

A History of Children's Play from the Earliest Days of Humanity to Nowadays: Historical and Conceptual Review

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Abstract: *Our study aims to analyze the evolution of play from a diachronic perspective, evoking at the same time the mythical, realistic, imaginary, cognitive, emotional and social dimensions, starting with the earliest days of humanity and up to the present day. At the same time, we captured the universal, multidisciplinary and polysematic nature of play by approaching it from a synchronic perspective. The objectives and functions of play, from the perspective of human development, have been researched for more than a century by thinkers and scientists who have established the value of play for learning and development, but also the consequences of the lack of play in the children's life. In carrying out this study we analyzed the published literature and summarized the most relevant researches, opinions and recommendations concerning the evolution of play and its importance for the harmonious development, wellbeing and happiness of the children.*

Keywords: children's play; evolution of play; diachronic perspective, synchronic perspective; harmonious development, happiness.

The perennialism and ubiquity of play

Although play has a long past that overlaps with the history of humanity, being both an integral part of the culture of all peoples, but also one of the oldest forms of socio-human interaction, the history of play is quite recent in relation to those older evidence of life on Earth. Being practiced regardless of age, in all parts of the world, playing has not only a number of common features, but also has a series of cultural elements that imprints on their perennialism, originality, uniqueness and ubiquity.

E. Berne¹ argues that the historical significance of play indicates that, being passed down from generation to generation, the favorite play of each person can be found in the past, to grandparents and parents, but also in the future, to children and grandchildren. In this way, play can be analyzed in a large historical matrix, whose expansion is configured for about 100 years in the past and, at least 50 years in the future.

The study of play through time and across cultures has consistently demonstrated two characteristic features of it in human societies. First, it is obvious that play is ubiquitous among humans, both as children and as adults, and that children's play is consistently supported by adults in all societies and cultures, mostly in the manufacture of play equipment and toys. Second, it emerges that play is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with a variety of types that appear in all societies, but that there are variations in the

¹ E. Berne, *Plays People Play. The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1976.

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prevalence and forms that the various types of play take in different societies. These variations appear to if they differ from attitudes concerning the nature of childhood and the value of play.²

The diachronic and synchronic analysis of play stimulated the curiosity of scientists, so the concern of many of them focused on researching different aspects it. Thus, an important number of pedagogues, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, linguists, philosophers, ethnologists, biologists, philologists, historians, artists, mathematicians and so on have contributed through theoretical and practical approaches to the definition, explanation and understanding of this theme, both from a monodisciplinary perspective, but also from an integrated perspective, either interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary. However, the exact timing and location of the appearance of play is not fully elucidated³.

The ubiquity and perennialism of play are given by its presence 'in all areas of life and creation. The play's mechanisms were analyzed, as I said before, from the most varied perspectives. The study of play has been marked, over the centuries, by important researchers, such as: Girolamo Cardano (1565) *About the play of chance*, Galileo Galilei (1642) *Considerations on the play of dice*, Christian Huygens (1657) *Calculus in plays of chance*, Pierre-Remond de Montmort (1708) *Attempt to analyze the plays of chance* etc.

It is necessary to point out that the interdisciplinary of play has increased and led to the emergence of new paradigms in its approach as a human activity, so that 'we are talking about the play of childhood, literature, mathematics, warrior tactics, but also the plays of life, as well as of death itself⁴. The history of the child and childhood, the pedagogy of the play, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, studies of developmental psychology are also circumscribed to the activities of play, directly or indirectly, contributing to the explanation of the scientific field of play.

Play is widely identified and recognized as an important part of children's early lives, particularly within the preschool environment. Internationally, play is an embedded part of many years' early curriculums,

² D. Whitebread, *Developmental Psychology and Early Childhood Education*, London, Sage, 2011.

³ H. Catalano, I. Albulescu, *Pedagogia jocului și a activităților ludice*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2018; Delia Muste, "Managementului timpului școlar," in *Astra Salvensis*, V (2017), no. 11, p. 47.

⁴ V. Ceia, „Dinamica unui cuplu: joc și putere,” in Ana-Cristina Halichias, Maria-Luiza Dumitru-Oancea (coord.), *Joc. Joacă. Jucării, Actele Colocviului național organizat de Departamentul de Filologie Clasică și Neogreacă și de Institutul de Studii Clasice din Facultatea de Limbi și Literaturi Străine*, ediția a III-a, București, 17 mai 2015, București, Editura Universității din București, 2016, p. 29-37.

but play is also something that can be variably interpreted and enacted⁵.

Regardless of space and time, we can identify words that circumscribe the playful action, 'for each human group, the notion of play contains no more than expresses the word that the group has for this purpose.... All people play, and play amazingly similar, but the notion of play is nowhere near contained in all languages in one word as emphatically and at the same time as in modern European languages'⁶. White⁷ claims that despite the fact that adults can intuitively identify play, full consensus on a formal definition continues to circumvent the researchers and theorists who study it. Definitions range from discrete descriptions of various types of play such as physical play, construction play, language play, or symbolic play, to lists of broad criteria, based on observations and attitudes, that are mean to capture the essence of all play behaviors.

Freud re-directed play as the means by which the child accomplishes his first great cultural and psychological achievements; through play he expresses himself. This is true even for an infant whose play consists of nothing more than smiling at his mother, as she smiles at him. Freud also noted how much and how well children express their thoughts and feelings through play. These are sometimes feelings that the child himself would stay ignorant of, or overwhelmed by, if he did not deal with them by acting them out in play fantasy⁸.

No definition of play can encompass all the views, perceptions, experience and expectations that are connected with it. Nevertheless, there appears to be broad agreement amongst theorists coming from a range of disciplinary backgrounds that play can make an important contribution to children's development. In contemporary Western countries society, play is viewed as offering a time and space for the separation of children from the adult world of work and a medium through which young children can make sense of, and feel at home in the world⁹. Play, through its many types has 'roles in all stages of life and especially in physical, social, emotional and

⁵ H. Catalano, & V. Campbell-Barr, „The occurrence of pretend play in early childhood education in Romania – an investigative study,” in *Early Child Development and Care*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2019.1621306.

⁶ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Încercare de determinare a elementului ludic al culturii*, traducere din olandeză de H. R. Radian, cuvânt înainte de Gabriel Liiceanu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2012.

⁷ R. E. White, *The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning*, Minnesota, Minnesota Children's Museum, 2012.

⁸ B. Bettelheim, *The Importance of Play*, 1987, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1987/03/the-importance-of-play/305129>, accessed 12. 01. 2021. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Educational Aspects in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta," *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 14, p. 309.

⁹ M. Kernan, *Play as a context for Early Learning and Development. A research paper*, Dublin, Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007.

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intellectual development. The importance of the play has been recognized in all cultures; has been extensively studied, earned its place in the human sciences, and has demonstrated its usefulness in practice in the best schools around the world¹⁰.

Berne¹¹, the one who founded the Transactional Analysis, states that a play is a series of hidden complementary transactions, oriented towards a predictable result whose climax is the reward, and on a larger scale are integrated and dynamic components of each individual's unconscious life plan, in which he awaits the final fulfillment, either miraculous or catastrophic.

In the present day, play is seen as a predominant activity in childhood, carried out voluntarily, with multivalent formative dimensions throughout human existence, but with different endings, given by age, personality and cultural ethos of each person who is engaged in play.

Modern individual perceives the play world as a multidimensional space, whose philosophy encompasses multiple hypostases that polarize between different states, be they metaphorical, paradoxical, systematic, epistemic, unpredictable or proxemic. Without constraints imposed by age, time or space, play slides between: synergy and conflict, freedom and compulsion, surprise and predictability, semantics and semi-legislation, sacredness and magic, fantasy and achievement, seriousness and unseriousness, order and hazard, gratuity and utility, competition and cooperation, negotiation and conflict, creation and conformity, tension and extension, virtual and real, rule and metarule, etc., therefore one can support the assertion that 'most of the people consider life a struggle, or life is not a struggle, but a play!'¹²

Whitebread, Basilio, Kovalja and Verma¹³ claim the same idea about play being in all its rich variety one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of the other achievements would be possible. The value of play is increasingly recognized by researchers and within the policy arena, by adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being.

The beginnings of play

¹⁰ K. Robinson, L. Amonica, L. Școli creative. *Revoluția de la bază învățământului*, București, Editura Publica, 2015.

¹¹E. Berne, *Plays People Play. The Psychology of Human Relationships*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1976.

¹² F. Shinn, *Jocul vieții și cum să-l joci*, București, Editura Litera, 2016.

¹³ D. Whitebread, M. Basilio, M. Kovalja, M. Verma, *The importance of play: a report on the value of children’s play with a series of policy recommendations*, Brussels, Toys Industries for Europe. Brussels, 2012.

Following the brief presentation of the history of play, we propose an analysis of it, following how it was perceived throughout the evolution of humanity, according to the dominant opinions towards children and childhood. Due to its importance to humanity, Cohen¹⁴ suggests that play is as old as mankind.

Thus, at the dawn of humanity, play was part of all the rituals that could put man in touch with the sacred. Harari¹⁵ believes that world was seen by animist and polytheistic religions as a playground for several different powers rather than a single God. Mythology familiarizes us with the exploits of many heroes, whose birth and childhood are out of the ordinary, but who 'establish sports plays and one of the characteristic forms of their cult is the wrestling contest.

According to an ancient tradition, the four Panhellenic games, before belonging to Zeus, were dedicated to heroes¹⁶.

In his popular work, *The Child and Play*, Jean Chateau believes that most of the plays have as their initial source magical activities: 'The drum has a religious role in its primitives and the faithful attribute to its sounds mysterious virtues. The play *Little man is still alive* that we find in Siberia, Spain, Portugal and the countries of Northern and Central Europe, consists of 'passing from hand to hand a lit surface whose flame must be maintained as long as possible; this game would be related to an ancient legend about the secret rite of the Manicheans'¹⁷ Manicheism being one of the most important practiced religions in antiquity. From the research of ethnologists, it seems that the end also played a magical role, initially serving as an 'instrument in the wizards' command, and the kite represented the soul in the Far East being the center of attention at various celebrations.

Since the 2nd millennium BC. Hr., the Aryans of India were 'quite popular with the dice play, an entire hymn in Rig Veda (X, 34) is consecrated to him'¹⁸, whereas in Greek antiquity, Plato considers man 'a toy of the Gods', every man must live his life 'playing the most suitable plays'¹⁹.

Plato (427-347), for example, advocated the use of free-play, gymnastics, music and various other forms of leisure activities as means of developing skills for adult life, as well as supporting health and physical development. Aristotle²⁰ also emphasized the value of play and physical

¹⁴ D. Cohen, *The Development of Play (second edition)*, London, Routledge, 1993.

¹⁵ Y. N. Harari, *Homo deus. Scurtă istorie a viitorului*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2018.

¹⁶ M. Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase. De la epoca de piatră la misterele din Eleusis*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011.

¹⁷ J. Chateau, *Copilul și jocul*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1967, p.138-139

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.183.

¹⁹ S. Marcus, *Jocul ca libertate*, București, Editura Scripta, 2003, p. 34.

²⁰ Aristotel, *Politica*, Oradea, Editura Antet, 1999.

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activities for the overall development of the child. Roman thinkers such as Quintilian recommend the use of play as the ancient form of instruction²¹.

In his conception regarding education expressed in *Politics*, Aristotle states that, until the age of 5, there can be no need for a 'straining of the mind, nor any violent fatigues that would hinder growth. But it may be required to work to remove the full laziness of the body. Then children can be pushed to motion with different means, but especially through play. All must be done in order to prepare them for the work that awaits them later. Their play should be the outlines of the exercises they will carry out at an older age'²². The same philosopher manifests himself with restraint from its alternation with rest, so that 'the latter is undeniably preferable; but we must seek with great care to fill it properly. Undisturbed, not through plays; for it would mean making the play the very purpose of life, which is impossible. Play is especially useful in the middle of the works. The working man needs relaxation, and the play is only meant to relax. The movement that playing gives us, relaxes the spirit and rests it through the pleasure it gives'.

In both Greeks and Romans, the large public play was dedicated to the guardianship gods of the fortresses. The Olympic Plays, held in honor of Zeus at Olympia, attracted inhabitants of the entire Greek world, even though they were held every four years, from 776 BC to 395 AD²³, when they were disbanded by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I. From 1896, the Modern Olympic Games resumed in Athens, at the initiative of French Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Although women were not accepted at the Olympic Games, they were able to participate in those held in honor of the protective goddess Hera.

The dice game was also a favorite pastime of the Greeks, who saw in it a real art. It is necessary to point out that the game was a kind of pacifist element between the Greek cities that rivaled each other, but every four years they made peace when the Olympic Games were held. The Play Jacks, a variant of the dice play, was practiced with dexterity in the Greeks from ancient times. In Homer's *Iliad* (chapter 23, verses 85-88), we find an allusion to the passions that this game unleashed-the spirit of Patroclus killed the son of Amphinomus *only for a handful of jacks*. 'The game was played with four jacks, based on a regulation that did not relate to the numerical values encountered today'²⁴

Romans' play was differentiated by age, and according to the social

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 35-95.

²² *Ibidem*, p.154.

²³ J. Swaddling, *The Ancient Olympic Plays*, 2nd edition, London, British Museum Press, 2011.

²⁴ M. L. Dumitru-Oancea, „Și zeii se joacă,” in Ana-Cristina Halichias, Maria-Luiza Dumitru-Oancea (coord.), *Joc. Joacă. Jucării, Actele Colocviului național organizat de Departamentul de Filologie Clasică și Neogreacă și de Institutul de Studii Clasice din Facultatea de Limbi și Literaturi Străine, ediția a III-a, București, 17 mai 2015*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2016, p. 63-69.

position of the parents. 'In one of his villages, the poet Horatiu considers a mindless man to be a man who, being a grown man, would start to build up cottages from pieces of wood, to put mice in a stroller, to ride on a long cane or to play odds and evens... It is clear that all the poet listed are children's games'²⁵, Excavations in ancient China, Peru, Mesopotamia and Egypt have revealed miniature models made of pottery and metal, most probably used as toys for children and drawing showing depictions of people playing and play objects such as tops, dolls and rattles²⁶.

As no analysis of play can be *done* without invoking the classic work of the historian and philosopher Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, published in 1938, in connection with the initial moment of the play's appearance in the history of humanity, the author agrees that 'play is older than culture, because the notion of culture, however incomplete it may be defined, in any case implies a human society, and animals did not wait for man to teach them to play. It can even be said, without risk, that human civilization has not added any essential characteristic to the general notion.... It goes beyond the limits of a purely biological or at least purely physical activity. Play is a full function'²⁷ Huizinga's work is important not only for its attempt to distill the essence of play but also for its historical and anthropological analysis of the role of play in such institutions as warfare, philosophy, poetry, mythology, law, art, and sport²⁸.

Later, in 1958, Roger Caillois²⁹, French writer and anthropologist issues a theory that suggests a 'transfer by which a sacred object moves to the toy stage: originally, plays belong to the ritual universe, but then depart from it; play becomes a rite without myth- a ritual. The ball game, the ancestor of football, was originally a Maya rite linked to the myths of the conquest of heaven, and the stakes of the play, the ball, represented the sun. The mask is the most significant example in this regard, therefore, the transition of this universal sacred object to the toy stage represents a radical change in the history of human civilization. Henricks claims that Huizinga³⁰ explores the 'formal' similarities of play and ritual and the times when playing itself seems to rise to almost holy seriousness.

In Vedic India, we will find the sacred implications of play in the cradle that is associated with rain, with the ideas of fecundity and the rebirth of nature. In the spring, Kama, the god of love, solemnly swings, and

²⁵ N. Lascu, *Cum trăiau românii*, Bucureș ti, Editura Științifică, 1965, p. 388.

²⁶ J. L. Frost, *A history of children's play and play environments: toward a 50 contemporary child-saving movement*, New York, Taylor and Francis, 2010.

²⁷ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Încercare de determinare a elementului ludic al culturii*.

²⁸ T. S. Henricks, „Caillois's Man, Play, and Plays An Appreciation and Evaluation,” in *American Journal of Play*, 3 (2010, no. 2, p. 13.

²⁹ R. Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958.

³⁰ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Încercare de determinare a elementului ludic al culturii*.

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Krishna, the protector of sacred cows. Nor are the plays of the Greeks forgotten, dedicated to Divinities and accompanied by sacrifices and processions... The play is a serious business for many thinkers who have meditated on it..., in a speculated way the work of men with the gods positions the play of the gods with the people!... in Vedic India, the deities (called *sura* and *deva*, are the subject of a serious sacrificial ritual), they play, and their play is the creation, preservation or destruction of the world... In contemporary India, within the urban program of *bhajana* (collective song of hymns), *Krishna’s dance* is called *lila (joke)*, and the participants *play* as the shepherds (*Gopi*) of the god Krishna with whom they joke. Their erotic play, however, has profound mystical implications, as in *The Song of Songs*... The ritualistic game becomes terribly serious when it targets the play of God himself with the heart of man’³¹

The presence of play in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, childhood and play are characterized by sometimes contradictory theories that we find in historical literature and the binary positions involved therein. It is easy to hesitate between considering children 'either little angels or small demons, or between feeling compelled to protect a child and fear that you will be exhausted by them'³².

In the 13th century, Medieval Art reflected children’s play, but this was only on the periphery of paintings and never as a central interest³³ In the childhood of the Middle Ages, the fairy tales of Andersen or Grimm were not heard, but stories of cemeteries, demons and ghosts or frightening diseases, did³⁴

In order to pass from play’s features in Antiquity to its peculiarities in the Middle Ages, we recall the opinion of Clapared³⁵ from the meanings of childhood throughout humanity, expressed in the work *Child’s Psychology and Experimental Pedagogy*: 'the ancients, who in many ways had a more genuine conception of life, gave a place of honor to play in everyday education... Later, however, in the Middle Ages, under the influence of misunderstood religious beliefs, a crusade began against all that could bring joy to life... and children's play was contained in this harmful ostracism'. Emil Peacock states that from a pedagogical point of view, 'the Middle Ages constitute a relatively poor period in pedagogical ideas themselves, but rich in concerns about

³¹ A. N. Bulboacă, „Seriozitatea jocului în aspectele sale rituale și antropologice,” in *Revista de filosofie*, LXII (2015), nr. 2, p. 45

³² C. Heywood, *O istorie a copilăriei. Copiii în Occident din Evul Mediu până în epoca modernă*, București, Editura Trei, 2017, p. 59.

³³ Santer, J., Griffiths, C., Goodall, D. (2007), *Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review*, National Children’s Bureau.

³⁴ H. W. van Loon, R. Sullivan, *Story of Mankind*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

³⁵ E. Claparède, *Psihologia copilului și pedagogia experimentală*, p. 93.

school and the organisation of education'³⁶.

Interesting and provocative we find the theory of Philippe Ariès (1914-1984) an eccentric French historian, who dealt with acrimony of childhood history in the work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (1962), subject edit to severe criticism, according to which in the Middle Ages children were regarded as small adults.

During this period childhood was a risky stage that had to be overcome quickly and not worth being devalued. Children 'joined adults in plays and entertainment and, whether they were courtiers or workers, they practiced a trade, throwing themselves into daily routines, living and working with those who had already become craftsmen'³⁷. From the work of the *Western Middle Ages*, by the German medievalist Hans Peter von Peschke, it is apparent that the first seven years of life of children in the Middle Ages are presented differently from Ariès's theory: 'because until the seventh year of life, children had little to do in their parents' household, they had enough time to roam outside'³⁸.

Regarding the implications of *ludus* in the culture of the Middle Ages, Huizinga states: 'Medieval life is full of play: a popular play, crazy, full of pagan elements, which have lost the meaning of the present, have pretended to be simple jokes, then the pompous and solemn chivalrous play, the refined game of courtly love and a number of other forms'³⁹

Most of those games are still preserved today: riddles and songs, catching, hiding, brawling between boys, ball plays or spinning. Although the two authors, Huizinga and von Peschke, have different opinions regarding the first seven years, adolescence has some common characteristics: 'older children or adults did not have time for playing, because they worked as far as there was light outside, and, in the evening, they probably could afford a game of backgammon. On Sundays and holidays, the games moved outdoors and can be compared to today's bowling pins'⁴⁰

The games of Medieval Europe were mainly the same as those of Egypt: dice, knucklebone, checkers, etc. Although the origin of the cards game is not known, it appears that it belonged to the beginning of the Middle Ages and 'was reserved for adults and practiced by kings' (Chateau, 1967, 139). About the playful concerns of King Charles VI of France' wife, we learn from the work *Child and the play*: 'In the 14th century, in the court of the Queen of France, Isabella of Bavaria was entertained by morocco sticks'⁴¹.

The central idea held by most medievalists is that in the Middle Ages

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

³⁸ H. P. Peschke, *Evul Mediu Occidental*, București, Editura Rao, 2005, p. 19.

³⁹ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Încercare de determinare a elementului ludic al culturii*, p. 285.

⁴⁰ H. P. Peschke, *Evul Mediu Occidental*, p. 9.

⁴¹ J. Chateau, *Copilul și jocul*, p. 138.

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childhood and implicitly play were not considered priorities of those times, and this limitation may be due to the fact that the introduction of the child into the adult world was realized early, so that the period of childhood, as we perceive it today, was one of initiation for adulthood. Another reason for the lack of clear evidence regarding childhood and its specific activities is the obvious attractiveness of medieval authors to adulthood, more so 'medieval sources were often vague when it came to estimating ages, being caught up in the ambiguities associated with language from this field'⁴²

Revival of play

The Renaissance was the period that brought to the fore the sensitivity to the child and childhood, marking the triumph of humanism and a new conception of man, seeing him as a free, independent and creative human being. Education has played a key role in Renaissance thinking. Treaties and educational experiments have proliferated – from Vittorino da Feltre to *The Training of a Prince* of Erasmus. Their ideal, while maintaining the foundations of Christian training, was to develop both mental and physical talents⁴³.

In the 16th century children’s play had become the focus of artists’ representations. In the 17th century, diarists recorded their disregard for what was perceived to be ‘trivial’, which included play. John Locke acknowledged that children were predisposed to be curious, but was no advocate of play, which he considered to be silly and trivial. Play, at this time, was clearly not worthy of either discussion or debate⁴⁴

The school institution that Vittorino da Feltre created, *Casa giocosa* stroke a balance between physical and intellectual exercises by adapting the seven liberal arts to the 'new requirements'⁴⁵ Play was used as a reward for the students who successfully realized the learning tasks.

Another outstanding representative of the Renaissance, Erasmus of Rotterdam, in *La Civilité puérile*, highlights respect for individual peculiarities, so that 'the leanings of the child are revealed in play'⁴⁶ In the paper *About the Objects of Education*, Juan Luis Vives claims that mothers have a decisive role in child education: 'The educational process will have to start from an early age, in the form of a play. Mothers should teach the child the letters with the help of play. At the same time, play is also a means of knowing children's

⁴² C. Heywood, *O istorie a copilăriei. Copiii în Occident din Evul Mediu până în epoca modernă*, București, Editura Trei, 2017, p. 35.

⁴³ N. Davies, *O istorie a Europei*, București, Editura Rao, București, 2016, p. 424.

⁴⁴ J. Santer, C. Griffiths, D. Goodall, *Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review*, Brussels, National Children’s Bureau, 2007.

⁴⁵ I. Ch. Stanciu, *O istorie a pedagogiei universale și românești până la 1900*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1977, p. 79.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

skills⁴⁷.

Comenius grants 'an important role to play, which - he appreciated - gives the body movement, and the spirit recreation and sharpness ... stimulates the need for life in the community, develops initiative, perseverance'⁴⁸

The content of Renaissance-specific ideas and their reference to the playful spirit is characterized by Huizinga as follows: 'If there has ever been a conscious elite who, indulging in self-isolation, tries to put life into a configured play of perfection, then surely that was the Renaissance elite.... the whole spiritual attitude of the Renaissance is that of a play.

In *Iocari serio*, Culianu, a true master of the interpretation of texts, sizes play as a symbol of Renaissance thinking, considering it to be 'ambiguous, melancholic by excellence, but also exalting, because of the tremendous prestige of the child Dionysus who plays checkers'⁴⁹ stating that the mysteries of the world can only be unraveled by a ludic approach, 'to play the game of the world'⁵⁰. The Renaissance period is characterized by a serious play, in the sense that 'we will not be able to understand the content of play, without even referring to the content of the Renaissance, that is, the purposes and methods of Art'.⁵¹

The Renaissance promoted a new conception of science, human rights, society and education, prompting a real intellectual and artistic revolution. Humanists promoted the freedom to think 'trust in the strength of the human personality, in human reason, in the recognition of the human right to the joys offered by life, to happiness here on Earth'⁵². Such a context became favorable to the reconsideration and rebirth of play, after the Middle Ages, in which it was not considered as a priority of the freedom of manifestation of the child and implicitly of the harmonious development of personality.

Modernity of play

In the Modern Age, play is increasingly found among the concerns of many theorists and practitioners, therefore, the toy industry has begun to flourish and offered 'small innovations such as board games, small sets of tools and puzzles, as well as traditional toys.

With the impact of the Romantic movement in the 18th century, play came to the fore and was valued. Rousseau was central to normalising this in

⁴⁷*Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p.141

⁴⁹I. P. Culianu, *Iocari serio. Știință și artă în gândirea Renașterii*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2017, p. 17

⁵⁰*Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p.17.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

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his work *Emile* (1762/1963) which was a call back to nature, reflecting his philosophy that children should have time to explore the natural world. He believed that play was a child's right and that there was no antithesis between this and work. Play liberated children. Rousseau's philosophy stressed the importance of play as an instrument for the development of the senses, the exercise of judgement through sensory experience and contact with things: 'Let all the lessons of young children take the form of doing rather than talking, let them leave nothing from books that they can leave from experience'⁵³.

Rousseau's work influenced Pestalozzi, a Swiss writer, philosopher and defender of the poor, who valued play as central to human fulfilment and achievement at each stage of development. It also affected the work of Froebel, who was German. He believed play to be fundamental to all growth. He highlighted the need of interconnectedness and harmony between the inner and outer worlds of the child. The role of adults was to provide environments in which children could explore 'in areas not yet known but vaguely surmised'⁵⁴

Friederich Froebel is the first pedagogue to mention a systematic theory of early childhood education and the one who gives the name Kindergarten (children's garden) to the first institution for the education of young children. 'In children, the innate tendency towards activity manifests itself in the form of play. In Froebel's conception, the play is not only an exercise in the physical strengthening of the child, but also for his mental development'⁵⁵

Similarly, Schiller (1770–1835), a German philosopher, advocated that play was a means of becoming whole and unserious. In his *Ode to Joy* he defined play as the 'enemy expedition of exuberant energy'. This was not a popular message at the time. In the Victorian was the change from an agrarian to an industrial economy brought a new seriousness to society. Children who had previously worked on the land were now working in the mills and factors for long hours. Play and leisure therefore were rare. Work was remarried as the norm and play was the opposite of this, therefore considered by many as wasteful of time. Such were the concerns about the experiences of children who were working long hours in unsatisfactory environments that legislation was introduced to limit the time that they spent underground (the Mines Act 1842) and the age at which they were allowed to work (the Factory Act 1833). The Victorians believed that if people had leisure time, they were to use it to improve them. Documents of the time,

⁵³ J. Santer, C. Griffiths, D. Goodall, *Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review*.

⁵⁴ J. Liebschner, *Foundations of Progressive Practice The History of the National Froebel Society*, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 1991.

⁵⁵ I. Gh. Stanciu, *O istorie a pedagogiei universale și românești până la 1900*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, p. 256-257.

however, reveal the creativity of children in finding time to punctuate their daily work with bouts of play activity⁵⁶

For more than a century, play has held a rather idealised position within early childhood education. Inspired by the writings of pioneers of early education such as Friedrich Froebel (1782 - 1852), Rachel (1859- 1917) and Margaret Mc Millan (1860-1931) and Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952), the notion of a natural, active, play-oriented child has been placed firm at the centre of the Early Childhood Curriculum. This has also been linked to the progressive 'child-centred' approach associated with the work of John Dewey (1859 - 1952)⁵⁷

Saracho and Spodek⁵⁸ describe two approaches in order to analyze play in the 19th and 20th centuries, the classical one and modern one. In classical theories, the concern was to explain why the play exists, and the explanations included: Relaxation Theory in which individuals recharge the energy they lost in work, therefore play is relaxation and a source of energy, before starting the activity again; Surplus Energy Theory, as opposed to Relaxation Theory regarded play as a means of eliminating excess energy, so that it was considered an instinctive behavior without an immediate purpose; Recapitulation Theory under which it is believed that individuals go through personal development, parallel to the experiences of the human race, play is an instinctive way to prepare children for adult life.

Unlike classical theories, modern dynamic perspectives try to explain the content of play. The theorists that underpin these perspectives are Freud, Piaget and Vîgotski.

From a psychodynamic perspective (Freud, Erikson and Isaacs), children communicate and eliminate anxieties and fears by bringing them to a level of consciousness that can then be articulated through play. From this perspective, children's language in play is seen as parallel to adults' language used by them in psychoanalysis.

Piaget was interested in children's thinking and their development. He states that they build their knowledge through active engagement with the environment.

This is the historical period conducive to development, to theoretical and experimental approaches focused on the play. It is the moment when it provides an object of interest for many areas of human knowledge, gaining interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary connotations.

Play in the present days. Development or decline?

Like other areas of knowledge, the pedagogy of play presents obvious

⁵⁶ D. Cohen, *The Development of Play*, second edition, London, Routledge, 1993.

⁵⁷ M. Kernan, *Play as a context for Early Learning and Development. A research paper.*

⁵⁸ J. Santer, C. Griffiths, D. Goodall, *Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review*, p. 4-5.

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directions of innovation and development at the intradisciplinary level, but especially at the integrated level: interdisciplinary, pluri-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary. Expanding and diversifying concerns about playful activities attract paradigm shifts and renewals of the content of this scientific field. In this subchapter we propose to invoke, without the claim of pretentious epistemic demarcations, a series of phrases that we consider useful in the direction of producing theoretical and practical developments in dealing with play: playful experience, playful habitat, ludic poles, ludic facilitators, playful mentality, playful learning, playful maturity, ludic diet and ludology.

Also, given the fact that the current generation of children no longer uses traditional games as much as in previous generations, we consider that some reflections on some notions and phrases associated with the generations of 'digital natives' are necessary ⁵⁹Their free time begins to gradually disappear, being replaced by programmed activities: virtual, sports, artistic or intellectual, although, and the current generation of children should have new relationships, games and parties with friends such as they had their parents as children.

The importance of play in children's daily lives and healthy development has been increasingly recognized in recent years. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing, throughout childhood, is not only an innate behaviour but also contributes to children's quality of life, their wellbeing and their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. The type of environment for play is also important, having an impact on children's experience, choices and relationships, both with other people and with the environment itself ⁶⁰. For all subjects specific to the preparatory school it is recommended to organize mixed learning activities that can combine play activities, learning and school dominated activities, walks outside and discussions with the students in a relaxed and motivating framework.

The studies show that the *face down* generation shows no constant interest in the classic or traditional games. 'Even if for young children the line between real and virtual is very fine, traditional non-digital toys should not be ignored' ⁶¹This lack of mood can be an indicator of the lack of real, direct *playful experiences* as a result of the increasing number of electronic toys and devices that children have around them and which induce artificial behaviours at the expense of knowledge and meanings obtained through direct playful experiences. The information obtained through these devices 'is qualitatively different from that obtained by interacting with real three-

⁵⁹ M. Prensky, „Digital natives, Digital Immigrants,” in *On the Horizon*, 9 (2021), no. 5, p. 1-6.

⁶⁰ <https://www.playscotland.org/play-for-health/the-power-of-play/>, accessed 12. 01. 2021.

⁶¹ D. Dumitrescu, *Nativi digitali/Pregătiți-vă*, București, Editura Tritonic, 2013, p. 68.

dimensional objects and other children and adults⁶². The way digital natives perceive and relate to the world is mediated by play, hence an idea of a *playful mentality*: "The Net Generation wants fun and play to be component parts of work, school and social life"⁶³

Another reason for the lack of interest towards play can be blamed, in our opinion, on the precariousness of *the playful habitat*, seen as an ensemble consisting of:

- the human resources that are playing and/or that are responsible for building and securing the play-area and ensuring emotionally meaningful playful experiences. This category includes children, seen as *ludic poles* that can attract or reject, but also *ludic facilitators*: parents, teachers and/or other responsible people articulating ludic poles;
- material resources: toys, kits, boards, illustrations, objects and materials with multiple possibilities of use, etc.;
- ergonomic and temporal resources: the organization of furniture and play home space. 'Adult plays an important role in ensuring playing conditions by providing the objects, materials and things children use for play'⁶⁴

Different pedagogical approaches to Early Childhood Education and Care for example: High/Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner-Waldorf emphasize different aspects of the design of the space and the organization of resources and materials within the space according to the particular 'vision' of the approach. Whatever the pedagogical approaches being followed, when the service is home-based, community-based, private or public, it is important that the arrangement of space is accordingly to the pedagogical vision of the setting as the closer the match, the higher the quality of the ECCE setting.

Regarding these reasons, we argue that play-learning dichotomy requires reconsideration. Without denying that play offers learning opportunities, the tension between play, the subjective dimension of the experience of each person engaged in it and the objective part of learning situations caused by it, can be taken up by *playful learning*. By doing so, play can become a source of motivation and pleasure, a means of exercising skills or a facilitator of language development and communication. 'Play has a transformative function as meaning that it represents the effort made by people to fight the elements of the world, to modify them and, in the process, to learn about reality and their own powers, to act on these

⁶² M. L. Nell, W. Drew, D. F. Bush, *De la joc la învățare. Cum folosim jocul didactic în educația timpurie*, București, Editura Trei, 2016, p. 179.

⁶³ D. Tapscott, *Crescuți digital. Generația Net care își schimbă lumea*, București, Editura Publica, 2011, p. 74.

⁶⁴ M. L. Nell, W. Drew, D. F. Bush, *De la joc la învățare. Cum folosim jocul didactic în educația timpurie*, p.15.

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environments⁶⁵.

In their work, *Homo Zappiens. Growing up in a digital age*, Veen and Vrakking suggest that play: 'involves children in learning; a play plunges player into a discovery path that motivates them in a playful way. By blending play with learning, we can also reach children's fantasies, which is an important factor in increasing creativity'⁶⁶.

In the actual context, characterized by games played in the digital environment, there is a great deal of pressure on parents and teachers about how long to give children for these activities. Thus, the *play diet*⁶⁷ is outlined, seen as an useful tool for both parties, recommending a balanced practical approach to diversified playful activities that ensure, as a healthy nutrition, the whole range of *vitamins* taken from different types of plays: free play, society, construction, creation, team, digital, etc.

In the work *Does your child play? Psychological interpretations of play* (Copilul tău se joacă? Interpretări psihologice ale jocului), Sophie Marinopoulos⁶⁸ correlates the notion of growth with that of play, stating that the facilitator of this association is the concept of *playful maturity*. Since play is a 'thermometer of the child's emotional and psychological state, the tool observation of the child's development according to his ability to engage in plays' is the *ludometer*.

Play is the only human activity that children perform and in which players decide for themselves what and how to play, being free to create, observe and change the rules, without being sanctioned, as the unfolding of the play requires it.

Through play, the child exercises his physical and intellectual skills to achieve social success (specific to each culture in which they grow up). Trial and error learning is not only encouraged, but also accepted, a symptom of freedom being precisely the presence of mistakes.

Children often pretend and image when they play. Play enables them: to transform reality into symbolic representations of the world; to experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life; to try out different ideas, feelings and relationships with people⁶⁹

Play provides an opportunity for the child to structure and regulate his own conduct, and when he feels in difficulty to ask for support from the teacher. In no other activity does the child transform his colleagues, even

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

⁶⁶ W. Veen, B. Vrakking, *Homo Zappiens. Joc și învățare în epoca digitală*, Bucureș ti, Editura Sigma, 2011, p. 87.

⁶⁷ A. Gummer, *Play: Fun Ways to Help your Child Develop in the First Five Years*, London, Ebury Publishing, 2015.

⁶⁸ S. Marinopoulos, *Copilul tău se joacă? Interpretări psihologice ale jocului*, Bucureș ti, Editura Philobia, 2014, p. 14.

⁶⁹ M. Kernan, M. *Play as a context for Early Learning and Development. A research paper*.

those with whom he had small conflicts, into friends and together overcome fears.

Even adults can relay to play and become leaders, with one condition: to show sensitivity to the needs of all players, not just to their needs, especially since play gives the adult the opportunity for his intervention to go unnoticed. If it is carried out with suppleness, thus the child, under the illusion of full freedom, will develop play all by himself and reach the most advanced levels of its unfolding.

In the short and long term, play benefits cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Children's learning cognitive skills such as creativity, problem solving, divergent thinking, mathematics, and language. They leave to negotiate social relationships, regular their emotions, and control their own behaviors. Play also fosters the development of fine and gross motor skills. When play is fun and child-directed, children are motivated to engage in opportunities to learn. Moreover, when given choices in play, children can find activities that are best suited to their individual needs⁷⁰

The most important types of play involve the repetitiveness of the actions. This makes sense, the child only practices those skills and abilities that he does not master enough, and once acquired he leaves them. So, playful activity satisfies the hedonism of the child's brain because it hangs between the rule, the metarule and the pseudo-rule. Sometimes the child has to decide whether to stay in the game or abandon it and in this he is a decision maker, value that will support him in adult life⁷¹

Supporting play as a fundamental activity for the age of childhood is found since Antiquity. Thus, Platon (in his late dialogue, *Laws*) recognized the physical nature of young children when he stated: "The young of all creatures cannot keep their bodies still or their tongues quiet: they are always wanting to move and cry out; some are leaving and skipping and overflowing with playfulness and pleasure, and others fitting all sorts of cries. 'In the *Republic* he also talked about an appropriate approach to learning for the young people: 'Forced learning will not stay in the mind. So willing compulsion and let your children's lessons take the form of play'⁷². Garvey (1991)⁷³ also writes of children's exuberance, looking at it as a universal characteristic of play. Present day authors would agree that it is a natural instinct for children across all cultures to play. Historically, however, play has been viewed quite differently depending on the prevalence of childhood views of children and childhood.

⁷⁰ R. E. White, *The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning*.

⁷¹ H. Catalano, I. Albușescu, *Didactica jocurilor*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2019.

⁷² J. Santer, C. Griffiths, D. Goodall, *Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review*.

⁷³ C. Garvey, *Play*.

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Since 1955, however, children's free play has been in a continued decline, at least partly because adults have experienced ever-increasing control over children's activities outside of the world of labor. Children now spend more time at school, and at school they spend less time playing. The length of the school year and school day have been increased; more young children attend academically oriented kindergartens or preschools than in times past; and recess time has happened and, in some school districts, completely disappeared⁷⁴... 'Although play is perceived by the adult as an effortless activity, the child makes a sustained effort to get it done. Even if he is free and creative, he has to develop the subject, he looks for partners, he plays roles that he assumes, he sets and respects his own rules. In this regard, if instructed, the educator / adult can interfere in developing the play, interpret a character, appreciate the child's behaviour and encourage co-operation during play'⁷⁵

Although there is clear evidence of the benefits of play in personality development, the time allocated to it at home, with family members, in kindergarten and in school is constantly diminishing in the current society. Family, school and community put systematic pressure on play, focus on academic achievement in order to prepare the child for school and the standardized tests to come, more than preparing for life. Some parents do not appreciate play, not knowing its value in relation to learning and development.

An endless debate will be about those who want to keep freedom in play and those who perceive play as a closer learning activity, constantly guided by the adult. Many education experts and many politicians want a more restrictive school, not a more relaxed one. More and more frequent assessments, more homework, more supervision, more school days, more penalties for students missing from school, etc. are needed. Student evaluation has become an obsession, and schools have become sad places, as the testing system rewards conformism, docility and competition. Education should not be an obstacle course for tests and grades, marked by fear of failure⁷⁶

Over the past 50 years, the predominant site of children's free play has moved from public space on the street, to semi-public space such as separate public playgrounds, school yards and ECCE settings. Indeed, the play space for many children has most expanded indoors, especially within their own bedrooms where indoor play technologies such as television, video,

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ H. Catalano, „The Importance of Free Play in Early Childhood and Primary School Education: Critical Analysis for Romania,” *Educ Res Appl*, 2018; ERCA-150. DOI: 10.29011/2575-7032/100050 p. 4.

⁷⁶ K. Robinson, L. Arnonica, *Școli creative. Revoluția de la bază învățământului*, Bucureș ti, Editura Publica, 2015.

DVDs, game consoles and computer plays have proliferated.⁷⁷

In the name of education, we deprive children of the free time they need to educate themselves by their own means. In the name of their safety, we are restricting them from the freedom they need to cope with the dangers and challenges of life, proving self-control. The benefits of the play are overlooked by adults who want preschoolers to 'do the right thing' and stop 'fooling around'. Children are pawns on a competitive board where adults 'move' them according to their own interests towards performance. Studies show that we are tempted to direct children's activity because this position gives us the (illusory) feeling that we are in control.

Some play opportunities at school that were once embraced, such as recess, have transitioned into more organized activity or have been done away with, often because of the growing emphasis on academics or as a form of discipline for classroom behaviors. Physical education has experienced a decline as more pressing issues related to accountability and academics have been created. Opportunities for school play were once bountiful, occurring multiple times throughout the day, even beyond the kindergarten level.⁷⁸

Parents' attitude towards childhood has changed radically in recent times, so they 'subcontract' their children's childhood, 'schedule' it and load them with various activities: dance, piano, swimming, karate, etc. Some children do not have the desire to play because of the increased attractiveness to digital games, on tablet, phone, etc., and these induce artificial behaviors at the expense of the knowledge and meanings obtained through direct playful experiences.

The decline in play may be both a consequence and a cause of the increased social isolation and loneliness in the culture.⁷⁹ Lester and Russell (2010), in a major review of research examining children's contemporary play opportunities worldwide, provide a very useful and compulsive review of the environmental 'stressors' in modern life, associated with increasing urbanization, which impact negatively on children's play experiences. Within this, they make the telling point that half the world's children will very soon be living in cities. The concern of many comments is that the resulting pattern of children being over-supervised and over-scheduled, with decreasing amounts of time to play with their peers or parents, is likely to have an adverse effect on children's independence skills,

⁷⁷ D. Buckingham, *After the death of childhood: growing up in the age of electronic media*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000.

⁷⁸D. Stegelin, K. Fite, D. Wisneski, „The critical place of play in education. US Play Coalition,” 2015, available at: <https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/PRTM-Play-Coalition-White-Paper.pdf>, accessed 12. 01. 2021.

⁷⁹ P. Gray, „The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,” in *American Journal of Play*, 3 (2011), no. 4.

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their resources and the whole range of developmental benefits.⁸⁰

Reconsidering play in the school space is not only the most precious gift we can give to children, but it is an essential gift if we want them to develop physically, mentally and emotionally as future competent, autonomous and innovative adults. Thus, we can give children the freedom to take control of their own learning. If we wish children to be happy and to grow up to get socially and emotionally filled and competent adults, we must provide them, once again, with opportunity to spend many hours per day playing free with friends⁸¹

A combination of poor play environments, busy school schedules and an increase in structure activities has mean that this benefit and basic children right has come away sidelined, often perceived as an 'unaffordable luxury'⁸²

While there are many beacons of excellence, what play provision there is within educational contexts across Europe is also often effectively supported by inadequately trained staff. As a consequence, there has been a plethora of books published recently by early childhood educationalists and developmental psychologists setting out the value of play for children's learning and development⁸³.

At the same time, however, these publications consistently document the difficulties early years practitioners have in developing effective practice to support children's learning through play, widely exacerbated by pressures to 'cover' the prescribed curriculum, meet government-imposed standards etc. Combined with the curves on children's free play opportunities identified within the home context above, this leads to a worrying picture overall of children across Europe and the rest of the developed world with increasingly limited opportunities for the free play and association with their peers who were so commonly available only a generation or two ago to their parents and grandparents⁸⁴

⁸⁰ S. Lester, W. Russell, *Children’s right to Play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*, Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2010.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 265

⁸² D. Elkind, „The power of play: Learning what comes naturally,” p. 1-6.

⁸³ J. Moyles, J.(ed.) (2010), *The Excellence of Play*, 3rd Ed., Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2010.

⁸⁴ D. Whitebread, M. Basilio, M. Kuvalja, M. Verma, *The importance of play: a report on the value of children’s play with a series of policy recommendations*.