

The Importance of Play in the Aesthetic Development of Young Children

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the significance of play in child development through a review of theoretical and pedagogical research, based on a comprehensive literature review. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, neuroscience, and art education, it synthesizes classical and contemporary theories to provide a holistic understanding of play as a developmental and educational process. Foundational perspectives, such as those of L.Vygotsky, S.Freud, A.Freud and D.Winnicott, are examined alongside influential educational approaches including F.Froebel's kindergarten model, M.Montessori education, G.Lindqvist Playworlds and the Reggio Emilia philosophy. The findings highlight play as a dynamic and integrative process that supports cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, while fostering creativity, curiosity, imagination, and aesthetic experience. Play is presented as a sociocultural and symbolic activity that enables meaning-making, self-regulation, and the development of identity. Particular emphasis is placed on its therapeutic value, drawing on psychoanalytic traditions, as well as its role in experiential and child-centered learning environments. Furthermore, the paper examines the importance of outdoor play and open-ended materials, including S.Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts, and highlights contributions to play environments by C.T.Sørensen and A. van Eyck. Overall, the study argues for a holistic reconceptualization of play as an essential condition for meaningful learning and healthy development, emphasizing its critical role in fostering creative, resilient, and autonomous individuals in contemporary society.*

KEYWORDS: *Play-based learning, Theory of play, Aesthetic development, Art and play, Early childhood education*

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Play is inseparably linked to a child's life and its development. Numerous theories have been put forward regarding play. Most educators, researchers, and philosophers have spoken out and supported the value of play in all areas of a child's development; intellectual, cognitive, physical, emotional, and social. In the 20th century, theories regarding the necessity of play in a child's life address questions such as why humans play and what the significance of play is in psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, and sociology. H. Mead, in his theory of symbolic interaction (Triliva & Anagnostopoulou, 2008, p. 28) argued that through symbolic play, children shape their own personalities and act out the roles of others (Avgitidou, 2001). S. Freud and E. Erikson considered that play helps children cope with problematic situations, fears, and anxiety. Furthermore, according to art historians and educators throughout the ages, play has existential significance for the child (S. Pantazis, 1997, p. 54). Equally important findings have arisen in the field of neuroscience, where the positive effects of play on brain development are supported (Cole-Hamilton, 2012· Lester & Russell, 2008). The International Association for Early Childhood Education (ACEI) (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002) has argued that children of all ages need to play, especially in the modern world, where they are forced to make constant progress in multiple areas. Finally, psychologists and researchers believe that play is essential for the cognitive, physical, social, emotional development, and well-being of children (Piaget, 1962· Vygotsky, 1978/1997· Mayesky, 2014).

Regarding children's emotional development through play, they can experience happiness, achievement, pleasure, and joy, while coping with anxiety and fears. The LEGO Foundation's White Paper (Zosh et al., 2017) states that joy and play are associated with increased levels of dopamine, which play a role in the improvement of memory, attention, sustained movement, creativity, and motivation. When we feel positive emotions, everything is easier. Everyone can recall how difficult it is to be productive when they're sad about something happening in their life (Kokkinaki, 2025). Recent research tells us that it's no surprise that children who are more playful are more creative. In terms of cognitive development, children grow their creativity, reasoning, and problem-solving skills through play. It has been proven that children achieve the greatest learning outcomes by playing in relaxed settings, while at the same time, this informal and free atmosphere allows them to pick up new concepts, ideas, maths, and even language (Kumar, 2008). Generally, children through play, engaged and focus on the task at a higher level than when the same task is approached in a formal,

academic manner (Palmer & Galina, 2005). When it comes to social skills, children who play, learn to cooperate, share, negotiate, manage risks, lead, and defend themselves. They also learn to follow rules, behave appropriately, and pay attention. They acquire the ability to influence, manage, recognize opportunities, and make choices for their lives. When children play, they take responsibility, construct and deconstruct rules, decide how and when to conform, when to break the rules, and when to be leaders or followers. Especially when it comes to school social life, classmates become increasingly important, children learn to read and understand signals, to listen and understand others' perspectives, key aspects for the development of empathy. Through playful activities, students learn to share ideas, express themselves, negotiate, and reach compromises, balancing autonomy and interdependence (Mardell et al., 2016). Through play, the individual gains self-affirmation and recognition, emerges from isolation, and becomes social (Van der Kooij & Posthumus Meyjes, 1986). Additionally, children may develop their physical and motor skills through play. In other words, when a child plays, it has the opportunity to learn about itself, discover the world, socialize, interact, express itself, and acquire knowledge and experiences.

Equally important is the view of J.Fritz (Pantazi, 1997, p. 20) who argues that children don't play to learn but for themselves. Through play, children adapt to their environment, they transform it and reproduce the structures of thought they have acquired. In this subconscious way, children learn, without actually knowing it and without adapting to a conventional method of formal learning. M.Pourkos (2009, pp.30–31) argues that "The spontaneous play activities of our childhood were inextricably linked with our daily lives; in all these activities we found joy and satisfaction (...) a pleasant environment is created for the participants, which makes learning seem like play and fun". A.Freud (1996) argued that play ends when rational thinking emerges. It is believed, that free expressing is incompatible with logical thinking. This leads to the distinction between the adult, who acts as a rational being, and the child, who behaves based on its desires. This perspective invites a reconsideration of the relationship between play and creative expression, particularly in terms of how spontaneity, freedom, and intrinsic motivation contribute to learning and development. Rather than viewing play and creativity as opposing rational thought, these elements can be seen as interconnected processes that sustain curiosity, imagination, and experiential engagement. In this sense, the following discussion explores creativity, curiosity, experience, and imagination as shared and essential factors that underpin both art and play.

II. CREATIVITY, CURIOSITY, EXPERIENCE AND IMAGINATION, AS COMMON FACTORS OF ART AND PLAY

R.Schirmacher (1995, pp. 70–75) defines creativity as the ability to perceive things in new ways, to process information through unconventional modes of thinking, and to produce something unique by combining seemingly unrelated elements into something new. Within this framework, he emphasizes that all individuals are capable of engaging in the creative process. Furthermore, R.Schirmacher (1995, p. 56) argues that art constitutes an open-ended activity that encourages discovery, exploration, experimentation, and invention, skills that are essential for the development of creativity. Consequently, when individuals think creatively, they are able to approach problems from alternative perspectives, avoiding conventional solutions. In a similar vein, creative thinking relies on the ability to generate original, innovative, and alternative ideas for problem-solving (Tsakiri & Kapetanidou, 2007). Expanding on this perspective, A.Maslow (1962, pp. 127–137) suggests that creativity is a universal characteristic of the self-actualizing individual, expressed not only through artistic endeavors but also through everyday practical activities as a way of life. Similarly, A.Beaudot (1971) conceptualizes the predisposition for creation as an innate tendency toward self-actualization, which requires favorable conditions in order to be expressed. This tendency is particularly evident in children's curiosity and imagination, although it is often inhibited throughout their developmental trajectory.

Play-based learning can be a tremendous source of creativity and a great opportunity to develop thinking and learning skills through children's natural curiosity. Curiosity makes children brave enough to ask questions and identify problems. They also imagine new possibilities and solutions, they form new connections between people, ideas, and the world in general. The process of play enables children to develop their ability to explore environments and to think flexibly, using different approaches and in a more critical manner (Zosh et al., 2017). While engaged in play, a child becomes fully absorbed and focuses all of its attention on the task being performed, almost as if withdrawing from its surroundings (Winnicott, 1971). "Play is regarded as a task through which a child's thinking is opened up" notes B.Sutton-Smith (1979, p. 314). Play is a scenario that gives children the opportunity to direct their own activities through autonomy and active engagement in a safe space. Children experiment without the risk of real loss. Nevertheless, testing hypotheses and exploring unknown paths require courage. Play provides an opportunity for the fairly risky action of trying out new behaviors in a physical or social environment (Garvey, 1990, p. 42). Moreover, play in arts offers a range of emotions, from the joy of creation to the disappointment of a failed experiment. This is a challenge that must be managed as best as possible by educators, who should guide students towards fixing or rebuilding their idea. Teachers should provide a sense of security and support, asking questions, and guiding students through the process of

discovery and exploration (Edwards & Springate, 1995). Children who feel free to make mistakes, they learn to explore, to invent, create, and finally find new ways of doing things (Freire, 2006).

Within this context, the interrelationship between creativity, art, and play becomes especially significant. Kalouri-Antonopoulou (1999, pp. 58–59), supporting the views of J.Piaget, argues that any form of art in childhood is essentially synonymous with play. At the same time, J.Dewey highlights that children are not primarily passive listeners; rather, they prefer to move, communicate, explore the world, construct, and express themselves artistically. Learning through action, therefore, constitutes the process by which individuals make sense of their experiences, particularly those in which they actively participate in creating and exploring (Bruce & Bloch, 2012). In alignment with this view, G.Mialaret (1966) emphasizes that authentic education is achieved when the learner actively participates, engaging in creative and productive activity. J.Dewey (1934) believed in the “Unity of Experience” and demonstrated the value of aesthetic education by establishing the term Aesthetic Experience in the field of humanities through his work “Art as Experience”.

Extending this argument, Glykofrydi-Leontsini (2006, pp. 331–332) maintains that aesthetic education is not acquired solely through formal instruction but also through everyday life, where art and culture are inseparable from daily experience. In a similar direction, P.Duncum (1999) advocates for the integration of everyday cultural contexts into art education, arguing that ordinary aesthetic experiences play a crucial role in shaping individuals’ identities and worldviews. Likewise, R.Schirmacher (1995, p. 31) suggests that children’s everyday experiences provide rich opportunities that can be incorporated into artistic expression, while J.Holt (1981) asserts more broadly that meaningful learning cannot occur when it is disconnected from lived experience. Therefore, aesthetic education should not be treated as an isolated subject but rather as an integral dimension of the entire educational process (Dafermos, 2002, p. 88). This holistic and interdisciplinary approach to learning is further strengthened through experimentation, play, and aesthetic engagement. In this regard, L.Cole (1994) argues that enhancing children’s aesthetic experiences requires providing diverse opportunities for engagement with art, including play, discussion, and authentic experiences. These varied aesthetic experiences, in turn, foster imagination and creative thinking, thereby laying the foundation for further examination of forms of aesthetic education through play-based learning, which will be explored in the following section.

III. THEORIES AND METHODS OF PEDAGOGY AND AESTHETIC PLAY

L.Vygotsky: Perspectives on imagination, symbolism, and self-regulation

L.Vygotsky considered play as a sociocultural activity, regarding it as a driver of development. Play involves social interaction, cooperation, and negotiation among children. Through this interaction, children learn to communicate, adopt different perspectives, and develop an understanding of social rules and patterns. According to L.Vygotsky (1933/1998, p. 267), play constitutes “(...) a unique relationship with reality, characterized by the creation of imaginary situations or by the transfer of qualities from some objects to others”. He considers the most important feature of play to be the creation of an imaginary situation, with the performance of functions and consequently, the creation of rules. The rules do not pre-exist but arise from the imaginary situation (Papadopoulou, 2009, pp. 140–153). As the child adopts through play, characteristics, roles, and rules, it may regulate its behavior and control its actions, leading to self-restraint and self-determination. Symbolic play emerges in early childhood, when new desires develop, and serves as an imaginary fulfillment when these needs cannot be satisfied in reality. After all, the child’s thinking takes place first in an imaginary context of play and then in real life (Dafermos & Balis, 2009, p. 297).

Through symbolic play, children re-enact events and important experiences, in order to understand them. When children play, they attempt to keep their relationships with the real world in balance, since their resources are limited. Via the magical power of play, children conquer whatever is denied to them by the world around them (Gerou, 1984, p. 31). L.Vygotsky (Papadopoulou, 2009, pp. 158–167) argued that imaginative play with objects is the first activity that allows children to free themselves from the environment restrictions. When children create an imaginary situation, their actions and behavior are not based on mere external stimuli, but stem from the meaning these stimuli hold within the context of the imaginary situation in which they are used. A child plays, based on its interpretation of an object rather than of the object itself. Consequently, the actions are more a result of children’s ideas. Besides that, when a child plays with an object (that stands in for another) it separates the meaning from the actual object and apply it to the substitute. In this way, the child’s relationship with the external environment changes dramatically. The replacement object does not need to have any external similarity to the real object; it is necessary, however, to allow for actions that resemble those ones could perform with the real object (Papadopoulou, 2009, pp. 158–167). Thus, a stick can be a horse, as Vygotsky characteristically describes, not because it looks like a horse, but because it allows the child to ride it. Symbolic play with objects fosters abstract thinking. And, play that is based on the meaning of actions leads to the development of intention, that is, of conscious choices. F.Meredieu (1974, p. 20) argues that “The magical thinking of a child, as it blurs the line between reality and fantasy, develops through play, transforming the

world." After all, children's thinking first takes place in the imaginary realm of play and then in real life. Play is an important tool because, it bridges the gap between concrete understanding and abstract thinking, giving the child the opportunity to categorize real-life experiences, which are often complex for it.

D.W.Winnicott's Theory of Play as an Intermediate Zone of Reality

In "Playing and Reality" D.W.Winnicott (1971) explores how human development emerges through the relationship between inner fantasy and external reality. One of his most important contributions is the concept of transitional object, such as a teddy bear or blanket, which help the infant move from total dependence on the mother toward a sense of separateness and independence. These objects are not trivial comforts; they represent an intermediate area between subjective and objective reality. D.W.Winnicott argues that "The incredibly fascinating (...) thing about play is always the uncertain interaction between psychological reality and the experience of controlling real objects" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 18). As a result, the transitional object, provides the emotional and physical continuity, stability, and security required for children to enter into an experimental, open relationship with the unknown (Winnicott, 1971, p. 55).

D.W.Winnicott (1971) believed that through play, the child develops a sense of self and learns to relate meaningfully to others and the world. This relational and dynamic conception of play, suggests that all learning is based on transitions through the environment as a network of relationships, which is the very prerequisite for life. Based on this argument, D.W.Winnicott defines play as the "intermediate zone" a potential space between individual and psychic reality. Play becomes an environment that exists both inside and outside the body, a space of creation that is always already inhabited by many others. Moreover, Winnicott's concept of the "creative impulse" gives children the freedom to explore and learn creatively through environments they share with others. Overall, Winnicott concludes that psychological health depends on the preservation of this intermediate space of play, illusion, and creativity. Human development, identity, and culture all arise from this shared area between inner reality and the external world, making play not peripheral, but central to being fully alive.

Understanding nature and unity through F.Froebel's "Gifts"

F.Froebel, the founder of the modern "kindergarten movement" viewed child as an autonomous being, who develops with self-motivation and gradually achieves personal fulfillment through its environment. Froebel was the first educator to actively incorporate play into the curriculum, believing that through play, children expressed their deepest thoughts and needs (Kiamili et al., 2007). Also, he argued that play is a biological necessity that brings joy and helps children to explore and understand the world (Meta, 2015). The benefits of engaging in play are numerous, for instance, a child begins to understand both the internal and external properties of things. In this way a child can learn easier about mathematical relationships rather than in a conventional way of learning (S. Pantazis, 1997, p. 61). F.Froebel developed specific educational materials that promoted experiential learning through a variety of hands-on activities.

Froebel's most significant creation: "The Gifts", was not only a series of ingenious inventions, but also practical tools designed to meet children's cognitive and developmental needs. The Gifts consisted of geometric shapes, materials, and textures which could be combined, such as wooden cubes, cylinders, woolen balls, rods, etc. Through Gifts, children would be able to perceive dimensions, sizes, scale, materials and textures, as well as the way they are connected and constrained. The toy-objects contained symbolic meaning, while a child could ascribe to them a multitude of possible meanings (Pantazis, 1997, p. 63). Moreover, F.Froebel via Gifts aimed to initiate children into the natural forms and relationships found in nature (Kokkinaki, 2021). While, from Gifts we can identify a series of forms that have been introduced into the modern design of children's constructions and are widely used today (Georgiadou, 2024· Kokkinaki, 2022).

F.Froebel viewed education through the freedom and autonomy of the individual. Rejecting the teacher-centered approach, which thought as passive for the student, Froebel advocated for free, active, exploratory learning through creative play and contact with nature (Georgiadou, 2024). He believed that life in the universe is unified and that human development as a whole is founded on the principle of unity. The concept of "inner connection" was a key point in the theoretical foundation of the Froebelian system. In Froebel's philosophy, it is important for children to recognize their intellectual and organic connection with the material world (Kokkinaki, 2022). Froebel believed that studying nature helps children understand the world, and thus he established the institution of the "Kindergarten" which was integrated into preschool settings. He argued that when a child plays freely in the ground, it is doing nothing more than seeking its own nature. With Kindergarten he introduced a play-based philosophy viewing children as "plants" in a garden to be nurtured by teachers.

The Montessori approach: “Play is the child’s work”

M. Montessori had a unique approach to children’s play as a learning method. While her system includes many elements that could be described as “playful learning”, she herself did not use the term “play” in its conventional sense. Instead, she considered play to be “the child’s work.” Her main positions on it were: self-directed activity, learning through the senses, prepared environment, practical life. She believed in learning that offers joy and freedom, but she considered it to be meaningful and purposeful work that helps the child discover the world in his own. It is important to recognize that, for Montessori, the primary aim of education is to support the child’s holistic development, intellectual, physical, emotional, and social, allowing it to emerge naturally (Montessori, 1912/1988). This contrasts sharply with most contemporary education systems, which tend to prioritise measurable achievement in academic areas such as literacy and mathematics (Marshall, 2017).

Montessori’s approach is grounded in the idea that children learn better through active engagement with their environment. Thus, Montessori education involves objects, which are carefully constructed and presented to confer specific learning (Lillard, 2013). Play, in this sense, emerges through the child’s (self-directed) interaction with specially designed objects that stimulate curiosity and experimentation. Sensorial materials are reframed not as triggers for pre-existing abilities but as problem-solving tools that enable children to actively construct new knowledge through interaction and experimentation (Moll, 2004). These materials, classified into sensory, practical life, and academic categories, facilitate what can be described as structured play, where the child copies with objects, explores relationships, and refines motor or perceptual skills. Sensory play is particularly central, as it supports the development of intelligence through the cultivation of the senses (Koutsouvanou, 1992). Through tactile, visual, auditory, and other sensory experiences, children construct knowledge in a concrete and experiential manner.

A defining feature of Montessori pedagogy is the concept of freedom within limits, which directly shapes the nature of play. Children are free to choose their activities, repeat them, and determine the duration of their engagement, thereby transforming play into a process of deep concentration and self-regulation. The classroom operates within a framework of “freedom within limit” guided by ground rules that promote independence, respect, and non-disruption, reinforcing children’s responsibility toward themselves, others, and their surroundings (Rudolph, 1993, 40). Via “Children’s House” (Casa de Bambini) Montessori observed a profound shift in child’s behavior characterized by spontaneous self-discipline, deep concentration, and intellectual independence. Designed to resemble a home and adapted to the child’s scale, this environment encourages movement, exploration and spontaneous activity. The accessibility of materials and the aesthetic organization of space, invite children to engage in play-like tasks that mirror real-life situations. Practical life activities, such as cleaning, cooking, or dressing, function as forms of purposeful play, allowing children to rehearse everyday actions while developing coordination, responsibility, and social awareness (Montessori, 1980, 1981). Moreover, Montessori emphasizes the importance of movement and interaction with both indoor and outdoor environments. Play extends beyond the classroom into nature, where children explore, observe, and interact with living systems. These experiences enrich imaginative processes and support a holistic understanding of the world. Also, the incorporation of multiple sensory modalities in storytelling and learning activities further enhances creativity and engagement, demonstrating that play in Montessori education is deeply interconnected with imagination and expression (Foster, 2014).

Montessori lessons are interactive and tailored to children’s developmental readiness, typically involving individuals or small groups depending on age and skill level. Younger children more often receive one-on-one instruction, while older or more advanced learners may work in small groups (Lillard, 2013). Importantly, Montessori redefines the role of the educator in relation to play. Rather than directing or interrupting children’s activities, the educator acts as an observer and facilitator, creating conditions that allow meaningful play to unfold. This approach aligns with the broader aim of fostering autonomous learners who are capable of directing their own development within a supportive environment. Montessori’s contribution lies in bridging the gap between play and education, demonstrating that when children are given freedom, appropriate materials, and a supportive context, play transforms into a powerful form of learning that promotes independence, creativity, and lifelong engagement with knowledge.

Play as a relational and creative process in the Reggio Emilia approach

The Reggio Emilia educational approach, developed in post-war Italy and influenced by progressive theorists such as J. Piaget, J. Dewey, and M. Montessori (Gandini et al., 2015). At its core, the approach positions children as active, capable, and creative participants in their own learning, where play functions as a central mechanism for exploration, communication, and meaning-making. Through play, children engage with materials and their environment, in ways that support the construction of knowledge and understanding.

A central principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is the image of the child as competent, creative, and inherently driven to seek meaning. This perspective is closely linked to the concept of the “hundred languages of children” articulated by L. Malaguzzi, which emphasizes the multiplicity of expressive forms through which

children communicate and think. Via play, as the primary medium, these “languages” are enacted, integrating imagination, sensory exploration, and symbolic representation. Play inspires children to transform materials into carriers of meaning, construct narratives and engage in creative processes that bridge reality and imagination (Gandini et al., 2015, pp. 12–46). Material interaction is central in Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Children engage with diverse materials as communicative tools, using them to represent ideas and develop stories. This process highlights the importance of hands-on experimentation and sensory engagement in the development of thinking, as children construct the meaning, through active exploration (Pound, 2014, p. 52). Materials become tools for exploration and symbolic expression, supporting both imaginative and investigative processes (Rankin et al., 2017; Malaguzzi, 2017).

However, the role of the environment reinforces play. Conceptualized as the “third teacher” the learning space is intentionally designed to promote exploration, interaction, and creativity. The environment encourages play as an open-ended process where objects and spaces can be reinterpreted in multiple ways (Kakana, 2020, p. 144). Children actively participate in shaping their environment and transforming it into a meaningful place, that supports social interaction, experimentation, and imagination (Fraser, 2000; Clark, 2010; Kytta, 2002; Kakana, 2020, p. 150). Play, in the Reggio Emilia approach is also social and interactive. Learning occurs through group interaction, discussion, and the exchange of perspectives, where children negotiate the meaning and co-construct knowledge. The educator plays a crucial role as a facilitator and co-learner, observing, listening, and responding to children’s ideas while encouraging further exploration. As Malaguzzi suggests, educators must “return the ball” to children, in ways that support and extend their play and thinking (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 58).

A key feature of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is also the emergent curriculum, which aligns closely with play-based learning. Rather than following a predetermined structure, the curriculum evolves from children’s interests, questions, and exploratory activities. Play becomes the driving force behind project work (projects), where children engage in long-term investigations characterized by curiosity, hypothesis formation, experimentation, and representation (Forman et al., 2017, p. 380). This process is cyclical and adaptive, allowing children to revisit ideas, refine their understanding, and construct knowledge collaboratively (Stacey, 2020, pp. 40–48, 326).

Moreover, play is closely linked to artistic expression and visual representation. In the Reggio Emilia context, art is not a separate discipline but an integral component of cognitive development. Through drawing, constructing, and experimenting with materials, children externalize their thinking and deepen their understanding. Reggio Emilia emphasize on exploration rather than product, highlighting the importance of process-oriented play, where learning emerges through experimentation and creative engagement (Rankin et al., 2017, p. 435; Forman et al., 2017, p. 393; Gandini et al., 2015, p. 11). Ultimately, the Reggio Emilia approach challenges traditional distinctions between play and education, demonstrating that play is not only compatible with learning but constitutes its very essence within a holistic and child-centered pedagogical framework.

The therapeutic value of play as a medium for expression and healing

Over the past sixty years Play Therapy has become a well-known and popular therapeutic method. Early psychoanalysts, such as S.Freud, A.Freud, and M.Klein, explored the significance of play as a method of psychoanalysis and a way to restore negative situations rather than free association (Bratton et al., 2005; Leblanc & Ritchie, 2001). S.Freud and E.Erikson believed that children have difficulty in expressing certain or difficult events, and that this can ultimately only be achieved through repetition and approaching these events in a playful manner. Play supports the expression of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and problem-solving processes, all of which can be observed through children’s creative and behavioral expressions and are recognized in child psychotherapy research as fundamental to healthy development (Russ 1998; Russ & Schafer, 2006). Moreover, via play a child is allowed to reenact its anxiety and trauma and ultimately, gain control over them (Mulherin, 2001; Freud, 1996). Using the symbolic function of play, children are provided with a means to express their inner world more comfortable and safely since act takes place in fantasy (Schaefer, 1993).

Play Therapy not only uses similar ways of self-expression as in Art Therapy but also requires more active participation, for instance, body movement, character creation or storytelling. These activities could be seen less intimidating for children to explore their feelings, since they look like their everyday play. Play Therapy techniques allow children to engage creating different types of social situations, and express their feelings in a healthy manner (Schaefer, 2016). M.Klein (1997) considers that a child’s free play corresponds to the free association of adults. Through the method of free association, we can reach the source of the conflict after overcoming a series of obstacles. Furthermore, if we manage to interpret the symbols in children’s play, then we may find the cause of the conflict.

Play can become an appropriate therapeutic tool, because of the difficulty of young children to express their emotions through language (Porter et al., 2009). G.L.Landreth (1993) explains how play functions as

children's natural language, allowing them to express thoughts and feelings that they cannot articulate verbally due to developmental limitations. This is especially true for young children and those with limited language or abstract thinking skills. Through play, children can communicate thoughts and feelings more easily than through words alone. Using symbolic expression, such as dolls, puppets, and miniature objects, they can reveal difficult emotions and memories, gain awareness of them, and begin the healing process (Shrinivasa et al., 2018). Selected toys and materials with therapeutic value, help children to express unconscious conflicts through defense mechanisms such as projection, displacement, and symbolization (Schaefer, 1999). Via interpretation, the play therapist helps bring unconscious wishes and impulses into conscious awareness while a child acts and plays (Klein, 1955). The role of educators is very important as well, providing encouragement and support (Augitidou, 2001). The play therapist or the educator, could act either as a co-player or as a partner (Wood & Attfield, 2005). In this way, both therapeutic and educational relationships can create a supportive play environment that fosters expression, growth, and emotional development.

G.Lindqvist and the Creative Pedagogy of Play: integrating aesthetics and Playworlds

The pedagogical contributions of G.Lindqvist, focus on her concept of Creative Pedagogy of Play and the notion of Playworlds. Lindqvist's pedagogy was developed to investigate the role of aesthetic activities in shaping children's play, as well as to examine the intrinsic connections between play and artistic forms such as drama and literature (Lindqvist, 1995, 1996). Influenced by L.Vygotsky's theories of art, semiotics, imagination, and creativity, she conceptualizes play as a fundamental developmental process, through which children construct meaning and develop consciousness (Nilsson, 2010).

Lindqvist's Creative Pedagogy of Play, emphasize the interdisciplinary of the multiple aesthetic domains, like drama, literature, music, dance, and visual arts, into a unified pedagogical framework. In contrast to traditional educational models that often treat aesthetic subjects as fragmented and secondary, G.Lindqvist proposes a holistic and culturally grounded approach in which aesthetic expression is central to learning. Through this integration, children are understood not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in meaning-making processes, actively engaged in constructing understanding through aesthetic and collaborative experiences (Nilsson, 2010). Actually, Creative Pedagogy of Play, focus on the co-construction of Playworlds where children and adults jointly engage in shared fictional environments. Learning occurs through dialogical interaction within spaces that combine a real level of action and an imaginary, symbolic level of meaning-making. The coexistence of these two dimensions enhances children's cognitive and expressive abilities and strengthens their interpretative skills (Nilsson, 2010). This structure closely aligns play with artistic expression, particularly drama, which L.Vygotsky (1971, 2004) linked to imaginative development.

G.Lindqvist further distinguishes two main aesthetic forms of play that form the basis of her pedagogical model (Lindqvist, 1995, 1996). The first form is based on rhythm, music, and poetic expression, while the second is narrative-based and rooted in folktale structures and plot-driven storytelling. Together, these forms underpin the organization of Playworld activities and support children's meaning-making processes (Ferholt & Nilsson, 2015). Lindqvist argues that aesthetic elements such as rhythm and narrative, help children understand and reinterpret reality through imaginative engagement. This process enables the development of cognitive and emotional skills, positioning play as a culturally mediated activity that is central to learning and development (Nilsson, 2010).

The contribution of outdoor play and loose parts in children's aesthetic development

Outdoor free play is widely recognized as essential for children's holistic development, supporting physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth. However, opportunities for such play have declined in urban contexts due to restrictive planning, reduced leisure time, and increased digital media use (Lloyd & Gray, 2014). Socio-cultural factors, including safety concerns, parental overprotection, and structured routines, further limit children's access to unstructured outdoor environments (Birbili & Papandreou, 2020, p. 494). Outdoor free play offers multiple benefits for children's development, including improved emotional well-being, reduced stress, and better concentration (Taylor & Kuo Frances, 2011). Lack of such experiences is associated with difficulties in emotional regulation and negative effects on physical, social, and cognitive development (Lester & Russell, 2008). Outdoor environments also support resilience, autonomy, and self-confidence by allowing children to explore and also take risks (Birbili & Papandreou, 2020, p. 495). Additionally, natural settings enhance creativity, imagination, and problem-solving through rich sensory experiences (Clements, 2004). Children tend to prefer open spaces rather than conventional playgrounds due to greater freedom and stimulation (Shackell et al., 2008).

Historically, children's play was deeply embedded in everyday life and closely connected to nature, particularly in pre-industrial societies where play often emerged through participation and interaction in everyday activities with natural elements (Tedokali-Skourti, 1988). However, modern urban development has led to standardized and less stimulating play environments, often limiting children's creativity and agency (Hart,

2002· Katsavounidou, 2023). In response, alternative approaches to playground design have emphasized the importance of open-ended, child-directed play. Early contributions by Froebel and later innovations such as Carl Theodor Sørensen's "junk playgrounds" demonstrated how unstructured materials and flexible environments can promote creativity, collaboration, and democratic participation among children (Kozlovsky, 2008). The first play structure was placed by F.Froebel in the courtyard of the new founded kindergarten. That "sandbox" can be considered as the first appearance of an organized play space (Katsavounidou, 2023, p. 51). That "sandbox" can be considered as the first appearance of an organized play in school-space. Continuing, C.T.Sorensen's adventure playgrounds redefined the park as a participatory space where children could build and shape their own play environments using discarded materials and tools (Kozlovsky, 2008). First tested in 1943 in Emdrup, Copenhagen, these "junk playgrounds" (skrammellegepladser) promoted creativity, self-governance, and community solidarity, linking play to processes of social reconstruction (Kozlovsky, 2008· Gutman & Coninck-Smith, 2008). Unlike conventional playgrounds, where equipment dictates activity, adventure playgrounds allow children to assign meaning to materials and gain pleasure through agency and environmental control (Kozlovsky, 2008). Their form remains fluid, shaped by site conditions, available resources, and the relationships among children, adults, and facilitators involved in their creation (Diamantouli & Foster, 2020, pp. 306–307). Similarly, A.Van Eyck transformed the postwar urban landscape of Amsterdam through playgrounds that shaped children's everyday lives (Katsavounidou, 2023). Designed as unique site-specific compositions, these playgrounds functioned as neighborhood "nodes" that fostered interaction and creative engagement. Rejecting conventional play equipment, A.Van Eyck created open-ended structures without predetermined functions, encouraging children to activate the space through imagination and movement (Katsavounidou, 2023). Unlike traditional playground apparatuses, where motion is often produced by the equipment itself, Van Eyck's constructions stimulated children's own bodily movement and inventive play (Van Eyck et al., 1962/2008).

A key element in enhancing the quality of outdoor play is the inclusion of loose materials, which support constructive and exploratory forms of play (Maxwell et al., 2008). The selection of materials in spaces designed for free play is grounded in S.Nicholson's (1971) Theory of Loose Parts which argues that children's creativity and inventiveness are directly related to the number and variety of variables present in an environment. These materials, ranging from natural elements to recycled objects, can be manipulated, combined, and reimagined in countless ways, allowing children to actively shape their own play experiences (Neill, 2013). Environments rich in such variables not only stimulate imagination but also foster a sense of ownership, control, and engagement (Birbili & Papandreou, 2020, p. 496).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the central and multifaceted role of play in early childhood, positioning it as a fundamental condition for both development and learning rather than a peripheral or recreational activity. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of psychological, sociocultural, pedagogical, and aesthetic perspectives, play emerges as a dynamic process through which children construct meaning, negotiate reality, and engage actively with their environment. A key contribution of this paper lies in highlighting the intrinsic relationship between play and aesthetic experience. Creativity, curiosity, imagination, and exploration are identified as shared foundations of both artistic expression and playful activity. Within this framework, learning is understood as an experiential and open-ended process, where knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed through engagement, experimentation, and reflection. Theories and educational approaches examined, including those of Froebel, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Lindqvist, consistently affirm that environments which prioritize freedom, material richness, and meaningful interaction enable play to function as a powerful pedagogical tool. Furthermore, the therapeutic dimension of play reinforces its importance beyond formal educational contexts. Play provides a symbolic and emotionally safe space for children to express complex feelings, process experiences, and develop resilience. This highlights its critical role in supporting psychological well-being and emotional regulation, particularly in early developmental stages when verbal expression may be limited.

At the same time, the study draws attention to contemporary challenges that constrain children's opportunities for meaningful play, especially in urbanized and highly structured environments. The decline of outdoor play and the reduction of open-ended, child-directed experiences call for a reconsideration of how spaces for children are designed and how time for play is valued. Approaches such as the use of loose parts and flexible play environments demonstrate the importance of variability, autonomy, and interaction in fostering creativity and engagement.

In conclusion, this paper advocates for a holistic reconceptualization of play as an essential and irreplaceable component of early childhood education and development. It calls upon educators, policymakers, and researchers to recognize play as a core educational principle, to integrate it meaningfully into curricula, and to design environments that nurture exploration, creativity, and well-being. By doing so, we support the

development of autonomous, resilient, and imaginative individuals capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary life.

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