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ABSTRACT

The important role of spontaneous play in preschool education programs is emphasized. At present too much emphasis is placed on structured learning activities and it's suggested that more "open spaces" be allowed for in a child's day. In spontaneous play, adequate space and time must be allotted for investigation and unhurried experience. Good play equipment can be used in many ways and may be manipulated by the children. Both spontaneous and structured play should be planned for in a balance that is unique to the needs of the children in each classroom. Structured play activities directed by the teacher should be carefully planned and presented to meet individual and small group needs. General discussion presents supporting informationfrom work done by Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lili Peller. Four stages in play development defined by Smilansky are reported: (1) Functional play; (2) Constructive play; (3) Symbolic play; and (4) Games with rules. Examination of these stages may help the preschool teacher determine which stage the child has reached and how she can help meet his needs for play experiences. (SDH)

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# PLANNING FOR "NOTHING"

"What are you doing Mary?" "Nothing." Well, we do not do "*nothing*" in this nursery school. Everyone has a job to do. You come over here with me." Sound familiar? Perhaps it does, but I submit to you that whether we plan nothing or we plan for "nothing" has a significant philosophical base, and it is about this base that I wish to make a few comments this morning, with the ultimate aim of stirring all of you wonderful people who are working with children to think seriously about this nothing or "for nothing" connotation.

It is very fashionable in 1974 to speak of the open classroom in the primary grades. Primary teachers are rushing to learn about learning centers, interest centers, openness activities, small groups, and the like – in other words, all the many plus factors that have been part and parcel of the preschool program for many years. That is, until an army of cognition and technological experts, many of whom had never worked with a young child in their lives, rolled into the preschools and decided that babies and toddlers could learn to read and to do mathematical problems, until a whole army of parents were so mislead by these experts that they seemed willing to pay any price to assure their children of instant success in grade one, that magical year when *real* learning, *real* work, and *real* reading all became possible. Now the irony is that many of the primary grades are open, free, individualized, and relaxed while all too many nursery schools, day care centers, and kindergartens are closed, overly programmed, dominated by canned curricula, the alphabet, and phonics, have mini computers for everyone, and all kinds of isolated academic subjects are covered in a series of workbooks, skill books, programmed material, and technological devices that permit no errors, allow endless repetition that a human teacher can not tolerate, and even reward children on a programmed basis, untainted by human interaction. Definitely in these often frantic, harried, and frenetic classrooms no time is wasted in planning "for nothing."

The young child who is sensitive enough to be tuned into his own needs will have a difficult time in these force-fed and overly structured classrooms. He will not be allowed the privilege of withdrawal to a quiet spot from overstimulation or frustration. These would be seen as symbols of failure. He must fit into the master plan, often considered individualized by the teacher, but in reality the only part that is individualized is the rate at which the child goes through the program. He will be lucky if he even gets this as many teachers accept the view that, if a program is planned by experts, all children can go through this plan at the same rate, and it saves the teacher from making the decision of who is able to do what at a given point in time. To the learning and efficiency experts we must not waste one precious moment of our dogged pursuit of learning. Every second counts if we are to learn more and more earlier and earlier. There is a kind of race on to see how much the preschool child can learn in terms of information. Little consideration is given to whether the effort is worth it, or what are the long term effects on the child's eagerness for learning and his ability to handle the abstract concepts that are part of the later years. Children are helpless. Young children seem to have few rights and more and more odious responsibilities at an earlier and earlier age.

Perhaps I have painted too harsh a picture, but I am in touch with reality, especially in this great metropolitan area. The underprivileged go to school early to catch up before grade one, a kind of life insurance policy that should help the child to achieve in grade one. The so-called overprivileged go to school early to maintain that edge they have for formal learning as well as to satisfy the egoes of their parents and some teachers. The simple tragedy of all of this is how few children have the luxury of attending a preschool for their own total development or even for the purpose of enjoying an experience x number of hours per day. This should be one of the purposes of early childhood, at least from the viewpoint of the child as he is not equipped to handle long range goals such as a

career or college or to make Phi Beta Kappa. Life at three or four or five at that moment is what is important to him. We seem afraid to mention this as a goal because this is a non-measurable and non-cognitive goal, at least on the surface.

To many people these are *nothing* goals. Enjoyment is *nothing*. Why would one program for this? Is laughter and an inner happiness and serenity important? Do we ever count the number of times a child laughs within a given time period? Do we ever concern ourselves with how many times the teacher laughs at herself, laughs with a child, or chuckles with children over a humorous story or happening? I am constantly struck today by the grim and harried stance of teachers in the preschool. There seem to be so many demands that they want to meet, not questioning whether the demands are logical or good for children. If the demands cost money, they must be good. There may be 26 books of the alphabet to go through as I watch some kindergartens in a nearby system. There is no time for art, no time for trips, no time for anything but going through all these books. The children hate the sight of them but that is of no concern. The teacher gives the parents the idea that these are what kindergarten is all about, and only a few parents have questioned her judgment. Only a few have had nerve enough to remove their children from this symbol dominated room with so much paper.

Under no definition of reading can we say that knowing letters, saying sounds, and being able to write letters of the alphabet will of themselves guarantee reading. Reading implies understanding of content. Reading implies an understanding of oral language and the ability to reproduce this. There seems to be a growing and subtle put-down of non-reading activities in the preschool, an inference that only from reading does one learn. If that is so, how is it that babies and toddlers acquire so much information by osmosis, as it were, from their own life space experiences. We all can learn from reading, but it is not the only way to learn at any age, much less at the preschool level.

I think it is high time we planned for "nothing" very seriously, very thoughtfully, and very soon. By planning for "nothing," I am referring to non-didactic, non-telling, non-workbook, non-skill sheet, non-purple passion sheet approaches. I am talking about a little push, a tiny pull, and lots and lots and lots of ponder. I am referring to that nothing word called play. Play can be nothing or it can be planned for.

For years and years the traditional preschools have been criticized because so many of the teachers planned nothing. The same materials were used day after day, month after month, and indeed year after year with no attempt to see that children chose a variety of experiences or that these experiences were extended or deepened to meet the ever expanding growth needs of the individual child. These so-called child-centered schools served a socializing need, but little else. Largely, the teachers sat in the background, abdicated their role as a resource or guidance person, and intervened in the children's play little or none at all, depending on their philosophy. In a sense these teachers planned nothing except perhaps a story, or an art activity, or a holiday activity called social studies then. The intellectual development of the child was scarcely considered for the twos to fours. Even with the fives, a few so-called readiness activities seemed to suffice. This was the time when readiness was considered a careful dosage of certain items, usually presented around Easter time to immunize the child for success in grade one. The absurdity of a time limit on readiness was not seen, much less considered by the average teacher or person. That pernicious idea, incidentally, is still very much with us. The trend may have disappeared from the educational psychology textbooks, but not from school people.

Cannot we accept the fact that a child is always in a state of readiness from the time he is born until he dies? He is ready, willing, and able as a young child to interact with all the materials, people, and stimulation of his environment. This is the stuff of learning for him. So a professional and caring teacher and parent plans for these experiences, which are for the child to taste, savor, explore, think about, and enjoy, albeit through play.

Some educators would divide play into two very broad areas and perhaps this will help all of us to understand the semantical differences between planning nothing and planning for nothing or play. The traditional nursery school has leaned heavily on the first type of play, spontaneous play, play that the child initiated on his own, using materials generally available to him. This is often called free play also, a term which may cause early child educators of a certain non-play orientation to go into shock. For public relations purposes the term has almost disappeared from the kindergarten, even Head Start, and some nursery schools. You see the power of play being considered as nothing is at work here. Taxpayers see play as not a function of the school. Work is the function. These same taxpayers incidentally, pay tens of thousands of dollars for lighted stadiums in which a selected group of adolescents play football, but NEVER a cent for early childhood play.

These anti-play persons would replace the spontaneous and free-flowing play of the nursery school with the second broad type of play, structured play. In structured play the cognitive or intellectual culmination of the activity can be clearly foreseen from the moment of planning. This structured play is so logical to these planners. Children are seen as computers, and the programming is predicted for each child. Business and budget terminology and ideas are sweeping into education and smothering any ideas of humane or affective or feeling activities since these are so hard to quantify. Activities for children are determined by the capabilities of the computer. Why should schools pay teachers to teach children to play, say these experts, when every child learns to play without tutoring.

There is research evidence to prove that both children and animals who have been deprived of play opportunities fail to learn as effectively as those who have freedom to manipulate and explore. Psychoanalysts such as Anna Freud (1963) have observed that the thinking of young children is often brilliant, children constantly amaze adults with their solutions to

problems. But the solutions are not built on solid evidence, are bound neither to logic nor reality. In 1952 Lili Peller noted that while play is often wishful thinking there are common elements between play and the development of reasoning ability. "Neither has direct and immediate consequences in the outer world. In both, certain elements of reality are selected and varied. Both are far quicker than is direct action in reality" (1952). One plays or one thinks as if the world were oriented in a certain way. This orientation beautifully overcomes the obstacles of time and space. Peller (1954) also states that play, like reasoning, is precipitated by an experience that is not satisfactorily completed. Play provides the opportunity not only to savor whatever pleasurable aspects the experience had, and in various ways to work out compensations for its hurts, but also to understand it.

Clearly a child can try out his incipient intellectual powers in the play situation. Yet in a sense there are reality constraints even on play. The tallest block structure can be the John Hancock tower, but only if it is so constructed that it stays up – a clear challenge to the construction engineer of three years who may be inclined to pile blocks helter-skelter. This kind of play develops intellectual competence. However, the teacher or the adult is a key figure here. She has to arrange and rearrange the child's environment to confront the child with problem-solving possibilities or if he is frustrated to rearrange for the level of frustration that is productive for him and with which he can cope. This assumes that the adult is tuned into children and understands how the child's intellectual processes develop.

Erik Erikson (1959) said that the playing child advances toward new stages of mastery along two fronts, one related to association with peers, and one to use of toys and equipment. The role of the teacher here is to guide children so that they are successful in working with materials. She is helped in this task by the child's association with his peers. This

is essential to the child's development of a feeling of competency, a feeling of self-worth, and leads to his eventual understanding of his own eco-system and his place in it. He must get the feeling that he has some control of the life space in which he moves.

This is not an easy task for parents or teachers. Few people have clear ideas about what one should promote in children in terms of cognition. Piaget has influenced most early childhood teachers because of his attention to cognitive development in young children. According to Piaget (1962) the infant grasps, looks, and sucks, mentally storing information from each of these activities, while at the same time becoming more proficient in retrieving and applying these experiences in patterns of action which he calls schemas. Thus the infant intellectualizes his environment by what he can do with it. This is a key fact for all early childhood people.

During toddlerhood he has begun to use the twin processes of accommodation (in which his thinking conforms to fit outer reality) and assimilation (in which the child integrates new information into his previous background of experience). While these two processes tend to be reciprocal, they are not always in equilbrium. For example, most children can count to four long before they are aware of the meaning of fourness. Many times accommodation (conforming to reality) is ascendant over assimilation. This is true when he imitates. On the other hand, when assimilation (integrating previous and new information) is ascendant over accommodation (reality) the child is seen as playing.

Through the experience of playing the child handles many objects and discovers how many properties they have. This classification is most certainly cognitive. Through touching, feeling, holding, lifting, shaking, the child notes similarities and differences. Thus the child begins the basic cognitive skill of sorting objects into classes that have similar attributes (color, form, weight) and also he begins another basic cognitive skill – that

of ordering objects on the basis of differences, from smallest to largest, etc. Piaget considers all of this as the basis for conceptual learning.

Now some of you will say that all this sounds like structured play. This does not sound like spontaneous play. But Piaget (1964) considers language and the collaboration of a child's ideas with those of his peers to be essential in intellectualizing an experience. Structured play does not always permit this. In other words, a sort of social collaboration is called for. The young child has to take in reality in his own ego-centered way before he can become a logical thinker. As the child interacts with his peers in spontaneous way, he begins to adapt to their ideas; after all, his peers think more like him than does an adult. Therefore his social collaboration in a small group leads to children communicating with one another, a definite step in intellectual development. The transition from the intuitive, perceptually based thought of the preschool child to the logical operational thinking of the older child is a slow and gradual one. This comes only when the child has practiced enough through play and experimentation that he becomes dissatisfied with what he knows. Therefore he accommodates to situations that challenge and cause him to revise his knowledge.

There have been limited studies on the relation of a child's spontaneous play and his creativity. Nina Liebeman (1964) found some association between the teacher's ratings of playfulness in kindergarten children and the divergent thinking factors of ideational influence, spontaneous flexibility, and originality as measured by cognitive tasks derived from work by Guilford and Torrance.

Smilansky's (1968) work with advantaged and disadvantaged children in Israel points up the sharp differences in play between the two groups of children. While disadvantaged children often used the same play themes, such as home and family, the play was much more static, with little

expansion and imagination, with little variety, and with little depth in the sense of relationships. These disadvantaged children seemed to need replicas to play a theme. They were not able to substitute their imagination for these. If a child snatched the hat of the fireman, that child ceased to consider himself a fireman. Advantaged children tended to go right on, pretending that the hat was still there. It is as if the disadvantaged children operate from a memory level, not imagination. There are many other fascinating observations by Smilansky, with the view of helping these children to become active in sociodramatic play, where more than one person was involved in role play. She found that there were six types of reactions from children when adults intervened with the purpose of expanding the play.

first - no reaction or a negative one

second - passive participation, perhaps a smile or a look of interest

third - active participation - making use of teacher suggestions, often using the words of the teacher

fourth - additional participation - adding the child's own ideas, often using own words

fifth - interpreting the adult suggestions independently, reacting originally, and,

sixth - initiating a completely new plot, adult ideas not included at all

If you think back on the sequence of these you can easily see the intellectual development implicit in moving from first to sixth. This should

be useful to people working with children in being able to explain the hierarchical skills being demonstrated and sought in sociodramatic play. In our complex society, children need to master these skills of playing as they directly relate to adult skills later. Too many employees are locked into level one, no reaction. All too few are at level six where creativity and originality are shown. Do you not also see the relation of this to creativity? One cannot be free to create until one is sure of one's self, until one has become an active and free participant in a venture, not a passive participant.

Just as there are stages in intellectual development noted by Piaget, so are there stages in play development. I will note some of these by Smilansky. Looking at these stages might be helpful in looking at children carefully to see where they are now and where they will be moving if their play is being nurtured by the teacher. Note the use of the word nurtured, not necessarily structured.

***First stage*** - that of the infant - purely ***functional play***, largely motor activity-exercise, of the body parts; the child practices and perfects his physical capabilities and thus begins to explore the environment.

***Second stage*** - toddlerhood - ***constructive play*** - here the child begins to use materials; he goes from sporadic handling of these to building. He goes from manipulation of form to formations. He expresses activity through creations. In the process he often becomes a creator.

***Third stage*** - ***symbolic play*** - begins about age three and continues through four and five. This is the age of dramatic and sociodramatic play. In this the child acknowledges the objective world situation and yet can substitute any imaginary situation to satisfy his own personal wishes and needs. Social tendencies are developed. This type of play permits the child to be simultaneously actor, observor, and a participant to the full extent of his abilities in a common enterprise. What a wonderful way to work through one's understandings.

*Fourth stage - games with rules* -- this is the play form that we most carry through with us as an adult. Children learn to accept prearranged rules and concepts. A child learns to control his behavior, actions, and reactions within group limits. This often does not take place until the age of seven.

These play stages then reinforce the intellectual processes inherent in play. Children play to arouse interactions. Playthings do this, people do this, real materials do this. Play eventually leads to the integration of the previous with curren' experience as the child explores, investigates, and manipulates. The broader the experiences provided, the better. The child should be allowed to interact freely within his environment of the classroom, the only restraints being those of human and property rights.

This calls for planning - any material can be a plaything. Many toys are not playthings. In other words, adults provide toys for children to facilitate play, but the adult conception of a toy is not necessarily a child's. For example, the purchased doctor kit in the nursery school is an exact replica of the M.D. bag but it limits play. A child imagining that she is a doctor does not need a cheap plastic bag, a vial of candy pills, and a replica of a stethescope. A child can create his own bag out of anything. Pills and thermometer can be pretend, a figment of the imagination - and therefore more germ-proof with small children. A piece of yarn or hose can be a stethescope. A real one would be better because there are science learnings about the human body built into the use of this. We waste money on predictable toys. Good equipment and playthings are open-ended and serve a dozen uses depending only on the imagination of the child who is using them. If it can be used only in one way, think twice or three times before you buy it. Playthings that sustain play longer elicit a greater variety and a greater complexity of response. Complexity calls for investigation of properties of a physical nature and purposes that are not immediately predictable. Look for these characteristics when planning for play.

Another characteristic of useful playthings is the responsiveness to the child. The excellent plaything is manipulable. The child produces effects by her control of the plaything. Blocks fit this category so perfectly. So do many of the exciting science materials of water and sand. There is an art and a science in planning for the materials to be available in the classroom for the child to make a decision about its challenges and uses that are useful to him. Fantasy and reality materials are both needed for this.

I see the really excellent nursery school and early childhood program as one in which the two broad types of play, spontaneous and structured, are both used and planned for in a balance that is unique to the needs of the children of each and every classroom, these needs to be determined by the adults through observation, open-ended questions, and conversations with children and their parents as well as by the latest research findings relevant to children's needs. Certainly spontaneous play will be provided by provision of materials, adequate space, and, most of all, adequate time in which to investigate, talk about, and work through an experience in an unhurried way. This means large blocks of time left for these activities, commensurate with the child's age, experiences, and interests.

On the other hand, there is a definite need for structured play activities. These are carefully planned and presented to meet individual and small group needs. In structured play the teacher or the adult provides the leadership, not the child. There are usually more precise limits set in the use of materials. Often there is also a general time limit, not a strict time limit. What will be done is usually set. Often the two types of play will reinforce each other as a child moves easily from one form to another.

We must as professionals and concerned parents work together to protect the child. A narrow view of education, urbanization, mechanization, and an undue emphasis on the process of education tend to reduce the

quality of life for child and adult. Time is such an important commodity that Linder in his recent book "The Harried Leisure Class" (1970) says that even our leisure time is treated with attempts to make its use more efficient. In the life of adults he notes that the only large uncommitted block of time for an adult is sleep. There are signs that this subject is being attacked to make sleep more efficient and take less of our time.

In children, the large uncommitted block of time is for play. There is a real tendency to exploit this. There is an increasing attempt to manage play to achieve only structured goals.

To recapitulate, the worker in early childhood must be articulate about what a significant role play has in the development of the child, intellectually as well as socially and emotionally. This must be made known to parents, school boards, and professionals concerned with children. This articulation must be precise, not generalities that cannot be substantiated. Productive play does not happen in a vacuum. A teacher must plan for play by studying the needs of the child and matching these needs with materials and experiences that will broaden and deepen his understanding of the world around him by allowing the child to initiate and list his own ideas. The resultant interactions may be spontaneous in many cases. However, she is not afraid to plan specific structured activities. While children's interests can be exploited and used, often the teacher has to supply an interest, a motivating spark by which the child develops an interest and then moves into spontaneous play.

I can guarantee you that planning for that play is a difficult and challenging job. Anyone can plan nothing. I guarantee that you will never work harder in your life. I can also guarantee that never will you feel more comfortable, more relaxed, and have such a satisfying and productive year, not only for yourself but also for all the children. We cannct fail them. I am confident *you will not*.

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