

The role of playful in education: a holistic approach

El rol de la lúdica en la educación: un enfoque holístico

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ABSTRACT

The current educational context faces the challenge of developing students' cognitive abilities, promoting not only the transmission of information but also the development of skills and competencies that enable them to adapt to society. Play emerges as a key tool to achieve this goal. This study aims to analyze the role of play in the contemporary educational process, clarifying its contribution to learning, the impact on students' motivation and participation. To achieve the stated objective, a qualitative approach with a descriptive documentary design was adopted, under two sections: narrative and systematic case screening. The findings indicate that playful activities foster cognitive development, creativity, and critical thinking in students. Moreover, previous research shows that the implementation of playful strategies in different scenarios, such as science, has resulted in improved learning in both typical and atypical neurocognitive students, as well as being useful for students in both basic and higher education, therefore, its implementation is fully justified.

Keywords: playful, learning, critical thinking.

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RESUMEN

El contexto educativo actual se enfrenta al desafío de desarrollar las capacidades cognitivas de los estudiantes, promoviendo no solo la transmisión de información, sino también el desarrollo de habilidades y competencias, que les permitan adaptarse a la sociedad. La lúdica se presenta como una herramienta clave para lograr este objetivo. El presente estudio tiene como propósito analizar el papel de la lúdica en el proceso educativo contemporáneo, esclareciendo su contribución al aprendizaje, el impacto en la motivación y participación de los estudiantes. Para alcanzar el objetivo planteado se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo con un diseño documental descriptivo, bajo dos apartados: narrativo y por tamizaje sistemático de casos. Los hallazgos indican que las actividades lúdicas fomentan el desarrollo cognitivo, la creatividad y el pensamiento crítico en los estudiantes. Además, investigaciones previas demuestran que la implementación de estrategias lúdicas en los diferentes escenarios, como las ciencias, ha resultado en una mejora del aprendizaje en estudiantes neurocognitivos típicos y atípicos, además de, ser útil en estudiantes de básica como de educación superior, por lo tanto, su implementación está plenamente justificada.

Palabras clave: lúdica, aprendizaje, pensamiento crítico.

INTRODUCCIÓN

In the current educational context, there is a significant challenge for educators: achieving students' cognitive development to strengthen their abilities to face the challenges of society. This pursuit goes beyond simply transmitting information; it involves fostering the development of skills and competencies that empower students to adapt, innovate, and become active agents in society. To achieve this goal, teaching practices must incorporate innovative strategies that spark curiosity, motivation, and active student participation.

Parra (2020) advocates for planning innovative learning activities, allowing students to take ownership of knowledge and develop both intellectual and motor skills. Fernandez (2021) suggests that the objective of learning should be approached from a more dynamic perspective, contrasting with repetitive sessions that gradually increase in complexity. In other words, the activities carried out after each class should have a meaningful anchor for the student, stimulating them and connecting them to the process. Failing to do so could lead to student apathy towards learning.

It is at this point where playful emerges as a powerful tool. The inclusion of playful activities in the educational process is not limited to a simple transmission of knowledge. It represents a holistic approach that enhances knowledge construction, integrates new experiences with prior knowledge, and fosters the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

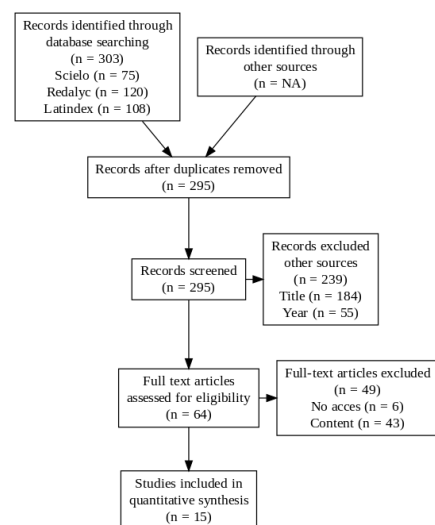
Furthermore, the heterogeneity of students in classrooms demands individualized attention. Guzmán (2017) mentions that individualized attention is important but complex to implement, as it requires resources that are often limited. However, he emphasize the application of playful to address this heterogeneity, expressing that with the same technique, teachers can meet the needs of each student. Caballero-Calderón (2021) complements this vision by highlighting the importance of integrating recreational resources and materials that enrich the learning process. With the purpose of understanding the contribution of playful in education, this research, through a descriptive bibliographic review, seeks to analyze the role of playful in the current educational context.

METHODOLOGY

The use of playful activities and their role in education has emerged as a promising and highly interesting scenario. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the role of playful in the current educational context to clarify its contribution to the learning process. To achieve this goal, a qualitative approach with a descriptive documentary design was adopted. According to Arias (2012), a descriptive study allows for a panoramic view of a specific topic.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagrams



This bibliographic review presents two structures. Narrative Review: This section provides a description of the challenges of contemporary education, an introduction to playful, its contributions as a tool, and its role within the educational context. Systematic Case Screening: To gain a holistic understanding of playful, 15 documents were extracted from the Scielo, Redalyc, and Latindex databases using a systematic screening process. The aim was to identify case studies from the last 5 years that demonstrate the impact of playful in different educational settings (Table 1).

To homogenize the educational levels in which the research was conducted, the following criteria were considered: Basic Education: Grades 1st to 10th, Secondary Education: 4th, 5th, and 6th year of high school and Higher Education: University students. The purpose of this investigation is not to achieve the saturation of knowledge about play as expressed by Mejía (2013), but rather to outline the contributions of playful in contemporary education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The challenge of contemporary education

Contemporary society, shaped by constant evolution in response to diverse stimuli, has been significantly influenced by education. Since time immemorial, education has played a crucial role in shaping individuals capable of facing the challenges of each era. Due to its fundamental role in this process, education has been subject to constant study and review (Sánchez y Araya, 2012). Upon closer examination, a diverse range of scenarios and challenges surrounding education emerges.

According to Coll (2010), the challenges facing contemporary education are the result of changes at social, political, economic, and cultural levels. The educational system must explore medium-term alternatives that emphasize its functioning, organization, methodology, content, and objectives to respond to the needs generated by these changes. These changes are largely attributed to globalization and the development and integration of new information and communication technologies, which have significantly impacted traditional education over the past two decades, rendering it obsolete.

The need for profound changes in the educational system is increasingly evident in order to address emerging challenges, something that traditional education has not achieved. It's not just about making improvements in aspects such as curricula, teaching methods, teacher training, and the functioning and organization of educational institutions, among others. The entire educational system is in crisis due to its limited capacity to meet the needs of individuals and prepare them to face new social, political, economic, and cultural scenarios. It is necessary to guide the educational system with the necessary measures to adapt it to these new realities, as suggested by Coll (2010).

De Zubiría (2013) argues that traditional schools taught at an elementary level to respond to an agrarian and industrialized society, emphasizing the training of obedient, routine-oriented, and mechanical individuals. He emphasizes that as the social environment globalizes, traditional schools have become obsolete and incapable of meeting new social, political, economic, and cultural needs. This poses a challenge that only an education system with structural adaptations can address, requiring a restructuring of learning that integrates the heterogeneity of students, adopts basic competency strategies, incorporates curricular flexibility, consolidates autonomy, fosters interest and solidarity, and promotes the integration of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

Sánchez y Araya (2012) place greater emphasis on the actors in education (students and teachers), arguing that this is where the problem lies and that education should "reconceptualize learning," making the student an active agent with the ability to learn and develop critical thinking skills to face current and future challenges. These authors emphasize improving retention, restructuring the curriculum at all levels, devising strategies that promote critical development, and combining education with political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. The goal is to empower and consolidate a humanistic, solidarity-based, critical, and creative education that is not governed by social classes and makes use of new technologies.

The challenges facing contemporary education are elements that need to be objectively contextualized to adapt individuals and meet the needs emerging from new scenarios. Moreover, the educational system needs a more integrative approach to its components to enhance the value and robustness of education, addressing present and future challenges.

An approach to playful

The term "playful," derived from the Latin "ludus" (game), encompasses everything related to play and entertainment. However, playful is much more than mere amusement; there are other artistic activities that are part of it (Vera, 2018). Attributing playful solely to games is not appropriate (Díaz, 2008). Playful is the state that fosters coexistence, the development of activities, and the generation of enriching experiences.

For Suárez y Salamanca (2022), playful is dimensioned through the human condition, characterized by a sense of well-being and happiness. Vaca (2022) emphasizes that playful is a state of being human, while games are one of its greatest expressions, reaching the creative and symbolic phenomena of imagination and fantasy. Therefore, play is the result of a playful state of being, an expression that helps achieve a sense of pleasure, well-being, and satisfaction.

Playful as a state is inherent in human beings, emerging naturally and expressed through games, activities that help them relate and communicate with others (Ruiz, 2017). When discussing games as a playful expression, it's important to mention that they are activities that have been passed down through generations since their inception, both orally and in writing (Caballero-Calderón, 2021).

Games are a set of dynamic communication activities that circulate knowledge and experiences, fostering creativity and strengthening human imagination (Salema y Salema, 2018). They are a medium that drives cognitive development, motor

skills, and language (Silva, 2004). Beyond a playful expression, games are a binding element of great importance for human beings.

Playful as an educational tool

During the development of a class, the teacher implements strategies, tools, methods, and practical resources that facilitate learning in students. Therefore, they look for elements that are positively dimensioned and framed within didactics, with the purpose of directing students to meaningful learning. Playful presents itself as a dimension that meets these qualities demanded by the learning process. According to Suárez-Vaca y Castellanos-Murcia (2022), it is a tool that helps to form social subjects with critical, ethical, and reflective thinking.

The teacher implements this tool because it is integrative and innovative, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving in the student. Gallardo y Gallardo (2018) mention that, by implementing playful in the development of a class, the teacher energizes the creativity and skills of the student. This tool promotes a dynamic and appealing environment, taking routine and traditional actions out of context, transforming the class into a conducive learning environment.

Playful, as a tool, oxygenates the learning environment (Brandwein, 2017), by deploying doses of fun and enjoyment in the student, whose purpose is to give them a pleasant stay in situations that become complex (Yanqui et al., 2017). In the same way, it empowers conflict resolution and promotes appropriate techniques for pacification within the classroom (Arroyave et al., 2021). As a tool that promotes learning, it has become a significant support for teachers, and its application during the development of a class is constant.

In the same way, playful, more than just a simple game, is a powerful tool for learning in contemporary education. As Ferreyra (2013) mentions, the knowledge that endures in our lives is the result of learning with playful contributions, which sometimes is not so evident, but there is “the hidden game”. This knowledge with playful anchorage makes students able to project themselves and grow cognitively, developing creativity and critical thinking.

It is difficult to conceive of a class in contemporary education where play does not have a starring role, since the ultimate expression of playful (game) has been executed since time immemorial. A tool that, beyond facilitating learning in students, is a fundamental structural component within pedagogy. It facilitates coexistence and strengthens social bonds in human beings and drives a more equitable and critical society.

The role of playful in contemporary education

In recent decades, experiences have accumulated around the application of playful in education, it is worth mentioning, the adaptation of the game with traditional bases, which has been polished with the purpose of applying it in education, to improve learning and teaching practices (Andreu y García, 2002). For Melo (2021), playful is related to development; by exposing that, social learning and cognitive growth are increasing due to the action of playful. This is why, current education has positioned playful as the central axis of learning.

Playful and education are parallel dimensions that share the objective of achieving a satisfactory end. To achieve this, negotiable norms are established that can be modified as the class progresses. The teacher, in this context, stops being the main actor in the learning process, transforming into an observer, mediator, facilitator, and guide (Andreu and García, 2002). The implementation of play in learning construction seeks to transform it into a more attractive process for students, as Rodríguez (2016) highlights.

A conducive and dynamic learning environment is fundamental for student success. García et al. (2017) showcase the positive impact of playful in creating such an environment, allowing students to thrive in diverse curricular areas. In contemporary education, playful has transcended its role as a simple energizer, evolving into a powerful vector for knowledge transmission.

The implementation of games in classrooms energizes learning, creating a significant anchor for students. This approach facilitates the creation of scenarios that prepare students for problem-solving and critical thinking development. By shaping students to pacify conflicts and solve problems consciously, they are equipped to face a complex society. According to Hopenhayn et al. (2006), humanity is moving towards a complex society on social, cultural, economic, and political levels. This is why play and education have become intertwined in a symbiotic relationship, directly proportional to the challenges they address.

In the same sense, Piedra (2018) draw attention to the importance of playful and its contribution to contemporary education, mentioning that today's society must be thought about by and for children, where play is an exploratory element both inside and outside the classroom. Empowering the student to take the elements of the environment that surrounds them spontaneously, to make these into an experience that consolidates their prior knowledge.

A holistic approach to playful in education

Playful is an important element within the different scenarios of contemporary education, adaptable to the heterogeneity of students, presenting the cases of Santos y Da Silva (2021) and Guevara et al. (2024), where playfulness helps students with neurocognitive problems (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism), in the development of attention and associativity, which for these subjects would be complex to achieve on their own (Table 1). As mentioned previously by Suárez y Salamanca (2022), the dimension of play is based on human possibilities. For these subjects, play is the tool that adapts to their possibilities and helps them compensate for their shortcomings, with the purpose of being competitive in this increasingly globalized world.

Table 1

Focus of Playful Application in Education for Learning.

Scenario	Playful Activity	Materials and Instruments	Level educative	Student neurocognition	Author
Biology	Pyramid	Power Point	Higher Education	Neurotypical students	Comonfort et al. (2023)
Chemistry	Chemical Trail and Quididático	Boards and Cards	10th Grade	Neurotypical students	do Santos et al. (2023)
	Compounds and Molecules, MET-organic and Unit Kemps	Boards and Cards	Higher Education	Neurotypical students	Reina et al. (2023)
Physical Education	Treasure Island	Cones and Blindfolds	5th Grade	Neurotypical students	Alonzo y Ramírez (2024)
Natural Sciences	I bring a letter for... and Fingerprint	Dye and flower pots	1st Grade	Neurotypical students	Rodríguez-Miranda et al. (2022)
	Playing with Dragons	Printed sheet	4th and 5th High School	Neurotypical students	Dinghi et al. (2020)
	Models	Erosion and sedimentation simulators, Riverbank forests	6th Grade	Neurotypical students	Pereira et al. (2020)
	Puzzle Assembly and My Mural	Puzzles and collage	1st Grade	Neurotypical students	Acuña y Quiñones (2020)
Didactic Education	A Cappella Sounds	Acoustic sound of the palms and the mouth	Higher Education	Neurotypical students	Acha et al. (2021)
Cultural Education	Basic Stories	Stories: Mowgli, Bloo, and Akela	Elementary students	Neurotypical students	Vargas et al. (2021)
Reading and Writing	Syllabic Method	Nacho Primer, Train Notebook	1st Grade	Neurotypical students	Herrera y Gayana (2022)
Attention Development	7 Errors, Shadow Labyrinth, and Forbidden Colors	Pre-established printed images	2nd and 3rd Grade	ADHD	Santos y Da Silva (2021)
Associativity	Disko	Micro-games: Konecta, Kooperera, Komparte, Komunica, and Kompromete	Higher Education	Neurotypical students	Cassinelli et al. (2022)
	Yellow Bag	Book	Elementary students	Autistic students and Neurotypical students	Guevara et al. (2024)
Health	Hand Hygiene	Tutor Robot	3rd, 4th, and 5th Grade	Neurotypical students	Costa et al. (2023)

Note: Organization of the 15 playful cases considering the application scenario. ADHD= Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

In typical neurocognitive students, playful continues to be a highly important tool. According to the number of cases reviewed, it is observed that for these subjects, the playful application in learning is not an isolated event, but rather it has become a non-negotiable element, considering the absence of neurocognitive difficulties in them. This leaves open the

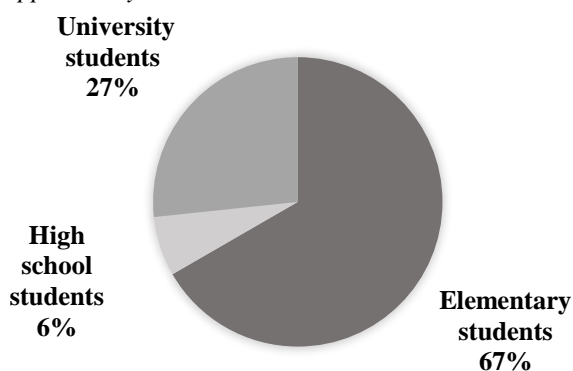
possibility of considering its application in classrooms naturally, regardless of the neurocognitive state of individuals. As García et al. (2017) mentions, playful is implemented with the purpose of allowing students to thrive in different curricular areas.

Depending on the scenario, playful takes on diverse forms as an activity, with the aim of meeting the needs of individuals and breaking down barriers to learning. The versatility of play is clear. Additionally, it's worth mentioning that depending on the playful activity to be implemented, materials and instruments are used. However, it is observed in the cases of do Santos et al. (2023) and Reina et al. (2023) a similarity in materials and instruments, it is possible that boards and cards are the most suitable for facilitating learning in chemistry. This is an interesting fact to consider when teaching this subject, especially for teachers when giving a class.

In a different scenario than mentioned, natural sciences are found, presenting a diversity of instruments and tools, in addition to a varied nomenclature of playful activity. These events lead one to assume that this is due to the fact that this science covers a wider educational space than chemistry. That is, the cases of Acuña y Quiñones (2020) and Rodríguez-Miranda et al. (2022) are playful activities for environmental education, while Dinghi et al. (2020) applies play for teaching biodiversity and Pereira et al. (2020) uses it for basic natural science learning.

Figure 2

Playful Approach by Educational Level



Note. Organization of the 15 cases according to the educational level in which they were developed.

At educational levels without any discrimination, 67% of the cases considered were established in basic education, however, this does not obscure the need to implement play in higher education. Especially, in the cases presented by Acha et al. (2021) and Cassinelli et al. (2022), where subjects are trained for teaching, although it may sound pretentious to say it, this significantly helps this group of students to implement playful strategies within their practice.

It is redundant to mention the contribution of play in science learning, its application in different contexts and academic levels is indispensable. With the purpose of reconceptualizing education, as proposed by Sánchez and Araya (2012), the aim is to motivating and facilitating learning. This is necessary to face the challenges that current education is exposed at the social, political, socioeconomic and cultural levels, as mentioned by Coll (2010).

CONCLUSIONS

Playfulness in the context of current education is far from dispensable. More than just a simple game, it emerges as a fundamental tool for tackling present and future challenges. Seeking well-being and happiness, it translates into meaningful and lasting learning, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Playfulness not only creates a dynamic and welcoming environment but also becomes a vector for transmitting knowledge, preparing students for the challenges of a complex society.

It is clear that playfulness is universal as it adapts easily to different contexts, scenarios, and educational levels, as well as to the neurocognitive diversity of students. The cases presented demonstrate that the implementation of playfulness in various curricular areas has resulted in an improvement in learning. Therefore, its application is fully justified. Furthermore, the results of the research highlight the need to implement playfulness in contemporary education permanently.

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