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## THE VALUE OF FINGERPLAY AS A FORM OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE CURRICULUM OF THE FIRST AGE PERIOD

**Summary:** *Fingerplay is an ancient form of folk art. Purified in content and form on the way from generation to generation it means universal art form that takes a baby and little child into the world of games, ritual and related arts and culture. In it the various related art forms live on, and in content the fingerplay can be connected with literally all areas of the curriculum for preschool. How can fingerplay in the first age group offer children challenges in the field of art, language, movement, society, nature, and mathematics? What can it contribute to the development of children in their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical fields?*

**Keywords:** *Fingerplay, Cultural Heritage, Curriculum of the First Age Period*

Fingerplay is a basic part of child's folk tradition. It represents the probably shortest and simultaneously the most comprehensive form of folk literature. All nations in the world know it, except Australian aborigines and the Japanese. "Fingerplays are pre-dramatic forms with fingers as players and the hand as the stage, completed within itself and created within the play itself" (Cvetko, 2000, p. 133). In our country this form of folk art is extremely rich: Igor Cvetko states 15 basic types and mentions an enormous number of varieties concluding this, among other things, points to the high age of this kind of child's tradition in Slovenian area. Because of its unique, "archetypical form that tangles the deep(est) layers of human existence and spiritual dimensions fingerplay is interesting as an anthropological (the function of the recognisable in the community), sociological (the social mechanisms governed through it), and psychological (human reaction to it and at it) phenomenon." (ibid.) How can an educator treat fingerplay?

Fingerplay is an important activity in the lives of babies, toddlers, and little children. They play it with the fingers of their bodies, together with adults in their vicinity. Usually these are the parents or grandparents, in preschool the teacher, teacher assistant or another adult person close to the children. The curriculum for preschools the preschool teachers implement through their activities, gives play, thus also the fingerplay, much importance. It defines play as an activity that is performed for the sake of itself, that changes the relation to the reality, is intrinsically motivated, free, open, and pleasant for the child (Bahovec et al., 2007, pp. 86,87).

Let us have a look what in this sense happens with fingerplay. The adult, who takes child's hand into the palm of her/his hand and plays fingerplay with the child, is not engaged with the child with the purpose of nurturing, caressing, comforting or feeding. The child, the baby knows that and reacts in a different way, smiles or laughs and wants more. And more. There is no obvious external reason for "the mouse to cook porridge" on child's hand: the child is not hungry, or lonely, not upset, and is clean. At play the child laughs in a particular way, physically he/she respond not just with the hand that serves as the venue of the play, but also with the whole body, and her/his voice expresses excitement and pleasure. Most often they want to repeat the game and play more and more. The palm of the child's hand converts into playing field and the fingers into a special kind of toys.

The adult starts the play and then the child takes the initiative. The inner motivation and playing the play for its own sake, not for an external goal, the pleasure at performing it, and the transformed, parallel reality, all these are reliable signs fingerplay too is a real play and corresponds to the broad definition of play, also the one provided in the curriculum.

Given that nursery and the first age groups include approximately up to two years old babies and 2 to 3/4 years old little children (Marjanovič Umek in: Djilas, 2013, p. 20), being aware of the important differences between these two groups and individual development characteristics, we will deal with the fingerplay every one benefits from. Given that the development stage of the child is the crucial assumption of the Curriculum and its essential component, it will also seriously be taken account of in the discussed material.

As in play in general, also in fingerplay all the areas of child's development interweave. Child's development is monitored in the social, emotional, motor, and cognitive areas. Let us have a look at the significance of fingerplay in each individual of these areas.

Communication between the child and the adult, their proximity and partnership in the play are great **emotional** potentials fingerplay offers the child and the adult accompanying him/her. On adult's lap, where fingerplay usually takes place, the child feels safe; he/she is closely connected with the nearby adult. Safety is complemented with the excitement at play the latter offers. Let us think the play takes place on child's palm and fingers, that it is about a pleasant physical contact, touch at extremely innervated fingertips. The touch of two hands always has also powerful sensual and emotional context. The range of emotions the child and the adult have experienced up to now, becomes richer with playing fingerplay and the child learns and develops new emotions.

In **social** terms fingerplay is a great opportunity for the child. The child plays the game in two, together with an adult, and in the play it is about a unique partnership. Child accepts the play first, then takes the initiative and shows that he/she wants to play, usually by offering the adult the hand. In the play he/she encourages the adult and determines the level of the temperament of performance (gentle, lively, quiet, loud, with reservations, by petting, clapping hands, tickling). With the responses he/she determines the manner in which they wish to play. Even for when and how to play fingerplay, the child assumes part of responsibility. On their palms the child and the adult create a new world together.

Fingerplay is a precious stimulus also for child's **motor** development. The hand-head link has led to the creation of humankind. The conclusion, lying in the little bed, the baby makes following the little hand with his/her eyes, it actually belongs to him/her, has important consequences. First of all, because the hand moves. The human – the child manages it with her/his will. The child has already experienced before birth that the thumb is a convenient soother diligently practicing sucking. But now the hand with the fingers becomes a convenient tool: the child can shake the rattle and create music, pull the diaper closer up. With the help of the hand, the palm, and the fingers the child begins co-creating the environment. The hand – tool simultaneously also becomes a

means of communication and playing. Exploring the world around, affecting it, communication and play, all this encourages the child to increasingly exact movement of arms, hands, and fingers. In the first play the adult “moves” child’s fingers, later their movement is increasingly in the domain of the child, autonomous. Movement is developmentally conditioned; reacting with the whole body slowly becomes focused on its individual parts. Fingerplay is a way to transfer this focus to the hand and the fingers and to start developing “fine motorics” by playing.

At the **cognitive** level the play widens the player’s world. Fingerplay provides the child, who plays with it, challenges in the areas of mathematics, language, music, society, movement, and, of course, arts. But, before revisiting the Curriculum with its individual areas, in which fingerplay proves to be indispensable, let us have a look at this precious form of folk art in its entirety.

If written, fingerplay is a simple five-line rhyme. Its appearance reminds us of poetry, it most frequently contains unrhymed verse, and if read, we feel a special kind of rhythm. In written form it often resembles dramatic dialogue. “This one says: Let’s drink! This one says: Let’ eat ...” In content each of the fingerplays describe events that follow each other: “This one fell into water, this one took him out, this one carried him into house, this one put him into bed, and this one covered him with a blanket.” It is, then, also about a story. Lyrics, drama, epic, so much is hidden in the five lines. (Sitar in Cvetko, 1996, p. 35-37) Fingerplay is an ancient form of folk art, more precisely of child tradition with which our parents and grandparents had grown up and we pass it on as parents – in the idiom of our home place, which differs slightly from the neighbouring one. Words, however, are just a part of the play. Let us proceed, then, from the record, and play the play. We all know how to play a play. A play has rules, without them it would not be a play. “As soon as the rules of the game fall, the world of the game falls down, the game is over then, the ‘ordinary’, real world is established,” says Paul Valery (Cvetko, 1996, p. 33). We all know, then, when and how to touch a finger, where to stroke, where to squeeze, where to tap, and where to tickle. We know where to create tension, where to calm down. We do not have to do with folklore reawakening of our ancestors’ heritage, but with living folk tradition we implement by ourselves. When playing fingerplay with a child, we are at the fountain of the purest and the most profound tradition. When the little fingers get alive and eat the porridge, we have to do with animation, this being “closely related with animism. The animation of the figure (the finger – author’s note) is simultaneously something material and spiritual” (Hamre, 2004). “It is exactly child’s play, then, that is an aspect of the deepest archaic in the tradition ... It is a bridge between phantasy and reality, the preparation and adaptation of the child to the reality of life.” (Cvetko, 1996, p. 33). When playing a play we are in the middle of life, we are living the reality already. What better

things could we offer a young creature growing at our side? But the mother who plays "Little mouse cooked porridge ..." on her little one's fingers does not think about that. Also the preschool teacher who seeks contact with the child in the introductory period spontaneously holds the child's hand, knowing when they play the fingerplay together, they will become allies in the fight against all fears and difficulties that might frighten the newcomer to preschool.

Let us now have a look at some of the principles that can be implemented playing fingerplay and then move on to the objectives and examples of activities with the first age group by individual areas of curriculum.

The structure of fingerplay itself functions as lens, as a mandala that in a regular pattern projects different forms of the world onto the palm of child's hand. The pattern moreover lives and as such functions together with the sound mandala of the rhythmically arranged words and sounds. As such fingerplay includes and contains several areas of activities and different ways of expression. With it the principle of horizontal integration of different areas of activities in preschool can be implemented.

The curriculum states "child play is the activity that in the most natural way combines the basic principles of preschool education and which, in case it is defined broadly enough in terms of exceeding its involvement in the so called academic or developmental approach in preschool education, is understood as a way of child's development and learning in early period." (Bahovec et al., 2007, p.27)

Fingerplay does not only combine epic, lyric, and dramatic literature; while playing fingerplay we are engaged in different art forms at a time: with fingers we create new visual compositions and spaces, the movement of fingers creates a unique micro-choreography, the fingers act and speak as dramatic personae, and their movement is in reality a simple puppet animation. The words following each other rhythmically, as well as clapping and snapping, are musical elements. Let us go a step further. The child repeats the fingerplay. Frequently they choose special moments for this: changing diapers, before sleeping, after feeding, at the time of relaxed rocking, etc. The ritualised play can get included into everyday, into routine activities, and make them exciting, while on the other hand with the aid of such play the child structures time and time related activities. "The implementation of daily routine must be pleasant and must offer opportunities for socialising, building friendships, for individual interactions, and courtesies." (Bahovec et al. 2007, p. 36). Ethnologists argue that play comes from rituals that have lost their original function, but also that plays as such are actually rituals themselves. Not only do all arts live together here, also rituals and play stand together, hand in hand.

## 1. Art

Given that fingerplay is actually a form of folk art, let us first have a look at what the possibilities of fingerplay are in the implementation of the curriculum in arts as one of the curricular areas. Is it also here about “implementation of creative potential that manifest already in child’s playful exploring and getting to know the world that for her/him is an inexhaustible source of inspiration, motivation, and contents in all areas of activities” (Bahovec et al., 2007, p. 23)? Considering everything told about fingerplay we can respond affirmatively. The implementation of fingerplay “motivates the child comprehensively” moreover, fingerplay as a compressed ancient form of a number of arts in which the child participates as a spectator (listener) and performer at the same time certainly offers “an integrity of experiencing and creating” and therefore represents “an important factor of balanced child’s development and mental health” (ibid.). With this fact we conclude that implementing fingerplay we can also attain the global goals in the area of art: experiencing, getting to know, and enjoying in art is identified with child’s on-going reaction, with which fingerplay is played, and with increasingly engaged and inventive playing at repeating it. With the fingers, which represent the heroes of the story/play and the palm of the hand as the venue, artistic imagination is evident. In playing the play that includes word, movement, voice, rhythm, animation, and choreography it is about learning and practicing each of these arts and of all at a time. Also developing child’s specific artistic abilities is associated with this, which implies besides playing within the rules, the performance always enriches the already attained solutions of creative challenges the play offers the child, and provides new ones; hence also the desire for numerous repetitions of fingerplay. Also the development of expression can be linked with this. Communication with art, though, is actually the essence of fingerplay, as playing it significantly extends the field of communication between the child and the adult and provides them with a common active entrance into the world of art. Given the complexity of the discussed artistic form virtually all global goals of the curriculum in the area of arts can be implemented with fingerplay. In consequence, however, opportunities also open for pursuing more concrete goals. Being aware of the value of fingerplay as a syncretic form of art, fingerplay can be applied in art, music, dramatic and puppetry, dancing, as well as in literary activities. Fingerplay, however, is indispensable in addressing folk art.

Besides the area of art five other areas are present in the curriculum: language, movement, society, nature, and mathematics. “In play different areas of the curriculum interweave and combine in child’s activities, which for the developmental stage and the way of learning in this age period is reasonable and professionally justified.” (Bahovec et al., 2007, p. 27) Fingerplay offers such interweaving. The five lines of words hide different messages, so simple, yet so

universal everyone who plays the play get something for them, both in terms of form as in terms of the way of communicating. Here it is always about a newly established dynamic balance between the prescribed words and movements and their free spontaneous realisation. Enjoying in art offers the amalgamation of different artistic elements (literary, theatrical, choreographic, musical, arts, and acting and puppetry). They all bring the aforementioned hidden, unpronounced messages as a set of action of all of them. On-going emerging of new world out of perfectly usual elements of the everyday that constitute the story is exciting. Transforming the palm of the hand into the stage and transforming the latter into the world fills the actor with the great power of the one who manages this world.

Playing fingerplay allows experiencing excitement at what is happening on the palm and experiencing safety in the dedication offered by the vicinity and joint play. Both co-actors enjoy in all this together. Along with the readily known "what" they are also confronted with "how", the basic question in art.

## **2. Movement**

In accordance with the curriculum preschool teachers with one to three years old children pursue the global goal of awareness of their own body. Following the puppetry principle "pars pro toto", a part representing the whole, then, puts the hand with the fingers into the focus (Sitar, 2012). At first in this kind of concentration the must be assisted by the adult, who with the touch denote the playing field of the fingerplay, the child's palm and fingers, then. They touch them intensely, look at them, and the attention of both, the child and the adult is focused on the palm. The second global goal, pleasure in movement, is realised when the child enjoys in tapping, stroking, squeezing, clapping of fingers and the palm, and the feels pleasant excitement that accompanies certain movements, parts of the play and the tense moments in the play related to them. In the fingerplay the preschool teacher implements the objective of developing finger skills or the so-called fine motorics. From the first beginnings, when the adult practically "animates" the child's fingers, the child becomes increasingly skilful in the fingerplay. From the "material" at first shaped in the sense of movement by the adult, child's fingers become independent players, and child's and adult's play increasingly that of partners.

## **3. Language**

In the area of language the preschool teacher pursues the basic goal: understanding language as the foundation of one's own identity. This goal is characteristic of all the global goals. In the first age period, "which is particularly

important for the development of child's speech, the latter is included in the broad field of cooperation and communication with adults and with children" (ibid.). The curriculum offers language as an object of play. And if words (such as words full of fricatives in the play "Little mouse cooked porridge") are also accompanied by certain movements, they get especially imprinted in memory. But, it is interesting to exchange words, repeat them, to explore their sound on the one side and meaning on the other. The quantity of words in the tiny fingerplay is not large; the repetition makes playing with them possible and facilitates memorising. Also emotional involvement that accompanies each fingerplay contributes to acquiring words. Child's emotional engagement must be added to the range of emotional states in the play experienced both by the heroes – the fingers, as well as by the two partners in the play, who create it. With its assistance new relations get knit between the latter, for which new words will need to be found, etc. The partners develop the vocabulary and mutual relationship in parallel to each other and interdependently. In fingerplay it is about "listening to the language, understanding it, but also about experiencing the language," as this is envisaged in the curriculum. Given that fingerplay is one of the child's/human's first contacts with their culture, this is certainly something extremely important. Awareness about one's own language leads towards other languages. The little children playing fingerplay will not be aware of growing into their culture, but at some later time it will be perfectly clear who has managed to shoot roots in a certain culture and who has not. Belonging to one's own culture and identification with it is, the same as in the language, what understanding others depends on. It is not a coincidence the curriculum mentions "social play, fairy tales, counting out rhymes, limericks, riddles, wordplays, etc. that have survived as common property through generations" separately. How many generations of children before us have put out their hands saying: "This one says let's drink!" and someone close to the one accepted the hand and played on ... Fingerplay has the potential of significantly intervening with the curricular area of society. The child as "part of the social environment in which he/she is growing up, living, and acting" gets the mysterious message in the fingerplay that we can explain if we understand fingerplay also in the way of theatre. In each theatre the stage represents the world. In the case of fingerplay the palm of child's hand is the stage/world. On the stage/world players/puppets appear, fingers in our case. Fingers grow on the hand; they are therefore part of this world. And they have a specially defined place in it. The index finger is always between the thumb and the middle finger. "The child learns that all, adults and children, belong to the society and are important." (Bahovec et al., 2007, p. 34) For the child entering into the world a place has been prepared that only belongs to her/him. This symbolic model of the society assures the children their place in the

family, in the society. It is extremely important for them, who in early childhood depend on the care of others. Playing fingerplay means child's "interaction with the environment, affecting and changing it" (ibid. p. 32). Playing fingerplay in preschool, when the little child needs individual treatment (such as during the daily routine of changing diapers or feeding), for the child and the teacher it can mean a moment they steal from the day for themselves, thus both of them investing into relationship. This is important if we think how much time a day children spend in preschool and how important roles the staff and other children in the preschool play in their lives. "Everyday life in preschool, the daily routine, the rituals, events, daily order, etc. must allow the child the feeling of belonging and create a pleasant atmosphere" (ibid. p. 34). The model of the palm of the hand as the world and of the people – fingers in it described above can already very early present the children their and other (different) families and family communities. The hand with the fingers, which represent the family, e.g. the mums, grandmothers, the child, uncles and the kittens, is very similar on the hand to the one in which a mother, a father, two children, and a dog live. The ones and the others are closely connected with each other and important for one another – they all deserve love and respect. It is the universality of the model that allows the child (and the adult) to understand the concept of family/ society in its essence; and the family is the environment in which fingerplay has lived forever and will live on. It is the best example of "including the child into own culture and into national tradition" (and through this of understanding and accepting other cultures and traditions). In the curriculum its ethnological and cultural value is nicely put as "common heritage through generations" (ibid. p. 32).

#### 4. Nature

Among other things the curriculum mentions experiencing nature in its aesthetic dimension. Fingerplay gets oriented into the miracle of nature, the human hand, with which and on which we create different worlds during the play. Regarding content fingerplay always represent nature and its functioning. The topic of fingerplay manifests life processes and the processes in nature, with which people are connected. A large number of topics are related to food: "This one says let's drink, this one says let's eat. Where will we get it? In mother's chest. And I will tell it all to mummy. Let's spank him. Pets, pets, pets." Or "This one took it to the mill, this one brought it from the mill, this one cooked it, this one blew on it, and this one ate it all." (Cvetko, 1996, here and there) In this case the play is not satisfied with the food being in the chest, it is interested in what way the food is made. Also how the food finds its way out of the body is a manifestation of life and can be found in fingerplay: "This one made a poop, this one swept it, this one loaded it, this one took it away, and this one tossed

it all out" (Cvetko, 2000, p. 27). Also changes are manifestations of life: how bread is made of flour, tasty porridge through cooking, roast of a rabbit, poop of food. The curriculum, however, also envisages a different kind of understanding nature; scientific mind differs from the world of imagination, so familiar to the child, at a very early stage already. Obviously they coexist with each other without damage: "The child gets to know in the imaginary world living beings, things, and substances also have characteristics they do not have in nature." The child knows the little finger cannot eat the porridge and that the thumb cannot make a poop, but this exactly is interesting, funny even. Not only do in fingerplay various arts live together, play and ritual socialise, also science and art exist hand in hand.

If we just stay in the area of science, what does fingerplay offer us? Among the concepts of natural sciences children acquire in the first age period there is also their body, learning about it, care for it and treating it. We are speaking about nature and human body cannot be excluded from it. The hand with the fingers is part of the body, and the body is part of the world, of the universe. Nature outside ourselves can be listened to, but equally interesting is also the one within us. The hand is therefore an object of observation and comparison. What does a human hand look like and what an animal paw? The curriculum suggests for younger children to compare puppies with grown up animals. Would we also compare the hands of a little child with those of adults? How are hands made? Why can they turn around? And from biology a step into physics: what can hands make if put between a light and a white wall? In what ways does the shadow of the hand on the wall behave? And more: what stamp will the hand leave if coated with paint and pressed on paper? And if finger pad coated with colour is pressed on paper? They get a fingerprint. What is a fingerprint like under lens or scanned and enlarged on computer screen? Children discover their fingers are similar, and yet every one different. Science supports social sciences and the already mentioned identity topics. With fingers puppets and riddles can be played: we draw, glue, or put different animals on them. We close the hand. Then we lift the fingers in regular or mixed order. The task is for the children to produce the sound of the animal on the finger. The element of fingerplay, the finger masked and animated like a puppet, becomes a teaching aid, a means for acquiring other kinds of knowledge.

## 5. Mathematics

Counting and fingers have always been related – counting to five, and two times five, and so on in various combinations. The hand is a convenient computing aid in different cultures. Counting and fingers are also related in

preschool. But, dealing with mathematics, let us take things nicely one at a time. The curriculum endeavours intensely to connect mathematics with life, which is natural, since mathematics observes and governs what can be seen in nature. "In daily chores the child gains experience, skills and diverse knowledge about what is large and what is small, of what there is more or less, in what things are similar to each other, what is a whole and what a part, what shape they are, what is within and what at the outside; what is now, before, and after; what are symbols etc." (Bahovec et al., 2007, p. 44). It recommends the adults warmly mathematics should be part of everyday, entertaining. It can be like this also with fingerplay that allows dealing with a number of mathematical concepts and operations. In the first age period children play games in which they perceive rhythm and repeat it. The metric form already, if we understand fingerplay as a song and associate it with music, offers the players patterns not just in speech, but also in music and movement. In the context of fingerplay as an epic form the child "observes and experiences the sequence of events in the story" that always follow each other from the thumb to the little finger or the other way round. Considering the so-called growing type of story the child can "predict the outcome of the story" (ibid. p. 46). The same as the time dimension also spatial orientation is present in fingerplay. The play on one's own body or on hands and fingers as its part enables the child to learn the concepts of left – right (the story always running in this direction). The orientation above – below is usually determined by the relation of child's and adult's hands. Sometimes the adult holds the child's hands from below and with the other hand plays with the fingers from above. The situation can also rotate by 90°, then we play the play in front – behind. If the story of the fingerplay runs horizontally, if the technique requires a vertical, then the stories or plays offer the concepts outside – inside or in – out. "Where will we get it? In mother's chest," or "This one took it to the mill, this one brought it from the mill," or "This one fell into water, this one took him out, this one carried him into the house, this one put him into bed, and this one covered him with a blanket," or "And she broke this one's neck and hid into a little hole." The orientation in – out means changing place, inside is usually a safe interior: house, bed, chest, little hole; while outside there is risk and adventure. Technical moves in – out mean the young player's travel (or the travel of a finger as his representative on the hand) between the safety of the lap and the outer world, where new challenges are awaiting the hero. The journey between the home and the world commences here, just where will it end for the little hero?

Having started with counting, let us also conclude the mathematical chapter with it: the curriculum recommends counting on fingers saying with younger children "it is helpful to use fingers, so the child sees and repeats ...". "Counting with fingers is," to conclude simply quoting the curriculum, "an

important contribution to developing the preconditions for successful addition and subtraction.”

## 6. Conclusion

Child play is limitless and endless. It represents child's cognitive, social, emotional, motor development and the links between knowing and not knowing, the current and the possible, the probable and the improbable. It represents the dialogue between imagination and reality, between the past, the present, and the future, between the logical and the absurd, between safety and risk. (Marjanovič Umek, Zupančič, 2001). With the awareness that in fingerplay, this special cultural phenomenon, it is not just about the five lines, but about a whole universe of possibilities, the adult can offer the child numerous challenges in all areas of development. The curriculum offers several reasons, but also forms what to do – it depends on the playing partners, who play the play, how. This ought to become part of “the strategies that assist the child to come forward in the development and in learning, in the zone of proximal development to move from the current to the potential development” (Marjanovič Umek, 2013, p. 25), to get anchored in their culture, to build their identity, but first of all to live a rich and creative life with the environment they are situated in.

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## VRIJEDNOST PRSTNE IGRE KAO VID KULTURNOG NASLIJEĐA U KURIKULU PRVE GODINE ŽIVOTA

**Sažetak:** *Prstna igra drevni je oblik narodne umjetnosti. Pročišćena i sadržajem i oblikom s koljena na koljeno, ona predstavlja univerzalni oblik umjetnosti koja bebu i malo dijete uvodi u svijet igara, rituala i s njima povezanih umjetnosti i kulture. U prstnoj igri nalaze se različiti oblici umjetnosti, a sadržajem ona se može povezati s doslovno svim područjima predškolskoga kurikula. Kako prstna igra može ponuditi u prvoj godini života izazove u području umjetnosti, jezika, pokreta, društva, prirode i matematike? Kako može doprinijeti emocionalnom, socijalnom, kognitivnom i fizičkom razvoju djeteta?*

**Ključne riječi:** *prstna igra, kulturno naslijeđe, kurikulum prve godine života.*