

## Educational innovation: synergy of Art Therapy and play-based learning in Preschool and Primary School Age

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**ABSTRACT.** The article addresses the issue of integrating art therapy and play-based learning into the educational process of preschool and primary school children. The purpose of this study is to substantiate the concept of synergy between art therapy and play-based learning as a contemporary approach to fostering child development and enhancing educational effectiveness, particularly in the midst of social and crisis-related challenges. The study (a) analyzes scientific and pedagogical literature to clarify the essence of the outlined concept; (b) identifies the most effective forms and methods of art therapy and play practices in preschool and primary education, with a focus on the specific features of rural education settings; (c) presents selected pedagogical cases of applying art therapy-based play technologies in practice, derived from focus group data (teachers, educators, parents of children with disabilities, art therapists, psychologists); (d) proposes an indicative model for integrating art therapy and play-based learning into preschool and primary education, which can be adapted to the conditions of specific crises. The scientific novelty of the study lies in its consideration of the synergy between art therapy and play-based learning in working with children, taking into account the realities of war and the specifics of an inclusive educational environment, particularly in rural areas. The study's results are of practical value for developing innovative educational strategies that promote the harmonious development of children, rehabilitation, and the strengthening of psycho-emotional well-being during the learning process.

**Keywords:** art therapy in education, educational innovation, rehabilitation, play-based learning, preschoolers, primary school children.

# **Inovação educacional: sinergia entre a terapia artística e a aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras na Pré-Escola e no Ensino Fundamental**

**RESUMO.** O artigo aborda a questão da integração da arteterapia e da aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras no processo educacional de crianças em idade pré-escolar e do ensino fundamental. O objetivo deste estudo é fundamentar o conceito de sinergia entre a arteterapia e a aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras como uma abordagem contemporânea para promover o desenvolvimento infantil e aumentar a eficácia educacional, particularmente em meio a desafios sociais e relacionados a crises. O estudo (a) analisa a literatura científica e pedagógica para esclarecer a essência do conceito delineado; (b) identifica as formas e métodos mais eficazes de arteterapia e práticas lúdicas na educação pré-escolar e primária, com foco nas características específicas dos ambientes educacionais rurais; (c) apresenta casos pedagógicos selecionados de aplicação prática de tecnologias lúdicas baseadas na terapia pela arte, derivados de dados de grupos focais (professores, educadores, pais de crianças com deficiência, terapeutas pela arte, psicólogos); (d) propõe um modelo indicativo para integrar a terapia pela arte e a aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras na educação pré-escolar e primária, que pode ser adaptado às condições de crises específicas. A novidade científica do estudo reside na sua consideração da sinergia entre a terapia artística e a aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras no trabalho com crianças, tendo em conta as realidades da guerra e as especificidades de um ambiente educativo inclusivo, particularmente nas zonas rurais. Os resultados do estudo têm valor prático para o desenvolvimento de estratégias educacionais inovadoras que promovam o desenvolvimento harmonioso das crianças, a reabilitação e o fortalecimento do bem-estar psicoemocional durante o processo de aprendizagem.

**Palavras-chave:** arteterapia na educação, inovação educacional, reabilitação, aprendizagem baseada em brincadeiras, crianças em idade pré-escolar, crianças do ensino fundamental.

# **Innovación educativa: sinergia entre la terapia artística y el aprendizaje basado en el juego en la edad Preescolar y Primaria**

**RESUMEN.** El artículo aborda la cuestión de la integración de la arteterapia y el aprendizaje basado en el juego en el proceso educativo de los niños en edad preescolar y primaria. El objetivo de este estudio es fundamentar el concepto de sinergia entre la arteterapia y el aprendizaje basado en el juego como un enfoque contemporáneo para promover el desarrollo infantil y aumentar la eficacia educativa, particularmente en medio de desafíos sociales y relacionados con crisis. El estudio (a) analiza la literatura científica y pedagógica para aclarar la esencia del concepto delineado; (b) identifica las formas y métodos más eficaces de arteterapia y prácticas lúdicas en la educación preescolar y primaria, centrándose en las características específicas de los entornos educativos rurales; (c) presenta casos pedagógicos seleccionados de aplicación práctica de tecnologías lúdicas basadas en la terapia por el arte, derivados de datos de grupos focales (profesores, educadores, padres de niños con discapacidades, terapeutas por el arte, psicólogos); (d) propone un modelo indicativo para integrar la terapia por el arte y el aprendizaje basado en el juego en la educación preescolar y primaria, que puede adaptarse a las condiciones de crisis específicas. La novedad científica del estudio reside en su consideración de la sinergia entre la terapia artística y el aprendizaje basado en el juego en el trabajo con niños, teniendo en cuenta las realidades de la guerra y las especificidades de un entorno educativo inclusivo, particularmente en las zonas rurales. Los resultados del estudio tienen un valor práctico para el desarrollo de estrategias educativas innovadoras que promuevan el desarrollo armonioso de los niños, la rehabilitación y el fortalecimiento del bienestar psicoemocional durante el proceso de aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** arteterapia en la educación, innovación educativa, rehabilitación, aprendizaje basado en el juego, niños en edad preescolar, niños de primaria.

## Introduction

Preschool and early school-age children who have experienced traumatic events, particularly those associated with war, require comprehensive support that integrates both educational and therapeutic approaches (Nazaruk et al, 2024). Traditional teaching methods often fail to address the psychological consequences of stress and loss, whereas modern integrative models contribute to creating a safe and supportive environment without barriers (Piekarski et al., 2025). Among such approaches, the combination of art therapy and game-based learning stands out as particularly effective. Art therapy enables children to express emotions and process traumatic experiences through creative activity (Tan et al., 2021; Wood & Mckoy-Lewens, 2023), while play-based learning fosters cognitive, social, and motor development in ways that are natural and accessible for children (Deboys et al., 2017). The synergy of these approaches offers a robust framework for simultaneous rehabilitation and learning, promoting emotional security, resilience, and self-confidence in children (Prasath, & Copeland, 2021).

*Research objectives:* (a) to analyze the current state of the outlined problem in scientific pedagogical literature and to substantiate the essence of the concept “synergy of art therapy and play-based learning”, (b) to determine effective forms and methods of implementing art therapy and play-based learning in preschool and primary education, with particular attention to rural contexts, (c) to identify key challenges in pedagogical practice through focus groups, (d) to develop a tentative model for integrating art therapy and play into preschool and primary school education, adaptable to crises.

## Research Methods

The article uses the following research methods: (1) analysis of scientific literature to study pedagogical, psychological, artistic, and sociological works on art therapy, game-based learning, rural education, and identification of key approaches and contradictions on this basis; (2) scientific synthesis was employed by integrating findings from various sciences (Pedagogy, Psychology, cultural studies, art therapy) to formulate a new conceptual framework – the “synergy of art therapy and play”; (3) classification and systematization – to identify and categorize and methods of art therapy and game practices for preschool and primary school

children, including in rural areas; (4) a qualitative approach using focus groups was applied to study the synergy of art therapy and game-based learning in rehabilitation and education; (5) pedagogical modeling to develop a conceptual model for integrating art therapy and play into the educational process of educational institutions, as well as predicting the potential outcomes from its implementation, particularly in rural educational schools.

To explore the implementation of the synergy concept between art therapy and play-based learning in rehabilitation and education, we employed a qualitative approach using focus groups. We selected this method to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences, views, and motivations of various stakeholders in the educational sphere. Group discussions allowed us to identify common perceptions, highlight differences, and generate new ideas that quantitative surveys could not capture.

The study involved three separate focus groups formed based on the principle of compositional homogeneity:

1. Parents (n=12) of children aged 5-9, including those who had experience participating in inclusive education programmes.
2. Teachers and educators (n=5) with experience working in preschool and primary education institutions.
3. Specialists (n=4) in rehabilitation, art therapy and child psychology.

Participants were selected based on criteria that ensured their relevance to the research topic. Each group received comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives and provided written consent to participate. Complete anonymity and confidentiality of their statements were guaranteed to the participants.

Focus groups were conducted as online sessions, each lasting approximately 40 minutes. A researcher served as the moderator, guiding the discussion according to a pre-prepared protocol. The study employed open-ended questions designed to facilitate the free exchange of ideas and debate on pedagogical topics. Examples of these questions included: "How do you assess the importance of play-based methods in overcoming communication barriers in children?", "What are the primary challenges and benefits of combining art therapy and play when working with children affected by war?", "To what extent, in your opinion, does the integration of these approaches foster inclusiveness?" etc.

With the participants' permission, all meetings were audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. We carried out data processing using qualitative thematic analysis.

In the first stage, we carefully examined the transcribed texts to identify key concepts. In the second stage, we grouped these concepts into thematic categories reflecting the main markers of the study.

## Research Results

Rural education exhibits several distinct features, including the quality of teaching, personal development, cooperation with parents and the community, the incorporation of ethnographic elements and the natural environment into the educational process, among others (Cox, Sproles, & Sproles, 1988). Researchers frequently associate rural regions around the world with depression, particularly in countries with lower levels of economic development. Limited infrastructure, compared to urban areas, is compounded by additional risk factors, as the prevalence of pests and diseases. These attacks by wild animals, seasonal floods, and unfavourable climatic conditions pose significant challenges to the organisation of schooling (Mhishi et al., 2012). Furthermore, in several post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Romania, rural communities are facing a demographic crisis that threatens the functioning of small schools (Smit & Humpert, 2012). For example, in Ukraine, a particularly urgent challenge concerns the optimisation of rural general education schools, as well as the functioning of individual institutions in small towns (Budnyk, Nikolaesku et al., 2021). The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has further exacerbated the situation by triggering large-scale migration processes that frequently leave villages without schools and qualified teaching staff (Budnyk, 2024). This dynamic undoubtedly affects the quality of education, which in turn shapes the development of villages (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Education and culture form the foundation of rural society, fostering the growth of universal community values.

Despite these difficulties, small rural schools have certain advantages that form the essential basis for our research topic. These include the possibility of individualised work with pupils, including children from disadvantaged families or at-risk groups, as small class sizes facilitate a more personalised approach (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995). In addition, rural areas have preserved the ethnocultural traditions and customs of each nation, as well as folk song culture and crafts, to a greater extent, which makes it possible to utilise them in the education and upbringing of children, in combination with games and entertainment. For example, L. Winkowski (2023) conceptualises cultural canons within the educational framework,

interpreting culture [in our context of a rural region] as “an invisible environment that provides a symbolic foundation for preserving the memory of signs. These signs serve as means of self-expression, understanding of the Other, creative self-transcendence, and the enrichment of cultural heritage for future generations” (p. 7).

An essential advantage of educating preschool and primary school children in rural areas is that it provides opportunities for psychological rehabilitation in a natural environment, which is often more comfortable and safer than urban settings (Reeves & Bylund, 2005). Despite the shortage of qualified personnel and necessary equipment, there are resources available to engage children in extracurricular activities that positively influence their development and provide them with emotional support during stressful situations.

In this regard, one of the priorities of modern educational policy should be to develop strategies to ensure the accessibility and continuity of education for students in rural areas, as well as to overcome the mental barriers that still exist in relation to rural schools (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Innovations, in particular the synergy of folk art therapy and play activities, serve as an effective means to this end.

### **Synergy of Art Therapy and Play-Based Learning in Rural Areas**

Preschool institutions and general education schools in rural areas possess distinctive features. Therefore, the focus of this study acquires particular specificity, as the synergy of art therapy and play-based learning in such a context creates not only pedagogical but also socio-cultural value (Johnson, 2019). This integration fosters an environment in which the educational institution functions as a centre of emotional development, creativity, and play, taking into account the educational cases of the region. After all, rural areas in all regions often face limited resources for implementing such creative activities – a lack of clubs, interest groups, specialised professionals, and appropriate teaching materials. Therefore, we observe a close connection between pedagogical activities and the region's nature and cultural traditions. At the same time, schools and kindergartens play a crucial role as educational centres for rural communities, where space is created for the creative use of art therapy and play methods to support psychological rehabilitation and personal development during crisis.

Consequently, pedagogical practices are closely linked to the local natural environment and cultural traditions. Within this framework, schools and kindergartens play a pivotal role as

educational centres in rural communities, providing opportunities for the creative implementation of art therapy and play-based approaches to facilitate psychological rehabilitation and promote personal development during times of crisis.

It is crucial to highlight the synergy of art therapy and play in rural schools and kindergartens. Favourable conditions exist *for using natural materials*, such as clay, stones, leaves, and straw, as tools of creative expression in the educational process. Equally significant is collective activity, also known as *team building*, which enables the creation of group works, such as mosaics or drawings inspired by local legends. Through such practices, art therapy provides children with opportunities to express their emotions, which is especially valuable in contexts where access to psychological support is limited. Moreover, the use of natural materials encourages play in a natural environment and enhances children's understanding of their surroundings, offering a wide range of possibilities for educational games (Lee et al., 2022). This approach also encompasses nature studies, role-playing games that reflect agricultural processes, as well as the integration of folk games and folklore into the educational process. To this end, teachers engage preschool and primary school children in creative play activities – for instance, encouraging them to make dolls from natural materials and use them to enact fairy tales. An important dimension of such activities is *emotional learning through the integration of art and play* – for example, drawing stories that subsequently come to life in the form of theatrical performances. Collective art projects presented as games, such as creating a wall map of the village or a “friendship tree,” provide children with opportunities for emotional renewal, temporarily alleviating the effects of psychological trauma (particularly relevant in the context of the war in Ukraine, where children experience various forms of distress). Art therapy, combined with play, thus serves as an effective pedagogical tool for both reducing stress and engaging students with disabilities in diverse forms of creative learning.

It is worth emphasising the importance of *introducing folk song culture into the education of children in rural areas*, as it helps preserve national identity and culture. After all, songs serve as a vehicle for historical memory, language, and traditions. Through melody and imagery, children learn to express and experience emotions, as well as socialise in a group setting (class or group) (Hamilton & Murphy, 2023). As an educational resource, folk songs are significant for their ability to convey fundamental values such as kindness, diligence, and love of nature, while simultaneously fostering children's musical ear, sense of rhythm, and artistic skills (Goraya et al., 2025). Group singing also serves as a form of collective play, allowing children

to visualise and illustrate song content, create dramatisations, or accompany performances with movement and dance. Notably, the use of folk songs constitutes an accessible educational resource that does not require complex equipment. Furthermore, rural communities themselves can serve as living centers of folklore heritage, enriching the academic experience of children (Andrews, 2011). Thus, folk song culture in rural education should be regarded not merely as an element of leisure or aesthetics but as a powerful medium for shaping national identity, fostering socialization, and promoting creative development (Franco et al., 2021).

Therefore, rural education has several advantages when it comes to the synergy of art and play in teaching and raising children. First of all, it increases motivation to learn, stimulates cognitive interests in children, and develops creativity and emotional intelligence. At the same time, it is essential to preserve and integrate local cultural traditions into the school's educational process, thereby maintaining the so-called intergenerational transmission of ethnographic elements that are more prevalent in rural areas (Reeves & Bylund, 2005). This synergy of pedagogical tools is also effective for working with children with disabilities, pedagogical rehabilitation, and psychological support for children with chronic diseases or war injuries (Piekarski et al., 2025). In this article, rehabilitation is viewed not primarily as a medical process, but as an educational one. The focus is on adapting the educational process, its materials and methods to the needs of children recovering from injuries or serious illnesses. Rural areas themselves provide a favorable environment for successful rehabilitation, facilitated by practical cooperation among doctors, rehabilitation specialists, teachers, and the child's family to achieve optimal outcomes. The primary educational pathway in this context is characterised by the integration of folk art (including rural artistic traditions) and game-based learning, combined with an individualized approach to teaching, upbringing, and the overall development of each child (Fomin, 2024).

### **A New Approach to Children's Rehabilitation: Combining Art Therapy and Play-Based Learning**

An effective means of supporting the recovery of preschool and primary school children who have experienced crises, including war-related trauma, is the synergy of art therapy and play-based learning within educational institutions (Johnson et al., 2019; Koukourikos et al., 2021). This combination can be regarded as a widely recognized multidisciplinary approach that not only fosters educational development but also contributes to comprehensive

psychological and socio-medical rehabilitation. In the case of children affected by war, such a synthesis integrates pedagogical tools across multiple domains – psycho-emotional, cognitive, and physical.

### ***Benefits of Play-Based Learning for Children Recovering from War Trauma***

In this context, when it comes to integrating art and play-based methods into the education and upbringing of children, it is worth noting, first of all, that artistic activity promotes critical thinking and problem-solving (Using Art as a Tool for Play-Based Learning, 2025). It helps them regain focus, adaptability, and a sense of control after a traumatic experience, thereby promoting *cognitive healing and resilience*.

Engaging primary schoolchildren, especially preschoolers affected by war (Budnyk, Delenko et al., 2023), is essential. Participation in diverse creative activities, such as drawing, sculpting, or creating collages, supports the restoration of fine and gross *motor skills, which may be delayed or impaired due to prolonged stress or relocation*. At the same time, we use game-based tasks that take into account age-specific characteristics (Khadar et al., 2013). Thus, the integration of art and play functions as an effective means for restoring motor skills in children experiencing a crisis. In addition, the creative process has a calming effect. Working with various materials, such as clay, sand, or paint, helps children release muscle tension, manage aggression, and reduce anxiety levels (Bashash et al., 2022).

Art therapy offers significant benefits for children who have experienced war-related trauma, as it provides them with a safe and nonverbal medium for expressing emotions and experiences (Rembierz, 2023). This approach is particularly valuable for children who struggle to verbalise their feelings, since artistic expressions enable them to process complex emotions associated with fear, loss, or displacement, thereby reducing emotional suppression and promoting psychological recovery.

We emphasize the importance of these techniques for providing *a safe means for emotional release and nonverbal expression of feelings* following war-related trauma. Children often lack the words to articulate their fears, pain, and anxiety. As previously noted, activities such as drawing, sculpting, working with sand, and other creative exercises enable them to convey emotions through images and symbols, offering a more accessible and secure form of expression. Educational board games also serve as an effective tool in this process (Mostowfi

et al., 2016). This approach helps to bypass the psyche's defensive mechanisms. By engaging children in a variety of creative activities, whether in preschool, primary, or extracurricular settings, educators activate processes that enable them to externalize traumatic experiences onto paper or into other forms. In doing so, children can gradually process these memories in a safe and controlled environment.

The integration of art and play with children who have experienced war-related trauma facilitates the recovery from feelings of helplessness and loss of control (Budnyk & Sajdak-Burska, 2023). Engaging in various creative tasks allows children to independently select materials, colours, and themes for their work, thereby restoring their sense of control and boosting their self-esteem. This process occurs under the guidance of a teacher, educator, or other mentor, whose primary task is to create a safe educational and rehabilitative environment. Such support contributes to restoring trust in adults and the world in general, which traumatic events may have damaged.

At the same time, such activities mobilize children's internal resources and strengths, helping them to overcome challenges. Each creative work they produce becomes a tangible outcome of their efforts, reinforcing self-esteem and self-confidence. The emphasis on playful methods is deliberate: artistic play encourages children to envision a positive future, fostering self-expression, optimism, and social reintegration (Sitorus et al., 2025).

It is essential to highlight the mechanisms by which art therapy, delivered within the context of game-based learning, facilitates the cognitive development of students by engaging functional brain areas responsible for attention, memory, and spatial cognition (McDonald et al., 2019). In inclusive educational settings, such as for children with post-traumatic disorders, this approach has significant rehabilitative effects, including the restoration of concentration, action planning, and problem-solving skills (Kotyk & Budnyk, 2025). Medical observations further indicate that stimulation of sensory and motor areas through creative activities promotes neuroplasticity, facilitating the formation of new neural connections following stressful experiences (Budnyk & Okliievych et al., 2025).

Many children who have experienced stress, loss of home, or exposure to hazardous conditions exhibit regression or delays in the development of fine and gross motor skills (Hart, 2009). Engaging with brushes, modeling clay, construction sets, and other materials within the art therapy process, when combined with active games, stimulates muscle coordination, tone, and spatial cognition. This method offers a tangible physiotherapeutic benefit, particularly

when conducted under the supervision of rehabilitation specialists and child psychologists. Art therapy delivered through play also helps to overcome communication barriers, fostering an atmosphere of safety and trust (Snir, 2022). This environment facilitates the assessment of psychological conditions, enabling specialists to tailor rehabilitation or educational programs to the child's emotional needs (Toga et al., 2006).

Therefore, the integration of art and play not only supports rehabilitation but also helps children develop an optimistic worldview and regain a sense of joy, predictability, and stability. From a medical and psychological perspective, this approach contributes to the reduction of stress hormone (cortisol) levels and improvements in sleep, appetite, and overall well-being. Additionally, preschool and early primary school children gain experience in safe social interactions within the educational environment, forming a foundation for long-term emotional stability and successful socialization (Somo, 2024).

Below are some of the participants' responses obtained during the focus groups. This provides a deeper understanding of the problem we have identified in the Ukrainian educational context, taking into account current challenges (with an emphasis on inclusiveness and crises, in particular, the realities of war).

### ***Responses of Parents of Children Aged 5-8 Years***

*Father (child aged 8):* 'My son has become noticeably less tense after lessons involving drawing or play. Previously, he would come home tired and anxious. Now, he can express his mood through drawing, which we then discuss as a family. I have observed that this practice helps him manage the stress of the school curriculum, and has contributed to an overall improvement of his mood.'

*Mother (child aged 6):* 'I do not object to games, but I'm concerned that they occupy too much time. Will my child be adequately prepared for school if lessons focus primarily on play? I want them to develop foundational skills such as reading and numeracy, rather than only engaging in drawing activities in kindergarten.'

*Mother (child aged 6, cerebral palsy):* 'Initially, I was sceptical about using games as a learning method. However, after observing my daughter improve her pencil grip while playing with blocks, I realised that it is effective. It's not merely play, it's therapy through action.'

*Father (7-year-old child with autism):* ‘The family initially faced significant challenges, as the school lacked understanding of how to support our son. Participation in art therapy at a specialised centre enabled him to express his emotions constructively rather than through screaming. Currently, he uses drawing to manage his anger. That’s a substantial developmental milestone.’

*Father (child aged 5, with speech impairments):* ‘The primary challenge is the lack of specialists in regular kindergartens, necessitating the use of private speech therapists. Nevertheless, when opportunities arise, we observe that play-based activities help our son overcome shyness and begin communicating, particularly with his peers.’

Therefore, the study indicates that the group of parents is mainly concerned with tangible outcomes and the effects of pedagogical interventions on their children’s behaviour. Consequently, parents of children in regular classes may perceive innovative methods, such as the synergy of art therapy and didactic games, with the expectation of enhancing their child’s overall development, while simultaneously expressing certain doubts regarding potential impact on academic performance.

### ***Responses of Preschool Educators***

‘We have observed that children with special needs respond particularly well to drawing and modelling, which helps them concentrate. However, there is a lack of support, such as teaching assistants, to facilitate these activities without distracting other children.’

‘Play-based learning forms the foundation of our work. However, we have been encouraged to integrate elements of art therapy, which is beneficial, but requires specialised training that we currently lack. Implementing these methods effectively requires psychological expertise, and we are not yet equipped to handle it. Typically, we use art activities (such as appliquéd, drawing, modelling) at regular classes rather than inclusive education or rehabilitation purposes.’

### ***Responses of Primary School Teachers***

‘I try to incorporate game elements into my lessons, but time constraints make it difficult, as some programmes must be completed within the scheduled class period. Art therapy presents

an even greater challenge, as there are no dedicated teaching materials or specialised courses for educators to develop these skills, particularly when supporting children in crisis. Implementation currently relies heavily on pedagogical enthusiasm.'

'I observe that these methods are particularly effective for 'difficult' children (especially those affected by the trauma of the Russian-Ukrainian war). Children who struggle to remain seated in class can better focus on the task when engaged in play. However, practical challenges arise: how can one teacher guide 30 students in sculpting or painting without an assistant, and how can sufficient quality materials – such as clay or paints – be sourced for all students?'

'I have observed that beginning a lesson with a brief art exercise helps children become calmer and more receptive to new information. This practice enhances class discipline and fosters a more creative atmosphere. It really works.'

### ***Perspectives of other professionals***

*School psychologist (1):* 'The synergy of these two approaches is particularly effective in managing emotional "overload". Children who express their fears through drawing are able to discuss them during play, which facilitates emotional openness. However, these approaches remain largely unintegrated into the education system as a whole.'

*Psychologist (2):* 'I believe that stereotypes represent the primary barrier to working with children in crisis. Many assume that art therapy is suitable only for creative individuals and that play-based learning is appropriate solely for preschoolers. In fact, these methods are universal and can be effectively applied across all developmental stages, including during school education.'

*Child psychologist (3):* 'Art therapy and play-based learning are not exclusively for children with special needs. They are powerful tools for the emotional and cognitive development of all children, as they help reduce anxiety, foster creativity and enhance social skills.'

*Art therapist:* 'Art therapy is often narrowly perceived as painting, yet it involves in-depth work with emotions. Play-based learning reinforces these skills through social interaction, functioning as two wings of the same aeroplane for the child. Our responsibility as specialists is to demonstrate to teachers that these approaches are not merely entertainment, but scientifically validated methods.'

*Rehabilitation specialist:* ‘Combining play-based tasks with rehabilitation prevents children from perceiving exercises as routine, thereby reducing stress levels. For instance, a motor skills exercise can be presented as a game such as “Build a tower with Lego”, which children enjoy, leading to improved outcomes.’

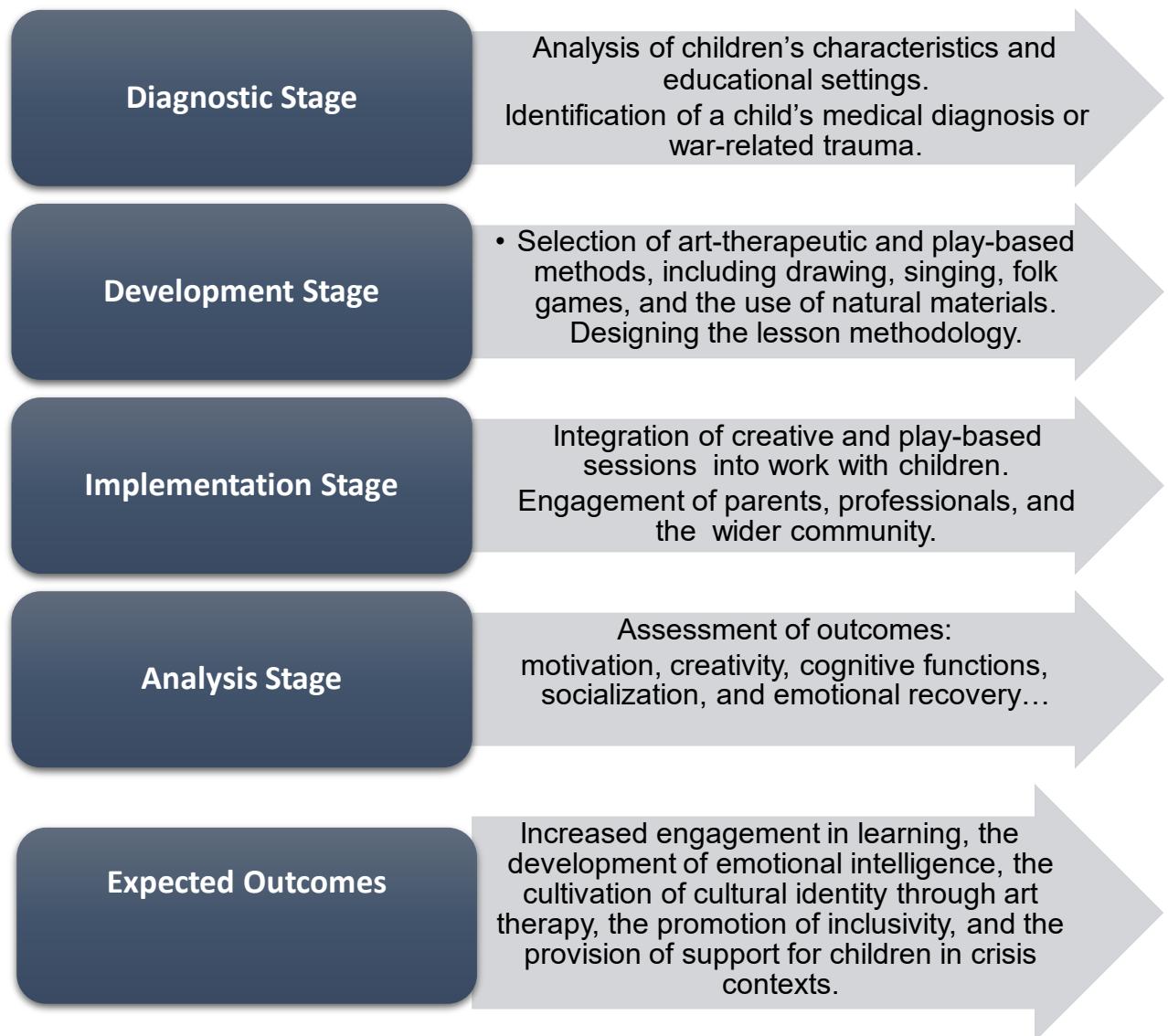
*Methodologist:* ‘The challenge lies in the fact that our educational programmes are overly focused on outcomes rather than the learning process. Integrating play-based and art methods requires a shift in approach, with a greater emphasis on creativity and emotional intelligence, rather than learning. This represents a challenge for the entire education system, and particularly for teaching staff.’

Thus, the responses of teachers and educators in preschool and primary schools indicate that the real situation in Ukrainian education encompasses both successful examples and systemic problems, including insufficient funding, a lack of qualified specialists, and stereotypes about working in conditions of inclusion or war. Additionally, primary school teachers frequently mention practical challenges in implementing innovations. For example, how to ‘fit’ new methods into the current curriculum, how to engage all students, and where to obtain the necessary materials, etc. Overall, the responses demonstrate that the introduction of new methods in regular classrooms generates enthusiasm and raises practical questions that require a systematic solution at the preschool and primary education levels, ensuring continuity.

## **Designing Pedagogical Models for Integrating Art Therapy and Play-Based Learning in Educational Settings**

We applied *the pedagogical modelling method* to develop an experiential learning model of integrating art therapy and game-based learning into the educational process of preschool and primary education institutions, with a particular focus on rural contexts. This model enables the identification of optimal forms of combining creative and game activities, as well as the prediction of potential outcomes of their implementation in rural schools, specifically increased motivation to learn, the development of emotional intelligence, creativity, and social adaptation in children. It is beneficial to combine innovative methods of art therapy and play activities when working with children with disabilities or those who have suffered various types of trauma and are at risk.

Figure 1 – Diagram illustrating the integration of art therapy and play-based learning in a kindergarten or primary school in a rural community.



*Source: Authors' elaboration.*

## Conclusions

The topic of the article is an example of interdisciplinary research at the intersection of various fields of scientific knowledge, in particular: pedagogical sciences (preschool pedagogy, primary education, pedagogical innovation and teaching methods), psychological sciences (age and pedagogical psychology, since art therapy and game-based learning serve as means of

behaviour correction, cognitive function development and socialisation of children), social work, art studies (art therapy is considered as a separate direction for therapeutic purposes).

Based on this research, it is essential to conclude the significance and positive effect of integrating art therapy and play as a potent tool for promoting the psycho-emotional well-being, rehabilitation, and support of preschoolers and junior schoolchildren within the educational process during wartime. In this context, it is crucial to consider the specifics of the inclusive educational environment, particularly in rural areas, with the aim of enhancing learning outcomes. The study accounts for unique needs and contexts, making its results practically valuable for a wider range of educational institutions.

The findings from both theoretical and empirical research indicate that the synergy between art therapy and play-based learning facilitates the holistic development of preschool and primary school children, enabling them to overcome communication barriers, stressful experiences, and trauma related to war. The identified forms and methods of art therapy play practices, along with pedagogical cases developed through focus groups, demonstrate their effectiveness across diverse educational contexts, including inclusive and rural settings. Moreover, the proposed integration model is adaptable to crisis conditions, which makes it particularly relevant in the current Ukrainian reality. The data presented suggest that employing this synergistic approach enhances the psycho-emotional well-being of children.

Overall, the synergy of art therapy and play-based learning can be considered a promising direction in educational innovation, designed to support the holistic development, learning and rehabilitation of children in crisis contexts.

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