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TEACHER READINESS TO IMPLEMENT LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN UKRAINIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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The article examines the problem of teachers' professional readiness to implement play-based, activity-based learning methods and the "learning through play" approach in Ukrainian primary schools in the context of holistic reform of school education - the introduction of the New Ukrainian School Concept.

The modern school reform, which was introduced in 2018, brought changes to all aspects of education in Ukraine, however, it was mainly focused on the approach of teaching and learning. A new educational strategy based on the integrative approach of "learning through play", which combines the principles and methods of active learning, experiential learning and guided discovery learning, inquiry learning, problem-based and project-based learning, and Montessori pedagogy, was introduced in the professional activity of primary school teachers.

The results of the conducted research indicate that the vast majority of interviewed Ukrainian primary school teachers showed an insufficient level of professional readiness for the introduction of play-based and activity-based learning methods due to: a negative attitude to play in education; their insufficient awareness of the developmental, didactic and other functions of the play in the comprehensive development of a person at all stages of his/her life; the dominance of an authoritarian style of communication with students, etc. It was found, that there is an apparent contradiction between the predominantly high level of self-esteem of primary school teachers of their own readiness to implement play-based learning methods and a negative attitude towards the need to change their professional activity.

The difficulties, revealed by the results of the research, provide the basis to make corrections in the system of higher and postgraduate pedagogical education in order to develop Ukrainian school education based on the principles of priority of the individual needs of the child, the competence approach, partnership and a safe educational environment

Keywords: primary school, school reform, professional readiness, professional identity, learning through play

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1. Introduction

In 2018, the New Ukrainian School reform was implemented in Ukraine, starting with children in the first year of primary school. This reform introduced profound changes in all aspects of schooling in the country, from the traditional approaches to classroom layout to the way teachers and students interact in a classroom setting. The main changes, however, are linked with the approach to teaching and learning in Ukrainian primary schools. The New Ukrainian School reform upholds learning through play as the pedagogical approach to be adopted in primary schools. Teachers, the vast majority of whom have either been trained in the old Soviet Union model or have been students themselves in the same model, had access to in-service teacher professional development in order to adapt their teaching methods and educational philosophies to the new school reform. In-depth in-service teacher professional development to implement this new pedagogical model was developed across all of the 25 regions of Ukraine in an effort from the government to upskill and reskill primary school teachers. Nevertheless, the success of this reform depends largely on teachers' readiness to implement learn-

ing through play in primary school contexts since a change in behaviours does not necessarily ensure a change in knowledge and attitudes. Given the particular context of Ukraine as a former Soviet Union country, teacher readiness to implement learning through play may prove more difficult to attain. This research paper reports on a preliminary study of the readiness of primary teachers in one region of Ukraine to implement learning through play.

Our paper is organized the following way. We start with discussing the New Ukrainian School reform and the implications it has for teaching and learning in Ukraine. We then discuss the concept of Learning through Play in primary school and the tensions and opportunities it brings for teachers. We follow this discussion with a brief introduction to the specific context of Ukrainian teachers and their models for professional identity. We then present the methods for data collection, followed by a presentation and discussion of results. We conclude the paper with further directions both for research and for teacher professional development in Ukraine.

Following a global movement for innovative educational reforms [1], Ukraine began to map out educa-

tional reforms, which were marked by the adoption of the new Law of Ukraine On Education and the adoption of the New Ukrainian School reform. Main components of the New Ukrainian School Concept became such as the new content of education based on competence approach, the new school structure (primary school – 4 years, basic secondary education in gymnasium – 5 years, specialized education in lyceum – 3 years), decentralization and a new approach to school management, school and teacher autonomy, the new educational environment (colorful, flexible, comfortable for children and teachers) [2].

In the beginning of the academic year 2018, all Ukrainian first-graders started primary school education under the new State Standard of Primary Education. This regulated a new educational space, which focused on the development of key competences and learners' transversal skills; prioritised the child's individual needs; advocated for a partnership between teachers, students and parents; and promoted a safe and stimulating educational environment. One of the key characteristics of the New Ukrainian School reform is the centrality of the role of the teacher. The New Ukrainian School teacher is described as a pedagogically independent professional who can design and support the pedagogical activity (including creating his/her own lesson and unit plans and choosing which teaching materials to use) and can scaffold child development. The New Ukrainian School teacher is also proactive and motivated professional who can plan his/her own professional development and activities within the boundaries of specific content and skills each year group should attain.

The New Ukrainian School reform proposes child-centered pedagogical approaches to foster children's holistic skills development. Child-centered pedagogies are strongly associated with the characteristics of playful environments that lead to learning [2]. Primary school teachers in the New Ukrainian School context are urged to use child-centered, integrated, pedagogies, which broadly map out to what is described in a white paper, published in 2019 on learning through play at school [3]. These integrated pedagogies, such as active learning, cooperative and collaborative learning, experiential learning, guided discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning and Montessori education, respond to a need to develop social, emotional, physical and critical thinking skills, which are essential in a globally challenging world [3].

2. Literature review

Recent research demonstrates the influence of learning through play on children's development, particularly in what concerns their holistic development [4]. Learning through play ensures the development of children's social, emotional, physical and creative abilities, as well as of their academic skills [5]. Play creates a positive emotional background in the classroom, ensuring children's intellectual achievements and emotional well-being [6]. Research on learning through play to foster children holistic development is based on Vygotsky's theories. Vygotsky noted that playing is a source of development as it creates a zone of proximal development: actions in the imaginary space, the creation of an arbitrary intention, volitional motives – all are

integral parts of the process of playing and connect play to what Vygotsky called the highest level of development [7]. When children reach school age, playing does not die away, but penetrates the attitude to reality. During the middle infancy years, play has an intrinsic continuation in school education and in work and new correlations between the semantic field and the real situation are created through play [7].

The introduction of playful pedagogies in primary school classroom contexts poses specific challenges for teachers. Teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the subject matter to be able to adapt to teaching the curriculum in a playful way. Teachers also need to understand how these pedagogies work, so as to ensure the necessary steps are taken to develop children's holistic skills. To do this, teachers need to be able to access professional development to become empowered and confident enough to readjust their practices [3]. Research shows that the introduction of innovations in educational practice is mainly complicated by teachers' reluctance to change their conceptions of teaching and learning rather than by general resistance of the schools' inability to change [6]. The transition from the traditional school pedagogy to play-based teaching methods requires additional professional development and additional resources [8, 9]. The findings of recent studies indicate that the implementation of play-based teaching methods in primary school in different countries faces significant difficulties due to the teachers' reluctance to accept the educational functions of playing [10].

Thus, researching teachers' readiness for the implementation of play-based teaching methods and teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards play-based learning gains particular importance, particularly as there is very limited research on this topic [3]. In what concerns the Ukrainian context, this paper is the one of the first studies.

For most teachers, changing their professional identity is a complex and multifaceted process. In the Ukrainian context, this is particularly relevant as most teachers were affected in some manner by the Soviet Union school model. This model was oriented towards shaping academic knowledge and skills at traditional 'chalk and talk' lessons within a 'teacher as sage in the stage' model. The Soviet school suggested the observance of strict rules both by the teachers and by the students: autonomous behaviour of children in the classroom was unacceptable, and noise in the classroom was an indicator of the teacher lacking professional competence. Most teachers had an authoritative style of interaction and communication with students, which was determined by the state educational policy, school environment, and the then dominating prescriptive pedagogical paradigm.

According to Elkonin [11], the Soviet era pedagogy was very conservative and standardized, which was reflected in the fact that teachers had no autonomy to choose a teaching tool or method; there existed a very rigid pace-setting of the curriculum, i.e., the State controlled the order, in which programmatic contents were taught and the time teachers could spend in each unit of the curriculum; and a State-controlled monopoly right to compile new teaching materials. Classroom

interactions in a typical Soviet school consisted of the following units:

1) the teacher imparted content knowledge upon the students, students received the information, tried to understand and remember what the teacher taught;

2) the teacher offered a number of typical tasks, at times offering a simple example of how to solve the task, and the students reproduced this exercise or tried to apply the knowledge independently in solving a relatively simple problem [11]. The dominant methods were information-receptive and reproductive.

Lerner [12] presented the following issues as the main problems of Soviet and post-Soviet school education:

- Inadequate content that did not meet the needs and age level of the students;

- Very limited individualization and differentiation of teaching, which lead to a generalized teaching approach and produced low academic results;

- Consumer attitude to knowledge as a source of future commodity (usually seen as the gateway to a desirable profession or career), which leads to rote memorization of information by students;

- Underestimation of the emotional-value factor in human activity and in the content and process of learning.

- Insufficient level of professional competence of teachers, which is reflected in insufficient motivation for exerting a proactive pedagogical activity.

- Low level of teacher knowledge of psychological or child psychosocial development;

- Predominance of an explanatory and reproductive approach (a sage on the stage approach) that disregards inquisitive, research-based teaching.

- Authoritarianism in communicating with students [13].

So far, the situation has not been changed greatly in what post-Soviet Union countries are concerned, and, in the Ukrainian context. This is evidenced by the results of studies of the peculiarities of Ukrainian teaching [14]. Ukrainian teachers evidence a low level of collegiality and collaboration. Co-teaching with other teachers in the same classroom is virtually inexistent, engaging in collaboration between different classes and age groups (such as collaborative projects) is very uncommon, team supervision of other teachers to provide feedback is perceived by a high number of teachers as a threat to their professional identity. The low level of team collaboration of teachers has a negative effect on the teamwork of students and on the interdisciplinary partnerships between different schools, which is virtually inexistent. Rote learning prevails among the preferred teaching methods in Ukrainian schools [14]. This recent evidence shows that the situation has not changed much since the independence of the country, as is confirmed by our experience of interacting with primary school teachers within the system of in-service teacher professional development. Research has also found that every third Ukrainian teacher feels emotionally exhausted, one in five feels physically exhausted, irritated or angry [15].

Therefore, the study of teachers' readiness to work according to the principles of the New Ukrainian School Concept in general and to implement play-based learning methods, the "learning through play" (initiated by The LEGO Foundation) in particular, is absolutely necessary.

The results of this study create a foundation for finding optimal ways of quality education and professional support for teachers in modern conditions, in the conditions of European education.

3. The aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this research is to ascertain the readiness of primary school teachers for the implementation of play-based teaching methods that are required by the New Ukrainian School reform.

To achieve this aim, it is necessary to solve the following tasks:

1. To analyze the components/levels of the readiness of primary school teachers for the implementation of play-based teaching methods.

2. To define general characteristics of primary school teachers' readiness for the implementation of play-based teaching methods.

3. To identify primary steps of developing the readiness of primary school teachers for the implementation of play-based teaching methods (learning through the play approach).

4. Materials and methods

The study is based on the following assumptions:

- most of Ukrainian primary school teachers have an insufficient level of professional readiness for the implementation of play-based teaching methods, which is manifested at the axiological, cognitive and praxis level;

- primary school teachers' low level of professional readiness for the implementation of play-based teaching methods is primarily due to their negative attitude to learning through play and the authoritative style of interaction with students.

In order to understand Ukrainian teachers' professional readiness to implement learning through play in primary schools, we adopted an analytical model, developed by Gura [13], which takes into account both the teachers' psychological state, and the teachers' professional competence as a specialist pedagogue that has the ability to effectively implement learning through play. This model includes several axes as demonstrated by the Fig. 1:

- 1) axiological (attitudes towards to play, play-based teaching methods, interests, motivation of pedagogical and play-based activity and professional development, awareness of one's own play experience, etc.);

- 2) cognitive (knowledge of the features of children's play activity, play strategies, awareness of the advantages of play-based teaching methods);

- 3) praxis (the ability to design the child's playing activity and support it, the ability to integrate play in the didactic process, communicative skills – democratic communication style, etc).

This research on primary school teachers' readiness for the implementation of learning through play was conducted among teachers of Southern Ukraine (Zaporizhzhia Region) in 2018. Participants were given participant information sheets, detailing the aims and methodology of the research, and signed consent forms for participation in the research were collected. Surveys were anonymous and classroom observation notes were also anonymised by observers before being handled by the research team analysing them. Ethics compliance and

data management were ensured by the Zaphorizhzhia Regional Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education. The sample was representative with 41 % (n=627) of all teachers from the Zaporizhzhia Region responding

to the questionnaires, which ensures reliability of results (confidence level 99 %, 1 % deviation). The professional experience of teachers surveyed ranged between 1 and 43 years and teachers' age ranged from 19 to 69.

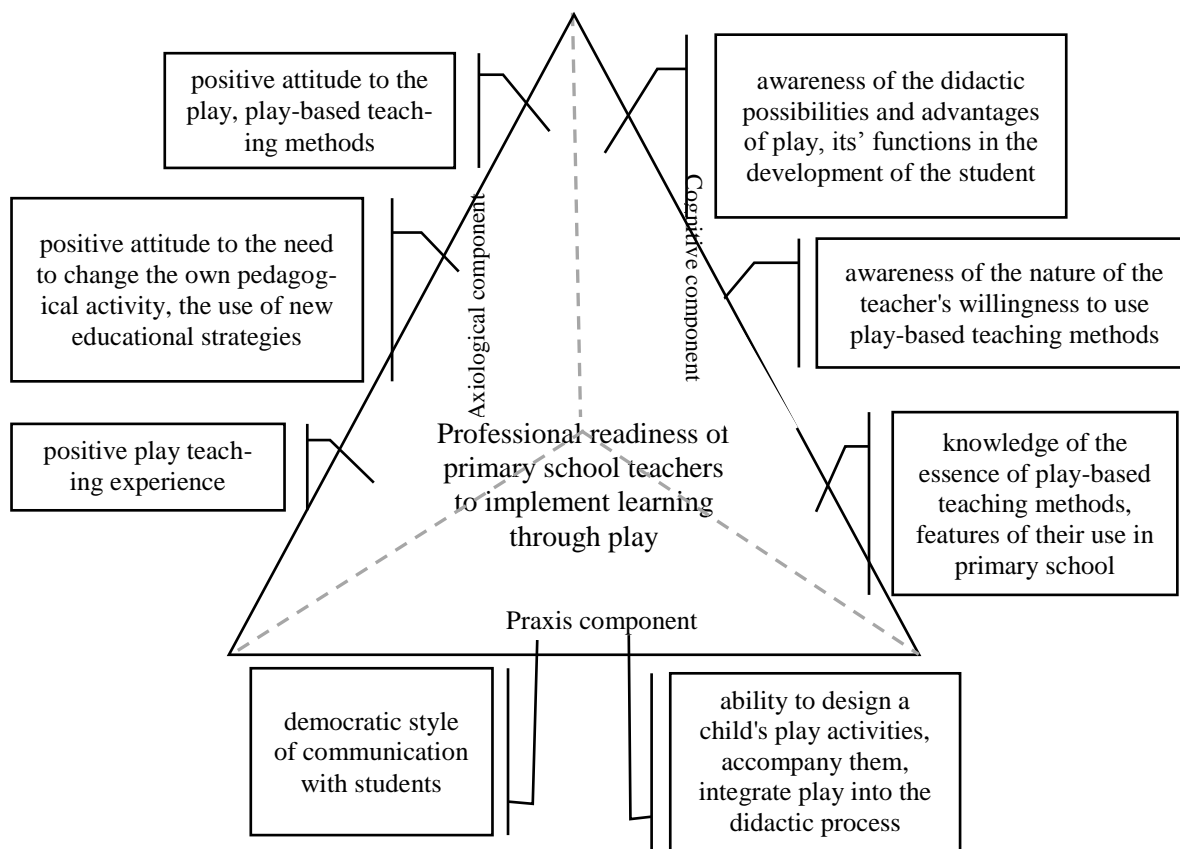


Fig. 1. Teacher's professional readiness for the implementation of learning through play

The socio-demographic and professional profile of the teachers who participated in the study is similar to the results of the All-Ukrainian Monitoring Survey of Teaching and Training among Principals and Teachers of General Educational Institutions (TALIS methodology) [14].

The methodology, used in this research, was a mixed one, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Paper questionnaires were distributed to all teachers in the region. Statistical analysis software – SPSS18 – was used for statistical analysis of results.

The diagnostic tools comprised of a complex range of methods, including:

– Teachers' self-assessment questionnaire to ascertain both participant teachers' readiness to implement learning through play and the level of teachers' awareness of the pedagogic functions of playing, and professionally relevant qualities for its implementation in primary school.

The questionnaire included both open-ended questions and close-ended questions for self-assessment with a 10 point Likert-type scale. Examples of both open-ended and closed ended-questions are provided in Table 1. The questionnaire was designed for this research and was piloted.

Table 1

Examples of items in the teacher self-assessment questionnaire

Open-ended questions	Closed-ended questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do you think that play-based teaching methods are an effective way of shaping primary schoolchildren's academic skills? – What professional qualities do you think a teacher should have in order to successfully apply play-based methods in the educational process? – What measures should be taken in the first place for you to successfully implement the "Six bricks" competence-based teaching method? – What are the main difficulties that may prevent you from effectively applying play-based methods in the educational process in primary school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Rate the potential developmental capacity of play-based teaching methods for a primary schoolchild; – rate the potential didactic capacity of play-based teaching methods for a primary schoolchild; – rate your general readiness to implement play-based activities; – rate your general readiness to change your own teaching activities; – implement new teaching forms and methods; – communication with students; – organization of the educational space;

– A questionnaire to ascertain teacher's psychological profile [16] aimed at identifying basic professional qualities of a teacher, including a self-assessment of prioritized values, psycho-emotional condition, style of teaching and interaction with children, the degree of subjective control and job satisfaction. The "teaching style" scale was of primary academic interest during the processing of initial data; it helped to define the dominant style of teachers' interaction with children. The styles that this questionnaire analyses can be typified as democratic, authoritative, or *laissez-faire*. The method was validated and tested in educational institutions in post-Soviet countries [17]. The method is of developmental nature, since it activates the mechanisms of the teacher's self-reflection and realization of the cause of his/her own professional difficulties;

– Expert classroom observation of a 40-minute-long lesson performed with the help of a supervision map designed for this study. This supervision map was developed to define the features of primary school teachers' implementing learning through the play approach, their attitude to playing in learning, the use of LEGO playsets in the educational process, the use of other innovative didactic and developmental techniques in the educational process, as well as the interaction between teachers and pupils during the lesson. The expert evaluation was carried out by specially selected and trained experts who were experienced professionals in the field of primary education and certified coaches in training teachers for the implementation of the NUS concept and learning through the play approach in Zaporizhzhia Region. All experts have been trained under the guidance of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and entered into a special national register of supervisors (Order of the Ministry of Education and Science No. 890).

The Pearson's correlation coefficient was used for statistical analysis of the obtained data, measuring the degree of dependence between them.

5. Results and discussions

After the data analysis we obtained the following results.

In the opinion of the majority of teachers (87.8 % of teachers in our sample), playing in general has a high potential development capacity for the holistic development of primary school children. Only 12.2 % of the surveyed teachers rated the developmental capacity of play as average.

With regards to the pedagogic capacity of playing in general in primary school, the following results were obtained: 36 % of teachers consider it low, 21 % below average, 28 % average, and only 15 % high. This result confirms an international trend of teachers' distrust towards play-based methods in the educational process and their unawareness of the role of play in the students' learning [18].

As a result of observations, a negative attitude of teachers to learning through play and views about the appropriateness of play-based methods only in pre-school education were reported. It was mentioned by 32 % of teachers, and 15 % were concerned about the potential significant decrease in students' academic performance in case of using play-based methods in the

educational process. The question "Do you consider play-based teaching methods an effective means of shaping academic skills in primary schoolchildren?" was answered negatively by 28 % of teachers who, in some cases, added additional comments and justified their answer as follows: "school is for learning, not for playing", "they play at kindergartens", "they play in their computers and phones at home", "play require a lot of time, which we do not have", "one cannot teach to count, write or read through play", "we didn't play in Soviet times, and we had the best education", etc.

As a result of the awareness of the difference that the New Ukrainian School reform brings to primary schools in Ukraine, 68 % of primary school teachers in our sample are aware of the need for specialized training for the implementation of learning through the play approach in primary school.

The majority of primary school teachers assess their own readiness to implement a play-based approach in education as average (46 %) or high (37 %), whereas 27 % of teachers stated a low level of readiness. However, 32 % of the surveyed teachers expressed unwillingness to change their own pedagogical activities (implementation of new teaching forms and methods, communication with students, organization of the educational space) and a negative attitude to the need to change its usual routine.

According to teachers in our sample, creativity is among the main professional qualities that a primary school teacher has to possess in order to successfully implement play-based techniques in the educational process (97 % of respondents). Around 48 % of the participants mentioned this professional trait as the only necessary skill a teacher should possess to implement learning through play successfully in primary schools. Other professional qualities, mentioned by participants, include willingness to work (9 %), motivation (9 %), tolerance (4 %), inspiration (4 %), power of observation (3 %), initiative (2 %), mobility, knowledge of children's age-specific characteristics, sociability, and honesty (less than 1 % of respondents).

One of the pedagogic instruments, introduced by the New Ukrainian School reform as a potential mechanism to introduce more active and child-centred pedagogic interactions in schools, is "Six Bricks". In what concerns the use of "Six-Bricks" as a pedagogic tool, the surveyed teachers mentioned the following implementation factors as having impact on their experience of using this tool: being able to try the tool before bringing it to classroom context (89 %); readily available methodological literature and guidebooks (60 %); the potential inclusion of a course on this topic in advanced training programs to help teachers use the tool in the classroom context (42 %); opening a pedagogical workshop or a creative studio (12 %); dedication of time to get familiar with the technique (6 %); watching video materials with other teachers' experience (3 %).

Still taking into account implementation factors, teachers in our sample stated the following main difficulties that may prevent from effective implementation of learning through play in the educational process in primary school: classroom management (61 %); lack of sufficient play materials (insufficient material supplies)

(60 %); large number of students in a class (32 %); lack of compliance with the existing requirements to the assessment of school children's academic performance (32 %); time limitations (23 %); noise in the class (23 %); lack of understanding with the methodology specialist, school leadership team (2 %). Around 12 % of teachers stated having no difficulties in the effective implementation of play-based techniques.

According to teachers, the main difficulties, preventing them from using LEGO playsets, another pedagogic instrument, introduced by the New Ukrainian School, in the educational process in primary school include: noise in the class (60 %); large number of students in a class; inappropriate educational environment in the classroom (slanted desks, no room for a carpet, no open space for teamwork) (32 %); need for regular sanitary treatment of bricks (12 %); children's distraction from the teacher's task (9 %); complexity of work organization in a group with inclusive learning (2 %).

In what concerns the diagnostic of the dominant style of teachers' professional communication based on the *Teacher's psychological profile*, developed by Rezapkina [16], our results testified to the authoritative tendencies in their interaction with children (39 %), which is manifested in the desire for strict management and control over the students' activities during classes and breaks, rejection of students' initiatives, a feeling of superiority from the teacher in the communication with children, confidence in the student's inability to be organized and responsible for their learning, cognitive and communicative egocentrism.

The democratic communication style (respectful attitude of teachers towards children, taking into account their needs in the organization of the educational process, focus on the development of children's activities, and their involvement in joint activities, openness in communication, awareness of the need to receive feedback from children) was identified in 51 % of the surveyed teachers.

Features of the liberal style, which is determined by the teacher's tendency to avoid decision-making, unsystematic organization and control over the students' activities, dissatisfaction with his/her performance, and feeling of dependence on others, were identified in 10 % of teachers.

The comparison of survey results based on the Teacher's psychological profile [16] and the results of the expert evaluation, obtained through the observation of teachers' pedagogic style at a lesson, confirmed the initial hypothesis regarding the dominance of the authoritative style of teachers' professional communication.

The results of the correlation analysis of obtained data revealed a stable correlation between:

1) teachers' awareness of their need for a special training for using learning through the play approach in primary school and their readiness to use play-based teaching methods (Pearson's $r=0,88$, $p=0,05$);

2) the degree of readiness of teachers to use play-based teaching methods and willingness to change their own pedagogical activities (Pearson's $r=0,74$, $p=0,05$).

6. Discussion

Our analysis suggests, then, that the surveyed Ukrainian primary school teachers who feel ready to

implement learning through play in their teaching understand the need to have professional development, targeted at improving their pedagogic skills. The results also suggest that teachers who are more willing to change their pedagogic practices are also more open to introduce learning through play in their teaching.

In addition to this, a strong negative correlation was found between the dominant style of teacher communication and his/her evaluation of the pedagogic abilities of playing ($r=-0,63$, $p=0,05$), i.e., the more teacher-child communication becomes authoritarian, the less the teacher has confidence in play-based methods.

Therefore, the results of the study indicate that the majority of the surveyed Ukrainian primary school teachers have a low level of professional readiness to implement learning through play methods, which is reflected in the underdevelopment of their axiological, cognitive and praxis components.

Our analysis allowed us to identify the characteristics of the axiological component of the professional readiness of primary school teachers to implement play-based teaching methods. On the axiological level, our results indicate that the teachers in our sample have an ambivalent and expressly negative attitude to play in learning, relegating play exclusively to pre-primary school levels and having set beliefs that learning through play will impact negatively on the academic performance of primary school children, thus not acknowledging the effectiveness of learning through play in primary school. Our results also indicate that the teachers in our sample largely present resistance to change their own pedagogical activity as a result of mandated implementation of different, and in many instances, new pedagogical approaches. These results show that the teachers who were part of our study feel that the introduction of learning through play pedagogies is an axiologically different concept to the traditional pedagogies they have acquired through their teacher professional development. This presents axiological difficulties, since teachers are being asked to introduce pedagogies that are alien to the practices they have held as traditional and effective throughout their careers and that are usually perceived as being a dichotomous concept to what learning really is.

Our analysis indicates that the characteristics of the cognitive component of professional readiness to implement learning through play are deeply linked with a lack of understanding of the didactic and pedagogical possibilities of learning through play. Teachers in our sample are not aware of the impacts of learning through play in the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development of primary school aged children. In addition to this, also on a cognitive level and deeply linked with the axiological level, we have found that the teachers in our sample do not understand how and when teachers can use learning through play in their classrooms.

Our results indicate that the dominance of the authoritarian style of communication in the interaction of teachers with students is a prevalent element of the praxis component of our model.

The expressed discrepancy between the overall high level of teachers' self-assessment of their readiness to implement learning through play and the negative

attitude to the need for changing their own professional activity also confirms our initial assumptions.

These results show a tendency, well recognised in the research, for teachers to perceive educational reforms as a mediating factor that will impact on their agency and sense of professional identity [19]. Teacher agency, identity and professional space are highly connected [20] and informed by both past and present experience and by projections of the future [21]. In the case of Ukrainian teachers, the Soviet Union past, the rapidly changing present and the uncertainty, relating to the future, create barriers for sense-making and restructuring of professional identities.

The results of the study are limited to the readiness to learn through the play of Ukrainian primary school teachers and cannot be extended without additional research to other categories of teachers.

In our opinion, prospective research may include a detailed study of the professional qualities of primary school teachers that ensure the effective implementation of learning through play and define their development paths both in the system of post-graduate education and at the stage of initial teacher training at the university level. It seems crucial to carry out a comparative study that will trace the dynamics of Ukrainian primary school teachers' attitudes to play-based teaching methods, since to restructure the educational system we also need to give the necessary conditions for teachers to have opportunities to make sense of their new required professional identity.

7. Conclusion

1. Teachers' professional readiness to implement learning through play in primary schools includes several components (axes): (1) axiological (attitudes towards to play, play-based teaching methods, interests, motivation of pedagogical and play-based activity and professional development, awareness of one's own play experience, etc.); (2) cognitive (knowledge of the features of children's play activity, play strategies, awareness of the advantages of play-based teaching methods); (3) praxis (the ability to design the child's playing activity and support it, the ability to integrate play in the didactic process, communicative skills – democratic communication style, etc).

2. The analysis of our findings demonstrated that, although some primary school teachers have a high level of readiness to implement learning through play, most teachers who took part in the study have considerable difficulties with even considering implementing play-based teaching methods.

Primary school teachers are aware of the developmental potential of learning through play and the need for teacher professional development for its implementation, but they are not aware of the pedagogic and didactic functions of play and do not trust play-based methods to be an effective means of developing primary school children's academic skills. One in three surveyed primary school teachers has authoritative tendencies in their interaction with children, which complicates the creation of a child-oriented and supportive educational process, in which students can freely communicate and ask questions, are not afraid of making mistakes and of receiving feedback and being assessed, can be active and interact

with each other, show emotions, assert and fulfil themselves, develop metacognitive and self-regulation skills, and get positive emotions in the process of learning through play.

Ignoring teachers' axiological, cognitive and praxis challenges in what regards implementing learning through play in primary school can lead to considerable difficulties in reforming school education in Ukraine and negatively impact on the implementation of the New Ukrainian School reform. Teachers need opportunities to convert the new models that are being prescribed into their practice within a space that also requires a great effort for professional identity changes and radical transformation of previous models of teaching and learning.

Further to the rejection by primary school teachers of learning through play, the predominance of an authoritarian communication style can lead to a decline in student motivation and engagement, and the increase of their school anxiety.

3. The obtained results point to an urgent need for taking measures that, in our opinion, would ensure the development of Ukrainian primary school teachers' readiness to implement learning through the play approach. The primary steps include:

- changes to the contents, forms and methods of primary school teachers' post-graduate education by shaping an axiological attitude to play in the educational process; providing opportunities for teachers to understand and master the necessary specialized professional knowledge in play pedagogy and psychology; fostering the necessary competencies to design and support children's play activities; reinforcing the use of play-based methods for didactic purposes and integrating them in the educational process. It is also important to carry out primary school teachers' in-service training practical activities, aimed at adapting their communication style and at activating mechanisms for reflective thinking and fostering motivation for professional and personal development;

- creation of a system for psychological and pedagogical support of teachers (mentoring) for the implementation of learning through play at the level of schools, district methodological associations, and region as a whole;

- creation of professional learning communities for the exchange of professional experience, communication and discussion of difficulties;

- changes to the contents, form and methods of post-graduate training of school managers, school psychologists and methodological specialists in order to develop the readiness to implement learning through play at educational institutions, to create a school expert team for overcoming difficulties;

- implementation of a series of educational measures for the pedagogical community and students' parents, so that there is an increased awareness of the effectiveness of learning through play in the holistic development of children.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to this research, whether financial, personal, authorship or otherwise, that could affect the research and its results, presented in this article.

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