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Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the philosophy of early childhood and children's play of the American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859–1952). Although Dewey busied himself with much more than early childhood and play, these occupy a central place in his pedagogical work. Around 1900, Dewey 'translated' his philosophical ideas into educational practices in his 'laboratory' (or 'lab') school in Chicago, participating in the debates about the education of young children. In these debates the American followers of two European pedagogues, Friedrich Froebel and Johann Herbart, stood firm, their ideas elaborated into widespread practices. Froebel's followers put his 'symbolism' at the heart of the educational process. For this the Froebelian materials or 'Gifts' provided the physical, and spiritual means (see Chapter 3). The kindergarten, in the toddler period, was designed to afford possibilities for children to play. Its methodology was dictated in minute detail – the prescribed way of dealing with the materials – the materials 'led' the way, the children were to follow. A similar dictation of a prescribed method occurred in the subsequent stages of primary education. There the methodical thinking of the followers of Herbart, the so-called Herbartians, dominated in theory and in practice. In their view, the development of the child followed a fixed sequence of phases. Education, both in literacy and numeracy skills and other school subjects, proceeded according to standard models that were entirely controlled by the teacher. The pupils were seen as passive recipients of knowledge.

Dewey encountered this situation when, around 1900, he became involved with theoretical and practical aspects of education. He criticized both the views of Froebel and Herbart, as well as those of their respective American followers. In part, this criticism was practical, for another part it was theoretical and philosophical. But Dewey also used these prevalent ideas to develop his own programme for the play and education of young children. He envisioned his school as a scientific laboratory, in order to experiment with new forms of learning and a new organization of subjects, areas of learning and learning content, and, above all, pupil participation (Dewey 1895). With this he anticipated much (but not all) of what later was to become the *project method* and teaching across subjects that we know today. The play of the

(young) child was a major focus in the new way of educating, to which Dewey was trying to give concreteness (Berding 2014).

Next I briefly present Dewey's philosophy and educational view. Keywords are *experience*, *transaction* and *participation*. Then I explain how Dewey looked at the play of (young) children. Finally, I show with some concrete examples how Dewey brought his vision into practice, and I discuss the value of Dewey's vision for today's educational practices.

Dewey's philosophy and pedagogy: critical concepts

Experience: natural and human

The core concept of Dewey's philosophy and pedagogy is *experience* (Dewey 1916, 1934). With this term he refers to the ongoing transactions or exchange and mutual influence between organisms, including the human organism. Organisms for their existence and survival depend on processes in which they exchange materials with their environment. Whether a rhododendron, a giraffe or a human being: all organisms, in order to survive and live, have to keep metabolic processes going. Think of breathing, but also of the processing of food and the excretion of waste products. It is a continuous taking in something from nature, and subsequently giving back something else. Thus organisms are kept in a precarious balance position in relation to each other. We know how easily that balance can be disrupted. For Dewey the term experience denotes the dual nature of the transaction: there is an active element and a passive aspect. The activities organisms undertake change the environment but at the same time depend on them: they undergo the effects or consequences of their activities. The significant issue is that by the continuous transactions between organisms and the environment both the individual organisms and the environment change. There is never a situation of quietude: the energies that go in and out of the organism may go in one direction or the other, may have a lesser or greater degree of intensity, but are never 'at rest'. Dewey criticizes philosophical and psychological perspectives – including the famous stimulus-response theory of the Behaviourists (see Chapter 11) – that hold that a response always 'law like' follows upon a stimulus; as if there is an organism-in-rest that would suddenly, from the outside, be awakened to activity. According to Dewey, there is always activity: thus the response in a sense produces the stimulus (Dewey 1896a).

In short, by the term 'experience' Dewey hints on *doing* – acting on the one hand and undergoing the effects or consequences of it, on the other. Thus we come to the particularity of the experience of the human organism. Humans are not only connected in a natural way to all living things but also in a cultural way. Humans not only take in and give back to nature, but also attach meanings to these transactions. By giving meanings to things, to our acts and those of others, and to events – meanings which are embodied in words – we build our culture. Or rather: cultures, because as we know, there are in the world many different cultural communities. On the one hand humans have a 'natural' place in the whole of all living things that is continuous with all the others (see Chapter 7). On the other hand, humans are the only 'animals' that relate in such a highly complex, cultural, 'coded' way to all the living and especially their fellow 'animals'. For Dewey this suggests the question of education. For if the human world is indeed characterized by the complex transaction between those who have the 'access codes' and the survival of the individual and society depends on this, what about the new members of that community: the children who are born in a community that uses ancient codes. Especially in today's society, the number of cultural codes and related practices is almost incalculable, and yet within those subcultures

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many things are still taken for granted (see Chapter 21). The link between old and new is found in *transaction*.

Education as transaction

For Dewey education is a *transaction* process, between the 'acculturated' adult members of the (sub)culture – and children, the new members of this group. Adults have children participate in various activities and thereby use language, and children become part of this 'order'. The language that adults use is a set of signs or tokens. When a mother says to her toddler: 'Come on, roll the ball to me', this is a complex utterance loaded with meanings. For Dewey a focal educational point is at stake here – one he recognizes as sadly missing in both the Froebelian and the Herbartian philosophies – namely the fact that a child only gradually, in a process of transaction with others, appropriates the meanings that are 'locked' inside the words of the adult. For the (very small) child the words that the mother speaks initially are only meaningless sounds. The sound (combination) 'ball' (b-a-l-l) is a 'signifier', and signifiers in the course of time (centuries) have gained a certain significance; sometimes several meanings. The adult, who already possesses the 'key' to the meaning, has a perspective very different from the child who has yet to learn to handle that key. But once the child has learned this, has appropriated the use of the key, a whole new world opens up. Then the child is able to communicate with others who have also appropriated this usage and understand the difference between, say, 'ball' and 'bell' (see also Chapter 11).

For Dewey the main point of this process is mutual action, the process of give and take, of transaction or co-ordination between adults and children. Indeed, according to Dewey, this transaction process is the only way the child can get access – or better, is provided access by the adults – to our encrypted, cultural world (see Chapters 10, 18). Getting access means to be 'inserted' in the world of adults, which is a world of language. This brings us to the third pillar of Dewey's educational view, namely *participation*.

Participation

For Dewey participation means taking part in, sharing structured activities, and he connects this with a vision of democracy (Dewey 1916). 'Participative' democracy is at least of as great importance as formal, 'representational' democracy (Berding and Miedema 2001). Dewey connects the political and social notion of participation to the way in which children can acquire a place of their own in the community, by joining in activities in a language community. For Dewey, participation is both an objective and a means of education. Educationally speaking, the goal is that children become part of the community and at the same time, participation is also the means to bring this about.

In the above, I have shown the outlines of Dewey's cultural-naturalistic philosophy and educational theory. 'Naturalistic' because human organisms are in constant 'natural' transaction with their environment, something they have in common with all living beings. For these transaction processes, the continuous give and take, Dewey uses the term 'experience'. The peculiarity of the human organism is that human experience is always 'culturally mediated'. It is the culture, represented by the adults, which gives meaning to things, events and actions. Participating in meaningful activities, the child appropriates – first slowly and tentatively, later more smoothly and more quickly – the language tools, and thereby extends his possibilities to think and act. In the next section, I will show what this means for Dewey's vision of early childhood in which 'play' is the key factor.

Play as the 'environment' of the child

According to Dewey, play is the 'medium' in which the child lives. One might translate 'medium' as 'environment'. Dewey wants to make clear that play and playfulness are inseparable from childhood. Being a child is, according to Dewey, a stage in the life of humans in which one is not always subjected to the economic necessity of earning a living. Play gives the child a certain degree of freedom and living without demands. In his play the child discovers a lot of value, but play also has risks. Concerning the latter, Dewey makes the interesting observation that children by their imitation are prone to reproduce potentially harmful or unwanted social relations, such as the unequal division of power between men and women or between the cultural majority and minorities. In this sense, Dewey states that a play or a game is never good, or bad, in itself. All depends on the educational environment (Dewey 1915: 278). The core of Dewey's concept of play can be found in his criticism of the Froebelians and Herbartians. According to Dewey, the Froebelians replaced 'real' life by symbolism. An example of this is the game with the so-called 'second Gift', which consists of a ball, a cube and a cylinder of wood. With these objects, the children performed, as prescribed by the teacher, dozens of different actions and movements. This was marked by the symbolism of the sphere that represents everything 'round', the cube that represents everything 'flat', and the cylinder – which is seen as integration of the two opposites. The Froebelians believed that the divine forces that lurk in the child might develop by manipulating these objects. Dewey did not believe that such forces exist; in other words, there is nothing to 'de'-velop, and moreover the child is not in the least aware of this symbolism. The concrete experience of the child in the here and now is very different, namely the hardness or resistance of the wood; in other words, it is the impact or consequences that the child undergoes as a result of his actions, his 'doing'. As in the example of the mother with her toddler talk, it is the adult, not the child, for whom the word attached to the object has (a) meaning.

According to Dewey, the Froebelians created an imaginary world, a world of make-believe and they forget the actual experiences and abilities of the child. For Dewey, it is these everyday experiences that should be the nucleus of the education and the play of the child. The child should be occupied with as many life-like games as possible, using real materials which can be playfully explored and whose possibilities can be discovered (Dewey 1899a). The lack of real-life learning is also the core of Dewey's critique of the Herbartians. Both the learning content and the method to be followed were described in detail, and all spontaneity was made impossible. According to Dewey, however, there are no predetermined methodologies needed to guide the discoveries of the child (Dewey 1916: 181–182). He gives one guideline though: the teacher must give much attention to the linguistic and social aspects of the child's play. If one thing is clear from Dewey's view of education it is the importance of language in its social and communicative aspects. That language is socially structured was already made clear by the example of the mother and toddler. By speaking to the child and modelling how to connect through language, objects and actions, the adult offers the child the opportunity to become embedded in the order of the language and thus in the culture. The child appropriates the language as a tool that can decrypt (a very specific) part of reality, offering the possibility to communicate with others. Language is for Dewey primarily a matter of communication (Dewey 1895). The teacher should therefore take every opportunity to communicate and use language. Then meaningful activities will emerge, and about meaning one can argue.

Dewey's view

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Dewey's view on play

In his definition of play Dewey emphasizes the 'aimlessness' of this activity. Play we call 'those activities which are not consciously performed for the sake of any result beyond themselves; activities which are enjoyable in their own execution without reference to ulterior purpose' (Dewey 1912: 318). In other words, play is a process and a product at the same time (see Chapter 14). Play, like art, derives from life itself. The child comes into the world with a number of inherited impulses or instincts, says Dewey (1899a: 29). These are: the social instinct that the child shows in conversations and dealings with other people; the instinct to make – Dewey speaks of the constructive impulse; the impulse to investigate; and finally the expressive, artistic instinct. Together, they ensure that the child develops an inquisitive attitude in exploring the world, as an active participant. On the basis of these instincts, the development of the child takes place in four, smoothly merging stages of which the first two are of interest to our theme (Dewey 1900: 194).

In the first phase, earliest childhood – up to around two-and-a-half years, everything centres on the conquest of the child's own body: the discovery, while playing, of the possibilities of one's own body parts and locomotion. The first forming of habits takes place then. Education is also important here, because most of the objects with which the child (literally) comes into contact, are handed to her by the adult. The environment of the young child becomes larger and larger, and that area is full of meanings which, as we saw, come to the child in an indirect way, *via* the adult. The play of the child is characterized by imitation. Again, Dewey makes a distinction between the perspective of the adult and of the child. Children are not conscious imitators but process in their own way, the things they see, hear and feel the adult does. As stated earlier, a child is always active and somehow this acting is enhanced by the action of the adult. The effect of this is, according to Dewey, that there are constantly new stimuli which are 'richer, more complex in range, permitting more flexible adaptation, and calling out novel reactions' (Dewey 1910: 307).

The second phase up to about six or seven years will be devoted to learning about social relationships and meanings of the signs that occur in everyday life. The encounter with the self and the world continues on a more mentally abstracted level. The imagination – what Dewey describes as the inner, spiritual aspect of play (Dewey 1899b: 340), is introduced and thus unfolds the potential for a different type of play. In play, the child may take different roles: police officer, nurse, teacher. There is continuous reorganization of knowledge and meanings. Play, incomplete storylines and different roles flow easily into one another (Dewey 1910: 307). The imagination, in the form of fantasy, plays an important role, but nevertheless the child lives in a real world. It is therefore a matter of superstition, says Dewey, arguing against the Froebelians again, that children should make do with fake cutlery, or cleaning up a fake house with fake brooms. The more real the environment is, the more the child can deal with real materials, the better will be his memories and expectations about things, actions and events that settle in his mind (Dewey 1899a). No matter how simple acts of the child appear (in the eyes of adults), the child makes real discoveries, and exploration is loaded with the same sense of mystery as is the case with adults. Dewey pleads for constructive play for children because it gives them physical contact with a large number of different materials that they can really use. It sharpens their senses and powers of observation, it demands attention and what Dewey calls personal responsibility for their own learning and development. After all, the adult may provide anything, and stimulate, but it is ultimately the child with whom a mental attitude needs to settle. Dewey says: 'Plays may be taught, but not play' (Dewey 1899b: 339).

The school system

This second phase approximately coincides with the entrance of the child into formal education (the school system). Dewey says that the play (and incidentally also the 'work') of the child is too much subject to external demands and objectives as a preparation for future life as a working adult. Dewey argues that play must be seen as a service to discovering one's own possibilities in and through participation in social situations. He regards this discovery as a liberation (Dewey 1916: 177), a freeing of the child's potentialities. In Dewey's terms, play turns into work when the child (or adult) wants to achieve clearly defined goals and directs all of their energy accordingly. That does not mean that work cannot retain something of playfulness as a mental attitude that allows free action with regard to things, events and actions (Dewey 1910: 308). Dewey thus turns against a too sharp distinction between play and work: 'Play is work for the child and work that really interests him is play' (Dewey 1899b: 339).

In summary, it is clear that Dewey distances himself from the symbolism and formalism of his time and calls for a much more realistic and looser (but not non-committal!) approach to the play of the child. The teacher must make suggestions to lure and to promote the play of the child, and thereby bring him to a higher level of consciousness and action. For Dewey the actual experience of the child is the starting point of the educational process, not the prescribed curriculum or the standard method. It is a starting point, but certainly not the end. From the rough initial experiences, the child will acquire new experiences on the way to what eventually will become grounded personal knowledge, skills and insights. It is up to the educator to lend a helping hand by offering the child an opportunity to join in – in the order of the language that is the order of communication and the order of the community. Play acts in this both as a means and an end. Play is both pointless and useless – and extremely valuable. Noting this, I will in the concluding section briefly discuss how Dewey experimented in practice with his ideas. I then consider: What would Dewey say to us about the play of the child in our own time?

Practice and balance

There is a story of a visitor to the lab school in its early years who wanted to see the kindergarten department. At that moment this had not yet been established. 'But', the visitor asked, 'don't you do drawing here, handicraft, theatre games, plays and so on?' 'Of course we do', was the answer. 'Well then, that's exactly what happens in a kindergarten', was the response (Dewey 1899b). This story shows that Dewey wanted to promote a playful spirit which he considered characteristic for the education of young children throughout the school. Therefore, he did not teach isolated school subjects, like the Herbartians, but he organized the material into larger units, which he called 'occupations'. By this he understood the various activities that the child encountered in and around the house, like decorating, making clothes and preparing food (Tanner 1997). Dewey argued that the child comes into contact with these ordinary everyday occupations, and therefore is interested. The teacher should join with this interest, this 'non-invested capital' (Dewey 1899: 70). That was Dewey's basis for the curriculum of the school.

Cultural activities

Dewey used some elements from Froebel's pedagogy, like the Gifts, but the teachers did not work with the strict prescriptions (see Chapter 3). Also Froebel's stories, songs and crafts, such

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as weaving and mosaics, were used. Further, Dewey introduced the *circle*, not because in a circle, as Froebel would have it, children experience the symbolism of *wholeness* but because it is practical and convenient when children and teachers can look at each other. In Dewey's school a large amount of different materials and tools were used such as in woodworking, cooking and making clothing (Dewey 1895). In pictures from the early 1900s taken in the school, one can see children building a house together, eating the meals they prepared themselves, studying botany in the garden. All this was according to Dewey's statement: 'The child comes to school to *do ...*' (Dewey 1896b: 245). Dewey wanted to let the children experience what it means to perform these cultural activities directly themselves. He wanted them to experience these – and many other human activities – as necessary for the life of humans. They are loaded with historical significance, while at the same time they are new to the child; the pupils were in that sense true discoverers and inventors.

Playful spirit

Earlier I mentioned the playful spirit that for Dewey was so important in education. In our time this spirit is hard to find in some schools. Our schools are under constant pressure from political and social demands, and are judged according to performance (mainly on standardized tests). Schools are the subject of an ongoing debate on topics upon which they generally have little or no influence: if there is a decline in political involvement of citizens, the solution is sought in civic education in schools; environmental problems are to be solved by environmental education; the increasing uncertainty about interpersonal relationships is thought to be resolved by teaching children life-skills, and tensions between communities and the phenomenon of segregated schools are fixed by policies of mixing school populations. The pressure on education to deliver is greater than ever. Within schools we find these tendencies reflected in the curriculum and the ways of working. Usefulness and direct revenues seem to be the main criteria. Of the important domains for which education is meant to be: qualification, socialization, and individuation or subjectification (Biesta 2014), more and more stress has come on the first, with the third one suffering as a result. Partly due to these developments the play of the child in our education system is under pressure. After all, why promote something apparently so aimless and useless as play if one is continually forced to prepare children for the next theme, the next group, the next school, and in the end, the labour market?

Dewey called Froebel, for whom he had great admiration, the educator who put children's play on the agenda in the 1800s (Dewey 1899a: 82). In a sense this applies to Dewey himself for his own time, the early twentieth century. When industrialization, global communication and rapid social and scientific developments already applied, he argued for something as simple as the play of the child. As few other educators, Dewey saw the special place and importance of play for the child: a space where children can be, and become themselves, in relative independence from the pressures of society. One can argue that this is a naive, apolitical vision – and in a sense this is true. At the same time, it is a plea to not submit the school, including its children and teachers, to all kinds of political, economic and social forces that pursue interests quite different from that of the child. Education and hence the play of the child and the work of their educators are in need of a kind of *lee* to take place. This is not a plea for otherworldliness or to turn away from reality but ultimately a plea for an educational stance, an ethos which is essential in education. As we take stock, we can regard Dewey as the pedagogue of playful education, averse to symbolism and formalism but all for real life. In that life of the child, play takes an inalienable place. In that respect, Dewey's vision is as relevant today as it was more than a century ago.

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