

Playing for the Socialization of Democracy: Reimagining Jane Addams' Philosophy of Education

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In this paper, I argue that Jane Addams' philosophy of education was a practical and theoretical example of how the cultural meaning of virtuous and pleasurable *aesthetic experiences*—such as organized and supervised play, theater, dance, and folk music—provided children and adolescents from different cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds with opportunities to *socialize democracy*, that is, with multiple experiences for cultivating a revisable, collective, and cosmopolitan way of life in dialogue with different cultural, linguistic, ethical, and religious sensibilities. I particularly propose that a focus on her notion of children's play may enhance our understanding of the educational contribution of her works. Specifically, I argue that exploring Addams' notion of play not only enriches our understanding about the continuities among the human activities of play, art, and work but also can enlighten us with respect to how to cultivate a cosmopolitan citizenship in non-formal educational spaces such as the playground. Therefore, I argue that Addams deeply trusted in the aesthetic experience of play as one of the most powerful experiences that facilitates keeping democracy alive.

With the aim of deepening these ideas, I have divided this paper into three parts. Firstly, I will approach the main childhood and adolescent challenges identified by Addams in several works. Secondly, I will provide a brief introduction to Hull-House's educational activities and the possible interpretation of these activities as aesthetic experiences. And, finally, I will explore Addams' notion of play based on three theses that underpin her philosophy of education.

AESTHETIC INSENSITIVITY IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Laura Jane Addams was part of the first generation of women highly educated in the late nineteenth century. After a long period of training at the Rockford Seminary, an existential crisis, and a two-year trip to Europe, she

co-founded the Hull-House settlement in Chicago in the fall of 1889. The Hull-House settlement was a social center that promoted diverse spaces and educational activities organized by and directed toward immigrant children, adolescents, and adults. Her writings described valuable reflections on how Hull-House settlement initiatives were improving the living conditions of the people of the city of Chicago. Addams was in permanent contact with the social imbalances of the industrial cities and was committed to a large number of social movements in the search for social progress. William James had a very authentic way of describing Addams' works developed in the settlement. He said, "She simply inhabits reality, and everything she says necessarily expresses its nature. She can't help writing truth."¹

In several articles, but especially in her book *The Spirit of Youth in the City Streets* (1909), Addams made great efforts to understand the different discontinuities of childhood and adolescence, such as child labor, the liberation of the protection of domestic space, the loss of family bonds, commercial leisure, the gang's corruption, delinquency, drug use, hopelessness, and solitude. Addams criticized the fact that the industrial cities of the late nineteenth century ended up valuing children and adolescents exclusively for their contribution to the workforce rather than as human beings that embodied beauty, hope, and joy:

Is it only the artists who really see these young creatures as they are—the artists who are themselves endowed with immortal youth? Is it our disregard of the artist's message which makes us so blind and so stupid, or are we so under the influence of our *Zeitgeist* that we can detect only commercial values in the young as well as in the old? It is as if our eyes were holden to the mystic beauty, the redemptive joy, the civic pride which these multitudes of young people might supply to our dingy towns.²

All these imbalances led these children to what she called the "state of aesthetic insensibility" or, in other words, a state in which their senses were overstimulated and their minds and imaginations numbed. This state impeded their ability to see beyond their senses and made them ignore the perception of beauty, joy, and hope, as well as the materialization and harnessing of these qualities to direct

their agency for progress and social transformation. Considering this aesthetic insensitivity, children and adolescents socialized and developed human relationships based on the law of the strongest, hierarchy, loyalty to an authoritarian leader, and attitudes of rejection toward religious, ethical, linguistic, and cultural differences. In her own words,

We are told upon good authority that “If the imagination is retarded, while the senses remain awake, we have a state of esthetic insensibility,”—in other words, the senses become sodden and cannot be lifted from the ground. It is this state of “esthetic insensibility” into which we allow the youth to fall which is so distressing and so unjustifiable.³

While Addams was especially meticulous in analyzing the depressing situation of children and adolescents, far from observing this aesthetic insensibility from a repressive approach, Addams argued that delinquency and drug use were diverse expressions of children’s and adolescent’s primitive spirit for adventure as well as for their love for pleasure. Addams thought that juvenile crimes, beyond circumventing the law, showed “their blundering efforts to find adventure and in response to the old impulse for self-expression” and that, ultimately, this attempt was the product of the misdirected love of pleasure.⁴ It is worth mentioning here Addams’ definition of sin, which in her own words was the “misdirected love of pleasure.”⁵ The idea of directing love of pleasure is in the heart of Addams’ philosophy of education. Reversing the state of aesthetic insensibility could be achieved by educationally reorganizing the ways of cultivating a love of virtuous pleasure. In conceptualizing sin as the misdirected love of pleasure, Addams pointed to the need to reorient or reorganize childhood and youth leisure toward safe and virtuous recreation. Faced with such displays of pleasure-seeking and adventure, the city had to take charge of this human need and offer spaces for public recreation. Understanding the desire for pleasure and adventure as a fundamentally human issue involved an exercise in recognizing the playful impulse. Addams finds in aesthetic experiences such as organized play the opportunity to teach children and adolescents a new way of expressing their love for pleasure. Therefore, her notion of play

emphasizes not only the children's and adolescents' natural necessity for play but also the potentiality of a revealing activity of the human condition that overcomes challenges such as loneliness, hopelessness, isolation, or monotony in the industrial society. Establishing a new order in the love of pleasure had to do with rethinking and reconfiguring the spaces, times, and activities of childhood and adolescence.

CHILDREN'S PLAY AS AN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The Hull-House settlement offered diverse educational activities and clubs that allowed children and adolescents to cultivate this aesthetic sensitivity but also to organize themselves in their own way. These clubs met weekly and were supervised by adults of the settlement. Among the most prominent clubs were theater, dance, music, pottery, painting, crafts, sewing, debate, and reading. In addition, the settlement opened public access to many spaces such as public restrooms, kitchens, swimming pools, gyms, and playgrounds. In her works, Addams does not offer a concrete definition of aesthetic experience, nor does she refer to it directly; however, my readings and interpretations of her notions of art and beauty in relation to playful activity lead me to think that, for her, play was an experience with a profound artistic and aesthetic meaning. She understood art from the Tolstoian notion of the communicative process that surpasses the individual dimension of the human being. She argued that art "may or may not be beautiful, but it takes you into another man's mind [and] . . . breaks down the individual point of view."⁶ So, true artistic expression was that which allowed the passage from the individual to the collective sphere.⁷

The one who seems to have devoted the most attention to philosophical deliberation about experience, art, and aesthetics is John Dewey. In his book *Art as Experience* (1934) and, specifically, in his chapter "Having an Experience," he distinguishes between what he calls the "general experience" and *an experience*. In *an experience* there is structure, fullness, unity, and emotion. In it, the unity or parts come together and converge in movement and become an emotionally satisfying whole, as if it were a work of art. During its process of uniting the parts, an experience can have harmonic periods of connection and tension, pleasure and suffering, moved by the impulse of emotion. An experience, besides

being characterized by its quality of continuity, is temporally delimited since it has a beginning and tends toward a closing, a culmination, or an emotionally satisfactory consummation.

Playing in the protected space of the playground under adult supervision might represent just one more example of how aesthetic experiences facilitated the balance between the individual and the collective sphere. Supervisors could guarantee the creation of harmonious periods between the parts and the whole, periods of connection and tension or even pleasure and suffering, until a satisfactory collective and group end was achieved. If the aesthetic sensitivity of children and adolescents was cultivated, they could find beauty in a great number of activities: “he responds to poetry, he becomes a lover of nature, he is filled with religious devotion or philanthropic zeal.”⁸ And, likewise, this appreciation of the beautiful could incline children to think, act, and feel in favor of progress and social justice. Children’s play was, for Addams, as it probably was for Dewey, that collective experience which was “the source of all kinds of art” as it offered the continuous possibilities of experimentation, change, and dynamism that democracy needed.⁹

PLAYING IN THE PLEASURE GROUND OF COSMIC PATRIOTISM

With the aim of exploring in depth the notion of children’s play in Jane Addams’ philosophy of education, I explore three main theses that characterize Addams’ philosophy of education in relation to her notion of play.¹⁰ The first thesis has been widely studied by intellectuals who have explored John Dewey’s work: the claim that education is life, which in Addams’ terms would be expressed as *education as the socialization of democracy*. In her autobiographical book *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), Jane Addams reflected on the aims of the educational experiences in the Hull-House settlement. She wrote, “The educational activities of a Settlement, as well as its philanthropic, civic, and social undertakings, are but differing manifestations of the attempt to socialize democracy, as is the very existence of the Settlement itself.”¹¹ By “socialize democracy” she meant socializing a way of life sustained under the principles of revisable practice.

Addams' notion of play is deeply rooted in the assumption of understanding education as "a continuing reconstruction of experience."¹² As Dewey did, Addams opposed the consideration of education as a finished process that prepared children and adolescents for later life. She criticized traditionalist notions of education that supported the idea of education as preparation for a future life. Addams thought these notions contributed to the establishment of multiple discontinuities in people's lives, such as parts and whole, action and thought, home and society, play and work, past-present-future, generations of fathers/mothers with their children or adolescents, or any differences between immigrant people of diverse backgrounds.

Her notion of "socialized education" was a response to the traditionalist conception of education. Addams thought that by diluting the knowledge in a social environment (socialized education), it would be possible to overcome all discontinuities of the industrial life. By diluting knowledge, she meant including interests and affections of others in an atmosphere full of fellowship and goodwill. Only when people were able to dilute knowledge in social interaction and in a communitarian environment could they aspire to materialize social transformation as well as real and lasting "lateral progress"—that is, understanding education as a process of socializing a collective way of life in which people of diverse ages and origins could walk together toward social transformation.¹³ For Addams, lateral progress meant that social advancement could not be declared through individual attempts but could only authentically be found when the transformation included the whole sensitivities of the community. Following a metaphor that she provided, lateral progress was not "the result of [the] individual striving, as a solitary mountain climber . . . but it is underpinned and upheld by the sentiments and aspirations of many others."¹⁴

I will now analyze the socialization of democracy in relation to children's play. According to Addams, the dichotomy between work and play that had been emphasized by the industrial society could be overcome when children and adolescents were able to liberate the impulse of play instinct into their later work in the fabrics. Aesthetic experiences such as play were naturally pleasurable activities that could attract a strong creative component to people's lives. Play

awaited a solid spiritual meaning, as it was an experience that provided liberation, compensation, and complementarity to the high doses of materialism of industrial life. Thus, by playing during childhood, life could be less mechanical, aligned, isolated, segmented, or monotonous, or, in other words, life could be more variable, spontaneous, light, creative, tolerable, and manageable. As an example of this notion, Addams said,

When every boy and girl in the public schools has pleasure in his daily work, the play instinct will have a natural expression and will normally develop into the art impulse and that power of variation which industry so sadly needs. No force, however, will be sufficiently powerful and wide-spread to redeem industry from its mechanism and materialism, save the freed power in every single producer.¹⁵

By placing pleasure in the epicenter of her notion of education, Addams escaped from the false Aristotelian dichotomy that opposed play and work and, consequently, dissociated herself from the logic that considered work as serious, important, and useful and play as banal, irrelevant, and useless. Work and play are, for Addams, two human activities that, far from being antithetical, are mutually necessary and complementary.

For Addams, organized and supervised play was an experience that set in motion the construction and preservation of collective ways of life. Education had to provide opportunities for children and adolescents to understand that life was to be determined and that it was something that needed to continue to be constructed, something living and malleable that needed their participation. By considering the creative power that play can bring into industry, children could feel that they were enriching the social patterns or cultural traditions of human beings. This historical consciousness inclined them toward the development of progress in both industry and culture, which contributed to the construction of a more progressive society.

The second thesis that I have explored in Addams's notion of children's play is that the socialization of life was cultivated on the basis of *pleasurable*,

virtuous, and collective aesthetic experiences. Aesthetic sensibility had to be socialized through experiences that allowed the stimulation of the love of virtuous pleasure in interaction with others. The educational experiences organized in Hull-House—such as playing in the playground, painting, modeling, drawing, music, theatre, or gymnasium classes—were multiple attempts to reestablish the love of virtuous pleasure and to cultivate the inner life of children and adolescents. These aesthetic experiences, far from placing children and adolescents as spectators, allowed them to perceive life from the perspective of a craftsman who understood that the material he or she worked with was something that needed to be molded in the search for beauty, joy, and pleasure.

Based on a Tolstoian notion of art, Addams thought that collective aesthetic experiences such as play were characterized by their power of *unification*, as they could reestablish and integrate the discontinuities of childhood in modern life. Thus, by taking the organic, integrating, and unifying power of aesthetic experiences, children and adolescents could have a fuller life in the industrial society.

Addams was not very specific in offering pedagogical guidance on how the aesthetic education should be organized, but she recognized three stages delimited by inner changes in childhood and adolescence. The educator had to be aware of these stages and help children and adolescents to simplify life in accordance with their inner changes. I suggest that these three stages that Addams proposed represent the continuity between the human activities play, art, and work. From her perspective, up to the age of twelve, teachers should emphasize the cultivation of the imagination. Between twelve and fourteen, children had to refine their artistic technique, and finally, in the age band of fourteen to sixteen, they had to start their vocational period in which they had to prioritize the search for their place in the world:

A little child makes a very tottering house of cardboard and calls it a castle. The important feature there lies in the fact that he has expressed a castle, and it is not for his teacher to draw undue attention to the fact that the corners are not well put together, but rather to listen to and to direct the story

which centers about this effort at creative expression. A little later, however, it is clearly the business of the teacher to call attention to the quality of the dovetailing in which the boy at the manual training bench is engaged, for there is no value in dovetailing a box unless it is accurately done. At one point the child's imagination is to be emphasized, and at another point his technique is important. . . . There is no doubt that there is a third period, when the boy is not interested in the making of a castle, or a box, or anything else, unless it appears to him to bear a direct relation to the future; unless it has something to do with earning a living. At this later moment he is chiefly anxious to play the part of a man and to take his place in the world.¹⁶

Finally, in my third thesis on Addams' educational possibilities of children's play, I argue that when children and adolescents expressed their love of virtuous pleasure in associated aesthetic experiences such as playing in the playground, they stimulated and cultivated a cosmopolitan citizenship. Her notion of citizenship was expressed in her book *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907). Addams believed that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, North American schools were promoting a militaristic and nationalistic patriotism that glorified brutality and war. She argued that this patriotism was out of context with the historical moment in which America was and that it was frustrating democracy and social progress. "That old Frankenstein," she wrote, "the ideal man of the eighteenth century, is still haunting us."¹⁷ Addams believed that a new type of patriotism or citizenship was needed, and, indeed, it had already been cultivated in the social settlements such as Hull-House.

This new "cosmic patriotism" was to be characterized by a solid emotional base that included kindness, compassion, fraternity, affection, good humor, and good will.¹⁸ Far from discarding the origins of immigrant people, this patriotism needed to value their traditions, customs, and folkloric expressions as "an inexhaustible ancestral reservoir of material" that could stimulate imagination in the socialization of democracy. It was a patriotism broad enough to embrace the diversity of cultural expressions and identities, giving rise to new

forms or readjustments between the individual, the community, and society.

Addams thought that the playground was the only space where children and adolescents could cultivate this cosmic patriotism. In the supervised playground, they could express a variety of customs, traditions, and folkloric expressions without the fear of being ridiculed or undervalued by a manipulative leader of the gang. I would suggest that what Addams was trying to say was that, by playing at the supervised *pleasure ground*, children and adolescents disarticulated not only the citizenship embodied in the “old Frankenstein” but also challenged the process of American homogenization and reconstructed their identity and culture in the impulse of cultivating a cosmic patriotism:

only on the playground or in the recreation center do they find that variety is prized, that distinctive folklore and national customs as well as individual initiative are at a premium. They meet together and enjoy each other’s national dances and games, and as the sense of comradeship and pleasure grows, they are able to express, as nowhere else, that sense of being unlike one’s fellows which is at the basis of all progress. They meet in the kingdom of the mind—in the empire of imagination—as they discover that folk customs are similar in all nations. In the play festivals of Chicago sustained in the various small parks, the Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Norwegians meet each other with a dignity and freedom, with a sense of comradeship, which they are unable to command at any other time.¹⁹

I have examined how children and adolescents exercised their agency at the Hull-House playground through an analysis of clips from the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper. I argue that an analysis of the value of playful activity requires the incorporation of the voices of those who gave life to the playgrounds. This means that the wishes and hopes of the reformers like Addams need to enter into dialogue with the desires of children and adolescents. In my research, I discuss several examples that show how children and adolescents accepted, questioned, and rejected the games and rules taught by both supervisors and kindergarten teachers of the playground. This in turn implies considering children

and adolescents as active agents with their own ideas, interests, and concerns, which turns the playground into a context for building human relationships and culture and, ultimately, for the socialization of democracy.

The analyzed fragments reveal how children and adolescents showed themselves to be independent and possess their own ideas about how, when, and with whom to play. One example comes from the Hull-House playground's opening day for the summer season of 1895.²⁰ The playground was not scheduled to open until late in the day, but a mass of children arrived at the grounds early. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported, they were "spying with hungry impatience on the swings, hammocks and other things arranged for their amusement." At first, several of the children tried to climb the fence but were stopped by the three policemen. Eventually, some children decided to dig a hole under the fence, and before long half of the children waiting at the gates of the park were inside before the arrival of the supervisors.

Another example occurred on the morning of June 30, 1900, when a group of children were expelled from the playground because of the mistreatment of the younger children. The response was not long in coming: "Children Raid Hull-House Playground" reported the *Chicago Tribune*.²¹ The same day in the afternoon "a crowd of small children threw stones on the grounds . . . and several of the children were dragged from the grounds and robbed of their . . . coats." Michael Hines has interpreted these events as evidence that the children had their own rules and that these were abysmally different from the wishes and hopes of the reformers.²² I agree that the children had their own voice, desires, and interests, but I would suggest that what they were doing was not simply an act of rebellion and resistance but was part of the collective negotiation of life among adults, children, and adolescents—or, in other words, that these were examples of how the reformers offered a creative and playful space in which to rethink democracy. The interpretation of playgrounds as spaces in which children and adolescents educated their ethos and generated possibilities for experimenting with diverse forms of associated life is undoubtedly at the core of Addams' proposal.



This picture shows how children and adolescents were able to explore by themselves and in association with others their relationship in the sensory, emotional, and civic world.²³ The image shows some of the various ways in which the socialization of democracy took place in the playground. In particular, it shows the aesthetic, intersubjective, and civic dynamics that Hull-House was interested in stimulating. It shows a collective and shared use of the playground equipment and space among children and adolescents of different ages, sexes, religions, cultures, and languages. The circle dynamics is a representative example of this collective way of life of deep cosmopolitan values. It shows how a kindergarten teacher is energizing a circle with children of different backgrounds. This dynamic allows children to reveal themselves to each other collectively. The aesthetics of holding hands, the position of their bodies toward the inside of the circle, the direct eye contact with the people in front of them, from a distance but at the same time in the constant movement of the circle, provides an example of a concrete and attractive life that seems to represent the cosmopolitan impulse of the playground. It is likely that this image is a visual example of how the socialization of democracy and cosmic citizenship could be cultivated. Through these playful dynamics, children gen-

erated a cosmopolitan awareness and spirit that prompted them to find both similarities in people that were apparently very different and differences in people that were similar.

In conclusion, there are multiple parallels between Addams' ideas and our time. For example, perhaps the liberation of the protection of domestic space is not new, but we still have difficulties of family reconciliation. We have managed to abolish child labor in Western countries, and yet many children are drowning in schoolwork. Perhaps we do not have high rates of child and juvenile delinquency, but we do have the challenge of cyberbullying and other forms of violence. We may have made great strides in protecting children and adolescents from drug use, but they are increasingly developing technological addictions. We have large companies that have managed to develop a wide range of apps and games and yet policy makers do not pay attention to creating sufficient conditions in which it is possible to play in "digital public spaces." I hope I have been able to show that, for Addams, virtuous and pleasurable aesthetic experiences had great potential to socialize democracy, build community, and move toward lateral progress. This implies the need to rethink the role of teachers and caregivers in play experiences, not only in school contexts but also in community contexts. Play supervisors should ensure the minimum conditions for the socialization of democracy to be experienced, and, as mentioned earlier, this would be a matter of providing a space for expression and experimentation that allows association and union between very different people under conditions of safety, equality, and protection. Grounding Addams' ideas in the realm of practical implications for our time needs further elaboration, and this project will undoubtedly be my next work.

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3 Addams, *The Spirit of Youth*, 27.

4 Addams, *The Spirit of Youth*, 69.

5 Jane Addams, "The Humanizing Tendency of Industrial Education," in *On Education*, ed. E.C. Lagemamm (Routledge, 1904), 46.

6 Jane Addams, "Tolstói's Theory of Life," *Chatauqua Assembly Herald* 27 (1910): 2-3.

7 Addams experienced a certain break with Tolstoy's ideas after she and Tolstoy encountered (or perhaps mis-encountered) each other in the early twentieth century; however, my readings of Addams' works make me think that she has a notion of art somewhat similar to Tolstoy's. On her view, the arts could be a facilitator for communication, and the arts should be understood in light of their potential in the communicative process. This influence is more than possible considering that Addams was in contact with Tolstoy's works since her adolescence and on numerous occasions expressed her admiration for his ideas.

8 Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth*, 45.

9 Jane Addams, "Work and Play," *Chatauqua Assembly Herald* (1905): 214.

10 I have analyzed several articles that Addams published before the First World War. Among them are: "Arts and Crafts and the Settlement" (1902), "The Humanizing Tendency of Industrial Education" (1904), "Work and Play as Factors in Education" (1905), "Public Recreation and Social Morality" (1907), "Recreation as Public Function in Urban Communities" (1911), and her most important book on recreation, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909).

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12 Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 216.

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20 Michael Hines, “‘They Do not Know How to Play’: Reformers’ Expectations and Children’s Realities on the First Progressive Playgrounds of Chicago,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 10, no. 2 (2017): 206-227. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2017.0025>

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23 This photograph can be found in the Historical Archives of the Hull-House Collection, Adena Miller Rich Papers – Supplement 1, Box 10, Folders 12-18, The University of Illinois at Chicago Library.