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Psychomotricity: The Body as Self-Expression

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Abstract. The birth of psychomotricity, and the new interpretations that have been given to promote the healthy, harmonic development of the growing child.

1. Introduction

The term "psychomotricity" appeared on the pedagogical scene around 1960, to indicate a field of intervention dealing with a child's growth and learning from birth to school age.

The first applications of this discipline were aimed at rehabilitating children with various types of deficiencies, and its image was therefore linked for a long time to the pathology in question. Later on, thanks to research by well-known authors such as Pierre Vayer, André Lapierre, Bernard Aucouturier and Jean Le Boulch, psychomotricity became a real current in education.

"Psychomotor education must be considered as a basic education in the primary school. It conditions all pre-school and school learning; these cannot be carried out successfully if the child has not arrived at the point of being aware of his body, of lateralising himself, of situating himself in space and of controlling time, and if he has not acquired sufficient skill in coordinating his gestures and movements.

Psychomotor education must be given prominence at a very early age; if it is done consistently, it enables certain maladjustments that are always difficult to eliminate once they have acquired a structure, to be prevented. ...ⁿ¹. In addition to this, psychomotor education favours the establishment of more correct lifestyles that, to our way of thinking, also greatly influence the state of health of the individual himself.

"Before the mental images that will take him into the world of concepts and abstract operations are consolidated in the child, and before he is even mentally aware that he has a body, the child *is* a body – a body that feels and understands by experimenting within polarities and contrasts (balance-imbalance, inside-outside, near-far, tension-relaxation, etc.) to be found in all the games that he is constantly performing. Rocking, turning, falling, relishing feelings of dizziness, the limit of his balance, touching, building and taking apart are all conditions of that unique search to experience a bodily self that can give sense to the world".²

Le Boulch, taking explicit inspiration from Piaget's phases of development, maintains that the human being cannot be understood outside the link that unites him to his inter-human environment and the regulating mechanism that allows *adaptation* between the subject and his environment comprises two complementary, concomitant processes: assimilation and accommodation.

¹ J. Le Boulch, *Lo sviluppo psicomotorio dalla nascita ai 6 anni*, Armando Editore, Rome, 2004⁷, p. 25.

² I. Gamelli, *Pedagogia del corpo*, Meltemi, Rome, 2001, p. 21.

Assimilation is the integration of what is external to the subject's own structures. Accommodation is the transformation of the subject's own structures according to variations in the external environment.³ What Le Boulch calls *adjustment* is simply the aspect that accommodation assumes when it refers to the motor response to the stimuli of the environment.

From this point of view, the body adopts problem-solving *techniques*: these lead to the body's abilities to carry out actions (jumping, running, etc.) and to carry out actions on objects (manipulating).

Le Boulch calls these techniques *praxias*. A praxia is a system of coordinated movements with a view to having an end-result or to fulfil an intention.⁴

Pierre Parlebas⁵ suggests a specific meaning for the term psychomotricity, defining this word as "the set of motor situations without interaction between the co-participants; the individual is faced only with solving his task", for example in diving, in gymnastics using equipment, in throwing weights, in sub-aqua diving and in sailing. Psychomotricity, in this sense, is the opposite of sociomotricity, which refers to "situations that necessarily bring into play a motor interaction between co-participants", as in volleyball, tennis and even more so in basketball, football, rugby, etc.

One important characteristic of psychomotricity is that, it is necessary to have a nondirective, non-judgemental attitude when implementing it; the psychomotricist or educator must concentrate on what the child can do rather than what he cannot do. Even in an organised, structured activity, therefore, with the presence of explicit and implicit norms, the educator must not intervene with a directive or authoritative attitude, but must offer himself as a *facilitator* of the child's learning and lead him along the path of the child's own experience.

2. Suggestions for psychomotor play activities:

2.1. "Games of skill"

Aim: To improve skill in grabbing and handling objects and to tests one's skill.

Materials: Balls of all types, shapes and sizes, of all weights and materials, large and small obstacles, a balancing form, large and small mats and various objects that might lend themselves to this activity.

Method: We offer below brief summaries of various types of exercises that are suitable for being presented as play activities:

- Picking up and putting down objects that get gradually smaller: little balls, large marbles, little marbles, etc;

- Trying to grab little balls not just with thumb and forefinger but also with the middle finger, etc;

- Unwrapping a sweet with one hand;

- Tying a piece of string around a pencil;

- Bouncing various types of ball;

- Rolling large balls along the floor by moving them with the fleshy part of the fingertips as if the hand were a "little spider" walking on the ball;

- Throwing a ball and catching it in the air;

- Throwing a ball, touching the floor or turning round or clapping hands several times, and then catching the ball in the air;

- Throwing the ball and passing under it at each bounce;

- Setting up paths with slalom bends, jumping from one hoop to the next, rolling over mats, going under benches or obstacles and over the balancing form;

³ J. Le Boulch, ibid., p. 29.

⁴ J. Le Boulch, ibid., p. 32.

⁵ P. Parlebas, P. Arnaud, G. Broyer (editors), *Corpo e movimento*, Borla, Rome, 1989, p. 125.

2.2. "How I am made"

Aim: To get to know, to name and to use the various parts of the body.

Materials: Large balls and balloons.

Method: "The robot": the educator gives verbal orders and the "robot" children must carry out the following:

- In a sitting position, move their heads/lift an arm/lean forwards/open their arms;

- In a standing position, bend their legs/lift a leg/ open their legs/ close their legs together;

"The captain": divide the children into pairs and make them stand one in front of the other. The educator will give one of the two the role of captain. The captain will perform movements both standing and sitting, and the other must copy him. The role of captain will be alternated frequently as the game progresses.

"Mr. Wolf": the children walk round in a circle, around one child who plays the role of the wolf, and they say the following: "We're going for a walk in the woods, while the wolf is away. Are you there, Mr. Wolf? What are you doing?" The wolf answers, making the movements: "Lift your arm, lift your leg, rotate your head, etc.". The children copy the wolf's movements until he shouts "I'm coming after you!" Then they all run away.

"The right place": the educator arranges some objects on the desk: a cap, a hairribbon, some earrings, a necklace, a pair of glasses, a whistle. The children must point to the part of the head that corresponds to each object.

"The ball ring": the children are asked to pass each other the ball from one hand to the other, passing it first around a part of their bodies: around their necks, around their waist, around their hips, around their thighs, around their knees, around their ankles, etc;

"Touch it with...": the educator gives each child a balloon and asks them to perform games of skill by following certain instructions: "Touch the balloon and send it flying with your fist, with the palm of your hand, with your elbow, with your forearm, with your thigh, with your knee, with your bottom, etc.";

2.3. "In time and space"

Aim: To practise space-time perception and stimulate the structural organisation of the body-scheme.

Materials: Large and small balls of various sizes, forms and material, hoops of various diameters, cones.

Method: "The laser beam": throw the ball upwards and, while it bounces on the floor, approach it without being touched by it. The children approach it at first forwards, and then backwards. They will thus learn to be aware of their own bulk, at the front and at the back of their bodies.

"Bombing": throw the ball upwards and pass under it at each bounce, trying not to

get hit.

"Hoops": we give each child a hoop and leave them free to play. Then we suggest actions that they might do with the hoop. We roll it, spin it, slide it on the floor, throw it and try to jump while it is rolling, we throw it and try to pass inside it while it's rolling, we spin it and jump inside it before it comes to a complete stop. We can also twirl it around our arms, around our ankles, our necks, our wrists or our hands and we can use it as a "hula-hoop", etc.;

"Car race": we give a hoop and a ball to each child and leave them free to play. Then we suggest using the hoop as if it were a car steering-wheel and pushing the ball with this, making it roll along the floor, in various directions, along a pre-established track or even playing "dodgems".

"The hole": we give a hoop to all the children except one, who will have the ball. The children must run away, each rolling his hoop, while the child with the ball must try to catch them by throwing his ball into the hoops. When a child is caught he sits inside his hoop at the point where he was captured. The ball is then given to another child. To make the game a little more tricky, the child with the ball can be asked to bounce the ball on the floor as he moves around.

"Ball in the hoop": we divide the children into pairs and give a lightweight or foam rubber ball to one child in each pair and a hoop to the other. The child with the ball must try to put the ball through his partner's hoop and the one with the hoop must try to make it easy for the child throwing the ball. The distance between the two should be gradually increased. After each three "goals", the children exchange equipment.

"Ice cream cone": we divide the children into pairs and give a lightweight or foam rubber ball to one child in each pair and a cone to the other. The children must try to create a kind of "ice cream cone". One of the pair holds the cone upside down, with the base pointing upwards, and the other must throw the ball towards his partner, who tries to catch it in the air with the cone. After scoring two "cones", the children exchange equipment.

Psychomotricity : The Body as Self-Expression

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