THE DIDACTIC GAME IN CONTEMPORARY TEACHING – ANALYSES AND CHALLENGE

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Abstract

Play represents an important factor in the learning process and the development of children's personalities, particularly when it is purposefully used as a means of achieving educational objectives. Contemporary educational approaches increasingly emphasize teaching practices that encourage students' active participation, intrinsic motivation, creativity and independent learning. In this context, the concept of "Learning through Play" represents an important foundation for reconsidering traditional teaching practices and the possibilities of integrating play into contemporary education. This paper presents a theoretical analysis of the pedagogical significance of didactic games, with particular reference to the UNESCO report "Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning" (2024). The aim is to examine the relationship between learning through play, active student participation, motivation and the creation of a supportive learning environment. The paper applies a qualitative theoretical and analytical approach based on content analysis of the document and interpretation of relevant scientific research. Particular attention is given to the teacher's role in planning and guiding play-based activities, as well as to the conditions under which didactic games can contribute to meaningful and quality learning. The paper concludes that didactic games should not be understood merely as additional or entertaining activities, but as a pedagogically designed approach that connects knowledge with experience, activity and students' personal engagement.

Keywords: didactic game, contemporary teaching, learning through play, active learning, motivation.

Introduction

Contemporary educational trends increasingly emphasize the need to transform traditional models of teaching and learning, in which students most often assume the role of recipients of predetermined information. The development of contemporary pedagogical thought highlights the importance of students' active participation, their personal experiences, and opportunities for independent discovery, exploration, and application of knowledge. Within this educational context, play has gained an important role as a form of activity through which students can acquire knowledge, develop skills, and connect theoretical content with practical situations. Contemporary theoretical approaches to learning through play emphasize the potential of playful activities to create conditions for active engagement, exploration, and knowledge construction (Zosh et al., 2018).

Play is traditionally associated with childhood, spontaneity, and enjoyment. However, its pedagogical significance extends far beyond these characteristics and relates to its potential to promote students' cognitive, emotional, and social development through playful activities. When play is organized around clearly defined educational objectives, appropriate content, and pedagogical guidance, it becomes a means of purposeful and structured learning. It is precisely this connection between playful activity and educational objectives that reflects the essence of the didactic game. In this regard, Parker, Thomsen, and Berry (2022) examine learning through play as an approach that can be integrated into school practice, emphasizing the importance of pedagogical organization and the teacher's role.

The importance of learning through play is increasingly recognized in contemporary international educational frameworks. In its report Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning (2024), UNESCO highlights well-being, positive school experiences, and joy in learning as important dimensions of quality education.

Through the concept of "Happy Schools," the report indicates that the quality of education should not be assessed exclusively in terms of acquired knowledge and academic achievement, but also in relation to the conditions in which learning takes place, interpersonal relationships, school climate, and students' experiences of the educational process. Particularly relevant to the subject of this paper is the report's discussion of learning through play as a continuum, identifying different ways in which play can be connected with educational processes (UNESCO, 2024).

From the perspective of contemporary pedagogical theory, it is important to emphasize that learning through play does not simply involve introducing entertaining activities into teaching. Rather, it represents an approach in which playful experiences are connected with educational objectives, enabling students to participate actively in exploration, problem-solving, and knowledge construction. Particular importance is attributed to guided play, in which the teacher provides appropriate support without restricting students' initiative and active engagement. Research findings indicate that this approach can contribute positively to certain learning outcomes, although its effects depend on the type of activity and the educational context (Skene et al., 2022).

Based on these considerations, the subject of this paper is a theoretical examination of the didactic game as a means of improving contemporary teaching, with particular emphasis on its relationship with the concept of "Learning through Play." The aim is to analyse the pedagogical foundations of learning through play, the possibilities for its integration into the teaching process, and the role of the teacher in creating conditions for meaningful learning through playful activities. Particular attention is given to the theoretical perspectives presented in the UNESCO report (2024), as well as to the possibilities of interpreting these perspectives within the context of contemporary teaching practice.

2. Theoretical Definition of the Didactic Game and Its Pedagogical Significance

Play represents a natural form of children's activity through which they explore the world, establish relationships with their surroundings, develop their abilities, and acquire experiences. Its significance in the educational process derives from its potential to connect spontaneous activity, personal interests, and educational content. Unlike activities in which students are primarily expected to reproduce previously acquired information, play enables learning through action, experimentation, problem-solving, and interaction.

A didactic game represents a specially organized playful activity designed to achieve a specific educational objective. Its essence lies in connecting game rules and challenges with curricular content, enabling students to acquire or apply knowledge through active participation and direct engagement. It differs from free play in that the teacher has a predetermined pedagogical intention, while its distinction from traditional exercises lies in its playful structure, elements of choice, challenge, and active participation.

The theoretical foundations of this understanding can be associated with the work of Jean Piaget, who emphasized the important role of play in children's cognitive development. Through playful activities, children organize and process their own experiences, connect new information with existing cognitive structures, and gradually develop their understanding of the world. From this perspective, the didactic game can be understood as an opportunity for the active construction of knowledge rather than its passive reception.

An important contribution to understanding the pedagogical function of play is also provided by Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the role of social interaction and mediation in the learning process. According to his theoretical perspectives, learning takes place within a social context through communication, cooperation, and support from adults or more experienced participants. Play creates situations in which students can act beyond their usual patterns of

behaviour and develop their abilities through interaction with others. In teaching, this is particularly evident in group-based didactic games, collaborative problem-solving, and activities that encourage the exchange of ideas.

From a pedagogical perspective, the didactic game is also important for the development of motivation. The playful nature of an activity can increase students' interest, reduce monotony, and create a positive emotional atmosphere. However, its motivational value does not arise solely from enjoyment, but also from a sense of competence, opportunities for choice, experiences of success, and active participation in solving tasks.

Therefore, the didactic game should be understood as a complex pedagogical activity in which the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning are interconnected. Its value is determined not only by the interest it generates among students, but also by the quality of the knowledge and abilities developed through participation in such activities.

3. Methodology of the Theoretical-Analytical Study

This paper is based on a qualitative theoretical-analytical approach, primarily grounded in the content analysis of the UNESCO report Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning (2024). The document was selected because of its contemporary conceptual framework, which links the quality of education with students' well-being, a positive school environment, and the creation of conditions that promote engaged and motivating learning.

The analysis employs the methods of content analysis, description, and synthesis. Through an examination of the document, its main educational principles are explored, particularly those relating to the learning process, relationships within the school environment, and the creation of a stimulating educational setting. These principles are interpreted from the perspective of the pedagogical significance of play and its application in teaching.

The analysis is further complemented by relevant theoretical perspectives and scientific research on learning through play, with particular emphasis on guided play and its effects on learning processes. Accordingly, the paper focuses on developing a theoretical understanding of the pedagogical value of didactic games and critically examining the conditions required for their effective implementation in the contemporary educational context.

4. The Concept of "Learning through Play" in the UNESCO Report (2024)

The UNESCO report Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning (2024) represents a contemporary educational document that emphasizes the need for a broader understanding of the quality of education. In this report, the school is viewed not merely as an institution for the transmission of knowledge, but as an environment in which conditions should be created to promote well-being, positive interpersonal relationships, engagement, and meaningful learning.

The document presents the global "Happy Schools" framework, structured around four pillars: People, Process, Place, and Principles. This conceptual framework indicates that quality learning results from the interaction of human relationships, pedagogical processes, the physical and social environment, and the values upon which education is based. Of particular importance is the connection between learning and positive emotional experiences, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for students to participate actively in the educational process (UNESCO, 2024).

Although the report is not devoted exclusively to didactic games, its underlying principles can be interpreted as an important theoretical foundation for their pedagogical consideration. Play represents one of the ways in which an environment can be created where students learn with

interest, explore, cooperate, and experience satisfaction through their own activities. In this sense, the concept of "Learning through Play" is connected with a broader understanding of learning that is not based exclusively on the mechanical acquisition of content, but rather on active participation and direct experience.

From the perspective of the "Process" pillar, particular importance is attached to how teaching is organized and what opportunities students are provided with for active learning. Didactic games can contribute to this approach by creating situations in which students independently acquire knowledge, ask questions, make decisions, and evaluate their own solutions. They enable educational content to be presented in a form that activates students and encourages their direct involvement in the learning process.

The "People" pillar emphasizes the importance of relationships among teachers, students, and other participants in the educational environment. In the context of didactic games, this principle is particularly important because playful activities are often carried out through cooperation, communication, and mutual support. The teacher is not merely the organizer of the activity, but also an active participant who guides students, stimulates their thinking, and creates conditions for positive interaction.

From the perspective of the "Place" pillar, the importance of providing a school environment that encourages learning and promotes a sense of security and belonging is emphasized. Didactic games can contribute to the creation of such an environment by allowing more flexible classroom organization, different forms of interaction, and greater student involvement.

The fourth pillar, "Principles," emphasizes the value-based foundations of education and the need for school practices to be based on respect, equality, inclusiveness, and concern for students' well-being. These principles have direct implications for the planning of didactic games. Playful activities should be organized in such a way that every student has the opportunity to participate, regardless of individual abilities, prior knowledge, or learning pace. Therefore, the contribution of the UNESCO report to the subject of this paper lies in its broader understanding of quality learning and the educational environment. The didactic game can be considered one of the pedagogical approaches through which these principles can be translated into concrete teaching practices.

5. The Didactic Game as a Means of Active and Motivating Learning

One of the most significant characteristics of the didactic game is its potential to make students active participants in the process of acquiring knowledge. In traditional teaching, students are sometimes primarily expected to listen, memorize, and reproduce information, whereas playful activities enable them to acquire knowledge through task-solving, exploration, comparison, and practical engagement.

Active learning implies students' involvement in processes of thinking, decision-making, and the application of knowledge. The didactic game creates opportunities for these processes to take place within the context of a specific task or problem. For example, through a game in which students are required to classify objects, solve a mathematical challenge, or identify specific information, they do not merely repeat the learning content but also apply it in practical situations.

The motivational function of play is associated with the opportunity for students to experience success, receive feedback, and feel that their activities are meaningful. The structure of a game can create challenges that encourage students to remain engaged and make additional efforts. In this regard, it is important that success should not be associated exclusively with winning against other students, but also with personal progress, problem-solving, and the acquisition of new knowledge.

The opportunity to develop cooperation through play is particularly significant. Group-based didactic games require students to communicate, coordinate their actions, and take responsibility for achieving a shared outcome. In this way, alongside cognitive abilities, students also develop social competencies, tolerance, and respect for different opinions.

Scientific support for the importance of guided learning through play is provided by the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Skene et al. (2022). The review examined 39 studies, while the meta-analysis included 17 studies involving a total of 3,893 children aged between one and eight years. The findings revealed positive effects of guided play compared with direct instruction in certain mathematical skills, shape knowledge, and task switching. Compared with free play, a positive effect was also identified in relation to spatial vocabulary. However, no significant differences were found across all the outcomes examined, indicating that the effectiveness of learning through play depends on the type of activity, its organization, and the educational objectives pursued (Skene et al., 2022).

These findings are particularly important because they prevent an uncritical idealization of play. Not every playful activity automatically contributes to improved learning. Its educational value derives from the careful integration of playful elements with curricular content and students' learning needs.

6. The Teacher’s Role in Planning and Implementing Didactic Games

The implementation of didactic games in teaching requires teachers to possess appropriate pedagogical and methodological competencies. Although play is often perceived as an activity dominated by spontaneity, its educational application involves planning, organization, monitoring, and evaluation of the outcomes achieved.

First and foremost, teachers should connect playful activities with specific learning objectives. The selection of a game should not be determined solely by its attractiveness, but rather by its appropriateness for the curricular content and the expected learning outcomes. If a game lacks a clearly defined pedagogical purpose, there is a risk that the activity will be reduced to entertainment without achieving meaningful educational results.

It is particularly important to adapt games to students’ age, developmental characteristics, and individual abilities. Teachers should create conditions that enable every student to participate and contribute to the activity. In doing so, they should take into consideration students who require additional support, as well as opportunities for different forms of participation.

During the implementation of a game, the teacher assumes the role of an organizer and facilitator of learning. Teachers should monitor the activities, ask questions, stimulate thinking, and provide appropriate support when students encounter difficulties. Such guidance should not restrict students’ initiative, but rather help them independently arrive at new insights and solutions.

Reflection is particularly important after the completion of a game. Teachers should help students connect their experiences from the playful activity with the curricular content, explain how they arrived at particular solutions, and recognize the knowledge they have acquired. Without this connection between play and educational content, part of the game's educational potential may remain unrealized.

Therefore, teachers should not be merely organizers of playful activities, but educational professionals capable of recognizing their pedagogical value and integrating them into the overall teaching process.

7. Opportunities and Limitations of Implementing Didactic Games in Contemporary Teaching

Didactic games offer significant opportunities for improving the teaching process, particularly in terms of increasing student engagement, stimulating interest, and creating a positive educational atmosphere. Through their implementation, theoretical knowledge can be connected with practical situations, thereby contributing to a better understanding and application of educational content.

Their potential for the individualization and differentiation of teaching is of particular value. Playful activities can be organized with varying levels of complexity, different rules, and multiple approaches to problem-solving. In this way, students are given opportunities to participate according to their individual abilities and prior knowledge, while simultaneously being encouraged to make further progress.

However, the implementation of didactic games also involves certain limitations. Insufficient planning may result in the playful activity losing its educational focus. Excessive emphasis on competition, on the other hand, may create unnecessary pressure among students and reduce their willingness to participate. Therefore, it is important for teachers to establish a balance between competitive and cooperative elements.

Additional challenges include the time required for preparation, material conditions, and the organization of teaching. Not every playful activity can be easily implemented in every educational context. Careful consideration must be given to the curriculum, the number of students, and the available resources.

A critical approach to learning through play also requires consideration of the findings of scientific research. The meta-analysis conducted by Skene et al. (2022) indicates that guided play can have positive effects on certain learning outcomes; however, it does not establish its universal superiority over all other forms of instruction. Consequently, the didactic game should not be regarded as a replacement for all teaching methods, but rather as a functional complement to them.

In the context of the principles outlined by UNESCO (2024), it is particularly important that playful activities contribute to creating a positive school environment in which students feel accepted, motivated, and encouraged to participate. In this way, play becomes not only a means of acquiring knowledge but also an opportunity to enhance the overall educational experience.

8. Conclusion

The didactic game represents a significant pedagogical opportunity for improving contemporary teaching, as it enables educational objectives to be connected with students' activities, experiences, and direct participation. Its value lies in its potential to stimulate interest, develop cognitive and social abilities, and create a positive learning atmosphere.

The theoretical analysis of the UNESCO report Why the World Needs Happy Schools: Global Report on Happiness in and for Learning (2024) indicates that quality education cannot be reduced solely to the acquisition of knowledge and the achievement of educational outcomes. It also involves creating an educational environment in which students have opportunities to participate actively, cooperate, explore, and experience learning as a meaningful and positive activity. Within this context, the didactic game can represent an important means of putting contemporary pedagogical principles into practice.

A particularly important conclusion emerges from the examination of guided learning through play. Research findings indicate that its effectiveness depends on pedagogical organization, the appropriateness of playful activities, and their alignment with specific educational objectives.

Therefore, play should not be implemented merely for entertainment or to attract students' attention, but as a purposeful activity that enables the acquisition and application of knowledge. The teacher plays a central role in this process. Their professional responsibility is to select and organize playful activities, adapt them to students' needs, and ensure their meaningful and pedagogical connection with learning objectives. At the same time, teachers should create conditions that encourage cooperation, mutual respect, and the active participation of all students.

In the contemporary educational context, the didactic game should be understood as an integral part of diverse teaching approaches that place students at the centre of the educational process. Its implementation does not diminish the importance of other teaching methods, but rather provides opportunities to complement and enrich them.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that the pedagogical value of the didactic game derives not merely from its playful nature, but from its potential to transform learning into an active, motivating, social, and meaningful experience. It is precisely this connection between play, learning, and student well-being that highlights its significance for contemporary teaching.

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