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## **Statement of interest**

The role of playing at school and the establishment of playful cultures is a challenging issue, especially when it comes to education. Significant research can be found around playing and early-childhood education, and over the last years the fields of game-studies in education and virtual educational environments have been developing constantly.

The element of play is mostly related to children's development. Psychologists and educators support that playing can enhance and facilitate learning in the early-years of the development and can empower imagination and social activity. In the early-years and primary education, specific approaches can be identified that promote children's play and propose specific curricula and activities based on this principle (eg. Montessori schools, Reggio Emilia approach)

Questions arise when considering playing in the context of secondary education. Only a small amount of research could be located concerning older children, and most of it comes from the relatively new field of game studies. Is it because older children do not play any longer? Or is it because the demands of our performance-oriented curricula dominate the school culture without leaving enough space for playing in secondary schools? Is the distinction between play (as a non-serious activity) and work (as a serious thing) valid? Using these questions as a starting point, I intend to explore the possible implementation of playing and playfulness in a secondary school context. As a teacher and educational programs designer, I have used playful approaches in my work and I have experienced some positive outcomes.

I am particularly interested in exploring how, and if, such approaches could benefit the learning and engagement of adolescents. Specifically, this work aims in a deeper understanding on how post-elementary students and teachers perceive, introduce and implement the element of play in the school context. Their common points and differences will show if such an approach is welcome at schools, and if so, in what form. Initially, in this research, I will attempt to identify the places where children play and the circumstances under which such attitudes occur in a secondary school setting. The distinction between play and non-play attitudes can be particularly challenging but revealing at the same time in this investigation.

Depending on the school practices, if elements of play are identified in the teaching process, it would be highly interesting to explore how students engage in their own learning and the ways they develop their personal and social skills through this approach. Issues of classroom culture, teachers' authority and students' choice in learning seem to be equally important in this case.

In my proposal, I will review the core elements and ambiguities of play, by referring to theoretical and empirical work on the field. Additionally, I will present the main points of the research project I intend to undertake for my Masters' program and I will continue by estimating any practical and theoretical difficulties that might occur during my research. Finally, I will discuss further some thoughts provoked by the current literature.

## **Literature review**

Theorists on play studies assert that play is an easily observable activity, and even though the interest in exploring play goes back in time, a concrete, fully accepted definition is not formed. This is mainly justified by the complexity of the subject and the various aspects it covers (Burghardt, 2011). Van Oers (2013) claims that a number of everyday words “do have an everyday meaning that is sufficient to recognize them in specific situations, but finding a formal definition of them has been more difficult” (p.187). In line with this perception, Stuart Brown (TEDtalk, 2009) asserts that it is not possible for researchers to have a complete understanding of what play is. For that reason, he suggests that we can explore it from different paths, by establishing ways of thinking about it and creating a taxonomy to guide us.

In order to overcome this obstacle, researchers tend to identify the core elements of play (with existence of rules, voluntary participation, internal goals and pleasure being the most common), and use these classifications for their empirical work (eg. Burghardt, 2011; Bateson, 2011). Van Oers (2013) opposes to this approach claiming that these criterion-based definitions are valuable, especially for the research settings, but they do not form a theory of play. Under his lens, play is a mode of activity where high involvement, acknowledgment of the rules and specific degrees of freedom are essential. Respectively, teachers’ withdrawal from authority and students’ choice in learning underline the element of play in school contexts.

As pointed out by the literature, play is mostly linked with younger children and games with older. This distinction though is not sufficiently proved by the empirical research on play, on development and on age differences in learning. For Baines and Blatchford

(2011), “although games have distinctive features that suggest that they may be different from play, a clear boundary is not easily drawn between them” (p.262). The defining traits of all games are the existence of goals, rules or obstacles, a feedback system and voluntary participation (McGonigal 2011, cited in Marksbury, 2012). Interestingly, various authors advise teachers not to use the term “games” when introducing the activity (eg. Hildmann, 2014; Harviainen & Savonsaari, 2014). The reason for that appears to lie in the play versus work distinction on the children’s minds, but further justification is not provided.

Hildmann (2003; 2014) conducted an intervention study in an experiential learning environment using four eight-grade classes. Her aim was to explore the effects of Adventure Initiative Games (AIGs) on children’s social and personal skills inside a classroom setting (for more details on experiential learning and AIGs, see Hildmann & Hildmann, 2003). She designed a qualitative experiment, including a six-month intervention period, where she would instruct the classes, following the official curriculum. The adaptations in her everyday teaching included minimum one AIG per lesson, courses structure following the principles of experiential learning, combination of subjects and teaching both inside and outside the classroom. For her evaluation, Hildmann used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, questionnaires (for students, teachers and parents) and students’ self-evaluation tables.

Significant changes on the students’ competences were noticed after the intervention period, both from their own and their teachers’ perspectives. Social and personal skills, such as cooperation, problem solving and group communication were significantly

developed. Moreover, students enjoyed the lessons more, since 28 out of the 34 that participated in the experimental group agreed that lessons should be conducted more frequently under this form. Another interesting outcome of her research is the fact that teachers embraced her approach. Teachers often experience difficulties in using alternative educational approaches, especially because they think that they do not fit in their teaching. In this case though, the teachers declared that AIGs were not demanding in time or equipment and easily incorporated in their teaching. They further suggested that there should be teacher-training seminars so that AIGs could be used more widely in schools. Teachers' willingness to adopt such approaches is essential. Their perception in this research proves that using playing in subject teaching is both welcome and applicable.

Play is often linked with exploration and, therefore, playful learning is investigated under the lens of experiential learning. Hildmann (2003) suggests that these two approaches are not distinct yet, and "straight line between these two will have to be made" (p.193). Rice (2009) claims to use a playful pedagogy in an experiential learning environment for adults in order to enhance creativity and imagination, but neither the terms nor the processes are sufficiently analyzed, leaving the reader with many questions. Moseley (2014) uses educational board games and places them in an authentic education context, which he also links with experiential learning for a holistic approach on education. The distinction comes from Fisher et al. (2011), where drawing from the literature, they argue that play and exploration have common attributes, but differ in focus, goals and learning processes. This debate becomes essential for estimating the validity of the outcomes from these research projects, and further research should be conducted.

Common patterns in most studies on educational play reveal an increase of students' motivation. Research on educational games (see for example Moseley, 2014 for board games, Harviainen & Savonsaari, 2014 for role-playing games and Annetta & Cheng, 2008 for virtual environment games) has concluded that the levels of motivation increase when children play games. Often games refer to real-life problems and thus children are related to the subject in question. By having a first-hand experience, their opportunity for learning by doing increases, and so does their engagement in the task.

A research conducted by Ketelhut et al. (2008) supports the effects of games and virtual environments on low-achieving students. After pointing out the paradoxical decline of student's interest in science education in America, they designed a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) in order to enhance student's motivation. According to their hypothesis, the lack of interest in science could be the outcome of pedagogics, meaning the ways science is taught in schools. For that reason, they tried to provide the children with an authentic experience, focusing on scientific inquiry (*River City*). They designed a pre-test, post-test experimental project, where their variable was students' self-efficacy in the task. They concluded that children rated with low self-efficacy at the beginning of the task, presented a significant progress, compared to those from the control group (where a paper-pencil based approach was followed). This was not the case for the average and high-achieving students though, where no difference was found, and in some cases the paper-pencil approach had better outcomes. Therefore, they suggested that a combination of traditional and serious games is required in order to meet as many of the students' needs as possible.

Annetta and Cheng (2008) challenge the effectiveness of games stating that even though games often prove to maximize pupils' motivation and subject interest, it is not clear if these findings could justify the claim that serious games promote effective learning as well. Moving towards the same direction, Girard et al. (2013) performed a meta-analysis of recent studies in the field in order to discover if there is sufficient proof of the games effectiveness. Critically reviewing nine articles (published between 2007 and 2011) for their main research, they revealed that even though the outcomes are often positive, further empirical research is needed for a conclusive answer.

In the case of board games though, it appears that often the content is more important than the process. According to Hamshire and Forsyth (2014), the core elements for an effective educational board game are: acceptability and real world relevance, goals, fun, competition/challenge, opportunities for interaction and collaboration, narratives and finally, simple rules. Interestingly, issues of voluntary participation and choice are often neglected. Ingleson (2014) advises teachers to "make it [the game] look like a 'proper' board game, so that students treat the exercise with respect" (p. 118). In line with this approach, Moyles (2010, cited in Patte 2012) perceives playful teaching as an approach where teachers present the activities in a way that children perceive them as play. The perception of games as another type of exercise or as a strategy is probably violating the core elements of play (Pellegrini, 2011) and promotes a non-authentic approach. De Castell and Jenson (2010), refer to the term edutainment in order to demonstrate that often the result of trying to use the players' enthusiasm for educational purposes ends up with something that is neither educational, nor entertaining. Further, Burghardt (2011) takes children's perspective and provides an



example where “turning memorizing multiplication tables into a flash card game [in schools] is usually not viewed as play by students” (p.10).

Even though a definition of playful learning is not yet formed, a balance between free play and guided play lies in one provided by Fisher et al. (2011). The authors analyze play in the preschool context, but this clear distinction could prove valuable, and more pragmatic around the whole educational spectrum. Playful learning is as ill defined as play itself, and the conceptualization by Fisher et al. is not a formal definition. Elsewhere, playful learning is described as a state of mind (linked to silliness, willingness to participate and others) but still, it is considered undefined.

To conclude, it is worth referring to two relatively recent examples of schools that embrace games and role-play respectively, as their main educational approach. The Q2I schools in the USA, (the first one opened in 2009), are structured in a game-based philosophy. According to their stated mission, they are driving through a learning experience that is both situated and gamelike (Salen et al, 2011). Adopting a quite different approach, Osterkov Efterskole in Denmark uses role-playing games for teaching throughout their curriculum. It is a boarding school, where instead of subjects they use narrative units. Subjects are combined in single narratives and lessons are taught interdisciplinary (Hyltoft, 2008). Both these attempts are still testing themselves. They do not claim that their approach could be successful for other schools. What they mostly do is explore the relations between play, games and education and offer alternatives to traditional ways of teaching.

## **Research design**

Situating the research problem in the heart of choosing a methodology, an exploratory, qualitative approach is more apposite. The subject of play could be better examined with qualitative research strategies, where the focus is “...to identify significant concepts and to explore their relationships” as well as “...in understanding what’s going on than...in testing hypothesis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.316)

According to Tudge et al. (2011) “Ethnographic methods seem more applicable when the goal is to understand the types of everyday activities and interactions that occur in the everyday lives of the people being studied, particularly when the focus is on play” (p. 127). In this particular study, a mix of methods will be applied, with a focus on grounded theory and ethnographic strategies.

The exact setting of the research is yet to be found. Nonetheless, a setting that would serve the research interest would be a secondary school, ideally in the area of London. A number of schools have already been contacted, but a final setting has not yet been chosen.

The participants will be students 13 to 16 year old and their teachers. The number of those interviewed depends on the participants’ availability and interest to participate further in the study; nevertheless, a number of 20 is considered sufficient (Cresswell, 2013).

Due to limited time frame and access, an opportunistic sample technique will be employed at the beginning of the task. After the initial observations, a purposeful

sampling approach will be used in order to identify the exact settings and specific participants that will be observed and interviewed in the second stage of the project.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project, observations and interviews will be the core strategies for the data collection process. Since “Unquestionably, the backbone of qualitative research is extensive collection of data from multiple sources of information” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 52), play will be investigated in the entire school context during the first stage of the research, using observations and interviews.

In similar studies, it is suggested that the researcher “may spend time getting to know the situation before trying to interpret it” (Smith, 2011, p.139). For that reason, the fieldwork will be divided in two separate phases. In order to familiarize with the setting and acclimatize the children to my presence (Smith, 2011), I intend to spend a preliminary period of informal observations in the school setting. During this period, I will be simultaneously an active participant of the setting (interacting with the children, participating in their classroom activities when asked to) and an observer. The aim is to identify where and under which circumstances play occurs, or whether it is inhibited in the school context. For that reason, the observations will not be limited to subject teaching, but they will expand to wherever I have access inside the school (eg. the playground, clubs in the school, art classes). Moreover, since the literature is not providing concrete examples of play activities, I will try to make distinctions between play and non-play attitudes in order to recognize the elements of play during the second phase of the project.

Later on, the focus will be on a specific number of classrooms (maybe two or three). Narrowing down the number of participants will facilitate primarily a more in depth analysis on how play is perceived and secondarily if such an approach could be welcome in the everyday teaching practices.

For the interviews, the *responsive interviewing method* proposed by Rubin and Rubin (2005) will be followed. The interviews will be semi-structured, based on main questions, follow up questions, probes and prompts. They will moreover be broad enough in order to allow the participants to express their own perception on the subject in question. For an inexperienced researcher, “it is vital to carry out a number of pilot interviews and to refine the interview on the basis of this work” (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 82), so I will conduct pilot interviews in some of my colleagues at the Master’s program.

Field notes, memos and margin notes will be used for the collection and analysis of the data during the observations. Additionally, permission for taking photographs will be asked from the school administration and the participants. After the participants’ agreement, all interviews will be audio recorded and fully transcribed shortly after. In case the interviewee does not wish to be recorded, field notes will be taken instead and transcribed immediately after.

The analysis will start when the first data have been collected and will continue during the collection process. This approach to analysis is essential since “...data analysis during data collection provides a sense of direction, promotes higher sensitivity to

data, and enables the researcher to redirect and revise interview questions or observations as he or she proceeds” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 58).

Common patterns will be identified from the data that will facilitate the initial open coding. By coding, I will attempt to “build detailed descriptions, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 184) of the ways play takes place (or not) in the school context and the participants’ perceptions. Furthermore, the outcomes from the analysis will be compared to other empirical and theoretical research on play in order to gain a better understanding on the subject.

Addressing validity issues, three main ways of achieving it will be used. Firstly, parallel different forms for collecting data will be used. Secondly, external advice and points of view through peer review will be asked prior, during and after the research. That way, constant questioning of the selected procedures and the interpretations will be achieved. Lastly, detailed and rich descriptions of the data and the analysis procedures will provide all the important information to the reader, in order for them to decide for themselves on the clarity and the transferability of the findings. (Cresswell, 2013)

This work does not claim generalization or transferability of the findings. As stated earlier, the aim is to explore how playing is perceived in a secondary school context, and in case it is used, how pupils’ recruit them and how teachers introduce them.

Regarding Ethical issues, an Ethics Form will be completed and sent for approval before the data collection begins. The BSA (British Social Association) code of

practice (2004) will be followed during the whole process to ensure the ethical practices.

Permission for observation will be obtained from the school's administration and consent will be required from the students and teachers that will participate in the interviewing process. They will be informed for their right not to participate in the research, or to withdraw at any moment they wish so.

Moreover, participants will be informed in the subject, purpose and possible audience of the research. Their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained during and after the research. The data collected will be stored in a password-protected computer and destroyed immediately after the end of the project.

### **Anticipated difficulties**

Conceptualizing and analyzing play activities can be quite chaotic, as it was illustrated from this literature review. The numerous diverse theories that develop around play and the lack of empirical research in post-elementary students can prove problematic. Numerous claims have been made for the advantages of playful approach in education, but their outcomes are not conclusive or sufficiently justified by the empirical research. Since the data collected during the fieldwork indicate the theoretical framework of an exploratory study, this issue will hopefully be overcome.

In the majority of secondary schools, playful approaches are not excessively used. Even though play attitudes can be identified, it is usually not part of the teaching process. Therefore, observation of play activities in classroom settings might not be

realistic. In this case, some degree of flexibility will be required in order to change, or adjust the research question in focusing at the things the setting has to offer.

## **Conclusion**

Apart from the numerous theories and approaches to the issue of play in education, this research hopes to constitute a pragmatic exploration of the current perceptions on play in relation to education. The fact that there is a “gap” in the literature when it comes to post-elementary students and play, deserves attention from the academic community and further empirical research. Under these terms, this work could contribute to the existing knowledge by offering an up-to-date perspective and providing a number of lenses under which play is understood, introduced and implemented in schools.

I will conclude with a thought that could be useful when considering playing both in general and especially in educational contexts. Bernard De Koven (2013) makes the distinction between a game and a play community. The main difference between these two communities is the relations between the players and with the game. In the first case, players meet for the sake of a specific game (eg. football) and their interest is mainly in winning. Instead, a play community relies on the communication between the players. Their willingness to play together is more important than the exact game they play.

Taking this example to the educational field, we could claim that probably, establishing a playful culture is more important than using play and games merely as educational tools. What that would include may not be very clear yet, but the literature suggests

that the main aspects of it would address child-centered approaches, and issues such as students' choice in learning, relation between learning subjects and real life experiences, problem solving, withdrawal from teachers' authority and authentic relationships, just to mention some. Patton (2012) empowers this idea considering that teaching historically is perceived as part art, part science. Instead of implementing educational games in the teaching processes (often even violating their principles as described earlier), engaging with playful approaches could prove more beneficial for a holistic approach on children's learning. The research project will hopefully answer some of the questions posed throughout this proposal.



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