



# *Chapter 1*

Play-Conceptual Delimitations



## 1.1 Play, the Essence of a Child's Universe

Frederick Fröbel (1782-1852) the founder of kindergarten believes that humans are creative and productive, if they are given the proper environment for development. What separates humans from other beings is the desire to change the environment they live in, to interfere creatively for their own benefit. Man created everything, from primitive tools to sophisticated devices by the brains' ability to see three-dimensionally and by the ability of imagining future, creating and recreating it in a unique manner. Teachers have to be good pedagogues, to surround children with love, appreciation and encouragement so that the child would reach the highest level of development and creativity. The environment should offer the child safety and freedom to play with children of the same age. His kindergarten provided children with toys to play with, and the activities carried out there were playing, singing and building. They gave the children the opportunity to explore, compare and test. His pedagogic ideas were based on four basic components of kindergarten activity: free activities, creative games, social games and movement games. It had started from the idea that true education should teach children that they are capable of creating anything with their mental possibilities where play is the motor of true learning. Playing is not just a behaviour but a biological imperative which encourages discovering the way the surrounding world "functions". The child has an innate desire to act and know, therefore kindergarten didactic activity should direct this innate energy towards activities that would develop the child's creativity based on kindergarten experiences. Any child is unique, every child is ready to acquire knowledge according to its inner nature and it is a waste of time to try to make the child learn something which is not in relation to his intrinsic features. Educating involves the educator's activity of "leading" the learner (child) to knowledge in a qualified institution that meets the demands required by this

activity: the kindergarten. The whole atmosphere in a kindergarten is especially designed to support the overall child development, based on didactic methodology that sets the child with its innate abilities in the foreground. The aim is to develop the personality by means of playing.

Playing makes us think about something easy and fun, however it is part of the human life and has also serious connotations: playing in a theatre performance, playing chess, playing the stock market or if we take the figurative meaning: “playing with life”, “playing with fire”, “mind games” etc. It is obvious that playing is a part of human activity at all ages and social levels. From times immemorial games and playing has been a part of human life. Greeks regarded it as child specific activity, for Jews it was synonym to fun and jokes, for Germans (spielen) it was an activity that brought satisfaction, in Sanskrit games (cleada) meant something that would bring joy and for us, the Romanians (ludo) playing is regarded as something that would bring happiness. In time, the significance of the word was reduced to an activity that does not require hard work and effort, characterized by a state of well-being and pleasure, when we refer to childhood games and a more elaborate interpretation when we refer to acting, playing the stock market or playing in sport competitions. The child could make the best distinction between these two types of games. Many psychologists have tried to elaborate a theory of playing but they have faced difficulties due to biological and psychological interpretations.

Undoubtedly, plays are part of the universal culture. Prestigious thinkers such as Fr. Schiller, H. Spencer, W. Wundt elaborated philosophical, psychological and aesthetic opinions related to plays.

Herbert Spencer<sup>1</sup> makes an analogy between human and animal play, seeing them as a manner of energy consumption. Both man and animal play, but for animals it is an instinct driven activity while for people it is an aesthetic one. Spencer advances a unique interpretation of the energy overload, regarding playing as a pre-condition of artistic and aesthetic enjoyment. Enjoyment, as link between aesthetic activity and playing was introduced by Schiller and had influenced the future elaboration of a theoretical interpretation of play. Though Spencer didn't give a particular attention to play and to the elaboration of a play theory, his interest for play was determined, as in Schiller's case, by his interest in the nature of aesthetic experience. He explains the energy overload through the evolutionist biological context. H. Spencer's conception of play is clearly stated in the following assertion: *Activities called games are linked to aesthetic activities by a mutual feature, namely that none of them helps directly processes that serve life* (H. Spencer 1897). Regarding the origin of playing impulses, H. Spencer develops his idea as follows: *inferior animal species have a general trait due to which all their energy is consumed to fulfil functions which are essential for their life. They are constantly preoccupied to search for food, to avoid enemies, build hideouts, and provide food and shelter.* For Spencer, the difference between playing and aesthetic activity is given by skills. One uses inferior skills for playing and aesthetic activity requires superior skills.

W. Wundt<sup>2</sup> understands better the nature of play than the previous two thinkers, and although he considers plays the results of enjoyment, Wundt confers play another nature too: *Play is the result of work. There is no game that isn't built on the results of real work, which always precedes it in terms of*

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<sup>1</sup>In 1855, Spencer wrote "The Principles of Psychology " where he explored a mind theory as a biological component of the body. In this model, human intelligence represented something that used to develop slowly, as a response to physical environment.

<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920). The physiologist W. Wundt becomes the first psychologist and psychology teacher of the Institute of Psychology.

*time and essence. The need of existing commits man to work. While working, he gradually learns to cherish the action of his own force as source of satisfaction.* Wundt also states that *Play by its nature removes the useful purpose of work, having as goal the pleasant result that accompanies work* (Wundt 1887).

## **1.2 The Universal Character of Playing**

Human playing is a form of activity where social relations are recreated outside spontaneous social activities (Elkonin, 1980).

This definition justifies the association of play with art. Art by its artistic, aesthetic means interprets aspects of human life and activity revealing their beauty and expressiveness. In its historical development, human society practiced symbolic games. Humanity gave up primitive forms of play in adults' life along with the evolution towards a modern civilization. In exchange, the role of play in a child's life increased and brought about the study of play as significant part in the development of child's as future personality. Play won't be possible without imagination and phantasy. The essence and charm of play lies precisely in the way the child changes common objects into favourite beings through imagination. The child plays with a random object and through the "alchemy of phantasy" he turns the object into something else" as H. Complaire stated. The child catches the reality with its objectivity, is aware of it but adjusts this reality to own needs. For instance, the child sees fir cones, chestnuts and acorns under trees, recognizes this reality with its concrete objects but wishes that they were objects used in the game it thought about. Thus, fir cones turn into soldiers from his imaginary battle. The child actually performs an act of creation, starting from a concrete reality which he changes into an imaginary situation and recreates it according to own wishes. The child focuses on a target which becomes a fixed idea in his mind and by means of fantasy, the child reaches the target.

The whole surrounding reality changes into an element of the play. The child plays a role in its game and creates a certain situation which folds up on own wishes. Children reproduce a social reality, copy social relations from a certain period, and reproduce its characteristics and features.

The content of the play grasps this reality and the topics are taken from the child's social life. Still, psychologists consider that although plays reproduce the social reality typical for the period the child lives in, play as biological phenomenon has internal rules that act limitless in time and space. Girls have always acted as moms, played with dolls and boys acted like soldiers in a war. These games overcome social and time boundaries and make us see children games as a universal phenomenon.

### 1.3 The Polyvalent Character of Play

Play is a constant reality in a child's life and offers them the opportunity to adjust to a reality that they are only partly familiar with; therefore it overwhelms them with the amount of information that waste their energy with many bans and interdictions. Thus, reality seems like a constant struggle for adaptation, an effort to understand the reality, a battle of contrasts and an impediment that the child with his limited physical and psychical resources cannot overcome. The conflict, which occurs in their minds is dimmed and improved through play. Playing is linked to imagination and endless phantasy; it fills in the blanks of real life which is too complicated and complex for the child's possibilities. For children, playing is both work and art, it's useful and pleasant activity, phantasy and reality at once. The Swiss pedagogue, Édouard Claparède claims that for children *play is the life itself*<sup>3</sup>, namely that objective,

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<sup>3</sup>Édouard Claparède, *Psihologia copilului și pedagogia experimentală*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1975.

touchable and real facts are intertwined in most natural way with phantasy, fiction, imaginary and dream in the child's mind.

## **1.4 Play, Constant Human Reality**

Play can be found in human life at any age. From birth till the age of 3, children play instinctively, just by manipulating toys. After the age of 3, playing becomes a permanent and formative activity in the child's life. At preschool age, children play more and more complicated and complex games with pre-set rules. Adults also keep games in their lives as something precious. At adult age, games have more subtle meanings; they evolve to more refined forms from word games used in a conversation to the actors' play on the stage. Adults play various games such as rummy, chess, cards, monopoly, bridge, etc. when they relax, in society, among friends. Then we can discuss the role of games in medicine. These types of games have a therapeutic value, and are played as socio-drama and psycho-drama. From times immemorial people have been having fun playing games, either public or individual, being directly involved or watching them as spectators, for instance the Olympic Games, sport games etc. The evolution of technology brought about the evolution of games, thus computer games, mobile phone games, television games and other games on various gadgets have developed.

Prestigious psychologists have been interested by games and the role they have in the child's evolution over the decades.

L. J. Vĩgořski argued the importance of games in the development of a child's personality, therefore he stated that new situations and experiences should be considered which would place games in the centre of preschool education.

D. B. Elkonin<sup>4</sup> states that the leading role in the development of games at preschool age is played by the occurrence of unachievable tendencies.

A. N. Leontiev was also concerned with the psychology of play and therefore he developed new ideas stating that unachievable tendencies existed in a child's life since birth. What is worth mentioning is the fact that along with speech development, consciousness is formed and developed. What was unachievable for a child at the beginning of his life becomes achievable now, not in a real plan but in an unreal one, gaining new forms in terms of ideas. Starting from the material plan, playing with objects, the child internalizes actions, which undergo changes in the imaginary world. This is the part when games intervene. Do games build the imaginary situation or does the imagination build the game? It is, of course, a rhetorical question but with various interpretations. They all self-determine one another, making a contribution to the child's development.

We can talk about the game itself only after the age of 3, as self-awareness occurs. Before this age we are dealing with the concept of non-game, or playing without conscious involvement. The evolution and development of games is linked to the child's ontogenetic development. Psychologists who have been interested in the psychopedagogy of play have made remarkable contributions in the field, clarifying certain aspects which are important for the understanding of the development and role of play in a child's life. We mention here a few principles related to the historic conditions of the emergence of plays:

- Playing has a social nature, especially the games with rules because they are social by their origin: their emergence is socially determined and their content is also social,

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<sup>4</sup>D. B. Elkonin, 1980. op cit.

- Actual games occur at preschool age, after the age of 3, and they are determined by educational influences and the emergence of self-awareness,
- Educational games at preschool age are strongly influenced by inter-human relations. This aspect can be noticed in the content of games which reflect human activity, inter-human relations; thus playing becomes a form of adaptation to social demands,
- Playing has as manifestation technique the transfer of significance from real to imaginary life,
- Play with its functions, especially at preschool age, contributes to the child's mental development and shapes his personality.

The importance of play in the development of a child's personality is undeniable. Children need games and they need to play in order to have a harmonious development, grow up healthy and have confidence in their life.

## Seminar Activities



### *Tasks and Applications*

1. —

Starting with the following statement: "*The child laughs: Play is my wisdom and love!*" (Lucian Blaga), write a structural essay of 150 words.

Working time: 10 minutes.

2. —

Bring arguments in favour of the: *Play, the basic kindergarten activity* by working in teams.

3. —

Bring arguments in favour of the importance of play's socializing function in preschool period.

4. —

Write your own definition of play.

5. —

Exemplify the role of plays in the development of child's personality by bringing three relevant examples.

6. ■

Plan a learning situation where play is the main form of activity.