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Play and learning in early childhood education: The contribution of High Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori pedagogical approaches

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ABSTRACT

The key role of play in early-years education has been highlighted by several pedagogues such as Froebel, Montessori, Weikart, Malaguzzi, among many others. It is consensual among the international educational community that children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play, exercising their bodies and using their imagination and creativity. This chapter aims to reflect on the power of play for children's learning and development and to analyze how three pedagogical

models, the High Scope, Reggio Emilia, and Montessori, integrate play throughout their curriculum development. The chapter is organized in several topics, namely: (i) the role of play in early childhood education; (ii) the High Scope curriculum and opportunities given to children to engage in free play and play with purposes; (iii) the Reggio Emilia approach: play through *100 languages*; (iv) the Montessori method, from hands-on activity and self-directed activity to collaborative play; (v) final remarks.

Keywords: Play, Pedagogical Models, Children's Initiative, Early childhood education, Development, Learning, Teacher's role.

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Play is valued worldwide and has been researched and written about by scholars from different theoretical disciplines, from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, anthropology, to medicine among others, and for that reason it is difficult to come up to a single definition of play. Nonetheless, there are several features that are common to different definitions of play. Thus, play can be defined as a freely chosen, voluntary, intrinsic motivated, pleasurable and flexible activity, involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Whitebreath, 2012).

Play is an essential activity of early childhood as it contributes to the cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development of children. Through play, children are able to explore and create a world they can master. Moreover, within the context of play, children learn, develop, and practice innovative behaviors and construct new knowledge (Bruner 1972; Pellegrini 2009; Pellis & Pellis, 2009).

Acknowledging the power of play for children's learning and development it is of vital importance to reflect on the teachers' role to promote early childhood playful contexts. Early childhood teachers must know how to create a learning environment that foster children's play and be skilled players. They must recognize that even when the exact role of play in learning is still debated, children everywhere play, regardless of culture and place. Thus, the teachers must create a space for playful activities and should allow the child to play freely.

They have a mediating role between play and children's development. According to Pecci (2010), early childhood teachers should create a relaxed and comfortable environment in which children feel safe to explore and experience new playful experiences. They organize contexts for play based on real life situations and according to the characteristics of children's cultural and social contexts; usually children like to reproduce in their play situations the actions and activities they observe adults do in their daily life. The careful observation of each child and the group allows teachers to adjust the play situations to the individual child, following their natural development and personal rhythm.

The power of play for learning and development in early childhood education is beyond question. Contemporary research reveals that play and playful activities are losing their vital role in many early childhood curricula nowadays (Ginsburg, 2007; Singer, D'Agostino & DeLong, 2009). Several studies conducted by researchers from the education sphere conclude that: (i) there is a relationship between the decrease of the time for playing in school and the increasing of extreme aggressive behavior (Gilliam, 2015); (ii) there are no long-term gains from teaching children to read at age 5 compared to age 7 (Suggate, 2010); (iii) when 'at-risk' children get inappropriate early education it has a lasting negative effect. These methods are intensifying the problems and not reducing the learning gap (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005); (iv) when schools focus on drilling literacy and math skills into young children it only produces a lack of creativity and curiosity (Engel, 2010). Research has shown that when children have opportunities to engage in different types of play, and to learn through active exploration of materials and toys, they have better results in school in both the short and long term. They also have more success in their personal and social life in adolescence and adulthood (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield & Nores, 2005).

It is consensual among the international educational community that children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration exercising their bodies and using their imagination (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Researchers and experts call action on the education of young children, and they express their deep concern that current trends in early education, fueled by political pressure, are leading to an emphasis on unproven methods of

academic instruction and unreliable standardized testing that can undermine learning and damage young children's healthy development (Miller & Almon, 2009). Given this scenario it is of vital importance to analyze the contribution of childhood pedagogy, and reflect how play is integrated throughout as an effective means to support all domains of development and promote learning in all curriculum areas in three curriculum models: High Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori.

The three pedagogical approaches presented in the next sections of this chapter are implemented in several countries from different continents and have been adapted to their cultural and diverse contexts of learning (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Lillard, 2012; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2013).

THE HIGH SCOPE CURRICULUM: A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO PLAY

The *High Scope Curriculum* is an early childhood education program for children ages birth to 6 years. The curriculum is a constructivist-based program that has its roots in Dewey's philosophy, Piagetian cognitive theory, and Vygotsky socio-cultural theory. The pedagogical approach is grounded in research, theory and practice and is continually updated (Epstein, 2007). Designed for children with or without special needs and from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities, the program aims to enhance children's cognitive, socioemotional, and physical development, imparting skills that will help children succeed in school and be more productive and responsible throughout their lives (Epstein & Hohmann, 2013). The curriculum is based on the view that children are active learners who learn from what they do as well as what they hear and see (Hohmann & Weikart, 2011). The development of the pedagogical approach is supported on central principles such as: active participatory learning; adult-child interaction; learning environment; daily routine; and assessment.

The curriculum that has a version for infants and toddlers (birth to 3 years) and a version for preschool children (3 to 6 years) is organized to offer daily opportunities for children to engage in free play and play with purposes with the support of attentive adults. Play is at the heart of the High Scope curriculum, and the core strategies that support children's engagement in play are: (i)

opportunities for children to choose materials, people and places for playing; (ii) space and materials organization; (iii) the plan-do-review process; (iv) and adults that play in partnership with children.

Active Participatory Learning

The cornerstone of the High Scope pedagogical approach is the belief that children learn and develop through interacting with materials, people, events and ideas (Hohmann & Weikart, 2011). Active learning occurs most effectively in developmental appropriated settings, where children are exposed to a variety of materials, tools and toys, and are encouraged to choose how to use them during play. Thus, at the High Scope settings, the learning environment, spaces and materials, and the teachers' style of interaction have a decisive role on the children's active participation in their own learning. Teachers and students are active partners in shaping the educational experience.

The active participatory learning is a complex process of construction of knowledge that entails decision-making, hands-on experiences, reflection on action, intrinsic motivation, invention and creativity, and problem solving. Children are encouraged by teachers to choose the materials and to decide what to do with them, to anticipate and reflect on actions and experiences that can occur while they are playing. The curriculum acknowledges that children should be given choices throughout the daily routine, whether the activities are freely chosen or planned by teachers. Moreover, the space and materials organization promote children's choice and initiative, boosting opportunities for direct experience with objects that are used at play.

Spaces and Materials for Playful Learning

Space is recognized as a locus of action and experimentation, where children interact with a variety of materials that support different types of play. The space is understood as welcoming, inviting and engaging for children, divided into differentiated and flexible areas (Hohmann & Weikart, 2011) that

encourage children to make choices and play with a variety of learning opportunities. The learning areas, that should be as large and spacious as possible for children to play alone or together with other children and adults, contain a variety of real tools, natural and reusable materials, and toys that are accessible to children throughout the daily routine. Materials are carefully organized, labeled, and stored in a variety of containers and shelves to promote children's autonomous involvement into play. Examples of areas for play include the house area, art area, block area, small toy area, and computer area, reading and writing area.

A variety of areas is also available or created in the outside space. Areas for climbing, running, jumping, playing with water and sand, riding bikes, explore natural materials and gardening, listening to stories and chatting with other children and adults. Materials within the indoor and outdoor areas are plentiful, varied and reflect children's interest and their culture diversity.

In a High Scope setting, materials are available to children at all moments of the daily routine, inviting them to engage in a diversity of playful experiences.

The observation of children's play and the High Scope *Key Developmental Indicators* guide teachers to organize the space, and choose the materials for the indoor and outdoor spaces.

A Daily Routine that Supports Children's Play

The High Scope daily routine provides opportunities for children to play using a variety of materials, and experience a diversity of interactions. The schedule is organized in different moments that create opportunities for children to engage in individual and social play, supported by adults that are guided by children's interests and intentions.

The plan-do-review process is the most important segment of the daily routine in which children make choices about what they will do, carry out their ideas and plans while playing in the different areas of the classroom, and reflect upon their activities and experiences with adults and other children. This cycle aims to help play become meaningful. The plan-do-review process fosters children's development of initiative, reflection, problem solving, responsibility, and

they can see themselves as individuals who can act on decisions (Epstein & Hohmann, 2013). Children experience the power of independence and are conscious of their intentions which support the development of purpose and confidence.

At planning time, teachers create opportunities for children to choose activities, materials and people whom to interact with, adults and other children. All the areas and materials of the classroom are available, and children are encouraged by teachers to think and reflect about their intentions and interests which foster their capacity to think in alternatives and make decisions about what they want to do while playing in the learning areas. Choice promotes children's ability to think about alternatives, make decisions, and be responsible for their choices (Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck & Taylor, 2003). Providing children with opportunities to choose activities, materials, spaces, people with whom they interact fosters their ability to think simultaneously about several possibilities, to evaluate and reflect on these alternatives, and to decide what to do next. Choosing involves using different criteria to select and this operation, carried out in a continuous and systematic manner, promotes the development of formal operational capacity (Piaget, 1970). From a constructivist perspective, choice is an individual activity essential for cognitive and social development (Branscombe et al., 2003). However, planning is more than making choices. Planning is choice with intention. Planning involves deciding on actions and predicting interactions, recognizing problems and proposing solutions and anticipating consequences and reactions (Epstein, 2003).

The range of strategies used by teachers to support children's planning enhance their ability to make elaborated and detailed plans. To engage children in planning is to encourage them to identify their goals and consider the options for achieving them (Epstein, 2003).

The moments of planning are, therefore, spaces and times for anticipating the action, where children, through a reflective process, elaborate plans of the activities and experiences that will be carried out in the following moment of the daily routine – the time for playing in the learning areas.

The activities children carry out in the areas are done so with a previously defined purpose, the plans they have made at planning time, and which constitute an organizer of the action (Dewey, 1971). Therefore, the type of play that occurs

at the “do” moment of the High Scope daily routine is play with purposes, freely chosen by children and supported by adults who acknowledge their choices and follow their ideas and leadership. This is the largest moment of the daily routine and can last from 40 to 60 minutes. When playing, children engage in different type activities and experiences that could be carried out individually or in partnership with teachers and other children. The adult’s role at this moment of the daily routine is to support children’s initiatives and play by observing them or taking an active role in children’s play following children’s actions, plans, ideas. Teachers are partners who play side by side with children, at their physical level, following their cues and, through scaffolding strategies, enhancing children’s knowledge and development.

The plan-do-review process ends with a moment for the children to share and reflect upon the actions and experiences carried out while playing in the learning areas. Children are encouraged to review and talk about what they have done, how they did it, think through problems they encountered and how they were solved (Holt, 2010). Review encourages children to think and reflect upon what they have been doing and gives them the opportunity to put into words their actions and thoughts. Review requires reflection, and reflection is more than memory or recitation of completed activities. “Reflection is remembering with analysis...Reflection consolidates knowledge, so it can be generalized to other situations, thereby leading to further prediction and evaluation” (Epstein, 2003, p. 2).

The plan-do-review process encourages children to engage in meaningful play activities and situations supported by attentive adults who acknowledge the vital role of free play for children’s learning and development.

Research has shown that children from low-income families and at risk of failing in school attending the High Scope Curriculum at the age of 3 and 4 years, and being exposed to a learning environment that encourages self-initiative and active learning through play, when compared with children that received no preschool program have better results in school at short and long term. The High Scope Perry Preschool Study, one of the most well-known High Scope research studies, that follow a group of 123 children since the age of 3 until the age of 40, found that adults at age of 40 who underwent the High Scope preschool program had higher earnings, committed fewer crimes; were more likely to hold a job, and

were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have a preschool education (Sweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield & Nores, 2005).

THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH AND THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PLAY

The *Reggio Emilia Approach* is built on the construction of the child's image that is conceptualized as a subject of rights, competent; an active learner who continually builds and tests theories about themselves and the world.

The pedagogical approach of Reggio Emilia for children from 0 to 6 years is rooted on the social-constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky, the Progressive Education of John Dewey, the constructivist theory of Jean Piaget, the theory of Multiple Intelligences of Howard Gardner, and is also influenced by the work of Jerome Bruner, Gianni Rodari, Bruno Ciari, among many others.

This pedagogical approach, which is carried forth in the Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, is based on distinctive characteristics, namely: the participation of families, the collegial work of all the staff, the importance of the educational environment, the presence of the atelier and the figure of the *atelierista*, and the pedagogical coordinating team. Focusing on the centrality of the *hundred languages* belonging to every human being (Malaguzzi, 1998), in the atelier spaces, young children are offered daily opportunities to encounter many types of materials, many expressive languages, many points of view, working actively with hands, minds, and emotions, in a context that values the expressiveness and creativity of each child in the group. Throughout the involvement in *100 languages* experiences, children have opportunities of experiencing different types of play within the network of relationships they establish with the learning environment, adults and peers.

Listening as Strategy to Enhance Children's Right to Play

The teacher's first role is to create an educational context of comfort, confidence, motivation that promotes children's involvement with objects, spaces, people (adults and other children), events and ideas, creating a network of relationships that supports the co-construction of knowledge (Lino, 2013). In this educational context, well-being and listening, at various levels, are the dominant traits of the pedagogy practiced in the schools of Reggio Emilia.

The concept of listening is based on the image of a child, which is conceptualized as active, rich in resources and knowledge, competent, creative, subject of rights, producer of culture (Malaguzzi, 2001). According to Rinaldi (2006), to listen is to be open to others and to what they have to say, is to consider others as subjects that contribute to shared research that each person develops about the meaning of everyday experiences. Listening requires an in-depth understanding of events, situations, ideas, and is free of judgment and prejudices. Listening is a reciprocal process that involves the listener and the one that communicates, recognizes the right to participation of children, teachers and parents, legitimizing their theories and interpretations of the surrounding world (Lino, 2013).

Children, very early in life, show a high competence in listening and want to be listened to, and this is a right that must be respected by all who interact with them, namely their teachers (Rinaldi, 2006). Teachers should be attentive listeners that observe children identifying their abilities, needs and interests, which will enable them to create a playful learning environment that meets children's interests, ideas, curiosity, and, at the same time, challenges their intellectual and physical capacities. Listening is therefore a central principle of the Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach that supports the children right to choose their own play experiences, and allows adults to provide a developmental and cultural appropriated context for learning.

Children's Participation

The right to participation is one of the central principles of the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia's pedagogical approach. Participation is a value and a strategy that enable children, teachers and parents to work together in the

development of the educational project. The children's right to participate recognizes their competence and places them in the role of actors and constructors of their own learning and development. In Reggio Emilia, the child assumes an active role in the construction of the early childhood centers educational project (Malaguzzi, 1998), in collaborative partnership with teachers and parents.

The children's interests, motivations, curiosity, questions, expressed through their look, gestures, words and language guide the action of adults in the organization of the educational environment by planning proposals for exploration of materials, and activities, which is designated *Progettazione* (Rinaldi, 2006). *Progettazione* is the process of reflecting, questioning, hypothesizing, planning the introduction of new materials, reorganizing spaces, providing experiences that aim to build an environment that follows children's ideas and knowledge, expressed at play, and challenges their capacities and thus creating real "zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 2000).

Spaces for Play and Learning

The organization of the space for playing is carefully thought out and planned by teachers, parents and architects who work collaboratively to create a pleasant environment that reflects ideas, values, attitudes and cultural heritage of their community (Lino, 2013).

One of the main objectives to be considered in the organization of spaces is the creation of environments of well-being and security, where children and adults (parents and teachers) feel welcomed with affection and respected for their individuality.

Another feature of the space is its flexibility (Reggio Children, 2011). Indoor and outdoor spaces are flexible and dynamic, following children's growth and interests and bringing new challenges and new ideas. The environment interacts, transforms and is transformed through the actions and experiences of children and adults.

Transparency is another feature of the infants and toddlers' centers and preschools spaces of Reggio Emilia. Large windows, glass doors and walls create osmosis between the indoor and outdoor spaces, and among the various indoor spaces. The existence of these large glass surfaces allows continuity among the different spaces facilitating communication and interaction among all members of the educational community. They also enable the development of playful experiences of light and shadow and, at the same time, create a calm, relaxing, and well-being environment that promotes children engagement on imaginative and creative play.

The placement of reflective surfaces, as mirror tables, "infinity boxes" and mirrors with different shapes placed in different parts of the classroom, promotes, among other things, play with the images, observation of the space from different perspectives, engagement in playful experiences with other children and adults. When children go inside a kaleidoscope mirror the multiple reflections they observe invoke surprise and delight.

The outdoor space is carefully planned and organized to enable continuity and extension of the children's play that starts at the indoor space. The outdoor space respects the natural characteristics of the environment, with shady areas, uneven and uniform ground and allows the involvement in games of exploration and interaction with the space, the objects and other people surrounding them.

Classrooms and other common spaces of the schools are also equipped with light tables, overhead projectors and shadow screens to encourage children to observe, to experiment, to use their imagination, and to develop creative play.

Materials, stored in transparent containers and placed in shelves accessible to children, include real tools, natural and reusable materials, toys and games, art supplies, books. Materials are carefully chosen and organized by the adults to create provocative situations that invite children to engage in a variety of games and playful experiences.

The outdoor space is carefully planned and organized to enable continuity, and terrain areas with water and sand and other materials allow children to involve in a variety of activities and experiences. There are also structures for playing and performing specific activities, such as swinging, sliding, climbing, jumping, overcoming obstacles, to promote motor development.

The design of the infants and toddlers' centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia includes spaces for classrooms of each age group and common spaces to promote interactions and enhance relationships among children, the personnel (teachers, auxiliaries, cook), and parents. The common spaces are the *piazza*, a central square, the *atelier*, an art studio, the kitchen and dining room. The *atelier* introduced by Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach, has a central role on children's learning.

The *Atelier* and the *100 Languages*

Focusing on the centrality of the *100 languages* belonging to every human being (Malaguzzi, 1998), in the *atelier*, young children are offered daily opportunities to explore many types of materials, many expressive languages, many points of view, by actively working with hands, mind, and emotions, in a context that values the expressiveness and creativity of each child within the group. Throughout the involvement in the *100 languages* children have opportunities of experiencing different types of play and create new games and playful situations.

The *atelier* is a space with a wide variety of materials and artistic expression resources that are used by children and teachers to support experiences, activities, and projects that emerge from the children's daily play. The *atelier* is conceptualized as a workshop for the expression of ideas, knowledge, questions, hypotheses of children who express themselves using an endless variety of materials (Vecchi, 2010).

Materials are an integral part of children's learning process and are used simultaneously as objects of exploration, research and construction, and as vehicles for expression and communication. The ways children use the materials are multifaceted and sometimes surprising and unexpected. Since they are born, children show a great deal of receptivity to interact with objects and materials, exploring them with all their senses, assigning meanings to the surrounding world (Vecchi, 2010). Thus, the greater the diversity and variety of materials, the greater the chances of the children to engage in meaningful explorations, and the richer will be their experiences (Malaguzzi, 2001).

In the pedagogical model of Reggio Emilia, children are encouraged to explore the comprehension of their experiences through different forms of expressing the *100 languages* of the child. Thus, children are encouraged to explore the environment and express themselves by using multiple forms of language that include: words, gestures, debates, mime, movement, drawings, paintings, constructions, sculptures, shadow games, mirror games, dramatic play, and music (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwa, 2005). These multiple forms of expression allow children to represent the observations, ideas, memories, feelings and knowledge that is built on the reality that surrounds them, in this way, building and producing culture. A study developed by Gencer and Gonen, (2015) that involved preschools adopting the Reggio Emilia approach shows that the involvement on project work and the use of multiple languages foster's children's creative thinking skills.

PLAY AT THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH OF MARIA MONTESSORI

The *Montessori* pedagogical approach for early childhood education is a child-centered pedagogical approach that has been used in diverse cultures for more than a century. The pedagogical proposal was developed by Maria Montessori through scientific observation of children in their natural contexts of play and learning. Montessori classrooms are well and aesthetically organized, displaying a diversity of materials and toys, freely available to children aiming to promote their learning in language, math, science, and all curriculum areas. Materials are designed for children to use them individually, in pairs or in small groups in a self-corrected process without close teacher supervision or intervention. Areas of the curriculum are tightly interconnected. Through structured daily routine children are offered opportunities to freely choose the materials available within the learning environment and engage in playful learning activities.

The Method of Scientific Pedagogy

The invitation to work with children with disabilities and later with children from deprived families between the ages 3 and 6 influences their professional skills and has enabled Montessori to develop the bases of her pedagogical approach.

The pedagogical approach developed by Montessori is supported by scientific pedagogy and implemented under the principles of the experimental method. Carrying careful observations of the children in the "Casa dei Bambini", in an organized environment with selected materials and stimuli, allows the discovery and understanding of how the children reacts and what they do. It also allows knowing the children and the materials better, as well as the interactions. These observations made it possible for Montessori to deepen the knowledge on the nature of children, object of publication in the book "*Montessori Method*" published in 1912. In this book, children are described as being: "capable of extended periods of concentration; enjoying repetition and order; revealing in the freedom of movement and choice; enjoying purposeful activities (preferred work to play); self-motivated, displaying behaviors that did not require either punishments or rewards; taking delight in silence and harmony of the environment; possessing personal dignity and spontaneous self-discipline; and, being capable of learning to read and write" (Montessori, 1912, as cited in Isaacs, 2015).

The Children in the Montessori Approach

The children in this approach are of someone with many potentialities, who need to be aroused to the full development of the person. To educate is to allow free expression and to promote the full potential of the children so that they can self-develop. Respect for children's characteristics, children's freedom and self-education are essential dimensions for Montessori (Pla, Cano, & Lorenzo, 2001). An important goal of the Montessori approach is the children development to the fullest of their potentialities in a structured, attractive and motivating environment, capable of promoting their autonomous activity based on a deep respect for the individuality of each child. It is expected, therefore, to help prepare the children to be free, autonomous, to think for themselves, to be able to make choices, to

decide and to act from the more or less structured proposals that the environment offers (Angotti, 2007; Pla, Cano & Lorenzo, 2001).

The development of the activity by the experimental method presupposes a concern with the organization and preparation of the learning environment so that the children can make their choices, discover and understand the world (Angotti, 2007).

The Teacher in the Montessori Approach

The teacher in this approach is seen as a key piece that enhances the growth and the self-discipline of a child full of possibilities, namely through learning materials and the creation and development of quality interactions in a climate of freedom, respect for the “true nature” and their way of being, feeling, thinking and learning. It is the responsibility of the teacher to observe the children, to learn about them and their nature, to identify their interests and needs, to provide them answers and to promote their full potential. Based on the observation made and the identified needs of each child, it is the responsibility of the teacher to support the activities, to extend them and to add others. The teacher is seen as a facilitator who guides and helps the child access the resources of the classroom (Isaacs, 2015). The teacher is also responsible for organizing the learning environment, presenting the materials and supporting the children, in a discrete and indirect way, on the employment of such materials in a useful way for their training. The training of the teacher was object of attention to Montessori, focusing not only on the professional aspects but also on the vocational and moral dimensions regarding such training (Pla, Cano & Lorenzo, 2001).

The Learning Environment in the Montessori Approach

The Montessori approach enhances learning through the senses and the development of learning materials, currently referred to as "educational toys" that are understood as instruments for children to reveal their "true nature" (Isaacs,

2015). Materials for the development of activities of everyday life, refinement of the senses and different forms of communication and language are accessible to children who can use them autonomously and independently. The proposed Montessori approach understands the practice, imitation, repetition, ordering, and classification as important dimensions because they allow the child to develop essential skills for the development of more complex mental operations. The repetition and imitation are previous steps to copy and creation and essential for children's development, particularly in terms of learning the symbolic play and language development (Pla, Cano & Lorenzo, 2001).

The favorable learning environment gives children the opportunity to learn in each own rhythm, supported by sensitive, well-prepared adults who respect the individuality of the child. The materials are designed in a way that the children can, autonomously and independent, identify any error in their use and look for solutions, without requiring the direct intervention of the teacher.

In the *Montessori* approach, the relationship among the children, the teacher and a favorable learning environment is very important and should continuously evolve and develop based on the children's continued observation. The children are an active agent of the environment and the teacher a facilitator who observes and interprets the behavior of children from sensitive periods to children's maturation (Isaacs, 2015).

Play in the Thought of Maria Montessori

The importance of play for the development and learning of the children is, today, unquestionable, as already mentioned in this chapter.

The question of children's play is, as Isaacs (2015) says, one of the great Montessori conundrums. Promptly in the first Children's House, Montessori observed and discovered that the child preferred to work instead of play. Isaacs (2015) seeks to analyze and discuss Montessori's understanding of the topic. Based on the observations of the children, Montessori found that they are more interested in the process than the product, often object of interest on the part of the adult. The child likes to repeat the process, because through repetition, they

are gaining and perfecting skills. In this way, and from Montessori's perspective, the nature of the child's work is different from the nature of the adult's work.

Isaacs (2015, p. 34) takes up another Montessori statement: "A child is also a worker and producer. Although he can't share in the work of adults, he has his own difficult and important task to perform, that of producing a man" (Montessori, 1966, p. 193), to discuss his work *versus* play perspective. In this statement, Montessori recognizes the great task that the children have to accomplish for their process of growth and development. She understands that this is a child's work, and she conceives and develops a learning environment in which all activities develop to contribute to the development and construction of the human being.

In the perspective of Isaacs (2015), Montessori's emphasis on work can be understood more as a need to give protagonism to the child, who needs to make, be active, manipulate and learn, rather than to devalue play. Montessori acknowledges that children enjoy doing work and do not distinguish between play and work.

There are various researchers divided on the importance that Montessori confers to the play. Authors such as Diamond and Lee, 2011; Elkind, 2007; and Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, (2009), quoted by Lillard (2013), sustain that Montessori does not deny the importance of play.

The approach and the learning environment proposed by Montessori presents some characteristics that are inscribed in a perspective that considers the relevance of play for the learning and the development of the children. As an example, the option of equipping the classroom with furniture adapted to the size of the children, withdrawing the desks and the desk of the teacher, including the garden as another workspace for the children. The accessibility and possibility of manipulation of the materials are organized by learning areas. The possibility of freely choosing the materials to use depending on their interests and for how long. There is freedom of choice and movements with great respect for the choices of the children who may choose to do nothing. This choice according to the interests of the children is supported by intrinsically motivated activity without the need for extrinsic rewards. On the other hand, the depth of the structure of materials, limitations to the free choice of materials that vary according to the macro level where there is free choice or micro with less free choice (Lillard, 2013)

and the absence of pretend play are characteristics that are distant from an approach that considers children's play relevant.

Montessori's context and life itself attest the importance of diligence, work to realize what she intended, and justify the importance she confers to work and the task of the self-construction of man. In addition, as Isaacs (2015) states, it is necessary to consider Montessori's previously explicit philosophical perspective to understand how she talks about the child's work. Today, Montessori teachers recognize the value of play in the lives of children and their training integrates this important issue. Children themselves establish relationships between work and play, especially when they represent roles that cannot be ignored by teachers and are understood as activities of the children's initiative that develop creativity and imagination.

Montessori's education exists for over 100 years and today has been implemented in numerous early childhood settings worldwide. There are two main styles on the implementation of the Montessori's method, the original program as it was stated by Maria Montessori and implemented in the "Casa dei Bambini", and supplemented program to which was added new materials and more attuned to the 20th century learning context in the USA (Lillard, 2012). The research on the Montessori's education is scarce and the results are not consistent. Lillard (2012) conducted a study that aims to analyze how child outcomes are associated with differences on the implementation fidelity of the Montessori's method. The results of the study show that across a variety of outcomes, children attending the "classic Montessori program gained significantly more across the school year than did demographically similar children in Supplemented Montessori programs (Lillard, 2012, p. 393). The larger gains were on social problem-solving, reading and vocabulary and math.

FINAL REMARKS

Children are born with an innate drive to explore their environment. Since very young age children are eager to learn and play, as stated in the first part of this chapter, is a vital activity for learning and development.

This chapter analyzes the contribution of the High Scope Curriculum, the Reggio Emilia Approach and the Montessori Pedagogical Approach for children's free and guided play. Research has shown that free play is necessary for children's social, emotional, cognitive and motor development. Research has also revealed that guided play can boost essential skills in early childhood. Guided play "provides an optimal medium for delivering educational content in ways that are enjoyable and that allow for genuine child agency, while constraining children's activities to facilitate learning" (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredges, & Klahr, 2016, p. 180). Rooted on the work of Lev Vygotsky, guided play proposes a pedagogical approach that respects children autonomy and the teacher have an active role, using scaffolding and acting at the *zone of proximal development*.

In the High Scope curriculum, play takes very important place. Children experience new skills through play and play requires manipulation, exploration, and free choice, interaction with people, adults and peers.

The High Scope learning environment is set up aiming to create opportunities for children to engage in free and guided play. The space is organized to promote children's initiative, and materials are placed at their level to enhance their free exploration and manipulation.

The daily routine offers the children many opportunities to freely choose the materials, activities and people they want to play with, and that is crucial to the learning process. Teachers support children in their play, ask questions to help or increase children's learning, add more challenges to it, and help children in problem solving approach. At the High Scope curriculum teachers play alongside with children, following their initiatives and ideas, maintaining a balance between child leadership and adult scaffolding which is the essence of guided play (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredges, & Klahr, 2016).

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education acknowledges the children's right to be active participants of their learning and development. Children are very competent protagonists and initiators, full of potential and active in constructing his or her own knowledge through interactions with their environment, which is carefully organized by attentive adults.

Free play and guided play are the heart of the Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach. The Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach emphasizes the children's right to freely choose the materials, the activities, the people, other children and adults with whom to interact with. In Reggio Emilia schools, when children arrive in the morning, they are free to play with their friends using materials, games or toys. The space, designated in this pedagogical approach as the *3rd teacher* (Malaguzzi, 1998), for its key role to provoke curiosity and wonder, invites the children to use multiple ways to explore the environment, to search out the knowledge through their own investigations, by playing with other children and adults.

The school should be a place of joy (Malaguzzi, 2001), the joy of finding friends with whom children will play and spend a day together, the joy of exploring new objects, expressing new ideas, co-construct knowledge. Joy and fun are essential elements to build a playful learning environment.

Children have a *hundred* different ways of thinking, showing their understanding and expressing their thoughts and creativity, through drawing and sculpting, through dance and movement, through painting and pretend play, through modeling and music, and these *100 Languages* must be valued and nurtured. These languages, or ways of learning, are all a part of the child, and learning and play are not separated (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwa, 2005).

The Montessori pedagogical approach emphasizes the children's autonomy, the capacity to make choices and take an active role in their own learning and development.

The classrooms are well organized and equipped with furniture, objects and materials to enhance children's opportunities to engage in free exploration and manipulation with the environment, supervised by attentive teachers that observe children in action and support their construction of knowledge.

Montessori developed a pedagogical method for early childhood education with a scientific basis, and settled on observation of children in the context of the classroom and in the natural context. Despite this scientific method, Montessori was not able to integrate the symbolic play in the proposed pedagogical approach, due to the lack of understanding about the role of symbolic play in the first years of the child's life. However, the pedagogical approach presented by Maria Montessori gives great importance to sensorial learning. She developed

sets of didactic materials aiming to engage children in sensory playful activities and games, that could be carried out individually or with other children. These materials were developed to enhance the children's autonomy and their self-learning. The self-corrected didactic materials guided children to build new skills and construct learning while playing with them. Therefore, Montessori was able to integrate the playful dimension of human activity into the teaching and learning process through the recognition of this type of activities and games.

There is a consensus around the challenge that play represents for Childhood Pedagogy as it was presented above. This chapter highlights the core role of childhood pedagogy and pedagogical approaches of play in the development and learning of early childhood.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Atelier: Is the designation adopted at the Reggio Emilia Approach for an art studio where children can explore and express their ideas, knowledge and questions through a variety of art techniques.

Ateliarista: Is an art teacher that is responsible for supporting children's work at the atelier and works in close collaboration with the preschool teacher at the Reggio Emilia schools.

Free Play: Is a type of play freely chosen by children.

Plan-Do-Review: Is a segment of three moments of the High Scope daily routine that allows children to plan and carry out their intentions and reflect upon them.

Play with Purposes: Is a type of play that encourages children to choose and communicate to others, children and adults, what they want to play with.

100 Languages: It is an expression created by Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, and means that children have endless ways to communicate their thoughts, ideas, knowledge.

The Method of Scientific Pedagogy – It is a pedagogical method developed by Montessori that consists on carrying out a pedagogical experience supported by a teaching material and observing the spontaneous reaction of the child. Observation and experimentation are the basis of teacher's work. The respect for the life, liberty, and self-education of the child are essential at the Montessori method, that is supported by materials and discipline.