

Review of Saralea E. Chazan, *Observing Play Activity: The Children's Developmental Play Instrument (CDPI) with Reliability Studies*

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According to the abstract, "The Children's Developmental Play Instrument is a multidimensional tool intended for use in observing the play activity of mainstream children." It was developed by S.E. Chazan, who adapted the "Children's Play Therapy Instrument" (CDPI) for observations of 'mainstream' children, whereas the CDPI is used to evaluate play activity of children with clinical diagnoses. The origin of the CDPI is clearly recognizable by the quality of the range of indicators, beyond the focus of educational research, which focuses mostly on developmental and social aspects of play. The CDPI observational tool is designed to examine not only developmental, cognitive, and emotional aspects of play, but also play styles and the function of play in the adaptation to challenges which a child may face in her own life. In the words of Saralea Chazan: "An emphasis on the function of play activity and the provision of a multidimensional, inclusive, structural framework mark the CDPI as a new contribution to child indicator research."

The paper consists of three parts:

1. The description of the characteristics of the design and the development of the CDPI
2. A demonstration of how it works by applying the instrument to the observation of one particular child
3. The process and the results of testing the validity of the instrument in two reliability studies

According to Chazan the study of play requires its own methods of observation in order for one to fully appreciate its significance for the child. She presents rating scales for the following indicators:

- Segmentation of the child's activity (pre-play, play, or non-play)

- Descriptive analysis and structural components (classification, script, sphere of play, affective, cognitive, narrative, and developmental components)
- Functional analysis (level of play engagement, level of symbolic play and play styles: adaptive, conflicted, impulsive, and disorganized)

Observational data was gathered mainly in two early childhood settings where the staff agreed to cooperate in recording a large number of ten-minute play observations of two groups of young children, one around the age of two and the other group between three and four. A selection of these video recordings was evaluated by a team of raters and the individual evaluations of raters were compared in order to test the validity of the rating scales.

A sample play observation of a child is included in the paper, which adds interest and life to the description of the project. Then the use of the play indicators is demonstrated in the interpretation of this particular play observation in order to give a firsthand experience of how it works.

A large part of the paper is devoted to the issue of reliability and the process of testing the instrument. Raters were trained in the use of a two-point rating scale (observed/not observed) for the descriptive indicators. Ten observations of a more structured activity for two-year-olds were rated by three students/graduates independently and ten observations of unstructured play by three- to four-year-old children were rated by three others. The instrument was refined until either excellent or acceptable agreements between raters were reached.

Following through with such a process, Chazan has taken a rigorous approach regarding the validity of the play indicators used by all raters for the evaluation of play observations. The

CDPI certainly is a very valuable contribution to determine the role of play in the development and life situation of individual children. There is no focus on developmental achievement or benchmarks but more on the understanding of personal and/or life issues of the child as they reappear in play. The study is a continuation of an approach taken in psychoanalytical play therapy, but it is extended to include the observation of children in a group situation and in normal educational settings, not just in a therapy room.

The CDPI was derived from a therapeutic diagnostic instrument, and there are areas where this becomes a limitation—for instance, when identifying the nature of play of young children. Recently this question has been the focus of a number of publications for authors such as M. Mendizsa/ J.C. Pearce (2004) and D. Elkind (2007), J. Almon (2003), and R. Long-Breipohl (2010). Chazan addresses the nature of play only briefly: “Play activity potentially serves the functions of mastery and adaptation.” This would most likely be regarded by all of the above-mentioned authors as a description of the function of play which is not broad enough. The definition has implications for the choosing of descriptors of play styles.

Four play styles are identified in the functional analysis of play. The adaptive play style is described as “synonymous with playfulness. It is the uninterrupted, forward-moving, joyful effort towards mastery.” Chazan continues: “Although most mainstream children in the samples studied manifested predominantly Adaptive Play Styles, some of the children manifested additional play styles observed at times as well.” These additional play styles are characterized as conflicted or somehow inhibited play styles, which reflect issues the child cannot resolve and which preoccupy him while playing. The study provides a range of indicators for adaptive, conflicted/inhibited, impulsive, and disorganized play. The descriptors seem to be well chosen in order to determine difficulties and disturbances in the life of a child, which find expression in play. However, during the rating of observations, most mainstream children’s play was rated ‘adaptive.’ This may indicate that the tool does not capture the richness and the manifoldness of the creative play of young children.

Chazan states that play serves “the expressive needs of the child.” Yet in the choice of indicators presented in the research paper, there appears to be no provision made to capture the wide range of childhood fantasy play in mainstream children. Fantasy play is mentioned in relation to releasing tension, conflict and trauma, or as ‘symbolic play’ in relation to the use of representational objects in play.

For a wider understanding of play, Chazan points to publications by A. Freud, Bretherton, Erikson, and Winnicott, who have mentioned “the ‘as if’ quality of play, allowing for freedom of imagination and trial efforts towards mastery.” But the research paper itself does not contain indicators for imaginative play. Chazan focuses more on analyzing the function which play fulfills for a specific child: “The functional analysis gives outward expression to a child’s inner thoughts and feelings, not necessarily manifested in behaviors in the everyday world. It enables observations and inferences concerning the child’s general adaptive capacities.”

As an outcome of this research project one should mention the finding that children’s play profiles differ greatly. Chazan concludes that play styles of children are highly individualized, an outcome which will interest Waldorf early childhood educators, as Rudolf Steiner himself pointed to the connection between play and the individuality of a child. Chazan states that it is possible “to discern variables acting in concert to convey a global quality of the play activity” of a particular child. “It tells us something about the predisposition and interests of the child, his social relationships, his feeling and his activities as viewed during these moments.”

One would hope that every trained educator in early childhood settings would be able to recognize such predispositions and interests of children in his or her professional observational and reflective practice. However, to be able to conform with recognized and rigorous scientific methods the existence and the specific traits of individual play styles may lead to a better understanding of children and may assist in advocating for a play-based early education for all young children.

Note: Visit the website www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org to read Saralea Chazan’s study.