

Chapter VI

**CHILDREN'S PLAY AS A FORM AND METHOD
IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

Sanja B. Filipović*

Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia

Mirjana B. Marković

Preschool Teacher Training College Šabac, Serbia

Abstract: Starting from the theoretical background, considerable research, and implications in the educational practice itself, children's play has proved to be one of the fundamental elements of education as a form and method of work in the development of the youngest. The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the attitudes of preschool teachers about the presence of play elements, based on the perception of their own professional strategies and procedures in practice. The research sample includes fifty-seven (57) practitioners who attend the master program of vocational studies of the Preschool Teacher Training College in Šabac. The survey was conducted in November 2018 by means of a *Questionnaire* specially designed for research purposes. The obtained results of the research showed that the majority of preschool teachers distinguish play as the basic method of educational work with children of preschool age; they recognize their own play "in-play" primarily in the activities of producing various creative contents from different artistic areas, in creation of work-and-play aids and in designing new games. The significance of this research is the reconstruction of the attitudes of preschool teachers about the presence of the elements of play within their own professional identity through self-evaluation, in the possibility of improving their own practice, as well as the practical application of the obtained results in improving the programs of higher education institutions for the education of preschool teachers in order to strengthen their professional competencies in accordance with the requirements of the practice and modern strategies of educational work in preschool education.

Keywords: *preschool teacher, children of preschool age, play, creativity, competence.*

Introduction

In the context of a holistic approach to the development of children's personalities, play and educational work are inextricably linked. Preschool age is defined as "the age of play" (Stern), since until children begin school, play

dominates as the basic activity of children, and its role is emphasized as a driving force because it leads them to new discoveries and to a higher level of development (Vigotski, 1996; Rajić & Petrović Sočo, 2015). Having a central role in early childhood, play is characterized as an essential need and a precondition for the proper development of children.

Due to its importance, great attention is dedicated to play during the upbringing and education of children, which is seen in our pedagogical science as a unique process. Confirmation of the educational values of children's play can be found in numerous foreign and domestic literature (Venger, 1973; Eljkonin, 1978; Woodhead, 1979; Clark, 1987; Marjanović, 1977; Kamenov, 1997; Šain, 1998). Affirmed as the cornerstone of work with children, "play is considered one of the most powerful latent energy generators in children, and all the teacher's skills include the ability to present to children what he/she wants as play" (Kamenov, 1989). Play stands out as an important principle for working with children, as it encourages a series of creative searches for appropriate methodical solutions (Šefer, 2005: 58). Pedagogical theory and practice are permeated by the study of the complex phenomenon of play and significantly direct educational work thus initiating the need for new roles of children, on the one hand, and changing the role in competencies of preschool teachers, on the other.

Having in mind the breadth and comprehensiveness of this issue and taking into account the importance of play in the organization of educational work, in this paper we have paid attention to insights regarding whether the experience in working with children influences formation of the attitudes of preschool teachers about the need for presence of the elements of play and in approaches to their own pedagogical practice, whether they recognize their own "play in play", as well as what the possibilities of applying the obtained results for the purpose of education of the future preschool teachers and teachers for pedagogical work are.

Theory framework

Upon considerations about children's play, depending on the area of their study, numerous authors have specified its definitions. Since play dominates preschool age, we state that "play is the basic form of children's activity" (*Pedagogical Dictionary 1*, 1967: 341).

Psychologists J. Piaget and J. Bruner contributed to a great extent to the understanding of children's play as an incentive for development (Bruner, 1976; Piaget, 1976). Lev Vygotski recognizes the basis (*praforn*) of children's creativity in play, pointing out that this is a "mental function of the greatest importance for the general development and maturation of a child" (Vygotski,

1996). Leontiev, Lukov, Fradkina, Zaporozhetsk, Elkonin and others (Duran, 1988: 16) developed the views of Vigotsky about play and its connection with the background processes of personality development in preschool age.

In our community, Aleksandra Marjanović has dealt with theoretical approaches to children's play, accepting Vigotsky's views that play is one of the stages in the development of thinking. The above author considers that play is an activity that contains the basic characteristics of the future creative activity of a man because "a child in play exhibits all those features that are characteristic of the creative personality: openness to experience, wonder, curiosity, dedication, passion, innocence, spontaneity, authenticity, sensitivity etc." (Marjanović, 1975). Emil Kamenov did not give a definition of play, believing that it is almost impossible to precisely define this phenomenon, but significantly illuminates this notion, advocating the systems of didactic games that will preserve the basic characteristics of children's play, in addition to logical, and creative, divergent thinking (Kamenov, 1989). In the mentioned considerations, play is seen from the perspective of a child's welfare in the educational process and, although other views appeared, its significant role has remained undisputed. Thus, for example, French authors Lechat, Vinclet and Kroy attempted to challenge the educational values of children's play, considering it an aimless activity (Kamenov, 1989). The existence of other tones in play's review failed to dispute its significance.

Most of the contemporary authors state that play has a notable place, advocating the encouragement of creative thinking and application of creative methods and procedures in the educational process. The creativity that children show during play is related to their ability to think divergently (Hutt & Bhavnani, 1976; Schaefer, 2005: 117). "The program concept of preschool education is based on the idea that a child learns through play, learns to play and thus grows into an active and creative being, since play is also a creative act", emphasizes Kopas Vukašinić (2006: 175). The support of adults to a child during play is valuable because it stimulates intellectual excitement, promotes concentration, focuses on the goal, and develops the ability to solve a problem independently (Medouz & Kešdan, 2000).

We believe that it is necessary to point to the current views on play that extend the scope of its positive effects, even on a preschool teacher, in addition to a child, giving new impulses to pedagogical practice. Thus, for example, we highlight the experiences coming from developmental psychology that emphasize the developmental function of play from a broader perspective directed at educational implications. The author who was amongst the first to point to play from a different angle was Bateson (Bateson, 1979; Nachmantovitch, 2009). According to this author, "play is not a name for an activity or action, it is the name for the framework in which a certain activity or action takes place" (Nachmantovitch, 2009: 139). The presence of play allows

for a wider viewing angle, contributes to different considerations and dynamics of changes of the angles from which it is seen, and thus to innovation. So “the opposite of play is neither work nor seriousness, because work can be play, and likewise play can be serious”, adding that the essential “contrast to play is the one-dimensionality in behavior and thinking, it’s inflexibility, rigidity” and literal “access to things (literar-mindedness)” (Nikolić Maksić & Ljujić, 2012: 117). Since play is in a meta-position in relation to other activities, play is easy to recognize but difficult to define. Therefore, numerous determinations of play are imprecise, because play by its nature and properties evades any definition; it is a protean phenomenon, in a meta position in relation to the activity of determination itself.

In the process of play it is possible to express freedom, curiosity, personal creativity and innovativity, because play is basically a holistic experience. The potential of play in education initiates new paths and shifts the boundaries of experience, enriching methodical practices and working methods. In order to succeed, the precondition is that the phenomenon of play is not only seen from the point of view of the play act itself, but requires a starting point that recognizes the basic human potential in play. Therefore, the presence of play is desirable in all activities that should be characterized by creativity, especially educational. (Nikolić Maksić & Ljujić, 2012: 124). Author J. Šefer also recognizes in play “a part of the creative behavior not only of children, but also of many scientists and artists – the determinants of play are similar to the determinants of creative behavior [...] such as: divergent imaginative thinking, logical and critical thinking, emotional expression, internal motivation” (Šefer, 2005: 112).

Based on the above, we notice that all the possibilities that play possesses have not yet been exhausted, because the play world is complex and should not be considered from one point of view only. Contemporary tendencies indicate that in methodical strategies within educational work, more innovative solutions should be encouraged that will enrich and develop the role of preschool teachers. Issues of the criteria for choosing activities, organization, monitoring and evaluation of children’s play include an active attitude of preschool teachers knowing the role of play in the development of children, as well as the role of play in acquiring their own practical experiences and developing professional competences.

Project and Methodology of Research

Starting from the theoretical settings, numerous research and implications in educational practice itself, children’s play as a form and method of work has proved to be one of the fundamental elements of educational work in

the development of the youngest. The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the attitudes of preschool teachers towards the presence of play elements based on the perception of their own professional strategies and procedures in practice.

The research sample consisted of fifty-seven (57) practitioners who are students of the master program of vocational studies of the Preschool Teacher Training College in Šabac. The survey was conducted in November 2018 with a Questionnaire especially designed for the research purposes, and was used to review the attitudes and claims of preschool teachers concerning the following: the role of play in educational work; meaning of play for a child of preschool age; techniques used by preschool teachers in monitoring and interpreting preschool children's play; what they give priority to when choosing a playful activity; important incentives when choosing games and segments of educational work that represent play in which they themselves play. The questions were of closed type. As for statistical method, a statistical account was applied.

Research Results

In the Questionnaire for preschool teachers, the respondents gave the following answers to six questions, and the results are as follows:

Table 1: Educators' claims about the role of play in educational work

Claims on the role of play in educational work and that play is:	YES		NO		OCCASIONALLY	
	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%
a. Basic method of work with children	55	96.5	2	3.5	0	0
b. Form of interaction in child-child relationship and preschool teacher-child	55	96.5	1	1.75	1	1.75
d. Way to achieve the goals of educational work	48	84.2	3	5.26	6	10.54
e. Challenge for both a child and preschool teacher	41	71.93	2	3.5	14	24.57
f. Support to preschool teachers to improve their own pedagogical practice	49	85.97	3	5.26	5	8.77
g. Applicable to all other activities in the work with children	55	96.5	0	0	2	3.5

As for the first question about the role of play in educational work, preschool teachers mostly opted for those aspects of play that are particularly important according to assertions that play is: a) a basic method of work with children – 96.5% of preschool teachers; b) a form of interaction in the relationship between child – child and preschool teacher – child – 96.5% of respondents; c) a way to achieve the goals of educational work – 84.2% of preschool teachers; d) a stimulus for both child and preschool teacher – 71.93% of respondents; e) a stimulus for preschool teacher to improve his/her own pedagogical practice – 85.97% of answers; f) applicable to all other activities in work with children – 96.5% of preschool teachers.

Regarding question number 2, the preschool teachers' claims about the meaning of play for preschool children, the answers were different. All respondents, 100% of them, believe that for a pre-school child, play represents a natural need and satisfaction; 98.25% of them believe that play for a preschool child is a possibility of gaining experience, and 94.75% of them think that play for a preschool child is the basis of children's creativity. What is noteworthy is that preschool teachers to a large extent, 92.98% of them, think that play is not a sole activity in which a child plays with toys; 77.2% of them consider that play is not just fun for a child with no special purpose, while a smaller number of respondents, 22.8% answered just the opposite i.e. that play besides entertainment has no special purpose.

Table 2: Preschool teacher's claims on the techniques used in monitoring and interpretation of preschool children's play

3. Claims on the techniques used by preschool teachers in monitoring and interpretation of preschool children's play:	YES		NO		OCCASIONALLY	
	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%
a. Observation of children	57	100	0	0	0	0
b. Listening to children	56	98.25	0	0	1	1.75
c. Talk to children	55	96.5	0	0	2	3.5
d. Talk with parents of children about kinds of play that children love	37	64.89	6	10.54	14	24.57
e. Detecting the questions that children ask	53	92.98	0	0	4	7.02
f. Sharing experiences with other preschool teachers about which kinds of play children like	43	75.45	1	1.75	13	22.8

In relation to the question number 3, the responses of the preschool teachers about the claims on the techniques used in monitoring and interpretation of preschool children's play were as follows: all preschool teachers stated that they use the techniques of children's observation; 98.25% of them opted for listening, 96.5% of them talk to children, while 92.98% pay attention to the questions that children ask. When it comes to sharing experiences with other preschool teachers about which types of play children like, 75.5% of them supported this claim, while 22.8% of preschool teachers said they only sometimes use this technique. Also, 24.57% of preschool teachers stated they only sometimes talk to children's parents about the games children like, while a large number of them, 64.89% frequently talked to parents about children's games.

Table 3: Preschool teachers' claims about what they give priority to when choosing a playful activity

4. Preschool teachers' claims about what they give priority to when choosing a playful activity:	YES		NO		OCCASIONALLY	
	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%
a. To be interesting to a child	55	96.5	2	3.5	0	0
b. To be equally interesting to both a preschool teacher and a child	24	42.1	7	12.28	26	45.62
c. To be interesting to a preschool teacher	6	10.54	34	59.64	17	29.81

As far as question number 4 is concerned, the proposed claims about what they give priority to when choosing playful activities, preschool teachers mostly opted for the attitude that play should be of interest to a child – 96.5%; attitudes of preschool teachers are divided in relation to the claim that when choosing a playful activity they give priority to those plays which are equally interesting to both a preschool teacher and a child – 45.62% of them do it sometimes, 42.1% always, while 12.28% never do so. Also, as many as 59.64% of preschool teachers think that when choosing playful activities, play does not necessarily have to be interesting to a preschool teacher – 29.81% of them are sometimes guided by this criterion, while 10.54% of respondents think that play should be interesting to a preschool teacher as well.

Table 4: Preschool teachers' claims about important incentives when selecting a type of play

4. Teachers' claims about important incentives when selecting a type of play:	YES		NO		OCCASIONALLY	
	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%
A. Suggestions given in the <i>General Principles of the preschool program</i>	30	52.63	5	8.77	22	38.6
b. Experience of other preschool teachers and the application of their ideas	27	47.36	7	12.28	23	40.36
c. Ideas found on the Internet	23	40.36	7	12.28	27	47.36
d. Direct children's play	52	91.24	2	3.5	3	5.26
e. Reviewing professional literature	47	82.46	3	5.26	7	12.28
f. Attending seminars	41	71.93	2	3.5	14	24.57

As for question number 5, the preschool teachers responded to claims on major incentives when selecting a type of play. A significant number of respondents, 52.63% of them, relied on suggestions stated in the *General Principles of the Preschool Program*, 38.6% of them sometimes, and only 8.77% of them did not use the suggestions from the *General Principles*. Attitudes on application of the experiences of other preschool teachers and their ideas are divided – namely 47.36% of them applied their colleagues' experiences, 40.36% sometimes, whereas a smaller number, 12.28%, never relied on the experiences and ideas of other preschool teachers. The redistribution of answers concerning the use of electronic resources is similar: 40.36% of preschool teachers browse for ideas on the Internet, 47.36% of them do it sometimes, while 12.28 % of them never use the Internet.

Nevertheless, it turned out that most of the preschool teachers, as an important incentive in selecting games, actually use direct children's play – 91.24% of them, while a smaller number do it sometimes – 5.26%, and just 3.5% of them never do that. As a reference point in the selection of children's play, 82.46% of teachers regularly use professional literature, 12.28% of them sometimes, while a minor number of 5.26% never use professional literature.

When it comes to the professional development of preschool teachers, as an incentive for the selection of children's play, 71.93% of respondents use the experience gained in seminars, a significantly smaller number of them, 24.57%, use these experiences sometimes, while only 3.5% of preschool teachers do not apply these experiences.

Table 5: Preschool teachers' claims about segments of educational work that represent play in which they themselves play

Preschool teachers' claims about segments of educational work that represent play in which they themselves play	YES		NO		OCCASIONALLY	
	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%	Frequency (f)	%
a. Participation in playful situations with children	53	92.98	1	1.75	3	5.27
b. Designing and creating work-and-play means	55	96.5	0	0	2	3.5
c. Organizing various kindergarten activities	48	84.2	3	5.26	6	10.54
d. Creating various artistic content (visual, musical, language, dance, dramatization, etc.)	55	96.5	0	0	2	3.5
e. Designing new games	50	87.72	3	5.26	4	7.02
f. Entering change and gaining new experiences in working with children	50	87.72	0	0	7	12.28

To the last question, number 6, in the Questionnaire, which refers to the preschool teachers' claims about segments of educational work that represent play in which they themselves play, a large number of preschool teachers answered affirmatively. For participation in playful situations with children 92.98% of respondents responded positively, 5.27% sometimes participated, while only 1.75% did not take part in children's play situations. All preschool teachers are involved in designing and developing work-and-play aids: always 96.5% of respondents, and only 3.5% at times. The majority of preschool teachers, 84.2%, are involved in organizing various kindergarten activities, while

10.54% do it sometimes, and 5.26% do not take part in organizing various kindergarten activities. When it comes to creating different artistic content (visual, musical, linguistic, dance, dramatization, etc.), all preschool teachers gave an affirmative answer, with 96.5% of them always doing it, while only 3.5% of them sometimes. Even 87.72% of preschool teachers participate in the design of new games, with a smaller number of 7.02% doing it sometimes, while the number of those who never do it is relatively small, but it is nevertheless noted that 5.26% of the total number of respondents never do this. One of the important aspects of the educational process is the initiative of preschool teachers to introduce changes and gain new experiences in working with children, for which all the respondents opted; thus 87.72% do it always, while 12.28% do it sometimes.

Discussion of Results

Starting from the assumption that play is one of the basic forms of educational work, it can be concluded on the basis of the obtained results that most preschool teachers are aware of the importance of play in the educational process, thus establishing the role of a preschool teacher who by using methodical design coordinates this process.

When it comes to the role of play in the educational work, most of the preschool teachers distinguish play as a basic method of educational work with children of preschool age: that play is a form of interaction in the relationship between child – child and preschool teacher – child; that play is a way to achieve the goals of educational work, that play is a challenge for both the child and the preschool teacher; that children's play is an incentive for a preschool teacher to improve his/her own pedagogical practice and is applicable to all other activities in the work with children.

As far as the preschool teachers's claim relating to their opinion on *what play is for a preschool child*, most of them think that for a preschool child, play is as a natural need and satisfaction, then the possibility of gaining experience, and finally that play is the basis of child's creativity and that it cannot be understood only as fun for a child without special purpose.

With respect to the *techniques that preschool teachers apply in monitoring and interpretation of preschool children's play*, the majority referred to the use of techniques for observing children such as listening, talking with children, and noticing the questions that children ask; the choice to exchange experiences with other preschool teachers about what kind of play children like, is also important; but likewise most of them talk with children's parents about children's play.

When asked *what they give priority to in the choice of playful activities*, preschool teachers mostly opted for the attitude that play should be of interest to a child, but when asked about the claim that they give priority to the selection of playful activity equally interesting to both preschool teacher and a child, the attitudes are distributed proportionately, as well as in case of the attitude that when choosing playful activities, play does not necessarily have to be interesting to a preschool teacher.

As important *incentives in the selection of plays*, a significant number of respondents stated that they rely on suggestions offered in the *General Principles of Preschool Programme*; while concerning application of the experiences of other preschool teachers and their ideas or use of the Internet, the attitudes are proportionally distributed among the respondents. It was found that most preschool teachers use direct children's play as an important stimulus when choosing a game and as a reference point in the choice of children's games; a greater number of them constantly use professional literature, as well as the experience gained during seminars.

Preschool teachers' claims about *segments of educational work* that represent a kind of play in which they themselves play, a large number of preschool teachers gave an affirmative answer where they primarily recognize their own play "in play" during the activities of making different creative contents from separate artistic areas, in the creation of work-playful aids, in the design of new games, but also in direct participation in playful situations with children. As one of the important aspects of the educational process is the initiative of preschool teachers to introduce changes and gain new experiences in working with children, which all respondents opted for.

Conclusion

The significance of this research is in the reconstruction of the attitudes of preschool teachers about the presence of elements of play within their own professional identity through self-evaluation, with the possibility of improving their own practice, as well as the practical application of the obtained results in improving the programs of higher education institutions for training of preschool teachers in order to strengthen their professional competencies in accordance with the needs of practice and modern strategies of preschool educational work.

The organization of educational work with children refers to respecting play as a basic activity of a child, since the child's knowledge and opinion are inseparable from play. In this regard, the paper points out certain theoretical considerations that confirm the above assertions. The obtained research results indicate that the dominant attitude of preschool teachers is noticeable,

which confirms that the significant majority indicate play as the basic method of working with children of preschool age. The research confirmed that preschool teachers are aware of the importance of play as a prerequisite for the development of a child, but also that play is an important driving impulse that contributes to the enrichment of experiences within personal professional development.

The need for innovative methodical approaches suggests the necessity of finding a solution that will result in a higher degree of creativity of both the child and the preschool teacher. The above requirements can be achieved in the educational process, which includes, with serious effort by preschool teachers, playful elements as well. Thus, the complex corpus of the play definition expands, suggesting even more space for the development of a child and preschool teacher, linking both to each other. The presence of play allows preschool teachers – practitioners, in the context of their own professional practice, to express their own freedom and creativity, which influences the fact that the developmental potential of play does not end its active role, but rather encourages further productivity.

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