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**THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE PLAY FOR
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Claudia VLAICU

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The Importance of Role Play for Children's Development of Socio-Emotional Competencies

Claudia VLAICU¹

Abstract

Recent research on child education has increasingly moved accent from intellectual factors to emotional and motivational ones when exploring themes like methods of teaching in primary schools. Play has been the most efficient tool of learning so far both in early years foundation stage and primary years. The present paper approaches the theme of role-play and is intended to prove through an experimental study its significant contributions to the harmonious development of child personality. The premise of the study is that our children can learn many skills and attitudes during role play; they can learn how to be co-operative and be empathetic with others. They can learn to express their feelings and emotions. They also can learn about other cultures and improve their language and movement skills. As for the teacher, role-play offers a particular satisfaction through its various educational implications. It contributes to the enforcement of the educational act in itself, it helps the teachers correct children's misbehaviour, it is a strong helping tool for the teachers in his mission to support the development of his children personalities. Facilitating communication, the role-play proves to be a complete educational method that should be used in the learning process. The conclusion of the study is that the teacher should be the first to know the psycho-social implications of role-play and should be able to use it at all disciplines, combining playing with learning and thus making the lesson more attractive and pleasant for the students.

Keywords:

role play, child education, emotional competencies, personality, development.

¹ Associate Professor PhD, Valahia University, Targoviste, Romania, vlaicu.claudia@gmail.com

1. The importance of play in child's development of personality

Nowadays, one cannot speak of efficient education without encompassing in the process of learning the social competence and emotional maturity, both of the teacher and the students. An efficient education also requires the necessity for educators to thoroughly study the personalities of the students they teach to.

It is a well-known fact that school success largely depends on children's ability to interact positively with their peers and adults. In this type of interaction, play in general and role-play in particular are vital both for children's social development and for maintaining the emotional basis for learning. Specialists on education consider that play enables children to practice both verbal and nonverbal communication skills by negotiating roles, trying to gain access to ongoing play, and appreciating the feelings of others; respond to their peers' feelings while waiting for their turn and sharing materials and experiences; experiment with roles of the people in their home, school, and community by coming into contact with the needs and wishes of others (Spodek & Saracho, 1998).

When asked about their play activities, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, choosing freely and being outdoors. Play supports emotional development by providing a way to express and cope with feelings. Pretend play helps children express feelings in the following four ways (Piaget, 1962):

1. Simplifying events by creating an imaginary character, plot, or setting to match their emotional state. A child afraid of the dark, for example, might eliminate darkness or night from the play episode.

2. Compensating for situations by adding forbidden acts to pretend play. A child may, for example, eat cookies and ice cream for breakfast in play, whereas in reality this would not be permitted.

3. Controlling emotional expression by repeatedly re-enacting unpleasant or frightening experiences. For example, a child might pretend to have an accident after seeing a real traffic accident on the highway.

4. Avoiding adverse consequences by pretending that another character, real or imaginary, commits inappropriate acts and suffers the consequences. Children whose television viewing is monitored at home, for instance, can pretend to allow the doll to watch indiscriminately and then reprimand the "bad child" for unacceptable TV viewing habits.

In addition to expressing feelings, children also learn to cope with their feelings as they act out being angry, sad, or worried in a situation they control (Erikson, 1963). Pretend play allows them to think out loud about experiences charged with both pleasant and unpleasant.

Playing games and having fun are crucial to development and highly motivating to children. The natural setting of a child's game provides opportunities for language development, hypothesis testing, problem solving, and the formation of thought constructs and "scripts" that reflect the shared cognitive themes related to cultural understanding (Fromberg, 1992; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). The power of using games to teach socio-emotional skills lies in the interactional nature of playing a game together. Games are fun to children and young people and therefore highly motivating. They provide the potential for transformative learning through social interaction, social connectedness, cooperation and collaboration, and possess many of the features that encourage student well-being and resilience.

2. Role-play-elements and educational implications

2.1. Role-play-elements and phases

Role-play is a type of pretend play where children get into character and act out a role or real life context. Role-play is an active, social activity where children can get into character and use role play to reflect on and develop their knowledge of a topic.

There are three stages of a standard role-play session: preparing the play, development of the play, assessment and debates over the performances.

As for the first stage, the teacher is mostly a facilitator of the activity. He sets the scene and arranges all elements of the setting; that is description of the script and assigning roles to the participants.

An important phase of the preparation is to allow a specific amount of time to the main actors to meet and arrange the general intrigue of their play. The teacher will supervise their work from the shadow; will make notes on the way the students interact.

The development of the scenario is the stage when students act. Each story should be adjusted to the possibilities of each class. The following stage is when the teacher and students analyse and debate over what should be improved. It is a very important phase and shouldn't be skipped over. Some phases may imply conflicting interactions, disagreement, especially if some players take it too seriously and adopt radical positions. Debates of these phases offer the teacher feedback and precious information about features of each student's personality. The teacher should encourage group talk and interpersonal communication. Humour can act as an efficient tool to establish an emotional and intellectual balance along with the therapeutic and cathartic functions of the role-playing.

Role-playing interferes with the theatre as well; in both cases the child performs an imaginary identification to a particular character, a mental transposal to a way of thinking, feeling and acting without losing self-identity.

Both in theatre and here the actor displays an emphatic attitude, setting off on a journey to meet a specific character, being accompanied by a freedom of creation.

2.2. Educational implications

Learning through role play is so important that within the Early Years Primary classroom and nursery schools, there is usually an assigned 'role play area'. This area can be decorated to suit particular topics and props can be left out for children to use and explore.

Although role play may usually seem like a child-led activity, the adult's role can be vital. Rules need to be clearly established with (or by) the children and an adult can prompt discussions or ask questions to help children think about their pretend environment and learn from it.

Children can learn quickly the positive and negative impacts of their actions from role plays through the reaction of adults and their friends.

Role play is an effective learning tool as it encourages children to become active participants in their learning. They can move about, put themselves in someone else's shoes, perhaps wear a costume and use props, communicate and make decisions in character, which will allow them to take risks and explore different areas. Learning from role play is therefore far more likely to stick with children than for example doing exercise sheets, mostly because they will be much more willing and enthusiastic!

Most role play areas will reflect a real life context. Role play is therefore an effective way for children to make sense of the world around them. Setting up a doctor's room, supermarket, police station or even swimming pool will allow children to explore these real life contexts. In any role play area there can be opportunities to develop children's writing and Mathematics skills. Just leaving a pen and paper out will encourage children to write or 'mark-make' without a fear of getting something wrong. For example, when setting up a supermarket, you could make blank shopping lists for the children to write on or give them pre-made shopping lists for them to collect items— so 3 oranges 5 lemons – this will encourage younger children to practice counting for a purpose other than assessment in a classroom.

Role play is especially beneficially for developing language, both for children with English as an additional language and for native English speakers. As well as vocabulary and language, role play develops toddlers communication skills as they communicate with each other in a safe 'play' environment. Role play is the most effective way of acquiring language.

Psychologist Sandra Russ (2004) identified a number of different cognitive and affective processes that are associated with pretend play. Her research dealing with play involves fantasy, make-believe, symbolism, organization, cognitive integration of seemingly separate content, and divergent thinking (the ability to come up with many different ideas, story themes, and symbols). Pretend play allows the expression of both positive and negative feelings, and the modulation of affect, the ability to integrate emotion with cognition (Jent, Niec, & Baker, 2011; Seja, & Russ, 1999; Slade and Wolf, 1999).

An important benefit of early pretend play may be its enhancement of the child's capacity for cognitive flexibility and, ultimately, creativity (Russ, 2004; Singer & Singer, 2005). Russ, for example, in longitudinal studies, found that early imaginative play was associated with increased creative performance years later (Russ, 2004; Russ, & Fiorelli, 2010). Root-Bernstein's research with clearly creative individuals such as Nobel Prize winners and MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant awardees, indicated that early childhood games about make-believe worlds were more frequent in such individuals than in control participants in their fields (Root-Bernstein, 2012).

What are the sources in children's environments that promote early and frequent imaginative play? Research has demonstrated that parents who talk to their children regularly explaining features about nature and social issues, or who read or tell stories at bedtime seem to be most likely to foster pretend play (Singer & Singer, 2005). A school atmosphere in which pretend games are encouraged, or even just tolerated in the curriculum or recess play of children has also been shown to lead to even greater amounts of imaginativeness and enhanced curiosity, and to learning skills in pre-schoolers or early school-agers (Ashiabi, 2007; Singer and Lythcott 2004). Indeed, educators are using pretend games to teach math and reading (Clements, & Sarama, 2009).

In essence, role play provides opportunities to develop skills in various different areas of the curriculum for example: numbers, history, culture and many other areas.

Systematic research has increasingly demonstrated a series of clear benefits of children's engagement in pretend games from the ages of about two and one half through ages six or seven. Actual studies have demonstrated cognitive benefits such as increases in language usage including subjunctives, future tenses, and adjectives. The important concept of "theory of mind," awareness that one's thoughts may differ from those of other persons and that there are a variety of perspectives of which each of us is capable, is closely related to imaginative play (Jenkins & Astington, 2000; Leslie, 1987; Singer & Singer, 1990; Singer & Singer, 2005).

Advantages and disadvantages of role-playing

When proposing an educational method as innovative and efficient for the development of personality any researcher should bear in mind that an objective approach of the respective method implies being able to identify both the advantages and disadvantages:

The advantages of role-play are:

- it allows the student to interact to situations similar to real life
- it determines attitudinal and behavioural changes
- it requires the use of complementary methods such as exercise, modelling, case study etc.
- it develops critical thinking and pupils 'creativity
- it requires the exchange and transfer of information, experiences and strategies
- it sets background to assuming future roles later in life
- it assures solid ground for long time memory because of the theatrical presentation of knowledge
- it encourages communication, exchange of opinions, assuming responsibilities;
- it offers a proper setting for cooperation
- it offers learning motivation and a powerful effect on group/team spirit
- it requires involvement of all members of the group and a high degree of implication from each of them

Critics of this method found among the most important disadvantages the following:

- it is time consuming
- it requires high degree of learning and personal abilities of the educator/teacher
- teacher may encounter difficulties in writing down all observations (this drawback could be overcome by using audio-visual means)
- the teacher may have to face denial or rejection of the role or even the involvement of the pupil;
- it requires a huge effort from the teacher and a great deal of experience with theatrical procedures

The obstacles that may appear when applying this method may be overpassed if the students and the teacher work together all the time, if their a mutual involvement from the start.

As a conclusion, we state that the use of role-play in the learning process support the teacher a lot in fulfilling the objectives, the advantages being more than disadvantages and significant ones.

3. Psycho-methodological premises of the study

The following psycho-methodological premises are mainly key benefits of role playing. Role-play:

1. Develops communication and language skills
2. Allows children to act out and make sense of real-life situations
3. Allows children to explore, investigate and experiment
4. Develops social skills as children collaborate with others
5. Children learn to empathise with others – taking part in a role play activity would usually mean that you are taking on the role of character which will teach children about the empathy and understanding of different perspectives.
6. Helps children learn about different cultures
7. Encourages children to express their ideas and feelings in a relaxed environment
8. Develops children's awareness of themselves and others
9. Gets children learning more as learning is disguised as play
10. Sparks creativity and imagination

4. Methodological design and objectives

The scope of this empirical research is to discover if the method of role-play applied constantly along the learning process significantly contributes to the development of school children personality. Is role-play decisive for the formation of a unique, active and creative personality, able to adapt to the requests of the society he/she lives in?

Hypothesis: If applied constantly on at least one year period, the use of role-play within the drama classes and/or literature classes significantly determines the development of socio-emotional competences, such as assertiveness, respect for the others, empathy, group cohesion and cooperation.

Variables of research: role-play method-independent variable and degree of assertiveness, respect for the others, empathy, group cohesion and cooperation-dependent variable.

The optional discipline that mostly involved this method was called "The Other Face of Me" and was developed during the year 2013-2014 to fourth grade students in a private school of Bucharest. The dramatic texts were previously discussed and analysed during another optional discipline called "Book fascination" and served as support scenarios for the other discipline of study. Among the most important topics were the following: breathing and talking on the stage, why I want to be an actor, describing the fascinating world of theatre, Here comes Santa Claus, Mother-the first beloved person, A journey

through the world of theatre, spring/summer/autumn/winter festivals, children and childhood, balance time. Each theme had a specific numbers of hours to be accomplished.

The educational and specific objectives were formulated starting from the premises of this study, therefore, for reasons of space limits we will not mention them again as they are deductible from the above.

The number of subjects was 50, divided into two groups: 23 children of fourth grade from the experiment class and 26 children from the control class. They both have the same intellectual level of development according to the final grades of the previous third grade.

The initial phase of the experiment included the testing the children's personality from the two classes. Our particular interest was focusses on knowing the degree of assertiveness, respect for the others, empathy, group cohesion and cooperation. The students were applied the emotion intelligence test adapted by Mihaela Roco after Daniel Golemen.

The second stage of the experiment included the introduction of the optional discipline called "The Other Face of Me" which was the intervention programme. Only the first class was submitted to the role-play experiencing, the other class was introduced only the another optional discipline called "Book fascination". Therefore, role-play was the dominant method of research and was performed at every class along the development of the optional discipline "The Other Face of Me".

During the third phase the students were applied the same emotional intelligence test to both groups. The final stage included a clear comparison between the two groups and discussions upon the confirmation of the hypothesis. The control group was submitted to other learning methods and the data were collected by both teachers at the same time.

5. Results and conclusions

The results are presented in the following histograms and are the results of initial and final testing. For the initial phase the test was applied and interpreted by the school psychologist and for the intervention phase the primary teacher applied the role-play method. An agenda of each student's stage evolution was also kept by the teacher who noted marks, appreciations and qualifications for each student and each type of role-play (main role, secondary or figurant).

For the final stage, a significant contribution was the observation files completed all along the year which encompassed features of personality and monthly assessments for the respective acting.

Although at the initial testing the two groups were similar, by the end of the year, the differences were significant and gradually marked a gap in the development of the respective competences. As for the assertiveness, the experimental group was more involved in exercises and role-play which required a continuously effort to express themselves and their ideas. As for the respect and empathy, there is only a slight difference. A possible explanation may be found in the fact that there was not a specific competence which was given more attention than another. Each competence was practiced within the type of learning by collaboration. But a successful representation asks for more than displaying a specific type of competence; it requires the use of all equally and simultaneously and we cannot speak of performance unless we display and practice something previously and frequently exercises. If in the lecture of a text, the teacher may choose whatever technique he thinks fits the respective

group, in drama classes the teachers cannot work but with role-play as a dominant one.

The control group proved also a progress of the respective competences but at a lower degree. The results of the study show that both groups have developed communication abilities but the extend is considerably higher at the experimental group (G.E.). It is particularly the role-play intervention with all drama techniques (free expressions of emotions and feelings, simulations, deliberate creation of conflicting moments and disagreements etc.).

An essential role was the one played by the teacher who was the key to fulfilling the objectives. His creativity, theatrical abilities, patience and spontaneity were the most important. It is the teacher who knew exactly when to create the proper moment for interaction, cooperation or debate. It is he who knew exactly when to come up with solutions for improvement of communication, of displaying empathy etc.

The educational implications of such a study are the following:

1. For selfish and individualist students who tend to be dominant and conquer the area of learning, role-play helps them to master what they can do best but also to learn how to listen and how to develop communication and negotiation skills.

2. Role-play is a useful instrument to integrate shy children in peer groups. There are children who encounter difficulties in communication, both verbal and non-verbal. This method encourage them to speak up front, to express feelings, disagreement/agreement, thus it is a good exercise to overcome fear, shyness, shame etc.

3. With the help of role-playing, children will integrate the content and messages of literary dramatic texts; will better remember the educational or moral values of them;

4. Children will successfully transfer knowledge from theory to practice through role-playing, improvising and practical exercise.

5. Drama and role-play significantly contribute to the development of children's personality both at the cognitive level and the emotional one.

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