

Didactical games in Early Childhood Education

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Aims of the courses		
General Objectives:		
Developing an information base on the main ways of designing games for early childhood education.		
Specific Objectives:		
Development of educational games to optimize the integration process in early childhood education;		
Identification of effective ways of education through play at early ages;		
Creation of educational games at early childhood education level.		
Proposing educational games created for different ages following the Curriculum for early ages.		
Assessment		
Formative evaluation	Portfolio with educational games	50%
Exam final	Test	50%

1) Arguments for using the didactical games in early childhood education

At the most comprehensive level of educational policy, it is stated that the ideal personality to be formed in today's society must be harmonious, integral, and creative, so that it is prepared to integrate into existing communities and be open to continuous, lifelong learning. Translated into practical teaching, this would mean that educators should use flexible content and active methods (including play) to train children in the heuristic style of learning. This truth, which is a "candidate for humanity" (H. Pierson), is witnessing rapid social and informational changes and must effectively "play" its role and social status. According to American psychiatrist Stuard Brown, play is the starting point of civilization, with significant implications in the areas of sports, art, film, and books (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Play also highlights the child's level of mental development and allows their personality to manifest (Verza & Verza, 2017). Play is the fundamental type of activity in the preschool period, contributing significantly to sensory, intellectual, social, emotional, and

psychomotor development (European Commission, 2019; Glava, 2002; MEN, 2019; UNICEF, 2010). In pedagogy and educational practice, the formative values of this form of activity organization and teaching method necessary for achieving the goals of preschool education have been emphasized.

Nowadays, we see a huge influence of technological developments and online communication from a very young age, which has many advantages, but we must also analyze the disadvantages and ways in which it could be used effectively. This interrupts channels of social communication and openness to humanity, requiring the use of methods that value a sense of belonging to a group, solidarity, team spirit, respect for rules, and fair play. That is why play is necessary for the harmonious development of children and the involvement of educators, whether in formal settings (nurseries, kindergartens) or informal settings (playgrounds) or the family. Through play, parents and children grow closer, and there is better collaboration and education (Cohen, 2012). Play as a fundamental activity in preschool is a pleasure for the child and, in most cases, does not have a well-defined purpose when it takes place outside the educational space. It becomes more organized and takes shape around the age of 4 (Verza & Verza, 2017). Play contributes to physical and mental development, cooperation, and socialization. The presence of social components in children's play is related to their age and ability to understand certain events. There are periods when play is solitary (around the age of 2-3) and much more inclined towards other children around the age of 4-5, when it becomes much more collaborative and interactive. It is interesting to note how the skills and competences of digital natives have developed towards various types of play. After more than forty years of experience, American psychologist Jeffrey Goldstein emphasizes that play, regardless of its form, plays a decisive role in children's development. It is, in fact, the "lens" through which preschoolers see and experience their world and the world of others. The consequences of deprivation of play can be severe, with long-term effects (Goldstein, 2012).

Another argument supports the principles of lifelong learning. Play is the dominant form of activity in childhood, but it should not be absent throughout life. It is necessary to develop the playful side of the personality in order to be able to look at solutions with imagination and inventiveness. From the perspective of classical didactics, it is necessary to respect the principle of adapting content to the age characteristics of the learner. Play becomes the main way of organizing activities for preschoolers. "Learning" is not the opposite of "playing" for them. Play is present in the institutional environment of kindergarten, but it continues in all social environments in which children are formed. The theory and methodology of play is

particularly important for those who will be teaching, regardless of the age group they are addressing, because it is an effective way to liven up the passive atmosphere in the classroom. It is both an art and a technique to organize and implement learning strategies based on the game system, which is why this course aims to provide an introduction to the field of knowledge and skills related to play.

The game method helps in developing game-based learning processes and effective design, in accordance with teaching standards. Play helps develop motor skills and the child's physical and mental self-development because this activity allows the child to explore objects, practice movements, and develop muscles and fine or gross motor skills (Golu, 2009; Verza & Verza, 2017).

As we can see, in reality, playing a game is not "play" devoid of importance and seriousness. It is, in a way, the only teaching method adapted to the psychological maturity of preschoolers. The role of play in learning for other categories of students should not be overestimated (Catalano & Albuлесcu, 2018; Golu, 2009). The method can also be used for older classes, but it will not be a predominant method. It is a very good way for children to learn about the world around them and satisfy their curiosity and investigative nature, and it truly develops their pre-learning abilities (Glava, 2002; Piaget, 1973; Wallon, 1978). The basic idea I am capturing is that through play, children learn, train their creativity, and exert effort in an activity similar to work. Maria Montessori believed that play is a child's work, thus drawing attention to the effort that children put into play. J. Piaget made detailed and extensive observations on play. He believed that when a child plays, they set in motion their entire capacity to control and influence reality. E. Erikson considered play to be a tool through which children act and bring to light internalized feelings and ideas. In this way, certain traumatic or pleasant experiences they have had can be resolved. Play can be defined as intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, enjoyable for the child, and process-oriented behavior. A unified and exhaustive definition of play is difficult to identify due to the great diversity of its forms of manifestation and the vast and voluminous information resources (Catalano, & Albuлесcu, 2018).

Psychological research has highlighted numerous psychological elements that are formed with the help of this form of activity. Preschoolers are considered to be developing personalities who think, act, and aspire to perfection. We all often take refuge in an imaginary world that we create for ourselves, full of dreams, wishes that come true, reverie, and imagination; it is a paradise where restrictions and rigid self-control are absent. Humans demonstrate that they can create such a world, starting at the age of 3, without anyone teaching them. In creating the imaginary world, humans transpose the real situation into the imaginary. They selectively take reality according to their needs and their own possibilities. This ability is quite developed in

children over the age of 3. Each child shapes reality according to their own self. The child can take certain elements from reality and invest them with certain aspects known to him (Cohen, 2012; Golu, 2009). After the age of 2, elements appear in the child's play that indicate the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination, and actions are increasingly verbalized. Researchers have shown that children's play is essential for the development of their personality and that basic skills and competencies are developed through play. It is good for the initiative, choice, and decision of the action to come from the child, when appropriate (e.g., in spontaneous play or in stimulation areas). Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood because it is the only free expression of what is in a child's soul.

Playful activities have a positive effect on brain development by establishing new neural connections. Through play, preschoolers learn how to learn because it trains thought processes such as abstraction, generalization, and concretization, rather than informational acquisition (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play also draws on the human ability to work with symbols, signs that are attributed to objects, actions, and facts that designate something other than what they are. It operates with representations in which it invests both emotion and reason; it is not a simple process of perception. Most of the time, play involves the projection of the individual into a role: the child plays "doctor," "family," "salesperson," imitating what happened in reality or what he would have liked to happen. The main content of all games is the life and social activity of adults, the child being, first and foremost, an eminently social being. Through play, children not only learn about social reality, but also imitate certain types of social relationships between adults. Thus, through play, children learn models of behavior and come to reflect on behaviors to the level of understanding. Moreover, the emotional benefits include improving emotional state by increasing the ability to adapt to new situations and perceive others realistically, reducing stress, anxiety, and irritability, generating feelings of joy, increasing self-esteem, intimacy, and self-control, improving emotional flexibility and openness to new things, and having positive implications for resilience and the ability to adapt to unexpected situations (Goldstein, 2012). Play helps to increase empathy and compassion, with children who play more being able to share their toys with other participants. At the same time, play situations generate more options and response variants, relationships within the game are based more on inclusion than exclusion criteria, improve nonverbal skills, and lead to increased attention (Goldstein, 2012).

Play has a therapeutic role for children who have not developed a spirit of initiative and the courage to compete. Through play, they free themselves from their old shy selves and throw themselves wholeheartedly into the dynamism of role-playing. Several authors emphasize the value of play therapy (Cohen, 2012) and the

support provided by parents through these activities. They are no longer so afraid of censorship because the character can say innovative things, and negative feedback does not occur as often in playful situations. Games positively affect cognitive functions and motivation, stimulating curiosity by including elements of fantasy (Albulescu, 2018).

Play can strengthen willpower and attention. Children can become more persistent and concentrate better without too much effort, stimulating their creativity, and they can easily follow the rules of the game. A person's ability to act creatively in different real-life situations is key to how their personality develops. All these psychological elements highlight the essence of play, which shows up in how kids act, but also in how people act in general. It can boost self-confidence and belief in your own ability to complete an educational task.

Physiologically, play helps improve the immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems through the positive emotions it generates, reduces stress and fatigue, and optimizes fine and gross motor skills (Goldstein, 2012).

In summary, through play, children:

- Engage in activities that promote personal identity, following the basic requirements and determinations of their being,
- Develop the ability to learn in a systematic, organized way,
- Solve problems in their physical and social environment,
- Experiment with possibilities for adaptation, becoming more flexible in their thinking and problem solving (the emphasis is on the process rather than the product),
- Create different solutions, express their experiences in symbols, which will help them think a little more abstractly,
- Communicate with others and/or themselves, talk, use many words, express themselves vividly, and learn nonverbal cues, etc.
- Use the objects around them for their intended purpose (learn the usefulness of things), but also for other purposes (be creative);
- They focus on the action, becoming attentive and interested.

Play is a specifically human activity, dominant in childhood, through which people immediately satisfy their own desires, as far as possible, acting consciously and freely in the imaginary world they create for themselves.

Functions and classifications of games

Ed. Claparede believes that the main function of games is to allow people to realize their true selves and express their personalities in a setting that allows them to do so. In attempting to answer whether play is instinctive, he points out that play is related to instinct in the sense that it triggers unacquired activities through an internal or external stimulus, which is why it can be considered an instinctive impulse. The same author emphasizes that play has several functions:

1. Entertainment. Play eliminates boredom caused by lack of activity. In this case, the function of play is to introduce elements that the environment does not offer (the entertainment role being directly related to the derivation function).
2. Play as a relaxing element. In fact, it is not so much about rest as it is about liberation from the constraints of work (a reference that applies to adults). Although often practiced with more intensity than work, play is less tiring because it responds to repressed tendencies for self-affirmation, stifled by the necessities of work (as Claparčde points out), and therefore gives the impression not only that it is not tiring, but even that it is relaxing.
3. Play as an agent of social expression—a function according to which play would exercise social tendencies in children, but without the ability to maintain them (a proponent of the biological orientation, he emphasizes the motor and intellectual functions of play to the detriment of the social function, which he considers a special case).
4. Play – agent of transmission of ideas and customs from one generation to another. Since ancient times, play has been used as a means of popular education, Claparede shows. His statement is worth noting: "it was not the social need to maintain traditions that created the instinct to play, but play already existed."

The functions can be summarized as follows (Stan, 2000; Glava & Glava, 2002):

- Adaptive function
- Formative function

- Informative function
- Socialization function
- Psychological revelation function

According to Ramona Răduț-Taciu, the functions of educational games are as follows:

1. The cognitive or informative function (accumulating new data and information)
2. The function of stimulation and complex development of the player's personality (developing multiple skills, including psychomotor skills)
3. The adaptive and formative-educational function (the game shapes the dimensions of the self, of the child's autonomous and creative personality).
4. The catechetical, balancing, and toning function (the game energizes the child and acts as a release and balancing agent).
5. Therapeutic function (playful activity allows the creation of an imaginary fairy-tale world, a world that brings us back to our state of well-being).
6. Social function (play is an important form of socialization).

Taxonomies specific to the field of play

The diversity of play activities and the countless possibilities for their application have made it more difficult to name the types of games and classify them into very specific categories. The criteria used are also multiple: from the age of the participants to the number of players, to the category and type of activity, the presence or absence of rules, the intended goals, the materials used or not used in the game, etc.

According to the author E. Claparede, games are divided into two categories, depending on whether they exercise general functions or only some special functions. The first category includes sensory, motor, and mental (intellectual and emotional) games. The second category includes fighting, hunting, social, family, and imitation games. Sensory games are typical for young children who, exploring reality, taste the most diverse substances, make sounds with different toys, and examine colors. The category of motor games is also specific to young children, helping them to coordinate their movements, develop strength, promptness, and even speech. Intellectual games are based on comparison and recognition, on association through assonance, reasoning, and creative imagination. Focusing on games in which imagination is the basic process, he states that "the child shows an unimaginable wealth of fantasy when he attributes to an insignificant object with which he plays all

the qualities he desires." Intellectual games are based on curiosity and arise from the child's desire for knowledge, for insight into a reality in which they have not yet integrated.

Affective games comprise the category of games that provoke negative emotions. Example: pain caused in a game is amusing if it is willingly accepted and does not exceed certain limits. From the second category, we will specify: Fighting games are meant to exercise physical strength and skill; Hunting games take the form of chase games in childhood, such as "Hide and Seek";

Social games are meant to develop social instincts. This category includes walks, organizing camps, and group interactions.

Family games are based on maternal instinct or family instinct (playing with dolls, "playing mom and dad," etc.).

Imitation games. Here, Claparede attempts to differentiate between imitation as such, which would mainly serve the purpose of procuring elements for the game, and imitation-play, in which the child imitates for the simple pleasure of imitating.

Depending on the psychological register specific to children in early education, the games played can be: symbolic games (games with intrinsic rules) and games with rules (games with extrinsic rules).

3. Methodical aspects of the game

The term 'didactic' associated with the term 'game' emphasizes the instructive-educational aspect of the activity, which becomes an integral and unconditional part of the activity and is concentrated in a large volume of knowledge and the mental and objective actions it requires. Regardless of the age stage at which it is used, the educational game fosters both the informative aspect of the learning process and its formative aspect.

The educational game has a number of characteristics which distinguish it from other spontaneous games and other forms of organizing joint activities.

Here is a possible composition of games:

- ☐ The title of the game - is formulated according to the content and the age of the participants (it may or may not be communicated to children);
- ☐ The educational aim - is an educational purpose of the game. It should be clear and specific to the game;
- ☐ Operational objectives - are specific, concrete, directly observable and measurable goals; their number can vary from 2/3 to 5/6;

☒ Didactic task (game brief) - is formulated according to the content of the activity and the age level of the children. It is the instructional element around which thinking operations are trained.

For children, the task appears as a thinking problem (recognition, naming, comparison, etc.).

This should be reflected in the way the educator formulates these tasks, taking into account the following characteristics:

- Be defined in the form of an operational objective, encompassing a single aspect of the content and specifying what the children must consciously and concretely do in the course of the game in order to achieve the goal;

("Form the crowd of red triangles!");

- It involves a problem to be solved by all the children;

- It trains the child's whole personality; even when the didactic game is integrated into consolidation/recapitulation activities, it should not only appeal to the child's reproductive memory, but to the whole intellectual system (thinking, associative capacity, flexibility, fluidity);

- It capitalizes in different ways on knowledge, skills and abilities.

☒ The content of the game (the course of the game) - is represented by the scope of knowledge, the way in which the game will unfold, the sequence of actions in the game;

☒ The rules of the game - are predetermined and binding for all participants. They regulate the conduct and actions of children according to the particular structure of the didactic game (they show what is allowed and what is not allowed during the game);

The teaching material - used in the game must be varied, appropriate to the content of the activity, age and individual characteristics of the children: toys, individual worksheets, cards, etc.)

☒☒ Variants of the game (complication) - either it is a matter of complicating the game items for those who have skills in the respective field, or about a use in other contexts, for other ages, for other areas of stimulation.

The notation of the variants has a formative value for the educator, because by imagining them she develops her creativity and is able to cope with concrete situations during the activity.

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