in Play pedagogy. When inviting the pedagogue in fantasy play, the child gives the pedagogue a role and they play together. As these rules normally are learnt in early childhood you can never expect a child to teach another child these rules. They must be learnt with an adult who has lots of patience and that is what a Play pedagogue must have for the method to be successful.

Results from the Questionnaire

Play pedagogy is building its method on the theories mentioned above. We know that we meet children in preschool and school that, for different reasons, haven't had the security and care during their early lifetime that is one of the conditions that must be at hand for the inner psychic area to grow (Mead, 1969; Winnicott, 1983). We also meet children

who are very insecure of their own ability to learn and to get friends (Erikson, 1986; Garvey 1976, 1990)

In this section I will present the three factors that crystallized when I used a questionnaire (Sandén, 2005); the cognitive factor, the emotional factor and the social factor and reason about how it could be possible to associate them to the concepts identity and inclusion.

First I will present the table over the factor loadings that show the children's development

Table 1. Standardized factor loadings with thirteen observed variables concerning children/pupil and their development through Play pedagogy

Observed Variables	Factors and their loadings		
	Cognitive factor	Emotional factor	Social factor
Ability to concentrate	,726		
Ability to plan and control own actions	,656		
Structure in thoughts	,652		
Knowledge about limits between play and not-play	,640		
Self control	,472	(,395)	(,308)
Elevated language	,375	(,309)	
Self esteem		,773	
Mental sense of well-being		,751	
Meaning and structure in experiences	(,521)	,549	
Emotional development		,519	(,510)
Ability to solve conflicts			,735
Ability to play and work with others			,693
Empathic ability	(,301)		,692

Discussion

As you can see in Table 1 the three factors have the following contents.

The cognitive factor consists of six variables:

- increased ability to concentrate
- increased ability to plan and control own actions
- increased structure in thoughts
- increased knowledge about limits between play and not-play and
- better self-control
- a more elevated language

The emotional factor consists of four variables

- higher self-esteem
- more positive mental sense of well-being
- a higher degree of meaning and structure in experiences and
- positive emotional development and

The social factor consists of three variables

- increased ability to solve conflicts
- increased ability to play and work with others and
- increased empathic ability

You can see from the table that some variables turn out to be in more than one factor. *Better self control* is found in all three factors, but to a lesser degree in emotional and social factor than in cognitive factor. So you can come to the conclusion that Play pedagogy has been of some importance in these fields and also influenced the development of identity and inclusion.

When you know yourself better, which is expressed in another variable in the cognitive factor, namely "Ability to plan and control your own actions", you have taken command over yourself because your identity is stronger than before. "The individual builds up his or her psychological backbone by, early in life through play, reviving important events" (Mead, 1976 and Berg, 1992). You build your identity through play. It gives the child an inner calm and a more secure direction in actions when "Structure in thoughts", which is another of the variables in the cognitive factor, have established.

It is of great help for the child, to know about the limits between play and not-play, when he/she is together with others. Because then the child has learnt the basic rules for social interaction through play (Garvey, 1976).

I mean that several of the thirteen variables in the three factors are of importance for a stable identity to grow and for making possibilities for inclusion and citizenship. What we also can see, is that the factors interrelate. The development of one variable in one factor influences variables in another factor.

Philip in Play Pedagogy

Now I want to tell you the story about one boy I have met in Play pedagogy. I will call him Philip. He came as a refugee from an African country and he came to Sweden with his mother and three siblings. I met him when he was eight years old and had been in Sweden for about two and a half years. He was a pupil in the first grade with absolutely no interest in figures and letters and with no idea about how to relate to his teacher and his class mates in the classroom or in the playground. He was a very lively boy, always running and jumping around indoors and outdoors and very often laughing when he was given a reprimand.

The pupil social welfare staff took the decision to offer him Play pedagogy and with the help of an interpreter his mother was asked to give her permission and she said yes. I am however sure, she did not quite understand what we, the personnel at school, were talking about, when we told her about Play pedagogy and that we had a hope that the method would help her son to find some calmness in thoughts and emotions and thereby find the ability to keep his mind concentrate and learning possible.

So one day I came to his class room and asked him to come with me. He knew about me. He had met me as his special needs education teacher several times. He came willingly with me and we walked together to another building where I had my play room.

When I showed him all the things there were, he touched them and kept saying "wow".

Is this for fun? Is this makes believe?

And he takes a big lump of clay, which he works with great energy. He bangs it in the table and hammers on it to soften it up. Then he flings it away and takes up the dragon, the crocodile and the snake.

Those frighten those.
The dragon and crocodile live on one side of the street and the snake on the other.
They quarrel.
Now a horse with a rider comes. The snake starts to eat the rider.

During this first play session Philip creates in his play: eating, shooting, killing and dying.

I confirm and describe in words what he is playing.

You *pretend* that the crocodile dies.
You *play* that you shoot the snake.

He plays and talks in a rapid tempo. I can see that he is in, what Winnicott (1983) names “a special psychic area” or “an inner room” which is neither reality nor fantasy. I can also see that he looks engaged but not afraid. And then suddenly he turns to me and says

Now they are all kind again. Snakes and dragons and all.
What time is it?
May I paint?

In a tremendous speed he takes out paintbrushes and colours and paints with orange and lilac colours with broad brushes.

I tell him that the clock will soon sound and he finishes his painting. We talk about that he is coming back next Monday at the same time as today and I follow him to his class room. He waves goodbye to me when he goes in to his classmates.

Philip came to the play room 29 times, so in all he had around 15 hours of Play pedagogy. When I now reread my journal I can discover a couple of different play themes that he returns to at intervals.

One theme Philip often returns to is playing with the dolls house and the small dolls belonging to it. Often a thief comes to the house and when he comes terrible things might happen. Philip uses the word “thief” for the evil person. And the evil person quite often kills the people living in the house. And I repeat saying

You pretend that the thief kills the boy.

He often blows balloons, ties them hard and then stitches a hole in them so that they bang. He looks at me saying

I get afraid when they bang. Do you get afraid?

And I can't deny it, because he sees how I startle with every loud bang.

Another theme is playing in the sand pit and digging tunnels. Philip sometimes combines the balloon play with the sand play. He lays the blown up balloon in the sandpit and tries to hide it in the sand. It is hard work, when the sand keeps gliding off. Here he really can show endurance.

He also has a recurrent theme with a small brown baby doll. This little doll is sometimes buried in the sand, but is always rescued and sometimes a super baby who can fly and help the others when they are in danger.

One theme is about being dead and coming to life again.

I saw them in the sand. They were all dead. There were thieves coming and they were bad.

And then after a while he says

They all live in a castle of sand. And it is very nice and cosy there.

Of course I often wondered what these play themes meant to him. It is not often that we, who works as play pedagogues, come to know what the play means to the child. The whole idea with the method is that the child helps himself/herself through his/her play.

But two days after Philip played about the dead people in the sand, we, his teacher, the headmaster and I, had a school meeting with his mother. One of Philip's elder brothers came too and functioned as an interpreter. On an earlier occasion we had used an educated interpreter, but he and Philip's mother disliked each other and therefore the meeting led to no good result. This meeting was opened by the mother who said

What has he now been up to? He is such a stupid boy.

The home-room teacher and I said at the same time.

No, that is not so.

And we tried to explain to her that her boy was not stupid. But we were worried over his restlessness. I told her that her boy was nice and polite and that he now could hold together play themes over quite a long time.

Philip's mother looked very sad and then began to speak her own language at a high speed and for quite a while. Philip was listening and started to weep. His brother began to talk to the mother in a low and calming way. Then the brother explained to us. When they were in their homeland there often were air strikes and when that happened they should all seek shelter at once. One day Philip was out playing with his younger brother and they did not hear the alarm. The little brother was killed. Philip saw it all. They had not wanted to talk about it now when they had come to Sweden.

Now Philip's mother began to cry and Philip went over to her and sat on her lap.

These were the terrible memories that Philip has tried to grasp. About what had happened to his little brother and to all his family.

Some weeks after this meeting we had Christmas holidays. When Philip came back from it he was quite satisfied and told me that he had had a good time. He had been with his mother to town, and his father had contacted them. He was now safe in USA and he wanted his family to come to him. Telling this Philip was happy and unhappy at the same time. He was happy about seeing his father again and unhappy about leaving his friends and teachers in Sweden.

Some months later I got a letter from him. One of his sisters had helped him write it. He liked it in the USA, but he hoped he could come back and meet all the people he had got to know.

Discussion

I have chosen to tell the story about Philip because he is a refugee child and in these days we have many refugee children in our country. They must get an opportunity to understand what has happened to them and slowly get acquainted with the new country and rebuild their identity and at length, hopefully, get a feeling of inclusion. I suppose that Play pedagogy helped Philip to rebuild a more solid identity. By, in his inner theatre (Winnicott, 1983), reliving some early memories, which were very hard for him to understand, he could in play begin to put the memory pieces together so that they were reasonable. He thereby reached an understanding of what has happened (Berg, 1992; Mead, 1969) and he could also start to reflect on his own role in the scary episodes. Raundalen (1997) and Lindberg (2004) emphasize that sorrow and fright does not disappear because time passes on. You have to work it through to be able to get on with your life. Philip also made some progress, concerning the way he cooperated with others in work and play. He got able to listen to the other children to a larger extend and a bit more able to adjust his behaviour to the situations (Garvey, 1976). He also developed his ability in turn taking (*ibid.*) and reached a feeling of being included.

Glimpses from an Ongoing Study

In a study just started, data are collected via interviews with

- children who have obtained Play pedagogy some months and some years ago, and;
- grown ups, who have obtained Play pedagogy during preschool and elementary school.

The questions put to them are about their remembrances from the play sessions and if they believe that the method has been of any significance for them. And if so: In what ways?

Here I will just shortly tell about two of the grownups and what they told me when I met them, eighteen years after their Play pedagogy sessions with me.

Lisa – A relief

When I first met Lisa she was seven years old. She was silent and shy. She did not want to be with the other children and not with the teachers either. She sat alone in the classroom with her head bent down and in the playground she stood at a distance from the other children just looking at them. Lisa is today an elegant woman, who has a talent

in expressing herself. She is working halftime in a clerical job and writes a lot in her spare time. She lives alone in her own apartment. She wants to be a journalist.

- *I was always afraid in school. Except for when I came to the playroom.*
- *It was a relief coming away from the class-room. You know I never wanted to answer questions. In the classroom I got many. But in the playroom, You never asked me any questions. It was like an oasis. I felt secure.*
- *In the class-room I wipped a lot. And all the others, both the adults and the children were very annoyed with me. Because I could never explain why I cried.*
- *Now I understand that I have a social phobia which I now get a treatment for.*
- *My other teachers made it clear for me that it is not allowed to be like me.*
- *But in the playroom the whole of me was allowed.*

You can say about Lisa that through her playing once a week she felt acceptance, and perhaps and hopefully it strengthened her identity.

Paul – It gave a feeling of confidence

When I met Paul in Play pedagogy he was seven years old. He was pale and anxious and quite often found sitting under his school bench. He had been separated from his invalid mother some months earlier and many things in his world were new to him. When I now meet him, he is a tall and healthy looking man with some responsibilities as caretaker at some schools in a small town where he lives by himself in a small apartment. Paul had some difficulties to express in words what Play pedagogy had meant for him. But he was very pleased to see me again after all these years.

- *My teachers were bad.*
- *Sometimes I was very worried in the classroom.*
- *I got back my composure when I came to the play room.*
- *You learn many things when you are playing.*
- *Do you remember Chris? And that there was a fire at his home? I told you that and asked if he might come to you in the play room.*

I think when mentioning Chris he tells us something important about Play pedagogy. It is a place where you can start to understand what has happened to you. You can integrate new events in your memory, in your “me”. You need time and possibility to let your “I” play with your “me” (Mead, 1976). In play you can handle your inner conflicts (Erikson, 1986).

Paul developed a strong feeling of understanding and empathy for his unhappy friend. Play pedagogy might have had some importance for that and also for his feeling of security and identity.

Final Remarks

In my ongoing study the children who earlier had attended Play pedagogy, told that they felt very vulnerable in the group and heavily forced by the pedagogues there. I will here also quote a play pedagogue who said

For children with behavioural problems Play pedagogy is the peak of the week. There they are spared negative judgements and conflicts. Play pedagogy turn out to be a safe breathing-space because no assessment is made (Sandén, 2005).

I assume, that the play pedagogue in some aspects during the time of play sessions, might take the role of both “the significant other” and “the general other” and thereby help the child to develop its self and its identity (Mead, 1969). To be able to play the child must have experienced a reliable relation (Winnicott, 1983). And it is the play pedagogues ambition to offer that. As is told in the story about Philip, Play pedagogy can give important support to refugee children and others who are suffering severe loses.

The positive results for children’s development, which can be understood from this report, ought to get more significance in pre schools and schools. When children, who have been worried and unable to concentrate, start to get interested in listening and learning, it brings about positive consequences for the whole group of children (Elfving & Sandén, 1992).

We who work with young children ought to show our respect for play. If not, we deprive children of the best universal way to develop identity and get possibilities to be included in social groups. First to have someone to play with, (Folkman & Svedin, 2003) and then as a result of that, start to wish to get included in society as a whole.

In the beginning of this text I wrote a Latin sentence and now I will end the text quoting Schiller (1795).

Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a Man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing (ibid, p. 80)

So my wish is, that we who works in preschools and schools, will inspire children to be wholly Man, which means Man in the full sense of the word.

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