



Chapter 4

The Play Dimension of Educational Phenomenon

4.1 The Importance of Play in Pre-schoolers Life

Playing is considered among the perennial human activities. Playing is a typically human activity and it is extremely important in childhood for the role it plays in the development of child's personality. Playing has a universal character; it is a manifestation of behavioural features of children all around the world. When children from various cultures meet, they overcome linguistic barriers by speaking a mutual language, i.e. the language of play. Playing or the play activity is a basic activity in kindergartens, which contributes to pre-schoolers training and education. Humans discover as children what playing means and continue playing all their lives.

This aspect made specialists assign playing a polyvalent character and for children it is equally work, art, phantasy and reality.

For children, playing is life and reality in their full complexion. It is their favourite and most intense activity. By playing, the child confronts with his own self, with others, with different objects, phenomena and processes, as well as with the environment.

In modern society, playing gets new values, though in everyday speech we still identify meanings which have negative connotation.: "It's just a game!", "First work, then play!", "Are you playing with me?" etc. Performance, prestige, competitive behaviours, material reward are the main motivations for playing today, and values like phantasy and creativity receive new dimensions.

The child, due to his nature, tries to build situations full of suspense in his play. He tries to learn something new and prepare himself for life. Playing develops the child's competitive and creative spirit; children succeed in following and reaching their goals, develop their spirit of perseverance.

Children practice and try by playing various types of behaviours, test reactions to various situations and develop their attitudes. Because of their age characteristics, children cannot keep suspense for a long time, that's why they solve unpleasant situations quickly and can repeat play situations over and over again without getting bored. Playing becomes an important method of learning and development. Each game is a way of learning in the child's physical and mental development.

Playing is a potential of training and developing complete personalities (*body – reason - soul*).

4.2 Play–Dominant and Defining Form of Preschool Activity

For kindergarten teaching, playing is a fundamental activity. Play and playing place are in the forefront the child's natural pleasure of doing something and not relating the action to a pre-set goal. Playing is an expression of child's spontaneous activity, an activity full of pleasure and satisfaction. All psychologists agree upon the fact that playing is the dominant infantile activity, which is practiced for the child's development and his fulfilment as adult. It is the exclusive form of behaviour and the most proper manner of learning until the child goes to school.

By playing, the child assimilates knowledge and adapts to the environment. Therefore, playing has always an immediate functional value. Healthy children play all the time; they play collective games, when their interest is awakened. Thus, they develop their socializing skills. Due to the children's unstable interest for an activity, they change easily their interests, preferences and game direction. As the child grows up and after more practice, these features become more stable. The evolution of motivation for playing can be noticed, too. The

balance between play and development can be identified in the propelling character from the process of child personality development. We want to reveal a few characteristics of playing at preschool age, as a proof of the statement that it is a dominant activity at preschool age:

- The pleasant character and the association with positive feelings,
- The rewarding character resulted from the fact that playing is a pleasant activity and does not involve reaching goals outside play situations,
- The spontaneous and voluntary character. Play is an action not caused or controlled by someone else,
- The active character requires the participants' active involvement,
- The easy character of actions is not the same as in real life and doesn't have to be taken literally.

Playing has a formal character; it involves the development of all child's personality dimensions by activation of mental processes resulted from exploration of surrounding reality. The child acquires skills, abilities and habits by playing and also activates his creative potential. The play has certain goals in the development of a child's personality³⁰:

- Progressive and spontaneous knowledge of the surrounding world,
- Proper understanding and control of issues and fears,
- Knowledge of their own person and relation to the world,
- Exploring the relationship between reality and phantasy,
- Development of intuitive and semiotic thinking.

³⁰Howard Gardner, (2004), *Mintea disciplinată*, Editura Sigma, București.

We can notice that during a child's ontogenetic development, the games are varied and more and more complicated and suffer progressive changes as the child grows up. Socially, there is a gradual evolution in the child's playing style, especially in the first years of life:

- Solitary play with objects prevails until the age of 18 months,
- Parallel play, involves observing and imitating other children without real interaction until the age of three,
- Social play, appears around the age of four when playing is more and more present in simple interactions with other children. Initially, these interactions are pretty rigid, turning into cooperation later on.

4.3 Classification of Games

4.3.1 A Possible Taxonomy of Games

Different authors have identified and classified many types of games, according to their goals. One possible way of dividing games is the following:

1. Relaxation games. As their name points out, they are games which have the aim of creating a pleasant and comforting atmosphere, without inhibitions, which stimulates the ability of accepting the others. During these games, the players get to know each other, develop relationships and friendships. The topics of these games involve: knowing the room, knowing the other participants. They are useful games for memorizing the participants' names; concentration games; games which involve a lot of movement, games without discrimination (no winner and no loser – “new games”).
2. Expression games. The aim of these games is human interaction based on verbal language, games based on sounds, various tones and rhythms.

3. Interaction games. These are cooperation and coordination games (partner games, group games); movement games with or without music; relaxation games; sensitivity games (confidence building games – in partner, in group); force games (power measurement, skill measurement), games with different materials (balloons, balls, chairs), games based on sounds, speaking, various tones and rhythms. Interaction games cover the need to establish relationships with the others, children or adults. Just like adults, who meet, communicate and interact out of the need of being socially active, children feel the need of human presence. Great importance is now given to speech and materials used.
4. Role plays. These games rebuild and reproduce real life situations; therefore they require longer and better preparation. Some of them are based on pantomime, improvisation, drama and even socio-drama and psychodrama.

According to Garvey, C., (1977) games can be categorized as follows:

- movement games,
- group games,
- speaking games,
- role plays,
- skill games,
- sport plays.

In his work *Games and a taxonomy of types of games*, Bob Hughes³¹ makes the following classification:

³¹www.playwork.org.

- symbolic games,
- aggressive games,
- socio-dramas,
- social games,
- creative games,
- communication games,
- drama,
- intellectual games,
- explorative games,
- fantastic games,
- imaginative games,
- movement games,
- authority games,
- objective games.

Gilsdorf și Kistner (1999)³² talk about:

- games for making friendship connections (games for learning the other member's names),
- movement games (“warming-up”),
- perception games,
- trust games,
- cooperation games,

³²www.relijoc.ro/html.

- adventure games.

A clear distinction cannot be made between these types of games. Elements of a category can be extracted from the context and be used in another category, but with different results.

5. Symbolic games: basic and evolved.

Basic symbolic games:

- Handling games:
 - a) Games with small materials,
 - b) Games with materials from the nature,
 - c) Games with residual materials.
- Imitation games: configure social actions: Feeding the doll, making injections, Reading magazines.

Evolved symbolic games:

- Games with everyday life subjects:
 - a) Games of social cohabitation relate to knowledge, skills and motivation: *Playing mother and child, Playing school; Playing the doctor,*
 - b) Building games relate to knowledge, motivation and building skills: we build, manufacture from: *Lego, Arco, Plasticom, Mosaic, Rotodisc* etc.

6. Games with topics from fairy tales and stories:

- a) Dramas are determined by the influence of stories on children: *Playing Mother Goat and Her Three Kids, Playing Little Red Riding Hood, Playing The Salt in Your Food.*

b) Dramas based on scripts written by specialist and prepared by kindergarten teachers: *Cinderella, Puss in Boots, The Big Radish etc.*

c) Games with rules:

- (1) didactic games,
- (2) entertainment games.

Didactic games:

- Movement games:
 - symbolic motion games which are played with or without toys and materials: running, crawling, climbing, bike riding, fitness machine games,
 - complex motion games are played during guided learning activities (physical education): varied exercises; walking exercises, running, development of motion skills: obstacles, climbing, crawling, throwing.

Sport and movement games. They can be divided into:

- Games with a strong sport and fun character which are played outdoors (bike riding, roller-skating, sledging),
- Games which develop known basic movements (walking, running, jumping, throwing, catching, crawling, climbing and balance),
- Movement games with rules and roles (in the classroom and outdoors),
- Games with devices and outdoor games,
- Games of road traffic,
- Basic and easy dances,
- Aerobics,

- Eurhythmmy.

The emergence and intensive practice of creative games is the result of the overall mental development of children, especially the development of self-reflection ability. Children reflect on the impression they have on the surrounding world:

- a) Games of affective expression: puppet theatre, board theatre, shadow theatre, imitation, crying, laughter.
- b) Games for mental development:

Sensory games:

- Games for hearing excitation,
- Games for touching excitation,
- Games for taste excitation,
- Games for smell excitation,
- Games for sight excitation,
- Games for educating balance.

Intellectual games:

- Phonemic games,
- Games for enriching vocabulary,
- Games for knowing the environment,
- Mathematic games,
- Musical games,
- Text and singing games,

- Games of the development of thinking,
- Logical games,
- Attention games, etc.

Entertainment games have a special aim and that is creating a pleasant atmosphere and bringing good mood. Therefore, they have to be simple, easily understandable through effortless explanations. They are attractive in themselves. Such examples are: *The kitten and the sparrows*, *Where is the bunny hidden?* *The swallow without a nest*, *The Statues*, *The wolf at the sheep* etc.

We can draft the taxonomy of games, if the selection criterion is the syllabus of instructional-educative activities:

- Games for Selected activities, games and other activities carried out by children,
- Games for Joint activities,
- Games for Complementary activities.

Another classification can be made starting from activity categories:

- Games for speech development,
- Games for mathematic activities,
- Games for environmental knowledge,
- Games for education for the society,
- Games for practical and household activities,
- Games for musical education,
- Games for art education,

- Games for physical education.

Each author who has been concerned with psychopedagogy of play drafted his own taxonomy according to the issues of the topic he dealt with. The main idea is that play is the basic activity at preschool age, irrespective of the activities the child is involved in.

4.3.2 Didactic Games

Didactic games are the most comprising category of games with rules; they enforce didactic activity through play motivations, which are subordinated to the goal of teaching-learning-evaluation activities. They differ from other games by the presence of didactic tasks.

Didactic games are:

- a didactic means of instruction and education of preschool children,
- basic didactic means in speech education and environmental knowledge,
- a means of linking the didactic task to playing.

Didactic games are extremely important in the teaching process because:

- they solve many issues of intellectual education by their content,
- they have an important role in the consolidation, systematization and assessment of knowledge.

The manner of organizing and using didactic games in kindergarten activities allows us to make the following distinction:

- based on pedagogic criteria,

- based on their objectives: sensory games (hearing, visual, motion and tactile), observation games, speech development games, games of interactive,
- based on teaching contents: mathematic games, musical games, sports games, literary/linguistic,
- based on the form of expression: symbolic games, orientation games, sensitizing games, conceptual games, riddles, crosswords,
- based on the resources used: material games, oral games, question based games, worksheet based games, computer games,
- based on rules: games with traditional rules, games with invented rules, games with spontaneous rules, protocol based rules,
- based on the stimulated psychological competences: movement games, imagination games, attention games, memory games, thinking games, speaking games, creative games.

The children's games turn into a method of teaching if they have a specific organization and are used in the order required by the logics of knowledge and learning. Children can discover truth, train their creative abilities because the strategies of didactic games are heuristic strategies, which involve spontaneity, inventiveness, initiative, patience, daring, creativity and intelligence.

The main intention of didactic games is not entertainment but the acquisition of knowledge with the aim of preparing the child for school and life. Therefore, didactic games should be instructive; they should enhance, methodize and retention of knowledge. The usage of didactic games in whole group activities brings attractive elements in the teaching-educating process. Each didactic game has a certain structure:

- contents,

- didactic task,
- rules,
- action.

The contents include the children's previous knowledge acquired during joint activities with the whole group. Knowledge refers to human beings, plants, animals, seasons, mathematic representations, society, etc.

Didactic task is actually a matter of thinking, recognition, designation, reconstruction, comparison, guessing. Didactic games may have the same contents but a different character, due to the tasks they have to solve. These tasks are always different.

The rules of didactic games have the aim of showing children how to play, how to solve the task, participate in an activity. Moreover, they have a regulatory function on the relationships between children.

The action includes the moments and stages of the game and makes the task solving a pleasant and attractive activity for children. It is actually the game in itself with its stages: waiting, surprise, guessing, competition, appreciation.

Didactic games are used in all curriculum stages according to their objectives. After the type of activity, didactic games are used as consolidation, practice, retention and recovery of knowledge. Irrespective of the manner it is used, the didactic game helps children engage their full mental potential, develop their initiative and inventiveness, flexibility of thinking, cooperation and teamwork spirit.

The didactic game contains the following stages:

- lead-in,

- enforcement,
- complications,
- end of games.

Didactic games run under a specific methodology, which takes into consideration the following conditions:

- the game should be designed according to the category of activity, considering its goals and task,
- it should be carefully and thoroughly prepared by the teacher based on time management and materials used,
- it should be varied, attractive and combine play with learning elements,
- the teacher should use play and surprises when children show signs of boredom and tiredness,
- games should create moments of recreation in order to recover the children's nervous energy,
- it should engage all children in the game,
- it should be age appropriate,
- it should be structured according to the type and goal of the activity,
- it should require creative thinking and use the children's intellectual possibilities at their full potential,
- the play elements should be introduced in any moment,
- the didactic tasks should be divided into progressive sequences in terms of difficulty,
- the explanations should be clear, accurate, and precise. The children should be aware of them and they should give them motivation for playing,

- games should be used in an active, stimulating and dynamic environment,
- didactic tasks should not be too easy but not too difficult,
- the rules should be clearly explained and the teacher should make sure that the children follow them.

Play elements such as: guessing, movement, racing, surprise, etc., involve emotional moods which maintain the interest for such activities.

The usage of didactic games in the teaching-educational process in kindergarten is motivated by:

- the efficiency is higher, the practice, retention and evaluation of knowledge being more pleasant, active and thorough,
- the children's thinking is constantly demanded and therefore in continuous development,
- determines the development of mental processes such as: independence, creativity and perseverance,
- stimulates the child's initiative; the child is more courageous, relaxed and less inhibited while playing,
- it contributes to a faster and more efficient knowledge of children,
- it develops the observation, analysis, judgement skills, removes monotony, routine, stereotypes and give children the opportunity to expend their vocabulary and thus communication becomes more permissive,
- it gives the teacher the opportunity to find out how children think and adapt their teaching methods to the children's thinking.

The literature in the field offers plentiful didactic games which can be used successfully during various activities. The teacher's skills will lead to outstanding results in play based activities. If the teacher wants to be successful

in her activity, she has to develop the following virtues in the participants to the game: communication, cooperation, responsibility, flexibility, spontaneity, creativity and trust. The play is a tool, a manner of constant engagement of children in an activity. Didactic games have to be prepared in advance according to its stages: *organization, lead-in, enforcement and exploitation of results*. In planning the activity, the teacher has to be familiar with the situation of her group, their training level, interests, etc. The planning of didactic games is based on bibliographic resources (books, game collection, cards) and the memorizing of many game elements, which can be used in any stage of the game. *Explanation* is one important step in the organization of a successful didactic game. The teacher has to explain the game and at the same time, she has to put it into practice. The teacher will explain the game using proper, uncomplicated vocabulary and will influence positively the climate. Then, the leader has to repeat plainly and clearly the game with its rules. The teacher guides her children towards easy and funny actions through her words and behaviour. She prepares illustrative materials or other type of material in advance and she will use them during the game. In certain cases, playing as joy and catharsis generator, becomes therapy for the child's mental balance, trauma healing and discharge of affective-behavioural regressions.

4.3.3 Entertainment Games with Rules

The games with rules are games which are integrated in preschool period and experience a complex development in early school years. As their name points out, these games are played according to pre-set rules. The rules are set at the beginning of the game and they have to be followed accordingly. Who doesn't follow them, will be rejected from the game. The rules and the organization are decided at the beginning of the game, after serious debate.

1. Two types of rules are used in this type of game:

- a) spontaneous;
- b) transmitted from one generation to the other.

There are significant differences between the behaviour of young, medium and older pre-schoolers both in subject games and games with rules.

A young pre-schooler cannot remember all rules in a game such as *Hide and seek*. He will only remember one or two rules, such as the one related to hiding. For him, hiding means sitting somewhere, where his head cannot be seen; thus he hides with the face against the wall or the hiding place is somewhere nearby. After a while, he runs towards the place the game started, without considering the stage of the game. When the game starts over, he will hide in the same place and in the same way. Young pre-schoolers remember just partly the rules of a complex game and their behaviour highlights the fact that they cannot fit in the overall temporary unfolding of events, their action is independent and contains repetitive, circular reactions.

The medium pre-schooler is more evolved in behaviour than the young one. He hides in further places, searches longer for a hiding place, makes a lot of noise while playing, gets mad with the younger ones who baffle the game. The medium pre-schooler doesn't organize well all stages of the game, although he knows the rules and obeys them. His participation is passionate, affectionate and complete. Although his social integration in the game is difficult, the child chooses complicated hiding places, which lead to conflicts because he has difficulties in coming out of his hiding.

The older pre-schooler fully understands the rules, he hides in accessible places, close to the playground; re structures mentally the actions, organizes pretty well the final stage of the game. He feels that the surprise factor is important in the game, but it doesn't always come out the way he wants it; he

interference in the game is sometimes tense, because he relies too much on the surprise factor. His ontogenetic development favours behaviour adjusted to the rules of the game, a better strategic organization of its stages.

Games and especially games with rules reach a superior development level at preschool age, when the game becomes a sine qua non condition for the child's future development. The psychopedagogists who have studied play state: *Playing is the child's main activity because its development stimulates and contributes to the most important mental changes which prepare the child's transition to a superior development stage.*³³

Preschool age is a time of unprecedented mental evolution, when playing is assigned new and important features, which bring it closer to social activities. Playing is enriched, builds varied activities to other activities from their superordination or subordination on criteria set by the rules, to their differentiation from reality through phantasy. The relationship between known and unknown, possible and impossible, real and unreal is developed on playing, seen as timeless and fantastic space, which helps the child learn about the world and life. These notions become more comprehensible by means of play.

Play at preschool age experiences an evolutionary stage parallel to child development. The most complex, varied and interesting games appear at this stage.³⁴

The children's games are extremely mobile and are converted one into the other. In terms of contents, the games with rules can be:

³³ A.N. Leontiev, *Probleme de psihologia copilului de vârstă preșcolară*, Editura de stat, Pedagogie și Psihologie 1948.

³⁴ S.Rogers, (Ed.). *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education: concepts, contexts and cultures*. Albingdon, England; New York: Routledge, 2011, p.45.

- Reproduction games of little events (ironing, getting dressed),
- Games with easy topics (walking with the doll, playing the garage),
- Games with complex topics (family, at the doctor's, in the kindergarten, at school).

An aspect worth noticing is that games with topics can be found at children 5-6 years of age, even when they don't have a play partner; the child involved in playing performs more successive (alternating) roles.

The games with rules involve obeying the rules of the game in a certain order, which determines changes in the children's attitude. They become more organized in their behaviour, restrain their impulses and become more disciplined. The rules cannot be broken; therefore games have a complex character and develop fair-play based emulation among children.

4.3.4 Creative Games

The studies of psychologists reveal an important characteristic of play which relies on the pre-schoolers' creativity and imagination (Amabile, Teresa, M., 1997), (Sawyer, R., K., 2001). Endless creativity and fantasy are mirrored in the children's creative games. Creative games help children change reality into experience and understand it. Aspects of reality encountered in the environment are integrated in creative games and interpreted in a manner that fits to the children's interests and desires. Creativity games help the child in his development and flawless evolution.

Decades of studies highlight the importance of creativity games in childhood. They are part of children's lives; playing and learning are inseparable at this stage and it is difficult to set the barrier between playing and learning. Childhood doesn't make a distinction between playing and learning. When

children play, they acquire knowledge, develop their abilities, train their physical and mental skills, and improve their social abilities.

Children assimilate reality according to their level of understanding and aspirations, in a playful, relaxed manner. The education of preschool children is made through play; if parents want to have healthy children with no problems of social adjustment, they just have to give them examples from all categories of games and create a proper playing environment. Creative plays a the children's was of acceding to knowledge. The adults and the teachers will supervise closely the play in order to interfere when things go badly. The play is the main kindergarten activity with educational-formative influence.

Creative games develop the children's innate abilities and skills.

It is very important to let children manifest their abilities without refraining them, but on the contrary, encourage their creative activities, especially creative games.

The specialists have noticed that repetitive actions are part of the ritual and they play an important role in the development of skills, abilities and potential of preschool children. In time, these repetitions lead from interest in certain activities to distinctive creative activities. A child, who constantly repeats a song, trains the vocal cords and develops certain musical abilities. Many times, angry parents hinder these manifestations. It is an extremely harmful situation for the child's state of mind. Instead of being angry, they should encourage the child, support him and help him develop his potential talent.

All psychologists who have studies child's play agree that a child wants to resemble an adult. Creative games prove the child's wish of growing up, of being like his parents or other adults. We can identify this aspect by analysing the children's creative games, which reflect their tendency of imitating adults,

of being like them. Games are the internal engine which drives the psycho-physical formative abilities of child development. Creative games enrich the children's life experience, develop their abilities and attitudes. If encouraged, children will improve their creative potential and motivation for performing these activities.

Creative games contribute to the development of voluntary attention. Although the children's attention is unstable due to their age, they are completely involved and focused while playing. It is common knowledge that children cannot stay focused for a longer period of time, if they like the game they play, things can evolve positively. Children are totally detached when playing. They are fully absorbed by their activity. Formal education and standardized teaching methods should keep the children's creativity vivid and encourage any creative attempt. Education, irrespective of its form, should maintain the children's innate affinity for creativity and follow the path of creative learning based on play.

Adults should give children positive examples as children imitate them in their games.

If until 2-3 years of age the child is oriented towards himself, his own body, surrounding objects, the spoon he eats with, the cuddly toys, etc. the plays become more creative during his ontogenetic development. Children imitate what they see around them, in their lives and games will contain actions taken over from reality (feeding dolls, preparing meals, walking the cuddly dogs, driving a car on an imaginary road etc.). There are certain elements of creative games which emerge in any child's early childhood. These elements are enriched and as the child grows up the topics of creative games are richer in content.

The child's social relations develop as soon as he starts kindergarten and

games are a reflection of changes in his life; kindergarten offers children the opportunity to express their creativity. When they are engaged in activities suitable for their personality, their age characteristics and interests, the impact on their development is very strong. They are motivated and like to be involved in activities. Thus, creative games give children real support for their training and personality development. Creation games such as socio-dramas or role play offer endless opportunities to develop cognitive and affective-emotional processes. (Sara Smilansky, 1990). After practicing such creative games, one can notice improvement in the following areas:

a) cognitive-creative:

- better verbal expression,
- richer vocabulary,
- faster understanding,
- more elaborate expression,
- optimized resolute strategies,
- greater curiosity,
- better participation,
- improved intellectual abilities.

b) affective-emotional:

- more active participation in pair games,
- active participation in the social group,
- better collaboration,
- reduced aggressive behaviour,
- emergence of empathic feelings,

- better self-control,
- refraining spontaneous impulses,
- innovation spirit,
- loosened imagination,
- better concentration,
- perseverance in task solving.

Creativity games, but mostly socio-dramas and role plays stimulate the intellectual, affective and emotional abilities channelling the children's energy towards the development of those abilities and skills which will be useful in school activities. The situations and relationships staged by socio-dramas show similarities to real-life situations, which children are about to experience in their school activity. Thus, children acquire knowledge and skills, develop their thinking, work with abstract and general notions, etc. Obviously, imagination plays a great part in these processes. Anything can be creative with the help of imagination and narrative art. Specialists have noticed that children who are actively involved in creative games in kindergarten show the same enthusiastic behaviour in doing school activities. This aspect was proven in the 70s in Germany, where an experiment was conducted on 100 pre-schoolers. 50 children attended a kindergarten that uses mostly academic activities in the teaching process and the other 50 attended a kindergarten which plans the activities on games. The comparison between the two groups revealed conclusive results. Children who attended the game oriented kindergarten had better results in terms of knowledge acquisition, psycho-motor, affective-emotional, social and intellectual development than kids taught with academic activities. The experiment was followed by reforms in the German preschool system. Kindergartens were focused on playing and play became the main activity in preschool training and education.

It has been noticed that adult involvement in children's games can be tactless and harmful for their creativity. Adult, teacher or parent interference should be carefully organized so that it won't refrain the children's freedom and creativity. Adults and teachers should only be regarded as outsiders of the game. They should interfere only for conflict solving and maintain discipline or suggest solutions based on their diplomacy and teaching skills. Children will be guided using the teacher's skills and teaching abilities and each and one of them can revalue the ideas and initiatives in a creative manner. If the child fulfils his intentions and aspiration in playing, he will be able to succeed in real life. Furthermore, a child's initiative will also involve other children in the creative game; it will develop relationships among children and they will become more sociable and civilized. Creative games enrich the children's horizons; their experience become richer and more goal oriented.

Suppression of initiative and creativity would curb the child's development, and children with potential can become children with difficulties. Such situations can emerge due to financial impediments or lack of proper teaching skills.

4.3.5 Role Play

Many times we ask children what they want to be when they grow up. They give plenty of answers such as: pilot, magician, ballerina, astronaut, actor, doctor, fighter, soldier. Their imagination is extremely wide, especially if activated and encouraged. If adults give children clothes to dress themselves up, their games become more dynamic and rich in content. Children chose clothes based on the role they are about to play and their imagination goes wild when they play together. The most ordinary objects are changed into useful tools for the game. A chair will turn into a sophisticated car, a stick into a magic wand, a bedding placed on a chair will turn it into an invincible fortress. Children have

an extraordinary ability of scriptwriting, plotting and staging like in a real theatre play. Role plays bring a tremendous contribution to the development of children's creativity and imagination. Adults in charge with child education, kindergarten teachers especially, should be familiar with the children's natural desire to play by imitating real life situations or fairy tales in their role plays. If children have clothes and pieces of clothing at hand, they get engaged in various roles. The more diversified the role plays are, the richer will the children's life experience be. Research prove that children who take part in role plays with various topics and use their imagination and creativity will become better pupils and solve faster any problems they face.

Children follow carefully the adults' activities, especially their parents'. A girl will follow her mother closely when she prepares herself to go out. When the girl goes back to her room, she will imitate every detail of her mother's preparation: from getting dressed to make-up.

In role plays, children learn competition, fighting to reach an objective even if they aren't aware of these things. All is going to be stored and kept in their memory and used when the time comes.

Adults in charge with preschool education must encourage the play. Researches prove that play is very important in the children's development on the following levels: cognitive, affective-emotional, desire. Children feel safer and braver in front of an audience, their self-esteem is higher and they have more confidence I their own strengths. Role plays engage even shy children, who sometimes take up even leading roles.

Role plays are exactly the type of games preferred by children. They prepare children for their future social life (Elkind, D., 2007). Researcher says that role plays are the heart of childhood, a heart which beats in the child's biological rhythm and has no limits in fulfilling the imaginary wishes of a preschool child.

Teachers are familiar with these childhood specific traits and are also aware of the formative character of role plays. The rooms should be equipped with a corner with costumes for both genders and certain accessories such as: jewellery, batches, bags, purses, etc. that would stimulate the children's interest and imagination. Teachers will encourage children to practice role play, advise them and also play along with them.

Besides all the aspects about the importance of play in the development of a child's personality that we have already discussed, we also want to highlight its importance in the development of speaking skills. Role play has a powerful impact on speaking because it activates the area of proximate development (Vygotski, 2002). Children have to communicate during role plays, they have to verbalize the rules in a correct and proper language; all have to talk to each other in a language suitable for the role they play. If the child plays the role of a policeman, he has to use specific vocabulary; if the child is a doctor the child will use medical terms; for the role of *Cinderella*, the child has to use the dialogue written by the author of the fairy tale. We can state that children use a metalanguage adapted to the situation and the role interpreted by the child, so that everybody else can understand him. Speaking is practiced, internalized and improved during role play activities.

Role play helps children adapt affectively and emotionally to different contradicting situations they have to face and for whom they are not yet prepared (Beaven, J. 2000). Contradictions, conflicts and the turn of events find positive solutions through role plays on an imaginary level. Reality with so many contradictions, rules and inaccuracies adapts to the child's cognitive and affectionate-emotional only through play. Role plays enable faster and easier understanding of surrounding reality.

4.4 The Children's Play Nowadays

4.4.1 The Ontogenetic Evolution of Plays

Play is a major activity in the child's development; between play and development there is a relation of interdependence and necessity. A healthy child plays and if one doesn't, it is a clear sign that he needs affection. Any healthy child plays and develops a relationship with his toys, which cannot be replaced with anything else; the relationship with his favourite toy is a special one. The child plays instinctively and intuitively but needs support to direct the game, enrich it and acquire knowledge. From a diachronic perspective, play has experienced many changes but also times of stability. All babies play alike, they move their hands and feet; all these clumsy and unguided actions bring satisfaction to a baby. It repeats them, feels that it can move, grab, drag, gurgle and syllabify. As babies grow up, they start seeing better, become more active, want to grab objects, bring them closer and analyse them, discover new thing and explore. If in the beginning all information go through senses: the child sees, hears, touches, tastes, smells and feels, later on he starts to recognize familiar objects, starts to distinguish between objects he likes or dislikes. At this age, he discovers that any action of his on an object has effects (if one pulls the chain from the carriage, the toys start moving). At this stage, knowledge and learning go hand in hand. The child grows up and reaches the age of biped walking, firstly helped by the parents and surrounding objects, which are used as support for his walking in the attempt to conquer the surroundings, and later his universe widens and appropriate for the child's desire to know. The child's play is assigned with other values and aspects; the child is aware of what is going on around him, enjoys the games played with the mother, and is full of energy and curiosity. Gradually, plays are richer and more varied; the child has playmates, learns how to play with other children and starts sharing the toys. If we follow the child's psycho-social evolution, we can have an idea about the ontogenetic

evolution of play:

- The toddlers' play – is a manner of baby-parent relationship. The baby smiles, looks, moves in response to the parents attention or to catch their attention,
- Solitary play – begins at the age of 1 and is the toddler's way of playing alone with his toys or the adults around him,
- Parallel play – from the age of 1 year and 6 months until the age of 2. Children play alone even when they are together with other children and aware of their presence,
- Associative play – between 2 and 3 years of age; children meet other children but they neither work together nor cooperate because egocentrism is still strong,
- Cooperative play – is the preschool period; children play together, have joint activities, share their toys, the play is more and more complex and well organized and it has rules.

We can notice an evolution of play along with the child's growing up, from instinctive, precise and intuitive play to elaborated, complex plays – plays with rules.

The child plays by instinct; no one tells him to play because playing is part of any child's genetic code. No one trains him or teaches him how to play because it is an innate ability; playing is part of a child's life since birth. Parents will interfere and guide the child in the attempt to know and understanding the world in the course of time. The new-born sees, but doesn't understand what it sees; hears but doesn't yet understand the meaning of what he hears; smiles but doesn't know why, makes sounds but doesn't speak. A baby is vulnerable, defenceless; it needs care and comfort, love and play to grow up beautifully and

healthy. Children explore a lot in order to understand the world around them. Handling and working with objects are extremely important in playing. Children explore by trying and failing, making errors. The most common example is that of a child disassembling all toys not because he wants to destroy them but because he wants to know them. At this level knowledge is acquired through senses: the child sees, hears, and faces reality in a direct manner. Sometimes adults don't understand the children's attitudes, but it is certain that children need to be understood and they need to understand the world they live in. You cannot ask the child to play in a certain way; his development is the result of personal explorations. They feel the need to find their own solutions which are actually a sign of their future learning style.

The play engages all area of personality development and therefore E. Erikson (1963) believes that playing is the child's manner of bringing feelings and interior ideas to light.

4.4.2 The Evolution of Play

Play has experienced many changes from a diachronic perspective. Today, children play games which until recently weren't played in childhood years. Children who live in the city spend a lot of time indoors, at home or in institutions, due to the conditions of city life. Children spend most of their time playing computer games, TV games or games on other electronic devices. The outdoor playgrounds are also equipped with games and other materials used for outdoor playing. These games don't have the ability of stimulating the child's development on all levels, therefore children should attend kindergartens where they have the opportunity to develop all their potential. Any child ability can be trained through games (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). All personality sides can be developed through games and the innate abilities can suffer evolutionary changes. The connection between play and the development of linguistic,

mathematic and aesthetic abilities has been revealed in studies conducted by specialists. (Răduț-Taciu, R., (coord.), (2004), Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales și Alward, 2007).³⁵

When children play,

- They have numerous opportunities to practice mental representations in various situations,
- They train all personality sides: physical, social, emotional, intellectual,
- They are fully engaged because they are motivated,
- They develop their thinking and abilities. For instance, a 4 year old girl learnt writing her own name with a plastic scrabble and she understood that each sound is represented by a letter. She found her motivation in the meaning of the word: her name,
- They acquire concepts logically; each concept has to be understood. Mechanic learning is useless because the concepts are not kept in one's mind, they are forgotten.

Playing is for children an extremely important and serious activity. They rebuild reality in accordance with their wishes, bring is closer, analyse and try to understand it. The child makes effort while playing like grown up do in their everyday life; therefore play is considered a childhood job. Children cannot process reality through abstract means because of their age related features. Instead they use concrete multisensory experience. Children solve issues related to the physical or social environment through play; they create situations to find different solutions – it develops their thinking, which along with ontogenetic development reaches also the formal one. Play allows children to learn the

³⁵Play at the Center of the Curriculum in www.4children.org/pdf/play07.pdf.

usefulness of objects; they focus on what they do, become interested in the environment, which they carefully explore with motivation and interest.

4.4.3 Play and Computers

The evolution of science brought about tremendous evolution of electronics and its applications of the personal computer are inexhaustible. Computers are part of every child's life; each child has a computer at home or in the kindergarten. Computer games are varied and some have even high educational value. Children enrich their knowledge and acquire new skills and abilities by using computer games. Statistics show that children who use computers in their early childhood are more intelligent than others. Didactic computer games are extremely useful in acquiring new knowledge about the world, even for learning writing and reading. Entertainment computer games are also very pleasant for children. Besides these positive aspects, we have to stress out certain aspects that each parent should take into consideration:

- time spent by children in front of the computer should be reasonable,
- the computer game is static; therefore parents should encourage children in doing outdoor activities, in the yard, in the park, etc,
- computer games are solitary and children need social interaction if they want to fit in the society and grow up healthy,
- many times the moral content of video games is mostly questionable,
- online connection is useful but at the same time dangerous. The virtual world is as full of dangers as the real one; therefore parents should restrict or even ban the children's access to internet when they are not supervised.

Many children who are passionate about computers spend much time in front of the screen and turn into unsociable, overweight or even neurotic teenagers.

Statistics signal these situations and every pedagogue should take them into account and mention them.

Computers are useful and beneficial teaching tools as long as they are used with moderation and combined with traditional teaching methods. The mixture of traditional methods with computer games or other electronic games will result in the child's complete development, provided that inter-human relationships and movement are not neglected.

4.4.4 Games that Activate the Brain

Besides other benefits that play brings into a child's life, it has also a therapeutic role. Counsellors and psychologists know the formative values of play as manner of changing undesirable symptoms and behaviours of children suffering from various mental disorders. Thus, play is a therapeutic way of educating children with *Global development disorders* (known as the autistic or Asperger syndrome). Children suffering from these disorders show signs of poor social interaction. The child can be taught how to react in various social situations using adapted games. The play of games with imaginary characters teaches the child to use forms of politeness, appropriate responses for repetitive situations from his social life. The child will acquire certain social skills; he can also learn social behaviours that he can use in everyday life (for instance the difference between private and public).

Plays are very supportive for teachers, when they have a hyperactive child in the group. Games with rules are very useful for teaching discipline; the hyperactive child will be forced to obey the rules to avoid the others' rejection. The child will refrain his aggressive tendencies and the teacher will reward

positive attitudes of hyperactive children.

The Japanese neuro-specialist Kawashima ³⁶ included in his medical researches two revolutionary concepts in healing people suffering from chronic diseases, whose sickness affected severely the quality of their life. The two studies are entitled *Train your Brain* and *Brain Age* and contain ways of making the brain use its functions. The two papers were very successful in Japan, which tempted a famous company in producing computer games. Therefore they proposed Kawashima to adapt his books to computer games, which used the researcher's theories. That is how the game *Brain Training* appeared. It stimulates intellectual capacity and mental sharpness. People obtain mental reactivation due to the mental exercises contained by this game and thus improve their life quality.

The play doesn't stimulate just one part of the brain but more regions which are used in everyday life and improve the brain's functions and also the ability of social readjustment. Play therapy is based on the principles of the child's ontological development and ensures proper ways of expression and communication.

³⁶www.braintraining.com.

Seminar Activities



Tasks and Applications

1. —

Starting from the following statement: *“Only what man acquired early in life is strong and persistent in himself”* (J. A. Comenius, Great Didactic), write a structured essay of 150 words.

Working time 10 minutes.

2. —

How can play stimulate the training and development potential of a complex personality?

3. —

4. —

5. —

6. —