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Integration of Game-Based Learning as a Teaching Method in Elementary Education

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Abstract

The education system in Kosovo is facing contemporary reform changes; moving from the inherited traditional system to a children activity-oriented form of teaching, where the objective is game-based learning. The purpose of this study is to form an understanding of the integration of game-based learning as a teaching method, and its challenges in application within the Kosovan elementary school teaching process. In the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 teachers from eight elementary schools. The study data were based on the descriptive analysis of the teachers' opinions, as well as observation of their teaching by the researchers. According to the findings of the study, the importance of integrating game-based learning in elementary education lies in changing the position of the pupil in the school, facilitating a sense of joy from using games during classroom lessons, and thereby enabling their free expression, to learn and to be appreciated without fear; which is something they may have been reluctant to do in Kosovan society. The results of the study present a challenging picture for Kosovan teachers in coping with integrating and delivering game-based learning as part of the curriculum reform; accordingly, the results seen in practice are not deemed to be satisfactory. Many problems exist with the use of games in the classroom such as lack of adequate teacher training, lack of textbooks and teaching aids, inadequate school facilities, and large numbers of pupils in the classroom.

Keywords: Integration, method, game-based learning, pupils, elementary education.



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Introduction

Contemporary primary schooling supports game-based learning goals that provide opportunities for developing reading skills, reinforcing writing skills, and helping children to become self-motivated and self-directed. The primary school, therefore, is the context within which pupils are offered the chance to mature and grow, and with the appropriate tools for entering into constructive contact with the world around them (Sclaunich, 2011).

Whilst different opinions have been put forward regarding the importance of game-based learning, the term “game-based learning” simply means the inclusion of knowledge matter of subjects into games (Dadheech, 2019). Game-based learning can be defined as lessons which are competitive, interactive, and allow the learner to experience fun while gaining knowledge (Diamond, 2003). Definitions of game-based learning mostly emphasize that it is a type of game-playing that has defined learning outcomes (Plas, Homer, & Kinzer, 2015).

One of the biggest challenges facing today’s teachers is to successfully teach different groups of pupils, dealing with a range of different personalities, different skill levels, and different preferences. Finding new ways to keep pupils interested in learning requires a variety of activities, rewards, surprises, humor, and digitalization, and is seen as one of the major issues of modern day teaching (Dadheech, 2019).

The primary school, therefore, is the context within which pupils are offered the chance to mature and grow and the tools for entering into constructive contact with the world (Sclaunich, 2011). Game-based learning has shifted focus from learning through lectures and written tasks to learning through games, and has become an indispensable part of modern education (Dadheech, 2019). The knowledge and skills acquired through game-based learning are retained longer than information from other learning methods. Therefore, in order to make learning effective, game-based learning requires games that are well-designed and have well-implemented learning tasks. Games designed specifically for the purpose of educating children can, to a significant extent, motivate their self-learning and improve their problem-solving skills (Dadheech, 2019). Game-based learning is an excellent way to boost engagement, but it can also be problematic in knowing how to get started (Matthew, 2019).

Games make learning concepts more palatable for students and provide learners with a platform for their creative thoughts to bounce around. As pedagogical devices, games are considered extremely useful, as they can enliven teaching topics and are seen as especially effective for dealing with problem solving and the learning of key concepts (Boye, 2011). Also, many studies have shown schools to be a place where children learn through playing, researching, discovering, creating, and developing their skills to solve problems, learning to make choices and decisions, and well as collaborating and communicating with others, becoming more aware of themselves, and learning to respect each other. Bruner suggested that children can learn through the process of play, which is not an activity in itself but a tool to comprehend certain aspects of literacy, numeracy, and the environment around them (Smidt, 2006).

According to researchers, in order to be stimulating, the educational process should provide a combination of learning and playing, gradually developing and adapting the work and life together within the confines of the classroom. As pupils move through their first years of elementary schooling, the focus shifts from drama play (although role-playing still

remains the closest) or imaginary games to “games with rules” and organized sports that require them to consider strategies and skills, such as traditional board games, playing cards, and video and computer games, as well as traditional physical games (Republic of Kosovo Basic Education Program, 2013).

Need for research

Based on Kosovo’s curricula within the framework of elementary education methodology (Grades I-V), school learning experiences contribute to the gradual transition from game-based learning to more systematic pupil learning (Ministria E Arsimit, Shkencës Dhe Teknologjisë [Kosovar Ministry of Education, Science and Technology], 2016). At this level, game-based learning in general and role-play in particular are suggested, as they are known to create effective communication skills and thinking skills, as well as collaborative and socialization skills.

Considering the importance of integrating game-based learning in Kosovo’s schools, which is and should be part of the learning process as a component of the curriculum reform, and that effective outreach requires teacher engagement, commitment and professional preparation, the current study is an attempt at understanding the integration of game-based learning as a teaching method in elementary schools.

Since 2001 (the post-war period), Kosovo, has been facing contemporary teaching reform changes, and as of late also a process of curriculum reform. This level of change poses a challenge for teachers in implementing what are seen as radical changes to the inherited system, i.e., progressing from the traditional to contemporary practices, and their relationships with pupils.

The effect of applying game-based learning as a teaching method according to its specific features depends largely upon the teachers’ skills, and the training they are given in adapting to the new contemporary methodology.

Only a few studies have been conducted in Kosovo that have explored game-based learning. Therefore, the primary motive of the current study is to address the shortcomings identified by the researcher during 2 months observing pupils and the pedagogical practices to which they are exposed. The new Kosovo Curriculum Framework is pupil-centered, and focuses on competence development, integrated teaching, game-based learning and flexibility, and teachers have attended various training events focused on pupil-centered contemporary methodologies; however, practice shows that little significant progress has been made.

The purpose of the current study is to describe, through the voice of teachers, the application of game-based learning as a teaching method in Kosovan elementary education. The research question that has driven the current study is therefore, “To what extent have game-based learning practices been integrated in elementary education in Kosovo?”

Organization of the categories for questions posed to the teacher was based on studies and definitions that have emerged over the years, such as: “Which game best integrates into the existing curriculum? (Harris, 2009, p. 26), “Which game meets the objectives of the topics being taught?” (MacKenty, 2006, p. 48), and “What are elementary school teachers’ views on game-based learning as a teaching method?” (Ucus, 2015). These question categories were then divided into subcategories, and the following questions were devised in order to be asked to the study’s participant teachers:

- How do teachers define game-based learning in elementary education?
- What views do teachers have on the importance of game-based learning as a teaching methodology in elementary education?
- What game-based learning activities do teachers apply most frequently in the classroom?
- What training have teachers received regarding game-based learning?
- What are the teachers' views on the difficulty of applying game-based learning?
- What suggestions do teachers have on applying game-based learning?

Methodology

Research Method

The qualitative method of research was applied in the current study. Maximum variation sampling (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006) was used in selecting school teachers from different urban areas of Kosovo, who each agreed to take part in the study. As prescribed by descriptive research, other data sources were interpreted such as observational notes and conversations held with teachers (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Participants

In total, 24 elementary school teachers took part in semi-structured interviews. The interviewees' responses were then interpreted through descriptive analysis, and in some cases the answers were interpreted verbatim. The participants were employed in a total of eight schools located in different parts of the country.

Data collection and analysis

In an effort to understand more closely the integration of game-based learning as a teaching method in elementary schools, a structure for the research interview questions was developed, and this was then examined by an expert in the field from a university in Austria. After a pilot interview was conducted, some of the interview questions were subsequently redesigned.

The established criteria for the current study were elementary school teachers in Kosovo, with some working under the new curriculum and some under the old curriculum. The principals of the schools were first contacted by the researcher, and the participant teachers were selected from those recommended by the principals. In each of the eight schools, the teaching process was observed over a 2 month period (March-April, 2018) on a weekly basis as part of the supervision and observation of teachers enrolled to the Faculty of Education according to their pedagogical internship.

Interviews were held with 10 participant teachers at the beginning of the second month of observation by the researcher, during their all-day visits to the schools, while other teachers were interviewed during the final week of the same 2-month period. The interviews each lasted 20-30 minutes. The interviews were each recorded using digital voice recorders, the interviewees' names coded, and the collected data were then analyzed.

The teachers' narratives in which they described their various teaching practices and principles were examined in detail, with them often illustrating their own teaching situations according to their own classes (Riessman, 2008). The reliability of the study was calculated according to the process suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), "Agreement/ Agreement

+ Disagreement x 100” and the reliability of the study was established as being 90% (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

Findings

This section presents the data obtained from the teachers’ interviews. Answers are grouped in separate tables according to the question categories. Throughout this section, those teachers who had received training according to the new curriculum are coded as “TNC,” whilst those who had not been trained in new curriculum are coded as “NTNC.”

Table 1. Teachers’ definitions of game-based learning in elementary education

Curriculum training	Teachers’ views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Logical and practical learning; learning by doing; learning through experience.
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	Learning by having fun; practical learning; means the way children develop in different aspects; learning by doing.

In the current study, the teachers in Kosovo tried to use a more systematic form of game-based learning, emphasizing “learning by doing,” “logical and practical learning,” “fun learning,” and “learning through experience.” One TNC teacher said that, “given that teaching has changed and it is required to be conducted more practically, then game-based learning means those fun forms that enable children to develop in different aspects.” While two TNC teachers explained that they try to use games to achieve pupil outcomes, because children have fun through playing games, express their emotions and skills, and have no fear at all.

Most NTNC teachers stated that when working through game-based learning, children are more active, more cooperative, and generally more interested in learning. One of these NTNC teachers expressed that this means children do not play only for the sake of playing, but also to learn and work.

Table 2. Teachers’ views on the importance of game-based learning in elementary education

Curriculum training	Teachers’ views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Develop skills and competencies; the best way to achieve the objectives; pupil outcomes are greater.
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	They learn and are evaluated without a feeling of fear; children exhibit free thinking; the best way to achieve objectives; pupil outcomes are greater.

Table 2 shows that teachers report the importance of game-based learning as “the best way to achieve the objectives,” and “pupil outcomes are greater.”

As one TNC teacher explained, “since playing is everything for children, when we set the context of game-based learning, then they will also love it, not just understand it, and it is important that we try our best to manage to give them something they prefer the most, which enables their development of skills and competencies.”

Some NTNC teachers said that integrating games in Kosovan schooling would foster a new spirit, given that Kosovo is a country in transition from traditional teaching, because it gives pupils the opportunity to express themselves freely, to learn and to be evaluated

without fear, which they may have been reluctant to do in Kosovan society, and which is considered very important.

Table 3. Teachers' views on game-based activities most applied in the classroom

Curriculum training	Teachers' views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Warm-up activities; reading and writing development games; association games; Lego games; card games; video games; social games; logical thinking games; outdoor games; cube games (shapes, counting); balloon games.
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	Tag games; rope games; colored tile games; balloon games; card games; reading and writing development games; rope games; outdoor games; social games; circle games.

Table 3 shows that teachers generally share many common ideas on what games to use in the classroom, such as "writing and reading games," "card games," "balloon games," "rope games," and "outdoor games." Most TNC teachers said that they also applied "colored tile games" and "circle games." While NTNC teachers also mentioned some game applications that they had learned from ICT teaching and training programs, such as "warm-up activities," "association games," "video games," "Lego games," "cube games (shapes and numbers)," and games for developing "logical thinking." One of these teachers explained that computer games are sometimes played in the computer room, in the absence of digital tools. She showed an example of an association activity for the first grade, where, for example, the letter "L" is represented through figures, and then through opening the columns the goal is reached, and at the same time it relates to other subjects. Whereas, in mathematics, one NTNC teacher mentioned games and explained that she "calls pupils up to the whiteboard and they write down numbers" (e.g., "8 + 4"), then they pick up balloons and write the results (e.g., "12," "8" etc.). In this way, children give examples, then they jump up to get the balloons and write the results.

Table 4. Teachers' views on the game-based training they received

Curriculum training	Teachers' views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Step-by-step; group meetings re new curriculum; contemporary strategies; critical thinking; training by Save the Children; KEC (Kosovo Education Center); BEP (Basic Education Program); application of Information Technology in teaching; CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency).
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	Contemporary strategies; step-by-step, critical thinking, BEP (Basic Education Program), group work, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), KEC (Kosovo Education Center).

Table 4 shows that teachers have attended similar types of training, such as training on "contemporary strategies," "step-by-step," "critical thinking," and from the "BEP (Basic Education Program)," "CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency)," and "KEC (Kosovo Education Center)."

Some of the TNC teachers stated having recently attended training on the new curriculum framework, where they addressed the importance of game-based learning with so-called "warm-up activities," as well as training on the use of electronic game applications in teaching.

Meanwhile, the NTNC teachers reported their schools not having yet incorporated the new curriculum, part of which concerns game-based learning. However, with knowledge they received from training in contemporary teaching, they try to implement different classroom games. One NTNC teacher reported that all teachers, those trained and also those not trained in the new curriculum, were able to use a dedicated social media page, and on there they shared their experiences in relation to problems in elementary education, including about various games. The teacher also mentioned searching online for different game models considered to fit the children's level. The results show that none of the teachers had attended specific training on game-based learning.

Table 5. Teachers' views on the difficulties related to applying game-based learning

Curriculum training	Teachers' views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Large number of pupils; lack of textbooks for modeling game-based learning; lack of digital tools; current textbooks do not match curricular contents; lack of play tools; lack of school facilities; time management difficulties; management of play activities; low motivation.
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	Large number of pupils; insufficient knowledge of teachers on game-based learning; lack of textbooks on game-based learning; lack of tools for applying game-based learning; lack of school facilities; time management difficulties; management of play activities; difficulties in pupil cooperation; low motivation.

Table 5 shows that almost all the teachers interviewed, both those trained in the new curricula and those who had not, expressed similar difficulties in applying game-based learning, with particular emphasis on the "large number of pupils" (on average, 40 pupils) in the classroom, especially considering that there is only one teacher per room. Also, other difficulties mentioned included a "lack of textbooks on game-based learning," "low motivation," "lack of tools for applying game-based learning," "lack of school facilities," and difficulties experienced with "management of play activities."

Most TNC teachers reported that "time management difficulties" are common in applying game-based learning as, according to the new curriculum, every activity has to be done within a given time, and this has not yet become habitual for teachers or pupils. One TNC teacher also emphasized that "current textbooks do not match [the new] curricula contents" and gave an example from a first-grade pupil's workbook, stating that, "Twenty tasks have to be completed within one class, and it is a waste of time to do any play activities that children love very much, but are also required by the new curriculum." However, the NTNC teachers stated that they do not have enough teaching models to apply game-based learning, in the absence of adequate training. Some of them said that even when planning a game-based activity, they had to provide the tools themselves, such as balloons, colored papers, Lego blocks, and similar materials.

One NTNC teacher reported that she often integrates math activities into PE classes, due to inadequate classroom space and large numbers of pupils. For example, she explained that when teaching geometric shapes, they would form a square, circle, and triangle etc., and the pupils then had to run around, but when the teacher said "stop in the square," they had to move quickly to stand within the square, and so on. Thus, these types of games were practiced outside of the regular classroom environment.

Table 6. Teachers' suggestions for game-based learning in elementary education

Curriculum training	Teachers' views
Teachers trained in new curriculum	Provide different game tools; provide computers and other digital equipment; collaboration between teachers and school management; provide textbooks with different game models in different subjects, but match the curriculum; take into account pupils' interests in choice of game-based learning.
Teachers not trained in new curriculum	Provide game-based learning training; provide relevant textbooks with game activities in different subjects; collaborate with other institutions on the new curriculum; provide different play tools; take into account pupils' interests in choice of game-based learning; collaboration between teachers and school management.

Table 6 shows a clear need for teacher training, the inclusion of "pupils' interests in the choice of game-based learning," "collaboration between teachers and school management," provision of "different play tools," and the provision of "textbooks with game activities in various subjects."

The TNC teachers suggested drafting textbooks that are in line with the new curriculum. Also, one of TNC teachers, who was also an instructor for several Information Technology programs in teaching, said that they have learned quite a few good applications for applying game-based teaching to different levels of children in grades 1-5, but that they lacking the necessary digital tools, so they cannot use them in classroom, only when they go to the Computer Room. Also, all of the NTNC teachers suggested that appropriate training should be provided on the application of game-based learning, as well as various working tools for applying game-based learning. They must also have access to the relevant textbooks on applying games in different subjects, because it was stated as being impossible to find enough ideas to apply game-based learning for every classroom hour across all subject areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the results of the study, the interviewed elementary teachers defined game-based learning as a form of practical learning. The teachers who had been trained in the new curriculum emphasized the level of transformation that teaching had undergone, from theoretical to logical learning. Also, that learning was now "through experience," and it was important to set the context of games in order for pupils' expected results to be achieved, as then the children have fun, express their emotions and skills, and have no fear at all, and thereby learn better as a result. The definitions given for game-based learning mostly emphasize that it is a type of game play, but with defined learning outcomes (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005). Also, game-based learning was defined by the interviewed teachers as "active and collaborative learning," and that children do not play only for the sake of playing, but are actively concentrated on the task of learning and working.

Overall, with the introduction of the new curriculum in some elementary schools in Kosovo, the interviewed teachers explained that the importance of integrating game-based learning lies in changing the position of the pupil in the school structure. In this context, game-based learning gives pupils the opportunity to express themselves more freely, to learn and to be evaluated without undue fear, which they perhaps had been reluctant to do

in Kosovan society, and that this was considered to be a very important point. In addition, the teachers emphasized that when information is placed in the context of a game that the children love very much, then the likelihood of them achieving their objectives and outcomes will be higher. In order to make learning effective, game-based learning requires games that are well-designed and have well-implemented learning tasks (Dadheech, 2019).

All of the interviewed teachers explained that they attempted to employ different types of activities, such as reading and writing development games, card games, balloon games, rope games, outdoor games, and activities on inclusion. In addition to these activities, the teachers who had been trained in the new curriculum also explained using digital gaming activities that they acquired or learned as a result of their new curriculum training; however, they also stated that although the children loved them very much, they were not often able to practice them that often in the absence of certain digital tools. Teachers usually use game activities to develop pupils' writing skills in language subjects, and numeracy and logical thinking in mathematics. They try to use those games that contribute to the learning content, whose objectives are considered accessible to the pupils, but that are also fun. The teachers also stated that they used activities based on inclusiveness, given that the new curriculum focuses on child inclusion. One example is the balloon game, where children gather around and have to touch balloons hanging over them. Thus, they talk about those who cannot reach them, making them aware of tolerance.

However, during the researcher's observations in the current study, the teachers were rarely seen to incorporate game-based learning, even though their pupils seemed to really love them and were happy during game-playing lessons.

The teachers, in general, cited training as one of the main challenges faced in the application of contemporary education and for the new curricular changes introduced in recent years, including new forms and activities that teachers have previously offered to pupils on a theoretical basis. The teachers mentioned training on the new contemporary pupil-centered strategies having been provided by various local and international organizations since 2001. Teachers trained in the new curriculum, in contrast to those as yet untrained, have attended so-called "new curriculum group meetings," where game-based learning activities have been the main focus, requiring warm-up activities before starting the main teaching process. They also mentioned having received training in various electronic game applications that could be applied in their teaching.

According to the Catalog of Accredited Teacher and Educational Leader Professional Development Programs (Ministria E Arsimit, Shkencës Dhe Teknologjisë [Kosovar Ministry of Education, Science and Technology], 2011), in Kosovo, international agencies and local organizations have arranged teacher training courses on the implementation of new contemporary teaching and learning methodologies. In this regard, the results of the current study show that teachers have not received adequate training in terms of gaming models that could be applied to the teaching of different subjects, but that they were able to apply the knowledge they gained from their training in game-based learning. Also, the teachers have attempted to integrate game-based learning themselves by independently researching different models on the Internet, and then sharing their experiences with other trained teachers. The study data, that includes the researcher's in-class observations of the teachers, shows that the teachers were trained in the methods of contemporary teaching, and which focus on active methods of working with pupils and also game-based learning, but that this training was then not satisfactorily applied in practice.

From the TNC teachers interviewed, it can be understood that the lack of appropriate textbooks creates numerous difficulties in applying game-based learning. It is also understood that game-based learning, as part of the new curriculum and the wider contemporary methodology, requires the integration of instructional games, yet the textbooks supplied to them are not in line with the framework of the new curriculum. It was suggested that the textbooks be made clearer and less encumbered, because they currently leave inadequate time or room for the game-based activities which pupils enjoy and need the most.

The teachers also emphasized time limitations as being one of the difficulties they face. It was said that the new curriculum requires that time be respected, and plans adhered to, and that all activities are conducted in a timely manner, which makes their job as teachers all the more difficult. According to the interviewed teachers, this occurs because they have so many textbook and workbook engagements to incorporate into their teaching, and that when they attempt to integrate certain game-based activities, they are often applied just as a formality, even though the pupils have a keen desire to continue to finish the game and thereby to see their results.

The results of the current study have shown that teachers often integrate game activities into their physical education (sports) classes, in the absence of adequate classroom space. The teachers stated that they struggle with a lack of resources for applying game-based learning, and that each time they plan activities, they end up having to provide the tools themselves. It was also seen through the researcher's observations that many classrooms do not possess so-called labs, with different concrete tools (figures, shapes, objects, toys, etc.), as is the case with schools designed based on contemporary teaching methodologies.

In order to overcome the difficulties in applying game-based learning, the interviewed teachers mainly suggested that they be provided with adequate materials, with the choice of different game-based activities so that they could take into account the learning level and interests of their pupils. According to the results of the current study, the interviewed teachers also listed the need for different play tools, and for greater collaboration between teachers and school management. Also, that adequate training be provided for all teachers, and especially for teachers not trained in the new curriculum, with a focus on modeling game activities. The teachers were able to find numerous game-based activities through various digital applications, but a lack of available tools does not then allow for their application in the classroom, despite the teachers' possessing valid knowledge in their usage.

The integration of game-based learning has shifted the pedagogical focus away from theoretical learning practices to children's activities that involve play. This means that the children are entertained, but at the same time are able to achieve academic results in a more practical way. A change in this regard is considered an enhancement to the quality of teachers, realized through their professional development in the research and implementation of methods and strategies to promote creative teaching and learning (KEC, 2001). The results of the current study have shown that teachers, through autonomy and flexibility of the games they introduce to the classroom, have attempted to set learning goals and other principles that enable the development of children's different competences and skills, and which also contribute to areas of the new curricula. However, much work remains

to be done in order to ensure that game-based learning is successfully adopted and implemented in Kosovan schools.

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