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PEACE PLAYGROUND¹

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(The prospects of developing community based creative partnerships on human rights, peace education and cultural practices in Hungary and elsewhere)

Play as an essential human need

Play has been long recognized as an essential aspect not only of childhood but also of human development. Some of the earliest studies in the related field started in the 1890s with G. Stanley Hall, founder of the child study movement that sparked a special interest in the developmental, mental and behavioral world of children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a comprehensive study in 2006 entitled: “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds”. The above mentioned study states that “free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact – essential helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.”²

Many of the prominent researchers in the field of psychology (including Jean Piaget, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, William James, Lev Vygotsky) have viewed play as endemic to human beings. Childhood ‘play’ is also considered by Sally Jenkinson, author of *The Genius of Play*, to be an integral part of childhood development. “In giving primary to adult

¹ A substantial part of this paper is based on my presentation at the IPE 2009 Conference entitled: *Human Rights Learning as Peace Education. Pursuing Democracy in a Time of Crisis*. Budapest, Hungary July 26 – August 2, 2009.

² Ginsburg, Clinical Report, doi10.1542/peds.2006-2697 (<http://dx.doi.org/10:1542%2Fpeds.2006-26979>).

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knowledge, to our ‘grown-up’ ways of seeing the world, have we forgotten how to value other kinds of wisdom? Do we still care about the small secret corners of children’s wisdom?”³

Contemporary research in the field of ‘affective neuroscience’ has uncovered important links between role playing and neurogenesis in the brain⁴ while sociologist Roger Caillois coined the word “ilinx” to describe the momentary disruption of perception that come from the physical play that disorient the sense, especially balance.

Stevanne Auerbach mentions the role of play therapy in treating children suffering from traumas and other emotional problems.⁵

In addition Sudbury model of democratic education schools assert that play is a big part of life at their schools where it is seen as a serious business. They consider that play is always serious for kids, as well as for adults who haven’t forgotten how to play, and much of the learning going on at these schools is done through play. Therefore they don’t interfere with it. Hence play flourishes at all ages, and the graduates who leave these schools go out into the world knowing how to give their all to whatever they’re doing, and still remembering how to laugh and enjoy life as it comes.⁶

According to some experts in the field play is a rite and a quality of mind in engaging with one’s worldview. Play refers to a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment.⁷

I am confident that everybody has already had experienced the kind of magnificent state of being when one feels like singing and dancing of happiness. Children have no problems with sharing this experience with others in contrast to adults who feel rather shy about showing any manifestation of this kind of outburst of overwhelming inner feelings. Now, try to imagine yourself a place where you find an atmosphere of such spiritual comfort that you can truly be yourself with your playfulness and happiness and you can share it with others without any constraints and barriers. Having lots of fun. For the sake of feeling well and sharing with others and keeping that spirit alive. Do you think that only yawning is catching? I don’t think so. I am dreaming of a place where one would feel safe and happy and enjoys playing and sharing the ability of being happy and creative. This place would be rather different from the SOCIAL REALISTIC style playgrounds from my childhood, made of the from the combination between rusty iron and concrete, and they would probably be quite different even from those that I came across later: those made of polished, shiny ready made elements, uniform in their aspect wherever you go, the so called EU-CONFORM ones. The playground I am dreaming of is much more closer to the one designed by an artist friend of mine called János Sándor originally from Szováta/Sovata (Transylvania, Romania) now based in Fót (Hungary). His playground differs in some relevant aspects from other already existing playgrounds: even children using wheel chair may have an access to it, it is made of environmentally friendly materials and above all the design is unique.

³ Jenkins, Sally (2001) *The Genius of Play. Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood*. Melbourne, Hawthorn Press

⁴ Panksepp, Affective Neuroscience 98

⁵ Auerbach, Stevanne (2004) *Dr. Tony’s Smart Play Smart Toys (How to Raise A Child With a High PQ (Play Quotient))*.

⁶ Greenberg, D. (1987) „Play”, Free at last – The Sudbury Valley School.

⁷ Garvey, C. (1990). *Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.





“The image of God creating the world playing and dancing - as the well known Hungarian sociologist, Elemér Hankiss puts it - is the product of the mythic imagination. It may, however, express something important about the universe. It may express its eternal and calm indifference; it may express a divine freedom and serenity of which we are hardly capable in our lives. It may have the message for us that we could achieve the bliss of real freedom and of genuine, though mortal, existence if only we could escape from the servitude of our needs and interests, which harass and chase us to death. Play may help us ‘switch of’ from this murderous struggle for survival and domination; it may help us relax and achieve the divine serenity and seriousness that is the essence of play.

Although we live in a consumer society, saturated with ‘entertainment’, we have lost our genuine ability to play, we have lost ‘the divine gracefulness of a child’ at play. We should relax. We should let things happen. We should admit chance and freedom into our lives and let the world create itself. Instead of feverishly and perpetually doing something, we should learn simply to be. We should learn from the profound absorption and tranquility of the playing child. The goal of life is “not to win the game (we are to lose the game of life anyway), but simply to play and to play simply.”⁸

⁸ Hankiss, Elemér (2001) *Fears and Symbols: An Introduction to the Study of Western Civilization*. CEU Press

Human rights aspects

Play and creativity is of such importance for a child's health and development that it is recognized as a fundamental right in Article 31 of the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989 entered in force in 1991). According to the International Association for children's Right to Play, "...playing is a fundamental activity for the development of every child's potential...because playing is a way to learn to love and to invent life and not merely a way to spend time."

Play is explicitly recognized in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states:

1. Parties recognize the right of the child to the rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities.

Starting from the recognition that everyone has the right to education and human rights begin with children rights the project will make use of indirect methods (creative practices) aiming at fostering human rights and peace education in general and in particular for challenged children, for Roma and for non-Roma children as well.

The state should guarantee equal access to genuine quality education. Unfortunately, too often the current system exists with one kind of schooling for *the haves* with well-trained staff and a high-profile infrastructure, and another for *the haves not* without the necessary technical and human resources. However, quality education cannot be limited to increasing material inputs into the school system or enriching school effectiveness. Quality education also defined by UNESCO, must be based on human rights approach and address areas including cultural diversity, multilingualism in education, peace and non-violence, sustainable development and life skills.

Through play and art children can experience key **principles of human rights** such as **respect, dignity, equality, inclusion, justice and fairness and cooperation.**

Towards creative learning in the knowledge age

Creative learning – as a UK based organization called Creative Partnerships defines it - is "a particular type of learning that occurs when collaborative relationship between teachers and creative professionals is established. By brokering individual partnerships between schools and cultural practitioners, new ways of working are emerging which , it is believed, will be replicable over time in different contexts."

Although many types of arts and cultural education have areas of overlap, in our proposed project creative learning has certain characteristics which differentiate it. It should be **long term collaborative in nature in nature**; it should demand a **joint commitment**, a

shared vision and a **willingness to embrace open-ended outcomes, challenge and risk**. It is aimed at helping to equip young people with the skills, ability, confidence and the attitudes to enable them to work creatively, to transfer and apply knowledge in different contexts towards new and valuable goals. First of all it encourages creative, critical and reflective thinking and produces excited, enthusiastic, enquiry-driven learners.

According to Kathy Hirsch – Pasek and Roberta Michnick play is central for school and school performance. “It might also play an important role in preparing children for the global world beyond the classroom. Business leaders suggest that in the knowledge age, success will depend on children having a toolkit of skills that include collaboration (teamwork, social competence), content (e.g., reading, math, science, history), communication (oral and written), creative innovation, and confidence (taking risk and learning from failure). Each of these ‘Five Cs’ is nurtured in playful learning.

In sum: Play = Learning. As children move from the sandbox to the boardroom, play should be the cornerstone of their education.”⁹

Specificity and uniqueness of the PEACE PLAYGROUND project

However, the idea of peace playground as such is not unique, since there are similar initiatives of the kind. The one in Sarajevo¹⁰ for instance is aiming at restoring play spaces for children where war has robbed them of this basic human need and right. Yet, the proposed Peace Playground Project differs from other similar initiatives by the very fact that it aims at incorporating and harmonizing 5 key elements as key values:

1. **community building** aspect and the aspect of **inclusiveness** (both at macro and micro levels, that is cross community and cross family level)
2. **environmentally safe** and **harm safe aspect**
3. the aspect of incorporating **diverse cultural traditions** (both local, regional and international)
4. the aspect of **sensitiveness towards challenged children** (e.g.: providing possibility for the use of wheel chairs, creating special surface with Braille writing system, the use special audio and visual effects for those who have problems with hearing)
5. the aspect of **learning through creativity and playing** (involving artists, art professionals from diverse fields)

Broad goals- for overall change

- Empowering local commitment and action by using creative methods in promoting indirectly human rights education with special focus on challenged children rights.
- Fighting back exclusive attitudes in school settings and everyday practices
- Creating a climate of acceptance for the disadvantaged of all kind, for distinctive values belonging to different cultures

⁹ <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Hirsh-Pasek-GolinkoffANGxp.pdf>

¹⁰ http://artscapeweb.com/peace_playground.html

Objectives – specific changes

- Developing cooperative attitudes in pluralistic society
- Developing young people's capacities for original ideas and action forms that enable them to engage positively with growing complexity and diversity of social values and ways of life in order to realize that creativity is not the preserve of the gifted few, the so called elite, but something inherent, something that, given the right conditions, can be developed in anybody.
- Integration of human rights and peace education through creative learning into current educational frameworks.

Impact – how achieving these objectives is going to help the human rights situation in general

- It is expected that young people will have a greater self-esteem, they will take more risk and will be more tolerant
- The range of creative experiences offered will enable children to learn about different cultures
- Singling out comments will not be heard in the playground, at school or in the wider community
- The play requires children working together, to share ideas, develop joint projects, improvise, articulate ideas, develop new vocabulary, ask for clarification, develop the ability to debate, contribute to joint decision making and work for common goals.
- Teachers will be enjoying teaching and will be drawing more creatively on personal skills and knowledge
- The school will increase opportunities for making new partnerships
- The wider community will become increasingly involved in the school activities
- It is expected to raise public awareness for human rights and minority rights
- Contribute to social cohesion and inclusive community building
- It has the potential to build models of creative learning practice that impact throughout the educational system and cultural and creative sectors to the benefit of wider society.
- Children and adults are expected to demonstrate increased self-confidence and emotional literacy, as well as engagement and developing ability to work, and respect others.
- Contribute to a more inclusive society

Activity – to achieve these objectives

Seminar Series e.g.: *Inspiring Play (Creating a Common Space)*

- Facilitated by local and other invited artists and a landscape architect children reshape the aspect of the playground with the help of observational drawings, of outdoor space, explore how people move between different spaces, how they make use of space at all.

Who will be the beneficiaries?

- Challenged children, Roma and non-Roma children, teachers, artists, the community

- Children become more confident with learning challenges, and the staff more experienced in developing creative opportunities, parents and adults will be more engaging.

What are the opportunities for change – and how to utilize them?

In terms of its impact on young people:

- building self-esteem and confidence
- raising the standards of learning achievements
- improving school attendance
- developing language and behavior
- supporting different learning style
- providing potential career paths
- supporting young people of all abilities to realize their potential and on schools

In terms of impact on the immediate community and on the society at large.

- changing teaching and learning practice
- motivating teachers and parents
- stimulating whole school change
- help schools to become the focus for wider, creative and community involvement
- developing constituency for creative partnerships
- contributing to the development of the sense of local patriotism

What are the risks – and how to avoid them?

Main tensions facing the world that effects education in general:

- tension between the universal and the particular
- tension between the extraordinary expansion of knowledge and the capacity of human beings to assimilate them
- tension between the spiritual and the material
- tension between the local and the global
- tension between **learning for the future** and **learning for the forgetting**

Sources of tension characteristic also to the national (in our case the Hungarian) environment

- tension caused by social distance
- tension caused by preconception and stereotypical thinking
- tension between long-term and short-term considerations
- tension between competition and equal opportunities
- tension between the traditional forms and fear from the new and unusual

Strategies that could help address these challenges

- *Learning to live together*: education should strengthen in students the skills and abilities necessary for them to accept their interdependence among other people; to plan together common objectives
- *Learning to know*: education should help children to acquire the instruments of problem solving, ability to understand rights and responsibilities and learn how to learn
- *Learning to do*: education should learn children to acquire occupational skills, social and psychological competencies to make appropriate decisions about different life

situations; to meet their basic needs and to improve the quality of their lives and others' lives.

- Learning to be: education should help developing critical, analytical and analogical thinking; contribute to developing the personality and enabling children to act with greater autonomy, personal responsibility, it should develop all aspects of potential: an aesthetic sense, spiritual values, communication skills, memory, reasoning, appreciation of one's own culture and of the others', ability to argue and debate, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression.

Risks

- skepticism
- disinterest
- resistance from the part of the teachers
- resistance from the part of the parents
- unexpected events that hinder participation
- lack of human and material resources
- lack of community constituency

Strategies to overcome the above mentioned risk factors

- briefing the audience about the importance of the kind of educational approach
- explaining the potential long-term benefits of the program, its innovative character, its benefits in the everyday life of the community and its inbuilt potentials in the future labor market
- help participants become psychologically comfortable in the new situation
- mediate between the different interest parties
- create a climate of acceptance for the participants
- motivate them for participation through concrete cases of positive examples
- try to provide right from the beginning of the program additional human and material resources in order to eliminate deadlock or failure caused by unexpected problems (health, overlapping activities)

Instead of concluding remarks: real life learning and cultural practice

Firstly I would like to refer to David L. Miller:

Life is a kind of hit and run game – according to those who cannot see that life is the game of life. For them it is the end, the purpose, that has value... Why not hit and run just to hit and run...? What did you do today? I played. What did you play? I just played. Why did you do that? Just for fun.

The overall framework of the project will be divided into successive phases. The work of each phase will be designed to build the previous one, encouraging children to explore their identities, the school, the local community and their relationship to the wider world, presenting the work within and outside the playground.

According to Elemér Hankiss “To achieve this freedom, this serene lightheartedness “may be a fascinating strategy against our own fears in this world. But it is not an illusion? A self-deception? Can we cross the street in happy blindness, not caring about the cars rushing by? Can we pass through the traps and minefields of our lives with a happy nonchalance?

Certainly not. But anxiety and panic, and the convulsive urge to succeed, to become and to achieve something, may reduce our chances of survival in a difficult world.”¹¹

Indeed, it may reduce it especially in the time of economic and moral crises.

“For the first time in history, knowledge is the primary source of ‘economic productivity’ and a core resource for organizations. Progress and global competition have driven a shift from manual work to ‘thinking’ jobs, which require skills such as problem solving and communication to information and risk management and self-organization.

The knowledge-based economy relies on the individual to be constantly updating their knowledge as an integral part of the work. The essential difference is that the individual will be required to apply their knowledge in a range of creative ways, as innovation is key to the economy. In response to this shift, education has to meet the challenge of equipping our society with the ‘tools’ to develop these skills, and change its concerns from ‘what’ students know, to ‘how’ they can use knowledge. It needs to find new ways of embedding learning in a range of meaningful contexts therefore equipping students with the ability to use their knowledge and skills creatively in order to have impact on their worlds.’¹²
(‘The Creative Age’, T. Bentley and Seltzer, Demos, 1999.)

¹¹ Hankiss, Elemér Ibidem

¹² Bentley, T. – Seltzer, Demos (1999) *The Creative Age*, Demos [Cited In Creative Partnerships Arts England (2005): *First findings. Policy, practice and progress: a review of creative learning 2002-2004*].