CHAPTER 7

The preschool child and play

T.G. Smith
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7.1 Introductory remarks

From the very oldest or earliest writings known to man, it is apparent that, already in the distant past, there were philosophers and educationists who perceived, thought about, and wrote about play as a teaching and educative activity during the child's first years of existence. At the same time, artist-craftsmen (and later, manufacturers) began to design and produce toys. Commercially produced toys helped to make certain games more enjoyable, but in the course of time, the teaching and educative possibilities of these became understood and were utilized. In fact specific games played with specific toys are today recognized as important educative and moulding aids.

7.2 Examples of the importance attached to children's play activities as means of teaching and learning by a number of scholars in the past

Many centuries before the birth of Christ, the Greeks saw the relationship between play and education. Plato (427 - 347 B.C.) considered the educative value of play so important that he even referred to it in his proposed education laws. In these proposed laws, he gave practical advice to mothers of infants as to what games were suitable for their children, and he also indicated why certain games were especially important for exercising, amongst others, the child's motor capabilities, his powers of discrimination and his intellectual abilities. Plato further distinguished between spontaneous play, and deliberate, planned games. He advocated that planned games be used as a means to educate the infant towards becoming a worthy citizen.

The Roman philosopher-educationist, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 - 43 B.C.), believed that instruction through the medium of play should
begin as early as possible. He adopted this standpoint because he believed that play assisted in the identification and development of the child's natural talents.

Marcus Fabius Quintilian (35 - 95 A.D.), a famous intellectual and teacher of Rome, attached great value to the intellectual moulding value of good instruction in conjunction with organized games. According to him, the child was to learn in a specific way while he played.

John Amos Comenius (1592 - 1670) subscribed to a most interesting and accountable concept of teaching. He said that the teaching of the child should start with play. The mother was required to provide the opportunities and circumstances that would make it possible for her child to play happily and spontaneously. Spontaneous and joyful play would develop the senses and sharpen the memory. At school, the senses, memory, comprehension and ability to judge would not only be developed as a result of instruction, but also and in particular as a result of the formative value of games. It is therefore understandable why Comenius regarded the "playground" as an essential requirement for any well-organized school.

The novel, *Émile*, written by the Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778), exercised a profound influence on education in his time. In this work, he adopted the standpoint that the child is educated by himself (according to his own nature), by people and by things surrounding him. Consequently, the infant should be taken to an isolated environment (the countryside) where his natural tendencies may develop spontaneously by virtue of his own observations, investigation, self-activity and play.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 - 1827) laid the foundations for modern infant teaching and education. After the death of his father, the very young Johann was raised by his widowed mother, and this perhaps explains why he later attributed such an important role to the mother with regard to the education of children in the family circle. In one of his books, *Lienhard und Gertrud* (translated into English under the title "Leonard and Gertrude: a book for the people") he attempted, through the main character, to paint for his readers the image of the ideal mother who instructs her children through play.

Pestalozzi drew attention to the fact that teaching must always take account of the child's level of progression and ability to reason. It has to be in accord with the child's experiential world and stimulate him to investigate the world for himself, because, by doing this, he learns. Pestalozzi wrote that: "Everything he learns is acquired by his own observation, by his experience ..." (Caplan 1973:259).

The child's intellectual abilities had to be developed by means of observation (Pestalozzi was one of the founders of teaching by observation), self-activity (including play) and contact with nature. Children were to use all their senses (ears, eyes, nose, mouth/tongue and hands) as far as
possible, in order to get to know sounds, shapes, tastes, smells and numbers. He was strongly opposed to memorization as a method of learning without the necessary underlying understanding. His byword for infant education and teaching was: help the child to help himself.

Robert Owen (1771 - 1858) rebuilt the little town of Lanark in Scotland, where his cotton-mill and factory were situated, into a model industrial town, and from here launched his education and social experiment. Child labour was abolished immediately in his factories and the workers' children and infants were sent to school (as well as to crèches and infant schools). Playgrounds were provided for children to spend as much time as possible in the open air, and opportunities created so that they could learn through games and self-discovery.

Friedrich Wilhelm Fröbel (1782 - 1852) was one of Pestalozzi's most enthusiastic followers. He established an infant school in Blankenburg (Germany) in 1837, which he named a Kindergarten (child-garden). To him, everything in, or a product of Creation was necessarily subjected to the same rule of law. Just as a young plant carries within itself the ability to grow, to reach maturity, to bear fruit and to die, just so the infant possesses the inherent capacity for self-development. Therefore, the youngsters in the Kindergarten, like young plants, should be allowed to develop - naturally and without compulsion - and to give expression to their progression towards maturity. In this wonderful event of "natural development" and "maturation", play occupied a central position: it is the most important form through which expression can be given to experience. It promotes good health and has value for social, intellectual and moral moulding.

To encourage the child's natural development and growth, Fröbel developed the concept of play "gifts". These play "gifts" are in effect toys, comprising different coloured balls of wool, building-blocks, mosaic tiles, small braided mats, sticks, beads, clay, objects made from cardboard, and so forth. To each of these play "gifts" Fröbel attached a certain symbolic meaning. In this way, for instance, a ball would represent the perfect unity, and completeness of Creation. By handling the ball, and playing with it, the child develops a sense of, or consciousness of, the unity that exists between all things. Seating children in a circle makes them aware of, and feel part of a social group, of the whole of mankind, and, ultimately, part of the Absolute.

By playing with building-blocks, the child is able to imitate objects from everyday life, to deploy his intellect and creative abilities, and learn concepts while he is at play. Thus, by these means the child's inner forces can be released.

In America, two sisters, Elizabeth and Mary Peabody, did much to emphasize the importance of games in infant education. (In 1866 they even published a short work entitled "Moral culture of infancy and Kindergarten guide", in which their ideas were set out.) The Peabody
sisters so impressed a certain Milton Bradley (1836 - 1911) with the important role play enjoyed in the educative event, that he established the "Milton Bradley Company" in 1863 in Massachusetts with the intent of producing suitable toys and of publishing colourful visual material for use in infant schools.

The British educationist, Margaret Macmillan (1860-1931), in association with her sister, Rachel, attempted to improve the health conditions and general living circumstances of infants in the London slums. In 1908 they opened the first school clinic, and in 1914, the first outdoor infant school based specifically on play. The intention was to mould these neglected children, by means of both spontaneous and controlled play, into happy young people.

In America, Caroline Pratt (born 1867) did a great deal for infant education, and for the production of toys of educative value. Because she believed that children benefited from active participation in the teaching event, she designed toys (the so-called "Caroline Pratt blocks") by means of which children could learn through play. These smooth, precisely manufactured blocks of hardwood were easy to handle, of simple design, with considerable emphasis laid upon the interdependence of size and function, and could be used in unrestricted variations.

For very small children, playing or building with these blocks was an individual activity. They were required to represent or portray something by means of these blocks. The older children (the five-year-olds) played more complex group games, which were calculated not only to challenge (or to stimulate) their creative urge, but also to promote their motor (physical), aesthetic and intellectual moulding.

The material and equipment designed by Caroline Pratt even to this day remain part of every modern infant school.

The pioneer of infant schools in the USA, Harriet M. Johnson (1867 - 1934), in conjunction with Lucy Mitchell and Elizabeth Coolidge, established the Harriet Johnson Nursery School in New York in 1914. In this school the behaviour of the children at play was observed daily and painstakingly recorded. The findings arrived at by these means made a profound contribution towards substantiating the importance of play as a means of education.

The Italian physician-educationist, Dr Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952) regarded the child's senses as "gateways to the soul", and for this reason, the child had to, during his playing, exercise his senses (with the help of learning aids), thereby developing his intellect, feeling and will. Sharing equal importance with this viewpoint, was the considerable value she attached to a relaxed, homely atmosphere in the infant school. Every child was to be free to play with the learning aids (i.e. graded educative apparatus which would promote sensory development) of his choice. The teacher was only required to devise and make available suitable learning aids, and see to it that these were used correctly.
According to Montessori therefore, play is pre-eminently the form in which, or the means whereby, the child explores and discovers his world. It serves as preliminary exercise for the ultimate acceptance of the life-task. The child can only become adult if he has had the time to be a child-at-play. By means of play, he gradually develops certain preferences for and interests in specific physical and intellectual activities, and this prepares him for his life-task.

In his *Ontwikkelingspsychologie* (Psychology of development), the renowned Dutch educationist, M. J. Langeveld, said that play consists in sheer pleasure for the child. Games, and the toys played with, must, however, always take account of the child’s level of development: they may never be too involved, since that can put the child off, instead of inviting him to "communicate". On the other hand, they should not be so simple that they have no potential for discovery.

Play is different from work, which is bound to time and completion, and must produce results. Play nevertheless forms the basis of all work in such a way that work and play alternate continuously in the life of the child.

Spontaneity is a fundamental precondition for a child’s play. The threatened, embarrassed, ill or insecure child cannot really play wholeheartedly. The level and quality of this kind of child’s play regresses. The child’s going forth playfully into the world is therefore closely bound to his state of mind, physical well-being and experience of every situation.

After the previous examples of the attempts of certain educators, educationists, intellectuals and even a toy-manufacturer to integrate play and toys with the educative event, attention can now be focused on a number of important theories concerning play.

### 7.3 Interesting theories on play activities

The games children play are shrouded in mystery. Many scholars have tried to analyse and describe children’s play, but no-one has yet been able to explain the phenomenon of play in its entirety. Every one of the many definitions of play, and every one of the different theories formulated about play, explain something regarding the nature of play, but not one of these is conclusively explanatory or explicable. This can be ascribed to the fact that there are so many forms of play, and that the effect of play on the development of the child is so subtle, diverse and far-reaching, that a single definition or theory will always be incomplete.

In the discussion that follows, only some of the most well-known theories on play are arranged in five main groups. Under the main group which is discussed first, namely, the standard theories, no less than six sub-theories are discussed. This in itself should be indicative of how
multi-dimensional and subtly nuanced the phenomenon of play is in ac­
tual fact. The discussion that follows should further illustrate the
veracity of this statement.

7.3.1 The standard theories

The six theories that may be classified under this category are relatively
"old" theories. They served as points of departure for further reflection
and for the formulation of newer theories, whence the name "standard"
theories.

7.3.1.1 The surplus-energy or discharge theory

One of the first attempts to explain why man (the child) plays is at­
tributed to both the English philosopher, Herbart Spencer (1820 -
1903), and the German poet, Friedrich von Schiller (1759 - 1805). This
theory is based on the assumption that man is active by nature, and that
he uses his energy first and foremost for the execution of those tasks
that are essential for the preservation of his life. When survival tasks
have been accomplished and before one is entirely exhausted (that is to
say, if one still possesses surplus energy), then this surplus energy is
utilized for "aimless" pleasure.

With reference to children, it can therefore be claimed that child's
play is a result of surplus energy because children are not burdened with
tasks pertaining to survival. Because they have reserve energy which
they must get rid of, they play. According to Spencer, play can therefore
be considered a type of safety-valve by means of which pent-up energy is
released.

An obvious objection to this argument is that participation in play-
activities is not dependent on surplus energy. A child can, for instance,
be persuaded to execute a wearying task with the promise that he might
go and play upon its completion. It is also generally known that a child
who is tired out from work is still eager to play. No empirical proof exists
that the reverse, namely that rested children ought to play more than
weary ones, is true.

7.3.1.2 The recreation theory

This theory was formulated by Lazarus (1883) and Patrick (1916). Ac­
cording to the recreation theory, play is as a result of (or caused by) a
shortage of energy, and not a surplus. According to this theory, energy is
actually replenished during play. Play helps to dissipate the fatigue and
tension which are consequences of the execution of complicated, difficult
and unfamiliar tasks.
Theories on play activities

What the recreation theory thus amounts to is that play is regarded as the opposite of work, since it is a form of recreation and a way of passing the time. It is a means of equipping man to tackle a new, worthwhile activity. This theory still enjoys a great deal of acceptability today.

7.3.1.3 The pre-practice theory

Many theoreticians have seen play as a form of instinctive behaviour, with the most important exponent of the theory being Karl Groos (1861 - 1946), a former professor of philosophy in Basel (Switzerland). This theory was introduced by Groos in two books in 1896 and 1899 respectively, one concerning play in animals, and the other about the play of humans.

Groos saw play as a form of instinctive behaviour. Play exercises and perfects the skills needed in adult life. When animals play, it is because play prepares and trains them for the struggle for survival. When a small kitten plays with a ball of wool, he is actually exercising his dexterity – an essential prerequisite for catching mice. Because a higher level of skill is demanded from the more intelligent animal species than from those less intelligent, the young of the former are, in the nature of things, required to devote more time by playing to the practice and imitation of the demands of life than the young of the latter.

This theory, when applied to man, regards play as the expression of instinctive behaviour. The child's hereditary instincts, movements and senses are developed through the medium of play, and in this way, he learns the skills necessary to adapt to, and to control, the demands that life will make on him.

Groos's theory is of value in the sense that apparently purposeless play-activities can no longer be summarily dismissed as having no value, since they play an important role in the development of the child.

7.3.1.4 The atavistic or recapitulation theory

This theory was developed by Stanley Hall (1844 - 1924), an American professor of psychology and education. It is based upon the premise that children are a link in the chain of evolution, and that the child in, and by means of, his play re-enacts the history of the human species. The experiences of his forefathers are embodied in his play in the sequence they were encountered by his prehistoric and primitive ancestors.

Hall was the first to distinguish these so-called "play stages". According to this, the child moves through a whole series of games that require an ever-increasing degree of skill. These "graded" stages represent a recapitulation or re-evocation of the stages of cultural development of humanity.
The recapitulation theory claims to offer a better explanation for the existence of the many different types of games than other theories. Thus Hall argues that the pleasure that children experience when they play with water is actually a re-enactment or a recall of the joy experienced in the sea by their ancestors (as fish on the ladder of evolution). Children's love of climbing trees and swinging can be ascribed to an unwitting repetition and imitation of the activities of their apelike forbears!

This evolutionary notion is unacceptable in many scientific and educational quarters. Indeed, on the grounds of recent findings regarding the function of genes, most Western geneticists reject the concept that learned skills can be inherited or be unconsciously imitated. This seriously questions the validity of Hall's theory.

7.3.1.5 The growth theory

In 1910 L.G. Appleton undertook a study of child's play and came to the conclusion that children play as a result of their yearning to grow up. The child plays because he wishes to master certain skills associated with adulthood, and he knows that play affords the opportunity to perfect them.

According to the growth theory, play is therefore not instinctive preparatory practice, as Karl Groos claimed, but rather a purposeful method or means whereby the skills necessary "to function" as an adult can be acquired.

7.3.1.6 The relation theory

According to the relation theory of Vermeer of the Netherlands, the child initially occupies himself with the world through play. The world (environment) directs an appeal to the child and by reacting to it by means of various activities (games), he learns to come to terms with the unknown. In, and through, his play activities, the child imitates the adult, and thus, through play, becomes involved in the world of the adult. Play is therefore a means of relating to the world, a means of entering into communication with everything and everyone.

In regard to all six of the standard theories referred to above, two misgivings should be noted:

(i) none explain the individual differences in children's behaviour when at play; and
(ii) there is no possibility of establishing the validity of any of these theories experimentally.
Theories on play activities

7.3.2 The psychoanalytical theories

Psychoanalysis (a method of determining mental aberrations) was developed towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries by the Austrian psychologist, Sigmund Freud.

7.3.2.1 The psychoanalytical theory of Freud

Freud's theory revolves around two concepts, namely, fantasy and desires. Fantasy that is woven around real objects gives rise to play. (The objects are then used as toys.) The child therefore gives expression to his fantasy through, or by means of, play. Opposed to this, Freud identifies a "passive" fantasy which is nothing other than mere daydreaming. Fantasy that is expressed in play is characterized by two types of desires. Firstly there is the child's desire which relates to his aspiring to be grown-up and adult, to fill the shoes of a successful person. The child, therefore, fantasizes a situation or circumstances as he would wish them to exist. He uses objects and situations drawn from the real world in order to create his own world (that is, through his play he produces an own-world) so that he can recreate pleasurable experiences at will, arrange events and effect changes that suit him best.

Secondly, the child may desire to change, by his active participation, those painful situations which he previously had to experience passively and helplessly. This impulse towards the inversion, or changing, of less pleasurable experiences takes place in the guise of play, which is in accordance with an inherited tendency to repeat over and over again the experiences which proved to be too much for the child. This childlike way of dealing with difficult or painful experiences enables the child to establish a feeling of intimate understanding of and, therefore, control over the situation.

According to Freud, people try to maintain their level of nervous tension as low as possible. An increase in nervous tension (agitation) is experienced as an unpleasant feeling. Unpleasant feelings (caused by tense situations or conflict) are repeated by the child while he is at play because this repetition lessens the excitement which was generated. Play thus enables the child to repeat actively and so control disturbing incidences or situations which he was obliged to experience passively or as a helpless spectator (for instance, a visit to the doctor). It is therefore assumed that re-enactment by means of play reduces the unpleasant disturbance.

Freud exercised a profound influence on psychological thought. His explanation of fantasy and play as projections of desires, and the re-enactment of conflict and unpleasant incidences with a view to their ulti-
mate mastery, led to the techniques of personality evaluation based upon
the assumption that play can reveal something of the child’s inner life
and emotions.

7.3.2.2 The psychosocial development theory of Erikson

Whereas Freud concentrated on man’s psycho-sexual development, Erikson, building on these foundations, formulated his theory with regard to
man’s social development.

Before Erikson’s theory of play can be dealt with, it is necessary to
clarify his approach to the psychic processes which influence man’s be-


He defines the id as being everything which reduces man to nothing but a mere animal (for example, the impulses of an ape). The superego is
the antipole of the id, and represents the demands of the conscience. It is
the superego that distinguishes man from the animal world.

Between the id and the superego is the ego which acts as a force of
balance between the two poles. A well-developed ego will, by sheer force
of necessity, balance out the excesses imposed on the individual by the
outside world.

Erikson also claims that man passes through a number of phases in
his life (a phase being a period during which certain changes take place)
and that each phase develops from the previous one. An important per-
sonality characteristic develops during each phase. Positive development
helps man to integrate the physical and biological environment with the
challenges posed by the community and the culture. According to Eri-
son, the child is confronted in each phase by a psychosocial crisis that
must be resolved before progression to the next phase can take place.

Thus the child plays in order to obtain or restore control of a situa-


In line with Piaget (whose theory will be discussed later) Erikson
believed (also with respect to social development) that it is necessary for
the child to construct and to discover for himself in order that he might
understand. He imposes two prerequisites for successful play, namely,
freedom within prescribed limits, and the opportunity to discover. True
play cannot take place if one of the above-mentioned aspects is absent.

Erikson further describes play in the different stages of development:

(i) During the first year: the baby is ego-centric and he concentrates
on his bodily sensations. During a later stage he brings external ob-
jects within his reach – for example, his rattle – into his play;
(ii) One to three years: the child can develop his will because he has developed new motor skills and mental capacities, as well as a greater knowledge about himself. The child becomes aware of his will, which limits the scope of his play. The child brings a balance to this issue by developing his autonomy and by keeping to a set of rules which he himself has created;

(iii) Four to six years: two kinds of play develop; solitary and social play. Both have an autotherapeutic influence on the child, for he starts learning to cope with conflict. He has reached a stage where he can decide on his activities. His initiative is demonstrated by the endless questions he asks and by his world of make-believe. The reactions of other people to his actions influence his feelings of pride or guilt in self-initiated activities in later life; and

(iv) Six to eleven years – the child is fully aware of his own capabilities and he feels that he can master difficult situations through play. He often projects conflict into his playing. During this stage, the child develops the ability to reason by deduction, and by playing games in accordance with hard and fast rules.

Erikson considers the following to be functions of play:

1. the adaptation of a traumatic experience;
2. the mastery of a complex life situation;
3. self-expression; and
4. the practising of developing skills.

7.3.3 The cognitive development theory

In his famous book *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), professor at the University of Geneva, expounded his thoughts regarding child’s play. Piaget saw play as a medium of thought used by the child to give meaning to reality.

In order to understand Piaget’s theory of play, it is necessary to give some attention to his theory of cognitive development. Intellectual development, according to him, is the result of the interaction between the child (man) and his environment.

Two processes are involved: namely, *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Assimilation involves the integration of new information with already existing knowledge. (The child knows, for example, that birds fly, and therefore, should he see an owl fly by, will name it a bird, even though he has never seen an owl before.) In other words, he bends reality in order to fit it in with that which he already knows. Accommodation takes place when the child cannot assimilate, simply because the new information cannot be integrated within the framework of his
existing knowledge. This framework of existing knowledge must thus be altered in order to accommodate the new information or to integrate existing knowledge with the new. (For instance, if the child knows that birds can fly, and he sees an aeroplane, he cannot assimilate and identify the aeroplane as being a bird as well. He must alter his thought structure to: "birds AND aeroplanes can fly").

These two aspects of behaviour, "assimilation" and "accommodation", act in unity and are always present. Intellectual development is a result of the continuous, active interaction between assimilating and accommodating: intelligent adaptation to reality takes place when the processes balance one another, or are "in balance". This is known as (the state of) equilibrium, or cognitive harmony. The child strives unceasingly for equilibrium and uses play as the means of achieving it. When assimilation dominates, the child can ascribe (assimilate) meaning, and play is the result. When accommodation takes place, the child cannot ascribe meaning – he imitates the procedure, sound or action (in his search for meaning) in order to accommodate it. Piaget distinguishes between this action, which he calls "imitation", and play, which he regards as a recurrence of a meeting (with that which has already been understood), with inculcation as the goal. Play and imitation, according to Piaget, form an integrating part of the development of the intelligence and they pass through the same stages (namely, the sensory-motor period from birth until approximately eighteen months; the representative stage, from approximately the second until the seventh or eighth year; the "concrete" stage, around eleven or twelve; the adolescent stage, age thirteen to fifteen.)

Play is, for Piaget, all modes of behaviour in which the aspect of adaptation to fit in with reality (that is, the aspect of mental accommodation as opposed to things as they really are) is not emphasized. Play occurs in so far as behaviour is merely the "taking-up", the "bending" of reality to suit man's existing forms of thought. Since this is a facet of all behaviour, there is at least some aspect of play present in every mode of behaviour; according to the opinions of Piaget, playfulness is present in behaviour in greater or lesser degrees in as far as that behaviour is an attempt, or is not an attempt, to adapt to reality.

Piaget distinguished between three broad categories of play. Early on in the life of the child, any newly mastered motor ability will be practised over and over again in different connections. All objects that the young child encounters will be "bent" to fit into the new pattern of behaviour, irrespective of their suitability. It has been observed, for instance, that a child locked in an empty room will even remove his shoes in order to play with them. No new learning takes place during the course of such behaviour, yet the child displays all the signs of enjoyment. This is an example of what Piaget calls "practice play". Secondly,
the game of "putting a rag to bed" is again an example of what Piaget calls symbolic play.

Imaginative play is a product of symbolic thought. The symbolic process in imaginative play was interpreted by Piaget as an attempt on the part of the child "to bring (assimilate) reality to the ego" without the retarding effect of accommodation. In symbolic play, the necessity of accommodation is thus cancelled. The child sees himself in his imagination as a train, the train driver and the policeman. Any object which is part of his environment, like a table, a chair or a vase of flowers, undergoes rapid changes to fit in with his creative thoughts. Although the child is able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, this distinction is sometimes not clear. Symbolic play serves to satisfy the ego, but Piaget does not consider it beneficial for cognitive development. Symbols are profoundly personal and subjective, and accord with the child's personal experience of an object or an encounter. Imaginative play thus represents that which the child has experienced by means of symbols.

Piaget also distinguished a third main category of play which he called "games-with-rules". This type of playing is the last to develop in children and is precisely what the name implies.

The value of Piaget's theory of play for pre-primary teaching is as follows:

(i) it may be deduced that play is the medium whereby cognitive development takes place;
(ii) it may be deduced that learning is influenced by the opportunities for play afforded to the young child;
(iii) the nature of the child's dealing with his environment is determined by the stage of cognitive development in which he finds himself, therefore this must be taken into account when the teacher attempts to structure the child's environment; and
(iv) in order to provide meaningful opportunities for play, the teacher should be conversant with how the child learns and thinks in each phase of cognitive development.

7.3.4 The ecological theory

This theory is particularly concerned with the preconditions which play has to satisfy and how these preconditions influence the play and behaviour of children. Research has indicated that the material with which children are provided and with which they play does influence the child's concentration, the interaction between the child and the material and the degree and type of communication that takes place.
7.3.5 The infantile-dynamic theory

Lewin's 1933 theory of play postulated that the child's cognitive living-space is still unstructured since he cannot yet distinguish between the real and the unreal. It is, however, easy for the child to transfer himself by means of play into an unreal fantasy world where everything is changeable, arbitrary and manageable. This tendency is noticeable right up until about the sixth year, especially when the child is subjected to a great deal of pressure.

Buytendijk (1934) agreed with Lewin when he said that the child plays because he is a child and because his cognitive dynamics allows no other course. The three main characteristics that, according to Buytendijk, determine the cognitive dynamics are as follows:

(i) the absence of motor and intellectual coherence and co-ordination;
(ii) the need for sympathetic understanding as opposed to objective knowledge; and
(iii) an ambivalence (the presence of contrary desires or feelings) in respect of objects, specifically unknown or unfamiliar objects, with which the child comes into contact or with which he plays.

Play is therefore the expression/manifestation of the child's uncoordinated approach to his surroundings. This permits pathic knowledge of the environment and offers no immediate solution to problems. In the infantile-dynamic theory, play is the way in which the child thinks.

7.4 Conclusions

It can be justly asked what the implications of these theories are for those involved in the education of children.

The one common factor that is stressed in all the theories is that play forms an integral part of the child's being. To play is an inherent trait, and it is an essential activity. Play is also one of the most meaningful means of dialogue and communication between the child and the world. When the child plays, he "relocates" himself within the reality of a "world of adults" that lies waiting, concealed from him, a world he still has to become familiar with by "conquering" it. Play is therefore an orientatedness towards the future.

Play leads to (new) discoveries and, while playing, the child shifts his horizons and, in so doing, expands the boundaries of his familiar world. Through his play, the child creates his own manageable, temporary world in order to feel secure. Precisely for this reason, the child often reaches for shapeless objects (e.g. a stick for a horse) onto which he projects reality. He identifies with the plaything and thus effects a per-
sonal encounter with it. The child at play is in the first place a learning child, finding his way to adulthood through the medium of play. Play affords the child the opportunity to be actively, conqueringly and creatively constructive and reconstructive. While at play he anticipates his own humanity. Play is life-fulfilling in itself – it is a mode of being human in the world.

In, and through, his playing, the child imitates the adult and adult activities, and in so doing gives expression to his yearning, his desire, to become an adult himself. This wishful world of the child is closely bound up with his world of feelings (the pathic) and his world of knowing (the gnostic).

The pathic appeal that things direct towards the child in particular extends an invitation in particular to physical exploration, to becoming aware of experienced movement, time and space, but also of visualizing and fantasizing.

The child can also experience his communion with objects gnostically where he can observe, handle and compare objects and respond creatively to them. Play activities lead therefore to a deepening of the experience of reality and, ultimately, to a familiarity with reality.

Proficiency that is won through the medium of play is again of a cognitive nature. (The child has now acquired an intellectual grasp of the world.) In this regard, it has been proved that play gives rise to improved planning, problem solving, creativity, creative thought, language and memory usage.

Play also has a bearing on the development and refinement of the child’s total motor capabilities and his developing awareness of his body. Through physical exercise, skills are developed that generate self-confidence and a sense of security.

The child is a human being amongst, and with, other people. As a social being he has a need to be part of a group, and in this respect, play contributes to the development of his psycho-social relationships. By playing with other children, the child learns how to conduct himself with (human) dignity in accordance with accepted rules of behaviour (rules-of-the-game) and this enables him to evaluate his own behaviour and "to measure" this against the norms of group action. In this way the child learns what is socially acceptable or unacceptable, which makes it possible for him to accept normative authority and to share space and ideas with others. Play is thus an essential preliminary activity for the mastery of complex and sophisticated emotional, intellectual, physical and social skills.

Owing to various economic and social reasons, many children today grow up in environments and circumstances that do not afford adequate opportunities for play. It then becomes the task of the teacher in the pre-primary phase so to structure and create opportunities for the child that his need to play can be satisfied in order that he may come to terms
with reality through self-discovery. Piaget states this important fact as follows:

... in order for a child to understand something, he must construct it himself, he must re-invent it. Every time we teach a child something, we keep him from inventing it himself ... that which we allow him to discover by himself will remain with him visibly ... for all the rest of his life. (Piers 1972:27.)

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