

# Playfulness in education: A systematic review

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## ABSTRACT

Play should be present in every dimension of children's lives as it is crucial to their healthy and happy development. Moreover, the right to play is not only closely connected to the right to health but also to the right to education. The balance between formal education and the time for leisure and rest brings, nowadays, several questions and the recognition that play has positive impact to children's educational development should be clearly stated. Play should be a reality in educational contexts, either in pre-school or primary school environments, mainly through a playful spirit that connects professionals and children, giving space for matters like creativity, cooperation and freedom to arise. So, the need to work with educational professionals to help them achieve their role as play advocates is a challenge that should be carried out. Playfulness, as the predisposition to play, is an individual variable that can be worked out with professionals and so we collected data on the relationships in research between playfulness and education, stating that playfulness is a mean to achieve better outcomes for children, namely on their school achievements and health indicators, but also for professionals, namely stronger motivation and commitment. We developed a systematic review in different databases (B-On, Scopus and Science Direct) between 2013-2019, in English and Portuguese, ending up with 17 articles for analysis. One of the most relevant ideas is that more research is needed as a playful environment and attitude has deep impact in children's learning and overall development. **Keywords:** Education; Health promotion; Playfulness; Right to play; Systematic review; Training.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Play is stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child but evidence shows that children nowadays are seeing this right compromised: they have more and more of their day spent in formal educational settings that don't leave time for one of their biggest needs: time and space to play (Amado and Almeida, 2017).

We cannot forget that play is the most natural way for children to express themselves and crucial for children's health and learning: "play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, p. 4).

The exaggerated thrive to success and the (incorrect) idea that play is not a serious matter have a deep impact on children's overall development (Neto and Lopes, 2017). Research has been reflecting on the links between fewer opportunities to play and higher rates of child's obesity and also on the arise of mental health issues like depression and anxiety in childhood (Goldstein, 2012; Miller and Almon, 2009).

The United Nations, in their General Comment nr.17 on the right to play, recommend that professionals receive training on how to create an environment where children can freely play and see their right fulfilled (Atkinson et al., 2017). So, a key matter in promoting the right to play can be each one's own playfulness, an understudied characteristic that can have a deep impact in all matters in education (Pinchover, 2017).

The present study aims to collect data on the relationships that have been found in research since 2013 between playfulness and education, stating that playfulness can be a mean to achieve better outcomes for children, namely on their school achievements and overall health indicators, but also for professionals, namely stronger motivation and commitment.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### ***Participants***

We consulted 3 sources (B-on, Scopus and Science Direct) and found, respectively, 55, 66 and 43 articles. After the exclusion criteria described below, we ended up with 17 articles.

### ***Measures***

The search for articles was made with the keyword's "playfulness" and "education", in the subjects' terms, in the timeframe 2013-2019 for articles in English and Portuguese. Considering that this is an understudied relationship and the studies connecting these two areas are recent, we chose to focus on this timeframe, including also some studies from the current year.

### ***Procedures***

After the analysis of the title where we had 42 articles, the following step was reading the each abstract. We found several articles connected either to gamification, nature play, health contexts or high education and so these were taken out and are the exclusion criteria (n=19). The main criteria for inclusion was articles regarding children in pre-school and primary school and articles focusing on playfulness as a professional competence for educators. Also, duplicated articles were taken out (n=6).

## **Analysis**

The articles were analysed with NVivo software, with the following prior categories for analysis: keywords, objectives, methodology, participants, measures, findings and future research. PRISMA 2009 checklist was used as an orientation for the current systematic review.

## **RESULTS**

The themes that arose from the analysis, by order of expression, were: the relationship between creativity and playfulness, learning facilitated by playfulness, the impact of educator's characteristics of playfulness on children's playfulness, adult-child interaction as promoter of playfulness, playfulness in children and its measures and finally, the role of families in playfulness and education.

## **DISCUSSION**

The place for play in education is not a comfortable one: its value as promoter of success and healthier and happier school environments is not assumed by everyone. Research shows that the disposition to play, playfulness, is a key element for education. Experiences where playfulness is assumed as a key component in the educational area (e.g. Norway) are well succeeded and should inspire others around the world.

From the findings of the current review, we can state that playfulness is a characteristic that can be worked on and several researches show that it cannot only be improved along time, but also is permeable to intervention. The greater added value these kinds of interventions bring is to improve each one's well-being, personally and professionally, for adults and children.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Nicholson and Shimpi (2015) sum up extremely well the importance of the relationship between playfulness and education: "if we want early childhood professionals to develop as courageous advocates, articulating the value of play for children's learning, development, and well-being in socio-political contexts where play is increasingly marginalised and devalued, we must begin by supporting them to reclaim play in their own lives" (p. 1614). Another key point is to see playfulness through children's eyes: the child-adult interaction in education can be the difference between well succeeded and not succeeded school involvement.

More research is needed as a playful environment and attitude has deep impact in children's lives.

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