# Cultivating democracy through children's play: An approach from the North American pragmatism of Addams, Dewey and Mead

## *Cultivando la democracia a través del juego infantil: una aproximación desde el pragmatismo norteamericano de Addams, Dewey y Mead*

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**Abstract:**

One vital constant in pedagogical narratives is the link between children's play and education. Study of their relationship from a philosophical perspective is marked by paradoxes and tensions that have often raised the implementation of their use in educational practice in differing and even opposing ways. This article seeks to set out new ways of interpreting the relationship between play and education from a conciliatory approach. This relationship is explored from the works of three contemporaneous pragmatist thinkers of the late nineteenth: Jane Addams, John Dewey, and George Mead. The results suggest that the possibility of a relationship between children's play and education is not so much found in the development of potentially educational materials, an extraordinary teaching method, or strictly teaching the curriculum. Rather, the significant contribution is concentrated in the conviction that play could be crucial for the cultivation of democracy. Pragmatists such as Addams and Dewey relied on the aesthetic experience of play as one of the most powerful possibilities for not only keeping democracy alive but also cultivating a cosmopolitan citizenship.

**Keywords:** philosophy of education, educational theory, history of education, pragmatism, Jane Addams, John Dewey, George Mead, children's play, democracy, cosmopolitanism.

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**Resumen:**

Una de las constantes vitales de las narrativas pedagógicas ha sido la vinculación del juego infantil con la educación. El estudio de su relación en perspectiva filosófica está teñido de paradojas y tensiones que, a menudo, han planteado la materialización de su uso en la práctica educativa de maneras diversas y hasta opuestas. Este artículo trata de contener nuevas formas de interpretación de las relaciones entre lo lúdico y lo educativo desde un enfoque conciliador. En este trabajo, dicha relación se explora desde las obras de tres pensadores pragmatistas coetáneos de finales del siglo XIX: Jane Addams, John Dewey y George Mead. La presente contribución analiza cómo las obras de los tres autores sugieren que la posibilidad de la relación de lo lúdico y lo educativo no se encuentra tanto en el desarrollo de un material potencialmente educativo, un método de enseñanza extraordinario o el estricto desarrollo de un currículo escolar. Más bien, su aportación significativa se concentra en la convicción de que el juego podría ser crucial para el cultivo de la democracia. En concreto, Addams y Dewey confiaban en la experiencia estética del juego como una de las posibilidades más poderosas para no solo mantener viva la democracia, sino también cultivar una ciudadanía cosmopolita.

**Palabras clave:** filosofía de la educación, teoría de la educación, historia de la educación, pragmatismo, Jane Addams, John Dewey, George Mead, juego infantil, democracia, cosmopolitismo.

## 1. Introduction

Anyone who currently takes an interest in the relationship between children's play and education is likely to have encountered discourses on gamification and ludic pedagogies (Prieto-Andreu et al. 2022). Dissatisfaction and disenchantment with dominant educational forms and methods have contributed to the proliferation of pedagogies that seek to incorporate a ludic component into their school routines. The best-known of these pedagogical projects in Spain include the Waldorf, Montessori, Regio-Emilia and Amara-Berri schools; forest or beach schools, free or living schools, learning communities, and democratic schools. In these initiatives, it is common to encounter discourses that reveal different conceptual enclaves and multiple groups of relationships between the ludic and the educational in childhood. The differing pedagogical implications of each educational discourse lead us to think that the discussion about the relationship between the ludic and the educational is more alive than ever in our days.

Outside the orbit of schools, some voices have called for the repositioning of ludic activity in public life. These movements argue for the creation of safe, peaceful, and sustainable opportunities to play in the urban landscape. A number of initiatives in English-speaking countries stand out internationally, such as Play England, Play Wales, Play Scotland, Save the Children, Play Australia, and recently PlayfirstUK. In addition to these movements, there is the construction

of adventure playgrounds (play areas of Danish origin disassociated from the rigid and traditional configuration of ludic spaces) and the international school streets movement, which pushes for the provision of safe school routes to facilitate children's pedestrian movement free from the noise and traffic of cities. This last model is on the same line as the well-known Cities of Children of Tonucci. Following this path, movements such as Revuelta Escolar [school rebellion] in Spain carry out initiatives that invite us to rethink and interact with the urban public realm of cities peacefully, safely, and sustainably and, ultimately, in a way that better fits the lives of children and adolescents.

The repeated attempts and efforts of teachers and educational professionals mentioned above might converge around the deeply held belief that there is a great educational value in the ludic drive as it inspires the introduction of the human being to nature, society, and culture; in other words, to its own reality, that of others and of the other. This usually accompanies or aligns the interest and will encapsulated in the ludic activity with what adults have considered to be valuable on the journey towards their transformation into free human beings.

At a time when children's playgrounds seem to have lost a certain allure (Jover et al. 2018) and where digital spaces seem to have become the new ludic spaces for socialisation (Camas et al. 2022), it is worth asking: what could the relationship between the ludic and the educational be?, why is play so important in human affairs?, why can it be something attractive and valuable instead of something serious and banal?, what is the value of the ludic in the educational? Or, on the contrary, what value does the educational have in the ludic? (Quiroga & Igelmo, 2013). At the least, offering answers to these questions is an exercise in backward-looking reflection that leads us to explore and investigate the history of the first public spaces for children's play.

The question of the value and meaning of the ludic in the human condition leads us to the classic reflection on the relationship between leisure, wisdom, the good life, and the meaning of life. Going beyond the classic philosophical opposition between play and work (Huizinga, 2007; Sutton-Smith, 2001), this article, rather than opposing work and play, seeks to reconcile them through optimism and pedagogical hope, neither false hope nor a lack of hope (Hansen, 2023), and it aims to find new ways of interpreting the relationships between the ludic and the educational in childhood and adolescence. In the attempt to find this conciliatory hermeneutical space between play and education, we propose analyses of the works of three pragmatist thinkers from the late nineteenth century, who were contemporaries and did much of their thought in the city of Chicago, namely: Jane Addams, John Dewey, and George Mead. This contribution analyses how the works of the three authors suggest that the potential of the relationship between the ludic and the educational is not so much in the development of an educational material, an extraordinary school method, or the strict development of a school curriculum,

but rather its significant contribution is centred on the conviction that play in childhood and adolescence could be crucial for the *cultivation of democracy*, this latter being not so much a form of government but rather a form of dynamic human association that aspires to collective well-being, cooperation, solidarity, and mutual support. In their works, the authors theorise through various ideas that play could cultivate valuable associated ways of life that can be attained through everyday sensitisation of love for beauty, stimulation of the capacity for imagination from reality, and the search for a new harmony between the individual and the community.

The article argues that the philosophical reflection and investigation of these authors could be indispensable both to generate a solid and valuable educational practice and to continue to reimagine and explore educational practice from a theoretical-philosophical perspective. Careful rereading of their works might illuminate new conceptual frameworks and generate new meanings that nurture contemporary educational practices that are already being developed. So, their practices could reveal and feed-back into new and little-explored theoretical paths that are worth taking. Ultimately, this seems to be a valuable opportunity to reconcile old and new ideas in debates about education. As this research focusses on the time and place of late-nineteenth-century Chicago, the authors will be analysed in the chronological order in which they developed their projects in the city, namely, their order of arrival: Addams (1889), Dewey (1892), and Mead (1894).

## 2. Jane Addams and play as aesthetic experience: Freedom and variety in the socialisation of democracy

In recent years, while working on my doctoral thesis, I have carried out an introductory and exploratory study of the philosophy of education of Addams (1860-1935) and its possible educational implications (Camas, 2021; 2022; 2023). Specifically, I have analysed in depth the educational meaning and hopes that the author pinned on ludic activity while she ran the Hull-House settlement between 1889 and 1935. My readings of her texts suggest that, although Addams did not tackle analytically and systemically the question of children's play in her public discourses on education and childhood, she often mentioned ludic activity as an experience that permitted the cultivation of a cosmopolitan citizenship.

In collaboration and harmony with other cities such as New York, the Hull-House settlement opened the first playground in the city of Chicago (1893). According to Addams, the playground was founded as a response to the hostile conditions of the industrial city that hindered children's growth and social progress. Children's ways of living in the city barely differed from those of adults. They shared work, drug use, corruption through complex dynamics between gangs, delinquency, prostitution, and commercialised leisure. As well as the overlap between childhood and adulthood, Addams argued that homes were no longer safe spaces as the entry of women into the place of work loosened the sense of protection characteristic of the

domestic space, leaving children without adult supervision. They often slept in the street, disengaged, isolated, disorientated, and starving; sometimes, faced with the lack of a meaning of life and in the attempt to find a way out, they would turn to suicide. So, the state of abandonment of children and adolescents was part of the backdrop of the industrial city.

In view of these circumstances, many social reformers worked in pursuit of childhood progress. One of their biggest efforts was the creation of ludic spaces open to the public that offered conditions of safety, protection, and adult supervision. The initiative of creating public spaces for play was in response to a much broader nationwide movement of European origins that sought to generate transformation of the fabric of society in the USA. The playground movement along with the hygiene movement, and the kindergarten contributed decisively to the systematic creation of public play areas. However, far from pursuing a strictly individual goal, reformers were enthused with the social potential of play.

Perhaps Addams's most important and most complete work regarding childhood and play is her book *The spirit of youth in the city streets* (1909). In it, she articulated a critique of the ways of life that had been developing since the emergence of industrial cities. According to Addams, social, political, economic, and technological advances had repositioned the human activities of work and recreation, focussing on the former and neglecting others that were equally relevant. According to her thesis, for the first time in history, politics had stopped considering the provision of public recreation. The suppression of public recreation and the emphasis on mechanical and subdivided industrial work would lead to people forgetting the need for them to come together, enjoy themselves, and celebrate communally. In her words:

> We continually forget how new the modern city is, and how short the span of time in which we have assumed that we can eliminate public provision for recreation from public life. The Greeks held their games an integral part of religion and patriotism; the Romans made provision through the circus and the pageant for public relaxation and entertainment; the medieval city not only provided tournaments for the edification of knights and ladies, but dances and routs for all of the people within its walls, and the church itself presented a drama in which no less a theme than the history of creation was put upon the stage and became a matter of thrilling interest. But during these later centuries at the very time that the city has become distinctly industrial and daily labour is continually more monotonous and subdivided, we seem to have decided that no provision for public recreation is necessary. (Addams, 1907a, p. 492)

With this fragment, Addams advances two key points on her notion of *play*. Firstly, the urgency of advocating for ludic activity as a human need that is not limited to its practice in childhood and which is linked to the social, civic, cultural, and spiritual dimension of societies. Secondly, its potential as a community activity that maintained the power of *experimentation* and *variation* and, with them,

the possibility of bringing freshness to compensate and reimagine life in the face of the intense and monotonous doses of materialism of industrial cities. She suggests that through play and recreation, life could be more varied, spontaneous, social, creative, tolerable, and manageable or, in other words, less mechanical, aligned, isolated, segmented, monotonous, or boring, and, ultimately, much more human. Ludic activity was deeply rooted in the aesthetic experience. Its effect transcended the boundaries of the artistic dimension and expanded to the *aesthetic* and the *everyday*[1], as it was deeply linked with the everyday life of people in community.

The consideration of play as an experience of deep aesthetic and rewarding significance seems to resonate with the ideas of two German philosophers: Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Mortis Lazarus (1824-1904). For Schiller, play was a free and spontaneous activity that was done for its own sake, without an external or utilitarian aim. He thought that play allowed human beings to live with a greater sense of freedom as, through their imagination, they were freed from the limitations of the real world. According to his thesis, human beings had a primary ludic drive that was activated by the abundant accumulation of vital energy. As the drive released energy, the individual and society could improve their moral development. Schiller's contributions inspired Lazarus's later theory of surplus energy in which ludic activity had a compensatory effect against work. Play involved a mechanism of harmonisation of energy that made it possible to relieve tiredness and refresh the body.

Considering their complementary nature, Addams avoided the false dichotomy that pitted play against work and separated herself from the logic that considered work as the only serious, important, and useful activity and play something banal, irrelevant, and useless. Work and play were for Addams, as they were for Tolstoy (one of her most admired thinkers), two human activities that, far from being antithetical, had a mutual need for one another. Ultimately, Addams seems to give play an educational meaning similar to that of *skholè* (σχολή) for the Greeks.

Addams (1998) criticised the inaction of the authorities in creating recreational opportunities for children and adolescents, as well as the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of the recreational sphere. This type of commercial and privatised leisure overstimulated the senses and numbed any attempt at cultivating the imagination. Addams described the state of numbing of the mind and the imagination as a "[state of] *aesthetic insensitivity*" (Addams, 1909, pp.154-155). This state hampered the appreciation of beauty, openness towards difference, communication, and comprehension of human depth. In contrast, it strengthened alienation, homogenisation, and the mechanisation of life.

Addams (1909) illustrated this as follows: "It is as if a child, starved at home, should be forced to go out and search for food, selecting, quite naturally, not that which is nourishing but that which is exciting and appealing to his outward sense" (p. 80). In this way, the only selection criteria

that they used was none other than "sight, sound, and taste" (p. 54), which were also numbed. Given their malnutrition, what they needed was to develop the virtuous "love of pleasure" (Addams, 1908, p. 25), through aesthetic experiences that made it possible to cultivate and harmonise the mind (imagination) and their senses. To justify her thesis, Addams used an extract from Plato's *Symposium* in which Diotima indicates to Socrates that love of beauty was above all love for the birth of beauty both of the soul and of the body (Addams, 1909).

Consequently, her approach to the notion of play as an aesthetic experience was a response to the state of aesthetic insensitivity. Two more basic coordinates emerge from these citations that bring us closer to understanding her notion of children's play. On the one hand, the idea of understanding play as a pleasant aesthetic experience that cultivates both the imagination (mind) and the senses (body). On the other hand, the need to accept the premise that the challenge of aesthetic sensitivity and the cultivation of the mind and body was a profoundly educational act in which adults should intervene and establish certain minimum conditions that would favour human growth. Therefore, the educational experiences organised at the Hull-House settlement (such as play; painting and crafts, lithography, literature, history, art, modelling, drawing, music and theatre classes; and fitness ) were an attempt to awaken and cultivate aesthetic sensitivity, harmonise the body and mind, and care for the inner life of children and adolescents.

Finally, another key component of Addams's ludic notion, is to regard play as an activity that awakens the cultivation of a type of cosmopolitan citizenship, that in turn has a close relationship with *democracy*. Democracy is understood here more as a form of institutional and formal governance, than as a way of life in society based, in the words of Addams, on "*sympathetic understanding*" (1902, p. 273), in other words, in the emotional attitude based on patience and listening, whose basis should be mutual and reciprocal understanding. In her autobiographical work *Twenty years at Hull-House*, Addams (1910) affirmed that the aims of the educational activities and the existence of the settlement itself "are but differing manifestations of the attempt to socialize democracy" (p. 301). So, the value of children's playgrounds was closely linked to the cultivation of democracy.

Her notion of cosmopolitanism is sustained when faced with the possibility of overcoming a conception of the self, other and the other based on rivalry and superiority (moral-cultural, linguistic, ideological, and/or religious) characteristic of the period. According to Addams, European nations, and especially the USA at the start of the twentieth century, practised a type of nationalist, militarist, and supremacist patriotism typical of the mindset of the eighteenth century that endangered the stability and global peace of peoples. "That old Frankenstein," Addams (1907b) wrote, "is still haunting us, although he never existed save in the brain of the doctrinaire" (p. 60). This moral conviction was supported on the basis that any immigrant cultural expression or manifestation was ultimately inferior to the predominant

or original one of each nation. In countries with high levels of immigration, this patriotism had a homogenising effect that inclined immigrants to abandon the cultural traditions of their places of origin and to adopt the dominant ones of the country. In this way, she denounced the USA's processes of assimilation.

Addams, who participated in the pacifist movement of her time, maintained that aesthetic activities such as play facilitated experimentation and the production of a type of variability that could be exceptionally valuable for citizenship. According to her thinking, the expression of variation that emerged from the act of play, cultivated collective and associated ways of life that could be more valuable for democracy. That is to say, from her interpretation, the power of variation in the act of group play would always bring something better and extraordinary for both society and the individual.

Aesthetic experiences like play were *unifying experiences* for Addams, as they could reestablish and integrate the maladjustments of childhood and adolescence caused by industrial life and the tendency towards homogenisation. Experimentation, dynamism, and change that occurred in aesthetic activities were the source of all types of art. The vindication of the cultivation of the cosmopolitan and pacifist imagination through everyday aesthetic childhood experiences such as play is a key aspect of the thought of Addams and is fundamental for understanding her notion of *democracy*. In her idea of democracy, then, the seed of variation as the basis for individual and social harmony is found. The aesthetic experiences of Hull-House placed the emphasis on everyday and social activities that were done in interaction with the interests and the affection of other people. So, the cultivation of aesthetic experiences such as play awoke the imagination and facilitated the socialisation of democracy.

The organisation of education was in the hands of the play supervisors, who could be *kindergarten* teachers (for the younger students) or police (for the older ones). In fact, Hull-House accommodated the first school for training play supervisors under the direction of Neva Leona Boyd: Recreation Training School of Chicago. Their role involved ensuring that girls and boys would play under conditions in which the "liberty of each is limited by the like liberty of all" (Addams, 1911, p. 38), so that "the grounds are used fairly and with a certain amount of fair play" (A Fourth of July Anticipation at the Abraham Lincoln Centre, 1908, p. 28). By subordinating individual liberty to collective liberty, the conditions for the socialisation of democracy were guaranteed.

According to Addams, supervised play was the only human activity through which people from diverse backgrounds (traditions, languages, religions, and ideologies) could collectively build a solid emotional foundation from which to feel in harmony. This *democratic* root enabled them to cultivate aspects such as goodness, compassion, association, affections, good humour, and goodwill. That is to say, understanding that, independently of their particular features, when playing

they were capable of finding *similarities* in their *differences* and *differences* in their *similarities*. But, above all, to understand that, beyond their differences, there was something profoundly human that kept them united. The aesthetic potential of play laid in the possibility of generating a disposition to openness to difference and the unknown. In this way, it became a space for intergenerational and intercultural cohabitation that favoured the development of a cosmopolitan identity and a type of collective human relations that overcame the high doses of materialism, nationalism, and militarism.

For Addams, ludic intercultural spaces generated unique opportunities for seeking progress and social transformation. Spaces like the playground permitted encounters between children and adolescents from different religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. The diversity of immigrant traditions in the USA represented for Addams a historic opportunity to experience the possibility of variation, as in their folklore and cultural traditions there was an inexhaustible ancestral reserve of material capable of stimulating the imagination.

Ultimately, the impact Addams had was none other than the profound rejection of the moral convictions of the Victorian, which viewed immigrants as inferior beings characterised by animality and brutality and who needed to be civilised. Recognising folklore and traditions as the best source of inspiration for social progress, Addams argued in favour of the cultural wealth of humanity, as immigrants had an extraordinary cultural value (thanks to their potential for variation in benefit of the reimagining of democracy), and they had much to contribute to the search for progress and development, both industrial and cultural. In summary, the aesthetic value of play and its application in the everyday life of people provided the necessary force to construct more reciprocal, cooperative, comprehensive, and egalitarian human relations.

## 3. Play as a ludic attitude in the works of John Dewey

Rodríguez (2018) has systematically analysed Dewey's (1859-1952) views of play. Dewey started as a great admirer of the educational theories of Froebel. In fact, he became a teacher in the Kindergarten Training School of Chicago, which delivered its classes at the Hull-House building. The students of this school often supervised and organised play in the playground of that enclosure.

Probably owing to the influence of the *kindergarten* movement and of Froebel's contributions, Dewey centres the discussion on play in its childhood version. While Dewey embraced Froebel's theories with pedagogical enthusiasm, his frustrated attempts to apply them led him to be ever more critical of them. Froebel tested his educational theories under the assumption that there was an innate power in children that had to be fed and nourished by providing the appropriate materials. Dewey's intermediate works, however, started to criticise the "abstract symbolism" of the German pedagogue and the rigidity of his educational proposal and structure (Dewey, 1997).

The materialisation of Dewey's ideas about play can be seen in one of his most ambitious educational projects: the Laboratory School, which he developed between 1896 and 1904 as Head of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy of the University of Chicago. In his book *My Pedagogical Creed* (Dewey, 1897), Dewey argued for the need to see the school as a space that represented everyday life. A life "as real and vital for the child as the one lived at home, in the neighbourhood, or in the playground" (p. 6). Dewey's ideas about play had a profoundly social meaning. Outside the logic of organisation by subjects, the centre was structured around the practice of various activities referred to as "active occupations". These had a profound social meaning and involved both play and work. Among the occupations there were: sports, growing plants, workshop, cooking, sewing, and crafts. That is to say, for Dewey, it was through familiar, everyday, and concrete activities that children approached the study of the abstract. The author referred to the "period of play" as a phase in early childhood. In *Democracy and education* (Dewey, 1997), he appears to offer a much wider definition of ludic activity and its link to work:

> It is still usual to regard this activity [play] as a specially marked off stage of childish growth, and to overlook the fact that the difference between play and what is regarded as serious employment should be not a difference between the presence and absence of imagination, but a difference in the materials with which imagination is occupied. (p. 251)

Dewey argued that the distinction between ludic and work activity was not restricted to the difference between childhood or adulthood. Play could be done in all stages of life, but these had different emphasis: "There is no distinction of exclusive periods of play activity and work activity, but only of emphasis" (Dewey, 1997, p. 212). Play, Dewey wrote, was "an imaginative activity" (p. 246) that offers freedom of action and thought, as it expands the habitual responses and, although only momentarily, dissolves the limitations of the present reality. He described it as a "natural, unforced expression" (Dewey, 2008, p. 340). As people matured, Dewey recognised that they tended towards activities that allowed them to achieve ends with "tangible and visible" results, like games of chance, according to the author, of questionable moral value. According to Dewey, play in childhood shaped the fantasy of the possibility (up to a certain real point) so that it tended to generate an *attitude of absorption*, until in adulthood it faded as its unachievable and impossible to materialise character was perceived rationally. Observable results were necessary to permit people to have a sense and a measure of their own powers. When fantasy was recognised as such, the mechanism for creating objects in fantasy is feasible for stimulating intense action. It is enough to observe the face of children who are really playing to realise that their attitude is of serious absorption; this attitude cannot be maintained in adulthood, when the environment ceases to offer an adequate stimulus (Dewey, 1997, p. 239).

According to Dewey's works, the division between play and work, so popular in Western culture, was another dualism that falsified reality. For Dewey, it made no sense to state that play emphasised the process and work of the product, as this could lead people to a "false [and] unnatural separation between process and product" (Dewey, 1989, p. 164). Nor was it related to the presence or absence of an end, as both work and play hid an end. Consequently, the place where attention should be focussed to identify and differentiate the two activities was more on the interest that people exercised in the activity itself. Both activities had means and ends although in play "the interest is more direct" as the children entered into a state of "hypnotic daze" and they responded to "a direct excitation" (Dewey, 1997, p. 237).

The author argued that, far from what was usually thought, play was not incompatible with industry or schools. "It is the business of the school," he said, "to set up an environment in which play and work shall be conducted with reference to facilitating desirable mental and moral growth" (Dewey, 1997, p. 170). The work of educators was based on identifying the form and interest of the development of the activity; that is, if it "flowed on from moment to moment", referring to play, or if the activity tended "to culmination," referring to work (Dewey, 1989, pp. 213-214).

In *How we think* (1933), the author argued that what determined whether an activity was approached from its ludic character was the attitude and interest of the people in it. Dewey emphasised the need to educate in the development of a "playfulness" or "playful attitude" (Dewey, 1989, p. 210). What was important was not so much the type of activity, but rather the "playful attitude" with which any activity was performed. In this way, one same activity could be approached from an attitude that flowed or tended towards culmination. It is consequently not for Dewey (2013) an activity, but rather a "mental attitude" (p. 83).

For Dewey, as for Addams, play was the original expression of all classes of art (Skilbeck, 2017). For Dewey, "work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art" (Dewey, 1916, p. 219). The playful attitude was related to the artistic ideal, a mental state that combined the ludic and the serious (Dewey, 1989, p. 220). It was a mental habit that imparted a new attitude to life. The activity of the artist was an example of how ends and means could be harmonised in adult life. Play, in the context of childhood, represented this harmony between ends and means, between the serious and the simulated.

In *Art as experience*, Dewey (2005) established connections between play and art, underlining their shared roots in action, in "doing something" (p. 282). Play, he wrote, gives an external manifestation to images; it makes ideas interact with objects. Objects function as stimuli for experimentation and action, enabling the idea to come to fruition. As the idea evolves towards a plan with an end as a result of this interaction, play transforms into work, that is to say, it receives an external purpose. In this conception, work includes the "work of art" (Dewey, 2005, p. 283). Thus, Dewey argued

that "playful attitude becomes interest in the transformation of material to serve the purpose of a developing experience. Desire and need can be fulfilled only through objective material" (p. 285).

In art, freedom is achieved through the manipulation and transformation of the material, turning it into expression; in play, according to Dewey, freedom is achieved through the imaginative expansion of the limits through action (that is to say, doing-believing). In both cases, freedom prospers over restriction and in turn comprises the fertile ground for the imagination.

Dewey argued that for a work to be done in a satisfactory way, workers had to be able to "enjoy themselves in the production process itself" (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 143) and, consequently, play and work overlapped on a gradient. In this sense, the experience needed the connection between the ludic and attitude and work attitude. In the words of Dewey "play must imperceptibly transform itself into work" (Dewey, 2008, p. 318). Schools should, therefore, focus their attention on the development of this ludic attitude in play and in work.

Years later, Dewey published his work *Experience and education* (1938) in which he explained how play should be aimed at educating society. In this book, he made a similar distinction to that found in Mead's approach (which we will consider in detail below) between play, game, and work. Dewey conceptualised play as a free, spontaneous, symbolic, and plastic activity (pretend play). The game was the intermediate space between play and work and had both rules and defined objectives. In a game, unlike in play, there is a commitment to the environment and to the needs and preferences of others. Baseball exemplified a game with rules, agreements, and shared expectations with the challenge of achieving a shared objective. Ultimately, the approach of both pragmatists, whether in its aesthetic meaning (Addams) or in its conceptualisation as an attitude that inclines towards the imagination (Dewey), seeks to support the idea that play is vital for social progress and democracy.

## 4. *Play, game*, and *the generalised other* of George Mead

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was one of the founders of pragmatism, along with Pierce, James, Dewey, and Addams. Mead was a great friend of Dewey and Addams and his articles contributed to the development of disciplines such as sociology and modern psychology, and he was widely known as the instigator of symbolic interactionism.

In his address *The relation of play to education* (1896), Mead distinguished between three types of general human activities: work, art, and play. Work was an activity with a defined end and its means were directed at achieving this end. As Dewey also argued, in art the attention was on the harmony between means and ends. Finally, play was a spontaneous activity that lacked extrinsic ends and means. Mead argued that schools should not undertake activities such as work, but instead offer and "arrange these stimuli [so] that they

will answer to the natural growth of the child's organism" (Mead, 1896, p. 145).

For Mead, doing ludic activities was a form of spontaneous expression resulting from an abundance of energy. An "escape valve" through which children could express their new learning. As with Addams, his notion of play as an expression of the accumulation of energy, seems to have German influences from the philosophy of Schiller and Lazarus. Children's activities in the process of growth included play, in other words, dedicating themselves to what they did with a "native interest". Education had to take charge of creating a sufficiently stimulating environment for "spontaneous use of … coordinations" (Mead, 1896, p. 145). In other words, finding the appropriate stimuli to awaken their senses and create synaptic connections (or coordinations).

In his text "The kindergarten and play" (n. d.), Mead asserted the need to recognise the nature of the child through advances in psychology in relation to the evolution of human beings (Mead, n. d.; 1934). In the *kindergarten*, it was necessary to find the appropriate educational processes and organise them so that they would be done spontaneously with a view to the subsequent adult activity (work). Mead stated his foundational idea in the following terms: "We only have to order his world" (Mead, n. d.; 1934). With this, he referred to games essential for life and nature such as seeking food, refuge, care, etc.

Manual and sensory education were implemented in the *kindergarten*. To do this, activities relating to objects were practised, such as working with textiles, building shelters, and hunting. This sought to elicit emotional and imaginative forms or reactions that would later shape the moral and aesthetic judgement of the adult. In synthesis, the principal question of education in the *kindergarten* for Mead was to organise the educational activities for children in a way that they would develop them spontaneously. In this sense, Dewey's ideas about the need for play to progressively and unconsciously become work are apparent.

Play was especially important for Mead as it mediated in processes of construction of the mind and of the self. For him, the mind was the product of the individual's participation in society in a process of social interaction in which he or she would learn to use socially recognised symbols (Mead, 1934). Like Dewey, Mead rejected the body-mind dualism typical of Platonic approaches. Far from being born with an already developed mind, people construct it through contact and interaction with the social environment. In Mead's words:

> Mind arises in the social process only when that process as a whole enters into, or is present in, the experience of any one of the given individuals involved in that process. When this occurs, the individual becomes self-conscious and has a mind; he becomes aware of his relations to that process as a whole, and to the other individuals participating in it with him; he becomes aware of that process. (Mead, 1934, p. 134)

Mead differentiated between three types of instances of the self involved in

the construction of the mind: I, me, and the self. The social construct of the self was mediated by two processes. Firstly, the response or the drive of the individual to the attitudes of others (I) and secondly, the organised set of attitudes of others that an individual assumes (me). This differentiation between me and I had previously been established by James; Mead subsequently developed it and linked it to the game.

According to Mead's theory, the construction of the self was based on the reflection of the processes of interaction between the me and the I during the interaction in social processes such as: language, play, and the game. The explanation for the distinction between these activities can be found in his essay "Play, the game and the generalized other" (1934), according to which the differentiation between play and game had a different implication and degree of commitment in the interaction with others.

Mead connected to the evolutionist narratives of the game. He argued that the first symbolic human interaction was carried out through what the author called the *conversation of meaningful gestures*. "Gestures," according to Mead, were "movements of the first organism which act as specific stimuli calling forth the (socially) appropriate responses of the second organism" (Mead, 1934, p. 14). So, prior to formal language, gestures were ludic interactions that marked the start of the first forms of social communication and interaction. The first ludic interactions by means of gestures were loaded with symbolic value for babies.

Once language was acquired, younger children as well as more *primitive* people would generally practise play or a symbolic play where they interpreted a role other than their own: "there we have a much more primitive response; and that response finds its expression in taking the role of the other" (Mead, 1934, p. 153). According to Mead, the practice of this type of game would be very similar to the work that was done in the *kindergarten*. This categorisation included processes such as the representation of figures like gods and heroes, but also important figures such as mothers and fathers, and the practice of different professions. In play, there was no type of ethical and political commitment to otherness, as "the child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on" (Mead, 1934, p. 159). Consequently, in play, individuals did not have their own individual or defined character or personality.

In contrast, the game was another type of higher game practised at older ages and including taking into account the attitudes and behaviour of the other people involved. In the game, individual attitudes and behaviours are articulated in a group, social body, or community, which Mead called the "generalised other", capable of "controlling his own behaviour or conduct accordingly" (Mead, 1934, p. 154).

Through games, the individual developed a self-conscience resulting in acceptance of the functioning of a social group that shared a common aim. It is in this

type of game that they started to seek a sense of social belonging and as a consequence it is when their personality and character starts to form. Mead situated the practice of the game as the genesis of the process of formation of the moral personality (Miras-Boronat, 2013).

The importance of the game lay in its connection with the development of experience as only in this type of game could they have an "individual's experience" (Mead, 1934, p. 159). To explain the social meaning of the game, Mead used the notion of shared "ownership" as "one must have a clear attitude of control of one's own property and respect for the property of others". What made a group of people a society were the distinct forms of social organisation that displayed common aims and attitudes such as religious beliefs, education, or family relations. In Mead's words: "we cannot have rights until we have common attitudes" (Mead, 1934, p. 164).

The main difference between game and play was therefore found in the involvement and control of the individual in the attempt to handle the complexities of a community or group during the ludic activity. Participating in a game involves not only understanding the interaction with others, but also understanding how the others can interact in a wide variety of situations. Playing the game was a reflection of what happened in the daily life of people, given that "what goes on in the game goes on in the life of the child all the time." (Mead, 1934, p. 160). There was therefore a connection between game and the development of life in a community and in a society. This is why, for Mead, team sports were so valuable in moral and political terms.

The nature of the ludic activity, expressed in its two fundamental forms, play and game, was governed by evolutionary principles that went from some more primitive forms of expression (play) to more advanced forms (game). Like Addams, Mead showed great concern for the function of the game in society. Like other reformers from the period, Mead and Addams were in agreement on the potential of team sports such as baseball or basketball, in fact these were frequently practised in the Hull-House settlement.

In summary, what we find in Mead's works on ludic activity is a continuum between different activities, game and play, which are fundamental for the development both of the self and the moral development of people. For Mead, the game was fundamental in the social and cognitive development of people. Children learnt to interact with others and they acquired knowledge about the rules of a society through play first and then through the game. When playing the game, children were able to put themselves in the role of the other, that is to say, to understand the forms of thought, action, and feelings of someone who is both similar to and different from ourselves.

## 5. Conclusions

The discussion about the extent, boundaries, and intersections of the ludic and the

educational remains alive today. Most current studies argue for the educational value of play as a means for dynamizing school learning (Prieto-Andreu et al. 2022). The pragmatists considered here argue that play is of value not so much as scrupulously designed material, a teaching method in search of a lost motivation or a means for curriculum development of the famous key competences, but instead they conceptualise play from a socially broad educational vision that goes beyond (although, in a way, also includes) the academic-school sphere. The important contribution of these three authors to the debate about the ludic and the educational is that play could be key for the *cultivation of democracy*. Democracy here is not so much a form of government but rather: an organic and dynamic form of human association based on: the desire to participate, display oneself, and share with the world; the conception of people as incomplete beings who mutually enrich one another (self); sensitivity towards plurality; openness, curiosity, and a commitment to the reality of the other (especially with marginalised or excluded people); harmony, mutual support, and trust; comprehensive, sincere, and reciprocal communication; the collective imagination; the search for the balance of individual and social freedoms or the conviction that improving society (or the group) is an expression of progress both individual and social, among others. The pragmatists showed insight when arguing that what children did when they played had great implications in their real life and so in their present. that what happened in play was not the expression of dreams or fantasies that were unattainable or were frustrated in the terrain of the unreal, but that play was an activity that was sufficiently everyday and real for an extraordinary variety of actions and ideas to be put into practice and put to the test. Its openly aesthetic and everyday character, following Dewey and Addams, could be framed within what Yuriko Saito (among others) has called an *everyday aesthetic*. Play *makes people believe* that they are in a mental, corporal, affective, spiritual and aesthetic state of spontaneity, direct interest, curiosity, fluidity, a sensation of absorption, wonder, experimentation, and searching for variation that inclines them to participate directly in life and so sustain the vital signs of democracy. Accordingly, through the everyday aesthetic play could offer continuous experiences of participation for constructing the self (between similarities and differences perceived by others and self-perceived) and for cultivating democracy in a profoundly *pleasant* and *virtuous* way. The pragmatists trusted in the aesthetic experience of play as one of the most powerful possibilities for not only keeping democracy alive, but also for cultivating a cosmopolitan citizenship where the construction of the self remains open to interchange with the different or the unknown for mutual enrichment, and this is especially relevant in the intercultural societies that we live in now. Conceptualising play from a cosmopolitan outlook would involve incentivising encounters between people of different orientations (religious, ideological, cultural, linguistic, etc.) so that they coexist in times and spaces. Something that David Hansen (2013) has argued in his many works is the possibility of "fus[ing] reflective openness to new people, ideas, values and practices with reflective loyalty to local commitments and ways

of life" (p. 158). Thus overcoming possible rivalries or domineering attitudes that denote superiority and that could hinder the development of human relations based on harmony, solidarity, and egalitarianism. So, for pragmatists, education in its broad sense (like play) is a profoundly social experience and play helps create this social ambience that is directed towards the search for justice, progress, and the transformation of the individual and society.

In view of the foregoing, and in conclusion, this article does not suggest rejecting the conceptions of play that argue for the creation of materials, ludic methodologies, or the reshaping of school or urban spaces intended for play; these educational demands are, of course, of profound value, but (especially in regulated educational contexts, including the university) we are perhaps still unable to appreciate, from a broad and complex perspective, the educational value of play in human affairs. Play can be an aesthetic and everyday experience of great value in the cultivation of democracy.

## Note

[1] While it is true that the everyday aesthetic is a matter of topical interest in Western faculties of philosophy and education, Hull-House was probably one of the first efforts to expand the consideration of the artistic towards the aesthetic and to reconsider it from the everydayness of people. For more information, see the doctoral thesis *Educación, juego y pragmatismo en el settlement Hull-House: del playground de Jane Addams a los playworkers de Neva Boyd* (2022).

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