QTIMES
JOURNAL OF EDUCATION
Technology and Social Studies

4
Ottobre 2025

Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education: A Comparative Analysis of Analogue and Digital Perspectives in Italy and Spain

Gioco e apprendimento nella prima infanzia: un'analisi comparativa delle dimensioni analogiche e digitali in Italia e Spagna

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.14668/QTimes_17431

ABSTRACT

This paper compares the formulation of the role of play in early childhood education for children aged 0-6 in Italy and Spain, across both digital and analogue experiences. Literature, applied research, and case studies from these countries, as perused hereinafter, poignantly unravel how play occupies a critical place in children's development and learning. Digital technology brings questions. Digital technology changes play environments. I examine the skills that educators need to design changing play experiences. This work serves as a teaching tool. It shows the research findings from national case studies. It points out the problems. It offers ways to fix problems in learning

environments. The paper aims to serve as a teaching tool in discussions shaping practical training programmes for educators, balancing analogue and digital methods to develop innovative teaching strategies that enhance the educational experience in Italian and Spanish schools.

Keywords: Play, Early Childhood Education, Comparative Analysis, Analogue and Digital, Educator Training.

RIASSUNTO

Il presente contributo presenta uno studio comparativo sulla strutturazione del ruolo del gioco nell'educazione della prima infanzia (0-6 anni) in Italia e in Spagna, con riferimento sia alle esperienze digitali sia a quelle analogiche. La letteratura, le ricerche applicate e i casi di studio relativi a questi paesi, descritti nel presente contributo, sottolineano il ruolo fondamentale del gioco per lo sviluppo e l'apprendimento dei bambini. Le tecnologie digitali pongono ulteriori interrogativi sulle loro implicazioni per gli ambienti di gioco; il contributo pone l'attenzione sulle competenze degli educatori per la progettazione di esperienze di gioco inclusive e trasformative. Il contributo intende proporsi come spazio di riflessione e confronto tra le diverse realtà, evidenziando le differenze e le similitudini tra i due paesi.

Parole chiave: Gioco, Educazione della prima infanzia, Analisi comparativa, Analogico e digitale, Formazione degli educatori.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Children develop through play which stands as a fundamental element of their growth during their first six years of life. Children between six years old and six years old use play as their main method to discover their environment while learning new things and developing social bonds. This article examines the role of play in early childhood education in Spain and Italy and compares how the two countries integrate play into their educational practices. It focuses in particular on how analogue and digital forms of play are combined within pedagogical traditions and how these combinations shape teaching and learning strategies.

In Spain and Italy, play is increasingly acknowledged not as an activity of free time, but as a primary avenue through which children work, discover, and relate to their environment.The research of Hall (2014) and Leggett (2017) supports this perspective because their studies show that play activities enable children to build creative skills and critical thinking abilities and social competencies. The

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discussion has acquired new knowledge because digital education now dominates education so researchers and educators must create functional methods to incorporate play activities through technological platforms (Gavazova, 2025). The research must establish methods to combine physical play with digital play activities which benefit children.

Recent policy acts in both countries emphasise play-based methodologies that provide children with meaningful, intentional, and authentic experiences. In its National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, the Italian Ministry of Education stresses the importance of holistic development by integrating play into the curriculum and offering opportunities for different dimensions of development to evolve harmoniously (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2012). The Spanish law LOE likewise emphasises play-based activities, as they enable children to reach full development through experiences that promote independence, creativity, and social abilities (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2006).

The research investigates the educational approaches that early childhood education programmes implement in the two countries. The Reggio Emilia pedagogy presents a comprehensive educational system grounded in Italian educational philosophy, which positions children as active learners who explore environments and use play as a primary form of expression. In the Spanish Escuela Infantil (Infant School), play is also promoted within educational programmes to foster children's cognitive and social development. By examining these assumptions, this study seeks to gain insight into how education systems can foster environments that support children's learning experiences.

Technology has made the relationship between education, play, and policy more complex. Educators need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of digital technologies in order to assess their impact on the quality of play experiences. New forms of engagement offered by digital games require clear pedagogical criteria and boundaries. This study examines how play operates in Italian and Spanish early childhood education by analysing educational systems grounded in both physical and digital recreational activities, and it discusses key findings that can guide educational practice as experts continue to debate the effects of play activities on children's holistic development.

2. METHODS

The research uses qualitative comparative methods to study how Italian and Spanish early childhood education (0–6 years) sets up and leads play activities through physical and digital interfaces. The research achieves its objectives through the combination of policy documents with academic literature and case study examples from both countries. The research establishes theoretical knowledge about how educational systems and professional cultures and digital transformations affect play-based learning instead of gathering statistical information. The research design contains three connected components which function as a whole to reach the study's objectives.

1. Document analysis of national policy and curricular guidelines on early childhood education in Italy and Spain, with a specific focus on how play is framed in relation to children's holistic development and the use of digital technologies.
2. Narrative review of the literature on play in early childhood education, with particular attention to analogue and digital play, educator competences, and family involvement in both

countries.

3. Comparative case study analysis, based on four emblematic cases that illustrate how play-based learning is enacted in practice in Italian and Spanish early childhood settings.

The research combines these elements through a comparative analysis which examines how Italy and Spain implement their educational systems through their teaching methods and institutional structures and classroom activities.

3. BLENDING LEARNING STYLES AND PLAY: A MIXED APPROACH

Many learning structures strongly advocate placing play at the centre of learning in early childhood education. For example, the Reggio Emilia Approach and the Montessori Method emphasise the role of play in thinking, feeling, and social growth among children.

The Reggio Emilia method is a child-centred approach. It considers play as an important avenue through which children relate to their environment and express what goes on inside them. Teachers in this model are recommended to use games, keenly observe, and document attentively, thereby building knowledge through further learning experiences.

The educational approach follows modern educational theories, which hold that children should actively participate in their learning rather than receive knowledge passively. The Spanish educational system bases its curriculum on Play as its core foundation. The 'Escuela Infantil' framework in Spain uses play to develop both cognitive abilities and social skills of children (Istenič, Rosanda, & Gačnik, 2023). It has been perceived as a form of learning through play, which develops children's social skills and creates holistic educational experiences. The research by Edwards *et al*. (2020) established that playing serves two purposes because it brings children both entertainment and it drives their cognitive growth by helping them solve problems and think outside the box. The research on digital play effects has become vital because teachers work to establish learning spaces which unite conventional play activities with digital content. Digital resources help students stay interested but they introduce two major problems because students spend too much time on screens and because they might replace their traditional play activities.

Mascheroni *et al*. (2016) observe that although digital play enables new modalities of interaction and learning, experiences should complement, rather than replace, the rich sensory experiences of analogue play. For integrated play practices to work, educators need the competence and knowledge that comes from learning how to use games for learning.

The professional development program will enable educators to learn how to create play activities which support various student requirements thus establishing an inclusive educational space for every child. The training program teaches educators to merge physical materials with digital tools which enables children to develop creativity and acquire teamwork abilities and critical thinking skills. Research confirms international studies which demonstrate that educational design produces superior results when teams work together (Brullet *et al*., 2025).

The education sector implements play-based learning because multiple groups of stakeholders, including teachers, students, their families and government officials (Tur, Urbina, & Forteza, 2019), influence its implementation. Educational programs that encourage parent participation in classroom activities create a network of support which enhances the learning space for children.

4. EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS AND THE ROLE OF PLAY

The two countries use distinct theoretical frameworks and practical methods for play-based learning in their early childhood education programs, yet both systems base their curriculum on play activities. In Italy, which has become home to the development of the Reggio Emilia Approach, it has gained great fame for its orientation toward child-centred learning, in which play plays a very significant role as a primary means for children to express their inner worlds and reflections freely. Research on inclusive play highlights how accessibility strongly affects children's participation and learning opportunities (Besio, Bulgarelli & Stancheva-Popkostadinova, 2017). Several teaching techniques have been implemented in Spain, with a focus on play. This perspective, known as the "Escuela Infantil" method, views play as essential to the development of cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, and social skills, according to Falcó-Pegueroles' team. (2021), the current view of play is as a secondary activity, not an entertaining one; it should foster children's social relationships and emotional intelligence, besides academic study. According to game design theory, interactive digital play environments can function as structured systems that support problem-solving (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003). The impact of digital play is gaining increasing importance as more teachers are being asked to incorporate digital play into their teaching methodologies. The effects of digital play are The research about digital play effects becomes essential because teachers need to unite conventional play activities with digital content for inclusive learning practices. The guidelines from Edwards et al. (Children found digital activities interesting and inspiring according to 2020 research. Children need to keep their natural play instincts while being guided to find new things and develop their creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Research shows children achieve their best learning results through direct experiences because they understand information better through practical activities which produces improved academic performance. The early childhood education stage requires hands-on learning as children develop essential life skills which will benefit them in their future (Smith, 2023)

Through play, and games in particular, they can test their abilities by taking risks and making mistakes that reflect learning on both cognitive and social dimensions. The other challenge educators identified in managing children in the digital age highlighted another primary focus for professional development: applying play-based methodologies.

Studies comparing analogue and digital tools emphasise that both environments can support development when applied complementarily (Sabiela *et al*., 2022). Training shall guide and support educators in making informed decisions about implementing various aspects of play, taking into account the new complexities introduced by digital tools. This appropriateness includes knowledge about developing various digital applications, as well as the right time and manner to integrate them into play, so that their usage does not diminish the advantages associated with traditional forms of games. Therefore, training programs should emphasise, as research powerfully highlights, that children should engage both individually and collectively in play, as this will allow them to learn from one another while developing social skills. Nothing can overstate the need for teachers in both countries to accept play as dynamic and integral to learning. The more they understand a typology of plays, the better support they can provide for holistic development in children, grounded in strong

foundations in the elements of lifelong learning. When children are actively involved in play, they are most likely to maintain a positive attitude toward learning. Ultimately, participation in early childhood education across communities in both Italy and Spain makes a strong case for hybridising analogue and digital experiences. By designing attractive environments, educators play a crucial role in enhancing children's learning experiences as they face new challenges in contemporary life. The cooperation of teachers, parents, and policymakers is crucial in developing a comprehensive plan to implement play-based learning.

5. EDUCATION POLICIES AND SYSTEMS COMPARISON: ITALY AND SPAIN

Italy and Spain present educational landscapes that offer varied, yet complementary, roles in early childhood education. Teachers and policymakers require knowledge about these two nations because they aim to improve their early childhood education methods and student results. The analysis examines how educational policies and teaching methods and cultural views about play and digital technology implementation affect the practical delivery of play-based learning.

Early childhood education in Italy is organised within a framework that gives play an essential role in learning. The Italian Ministry of Education developed guidelines that outline the general theoretical approach to early childhood education, emphasising the integration of play into the curriculum as the primary means of promoting cognitive, emotional, and social development. National Guidelines indicate that "playing offers a very dynamic and excellent vehicle through which lessons can be learned, actively involving both the environment and other children" (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2012). Such a prescription finds its theoretical foundation in the experience of Reggio Emilia, where learning is placed at the centre of children's activities, and play is considered the means through which children express their thoughts and establish relationships with reality. In Spain, play gets just as much love in educational settings. The “Ley Orgánica de Educación” (LOE) stated that care in early childhood education should foster children's complete development by fostering autonomy, creativity, and social skills through play. Regional rules go even deeper by adding more steps for using play in schools. To ensure that play is part of the curriculum as a means to support cognitive and social development among children.

In Italy, play has been recognised as an effective and important means of learning, with strong support from educators and parents for the Play-based Approach (Cagliari *et al*., 2016). The strengthening of children’s agency and participatory rights is also emphasised in recent Spanish studies (Castro-Zubizarreta & Calvo-Salvador, 2024). This cultural perspective varies across educational settings, where ‘learning happens through playing that forms part of daily routines and experiences’. On the other hand, Spain has traditionally favoured formal instruction over play, but a new shift is challenging this traditional perspective. This, therefore, increases the recognition of the need to emphasise the importance of play in holistic development (Hervás-Torres, Bellido-González, & Soto-Solier, 2024).

There is growing advocacy of Play as a legitimate avenue for learning, particularly in early childhood education. Italy and Spain present a duality for digital integration in early childhood education In Italy more projects that use resources bring resources into the early childhood education. Digital tools can make learning when people use tools well (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020). The same could apply to Spain, as digital tools were used within the “Escuela Infantil” framework with guidelines encouraging the provision

of technology that supports play-based learning (Zhang, 2023). What must be emphasised is that the use of any such digital tool does not replace traditional forms of play. Roussou (2004) argues that, though more interaction and learning can be facilitated by digital play, richness and diversity.
The Reggio Emilia Approach offers effective methods for connecting play activities with educational and care programs through its observation-based documentation system, which demonstrates how values shape children's learning experiences (Manera, 2022). The approach encourages group work, fostering social connections that children need to communicate and solve problems. The "Escuela Infantil" program does not hide its orientation toward organised games, inside specific themes or objectives that are learning-oriented. Creativity is expressed more effectively when there is a balance between play, structured and unstructured play, which present opportunities for creativity and exploration for young children (Nuzzaci, 2018). Spanish educators have realised that their curricula require more free play so that children can sit down to imagine. Professional training of educators is crucial to the successful implementation of play-based learning in schools and at home. In the preparatory training of early childhood educators in Italy, there is an introduction to and appreciation of play as a pedagogical tool, supported by reflective practices that accommodate children's developmental attainments (Bulgarelli, 2018). Programs for professional development in Spain are evolving to incorporate play-based methodologies that address the competencies educators need to implement effectively (Albanese *et al*., 2023).
A comparison of early childhood education in Italy and Spain readily highlights the unique characteristics, as well as the similarities in the concept of Play. While both of these countries have adopted the policy of keeping the game as an integral part, cultural attitudes and implementation practices differ. Professional development training for educators and parents' participation, as well as policies that support practices, are prerequisites for the successful implementation of play-based learning in both contexts. The multiple aspects of play enable Italy and Spain to create educational experiences that are more valuable for young children, helping them develop better learning skills for future academic success.

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6. CASE STUDIES

Research on the implementation of play-based learning in early childhood education uses case studies of successful practices from Italy and Spain to support its findings. The connection between play and culture is understood according to classical theories, which begin with Huizinga's definition of Homo Ludens (Rodriguez, 2006).
The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how educational institutions promote new teaching methods through their support for educational innovation and their creation of multiple essential changes in education. The pandemic led to the development of safe-practice methods that transformed how educators, parents, and policymakers interact.

Case Study 1: How Play Shapes Learning in Italian Schools

The Reggio Emilia Approach recognises play as an essential learning component which plays a vital role in student development. The Italian "children's poles" host educational programs for children aged 0-6, according to Benvenuto *et al*. (2021). Results show how play can serve as a double facilitator in both cognitive and emotional dimensions. This study assumed that learning through

playing increases children's motivation and social cooperation when educators are keenly responsive to individual interests. The research showed that children who worked together and managed their emotions well through play activities developed better, which proved that play-based learning remains effective during difficult times.
Other key aspects expressed in this study include the importance of having rich environments with diverse resources that provoke thought and stimulate creativity, as well as varied resources to explore and express oneself. Technology was integrated by including digital resources that support educators in enhancing play experiences without compromising the tactile dimension of analogue play.
The central values that make up a learning city gain their centrality from the quality and full provision of enabling a lifelong learning culture for all its citizens. Of course, this involves diverse backgrounds, and thus a high level of commitment and governance effort is required to ensure collaboration in delivering learning. Encouraged as part of this study, educators were fostering the integration of digital resources that support play without diminishing tactile experiences found within and around analogue play. Such pedagogical novelty is highly responsive to the post-COVID context, as educators integrate safety measures into their practices while maintaining the integrity of play. This supported the idea that play can be effective in an early childhood education setting, creating a model for other educators who may want to take the lead in new circumstances.

Case Study 2: New Ideas for Play in Spanish Early Childhood Teaching

In Spain, Raspa (2022) analysed new practices that early childhood educational centres adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, digital platforms hypothesised to make children more resilient and emotionally stable in times of crisis were described. Findings, supported by the results, indicated that virtual playdates helped children maintain connections with their peers, which is beneficial for their emotional development. They redesigned the curriculum through plural, ludic paths, mediated by digital platforms that permitted distance learning with the children, always ensuring that face-to-face play would remain at the core. It denotes a change in practice, which, while ensuring safety during the pandemic, enabled an approach to reflect on how play is carried out in both real and virtual environments.

Case Study 3: How Technology Changes Playtime

In recent work by Bortolotti, Rossi, and Biraglia (2024), educators' sentiments on the use of technology in play were described. Findings indicated that although most educators view digital tools as enabling children to be more engaged in their activities, they also express concerns on two counts: first, regarding the association between technology and excessive screen time; and second, regarding the preservation of traditional play. The study discussed possible strategies for the technological dimension of pretend play. Respondents indicated that they used digital technology for storytelling, creativity, and to demonstrate collaborative work. Some educators have used tablets and interactive whiteboards for digital story narration, providing children with an opportunity to work on multimedia projects and share their stories with others. Such experiences provide children with digital knowledge and a critical and creative mindset. Educators plan to achieve this by using digital technology alongside play-based education while maintaining a balanced approach.

Case Study 4: How Families Join in Learning Through Play

Family involvement is very instrumental in play-based learning. Nardone (2025) investigated how families in Italy and Spain support their children's play. The findings indicated that active family participation in playing with their children leads to better educational outcomes. Families like to support what kids are learning at school by also doing play activities at home. The study also found that educators with strong partnerships with families tend to be more involved and collaborative. Some educators conduct workshops and information sessions for parents on how to create a rich play environment at home, providing resources for play-based learning. These, by communicating the reasons behind children's play-based development, prompt families to take an interest in supervising their children's education. It has called for resources and strategies to help families navigate the digital landscape of play. With digital media, parents want to know how to manage screen time so that children's time on screens supports, rather than substitutes for, complementary and not substitutive forms of play. This finding is supported by the evidence presented by Choy, Lau, and Wu (2024) on how digital parenting may impact early childhood development through play-based learning at the initial stage of children's education in Italy and Spain. They include various strategies educators use to incorporate play into the curriculum, amid challenges posed by digital media and family engagement. Such examples from real-life scenarios provide a basis for critical reflection on effective practices that may improve children's learning experiences and holistic development. Add what has been learned from these case studies. It will update the conversation about the role of play in early childhood education as educators adapt to a new learning landscape.

7. CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the role of play in early childhood education in Italy and Spain highlights its central contribution to the holistic development of children aged 0–6. Play is recognised as an integral component of learning in both countries, but different cultural attitudes, pedagogical frameworks, and educational policies shape how this principle is interpreted and implemented. This comparative analysis draws on case studies and research to identify good practices for integrating analogue and digital play into education. A major takeaway of this study is the vital role that play has in cognitive, emotional, and social development. Children thrive in conditions of exploration and cooperative play, as Raspa (2022) suggests. Educational programmes have a responsibility to support educators in planning and implementing play experiences that include all children and respond to diverse needs. To make play-based efforts successful, families must also be involved in the process. When families are engaged, children's learning is reinforced, and the meaning of play at home becomes stronger. Teachers can support this by providing parents with tools and organising sessions on how to create play-rich environments. This shared approach helps build communities that view play as an essential part of growing up, as demonstrated by Ramírez *et al*. (2017). Educational practices follow the directions which policymakers establish through their authority. The educational policies of Italy and Spain support play-based learning yet they lack specific guidelines about how to implement play

activities in classroom curricula. The policies need to distribute funding for teacher development and educational materials and playground construction to establish learning environments based on play activities. According to Savio (2023) play requires intentional design to become an educational perspective which extends beyond its role as a teaching method.

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How to cite this paper: Falcone, G., Cangini, N. (2025). Gioco e apprendimento nella prima infanzia: un'analisi comparativa delle dimensioni analogiche e digitali in Italia e Spagna [Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education: A Comparative Analysis of Analogue and Digital Perspectives in Italy and Spain]. *QTimes webmagazine*, anno XVII, n. 4, 447-458.
Doi: https://doi.org/10.14668/QTimes_17431