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## ***Development Potential and Modalities of Use of Handmade Toys at Preschool Age***

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### **Extended summary**

For the purpose of this paper, handmade toys are defined as various objects that can be made together with preschool children in kindergartens, as a part of their arts and crafts activities. Such objects can then be used in play, thereby taking the role of toys. If such activities are planned and carried out in a methods-wise adequate manner, inducing children to play, think, explore and communicate with one another, a number of cognitive and developmental objectives are met. The aim of this paper is to research and determine the positive effects that the processes of hand making of toys, and the modes of their use, may have upon the overall development of preschool children, i.e. to determine their development potential, and demonstrate their holistic character. For this purpose, we have defined the following standpoints from which these activities are observed, and which function as pivots for the theoretical foundation of this topic: 1) holistic approach to education at preschool age, 2) integrative approach to arts activities, and 3) child play. Further, mutual connections between these standpoints were established by identifying their common features: child in the centre of the educational process; the importance of senses and of learning by senses; the importance of manual work; and the importance of workspace. In addition to identifying the above mentioned common key characteristics of holistic approach to education of preschool children, and the integrative approach to arts activities, by analyzing manipulative and productive activities and their positive effects on child development within three holistic preschool pedagogical systems – Montessori, Reggio and Waldorf - i.e. the objects and materials for play and learning used and/or made in these systems, it was found that the manipulative and productive activities within all three of these holistic preschool pedagogical systems, which include elements of fantasy and exploration, are very close to the explorative and productive nature of arts activities in kindergartens, which may include making of various objects and toys together with children.

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Creation of connections between the selected theoretical pivots is of utmost importance, since it sheds new light on both the arts activities at preschool level and on the products created, including handmade toys, allowing these toys to be seen as a means of stimulating learning and overall child development.

From the perspective of key aspects of development and of positive effects of arts activities, which may also include hand making of toys, examples of handmade toys and their uses in the education methods practice are shown and analyzed, with the purpose of confirming in practice the initial assumption that these activities, if and when performed in a methods-wise adequate manner, do contribute to overall child development. The given examples are organized according to the type of child play within which they are created and within which they can be used, making it possible to show and point out that the activities of making and using a toy are parts of the same process, that they are complementary and pervading, and it is precisely in this pervading connection that we should look for the possibilities of making use of their full development potential. Based on Sara Smilansky's (Smilansky, 1968) classification of types of children's play, which reflects the degree of child cognitive development, but at the same time – which is even more important for this paper, as its focus is on handmade toys - also takes into account the type of toys, objects and materials used in play, as well as the ways they are used, our selected examples of handmade toys and the ways of their use are presented within four types of play: functional play, conditional play, dramatic play, and games with rules.

The presented empirical research studied the opinions of our kindergarten teachers on the importance of making toys and of their uses, the actual practice, and the problems encountered in the implementation. Descriptive method and questionnaire technique were used. The questionnaire included both open and closed type of questions, and the sample constituted of 397 teachers from kindergartens in various parts of Serbia. The results demonstrate that the teachers are highly aware of the importance of these processes for all aspects of child development, but that their implementation, though satisfactory, does not correspond to the degree of importance professed by the teachers. Results of the research also show that teachers focus more on the aesthetic and exhibitory aspects, and less on the cognitive and functional aspects of making toys by hand. The possible reason for insufficient presence of hand making of toys in our kindergartens could be attributed to the lack of understanding of the nature of arts processes within which toys can be made. It can, therefore, be concluded that the change leading to the advancement of practice of hand making of toys and their use in our kindergartens should not relate to the awareness of the teachers of its importance for the overall child development, since their awareness is quite positive, and presents a solid starting point, but that the quest for change should rather be directed towards the development of programs supporting practice itself.

**Key words:** handmade toys, development potential, play, integrative approach to arts activities, holistic approach to education of preschool children.

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