

Tabletop RPG in the educational process: barriers and difficulties faced during classroom implementation

RPG de mesa no processo formativo: barreiras e dificuldades enfrentadas de implementação em sala de aula

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Abstract

The use of role-playing games (RPGs) as an active learning methodology offers immense educational potential, fostering immersion, critical thinking, and emancipatory learning; however, as various studies indicate, it also faces significant challenges. Consequently, there is a need to identify the primary barriers and challenges encountered when implementing tabletop RPGs in classroom settings. This study addressed this need through a structured methodology involving the selection of peer-reviewed articles from the CAPES/MEC journal directory platform, covering the period from 2020 to 2025 and including works in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. Of the 286 articles initially identified, 14 remained after the screening process. Nevertheless, numerous barriers and difficulties regarding tabletop RPG implementation were identified, most notably teacher inexperience in facilitating the game and challenges related to time management.

Keywords: role-playing game; pedagogical RPG; literature review.

Resumo

O uso de *Role-playing game* (RPG) como metodologia ativa apresenta enorme potencial educacional, promovendo imersão, pensamento crítico e aprendizagem emancipatória, porém, enfrenta desafios significativos, conforme apontam diversos estudos. Dessa forma, há necessidade de se descobrir as principais barreiras e dificuldades enfrentadas para implementar o RPG de mesa durante o processo formativo em sala de aula. Meticulosamente, a descoberta foi alcançada com uma metodologia estruturada, sendo necessário utilizar da seleção de periódicos indexados na forma de artigo da plataforma de diretórios de periódicos CAPES/MEC, incluindo artigos entre 2020 e 2025 e nos idiomas português, inglês e espanhol. Dos 286 artigos encontrados, restaram 14 ao final do processo de triagem. Ainda assim, foram identificadas inúmeras barreiras e dificuldades enfrentadas na implementação do RPG de mesa, com destaque para a in experiência do professor na condução do RPG e para os desafios de gestão do tempo.

Palavras-chave: *role-playing game*; rpg pedagógico; revisão bibliográfica.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Role-Playing Game (RPG) is known as a game of role-playing, the depth of its interactions sets it apart from the category of a mere "game," positioning it instead as a complex narrative system (Cassaro; Dei Svaldi; Caldela, 2013).

In essence, an RPG works as follows: a group of people (whether previously acquainted or not) gather intending to participate in an adventure and face a challenge. The most important

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aspect is not whether they win or lose, but rather the experience of collaboratively building a story with a plot that is entertaining for everyone involved (Cassaro; Dei Svaldi; Caldela, 2013).

In tabletop RPGs, participants assume the roles of characters they create themselves and to which they “give life.” This universe is envisioned by a specific player known as the “Game Master” (or GM), whose role is to present and narrate the adventure in which the players will interact (Freitas; Bianco, 2021; Geneuss, 2021; Nunes, 2004).

It can also be defined as a system governed by its own narratives and by a unique representational system for portraying reality (Winardy; Septiana, 2023; Lima; Marchesi, 2024).

An RPG is a form of improvisational theater in which each person controls a character, operating under rules stipulated by the specific RPG system used for the adventure. At certain points in the story, players state what they wish to do and then roll dice to determine whether they succeed or fail; consequently, the story can shift, leading to positive or negative outcomes based on the players’ choices and the results of the dice rolls.

Nowadays, educational RPGs go beyond mere entertainment, addressing a wide variety of educational themes—such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, and geography.

In an RPG, role-playing can be directed toward resolving a problem scenario set in an environment that mirrors a reality related to the subject matter taught in the classroom (Ferreira; Leão; Vasconcelos, 2024).

The act of learning through play is extremely important in the teaching-learning process; it is an engaging, appealing, fun, enjoyable, captivating, and interesting methodology that yields positive results in the school environment—a view widely supported by numerous authors (Fernandes; Ramírez; Fernandes-Sobrinho, 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2022).

In his books *Extensão ou Comunicação?* (1983) and *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1987), Freire discusses the need to break away from “banking” education, criticizing a model in which the teacher merely “deposits” knowledge into passive students (viewed as receptacles). RPGs represent the antithesis of “banking” education, as players are not there to listen to a pre-written story; the narrative advances only through their actions.

Furthermore, according to Freire (1983, 1987), education should be problem-posing—a process that occurs when learning confronts the student with problem scenarios drawn from their own reality. In an educational RPG session, the Game Master (or teacher) describes a setting based on the lesson content and presents a problem; resolving it then requires authentic critical thinking and collaborative decision-making.

According to Freire (1983), teaching must be grounded in dialogicity (horizontal dialogue), wherein educator and learner collaboratively seek knowledge. A similar dynamic plays out in role-playing games (RPGs), where the story advances solely through the dialogic and joint interaction of the players.

In *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (1996), Freire argues that one learns to make decisions by actually making them. RPGs simulate a safe environment where students practice autonomous decision-making and experience the consequences of their choices, aligning with the teaching-learning process advocated by Paulo Freire.

Based on the aforementioned works, it is evident that Paulo Freire establishes fundamental principles that explain and validate the immense potential of RPGs as a pedagogical tool; the practice fosters the active construction of knowledge (as opposed to “banking” education), problematizes education, values dialogicity and co-participation, and encourages the exercise of autonomy and decision-making.

Regarding the use of RPGs in education, although Paulo Freire (1983, 1987, 1996) does not explicitly discuss role-playing games in his writings, the foundation of his critical-democratic pedagogy aligns with the mechanics of RPGs. Thus, several perspectives can be inferred: the end of “banking” education, with the student acting as an active subject; the “encoding” of the game through challenges and its “decoding” via the students’ critical analysis of situations in search of creative, unforeseen solutions; horizontal communication; the co-authorship of knowledge, without a single possessor of absolute truth; the stimulation of imagination; and the transition from naive curiosity to “epistemological curiosity.”

Vygotski (1991) highlights the pedagogical potential of role-playing games through the exploration of play (make-believe), the creation of imaginary situations, rules, language use, and social interaction in cognitive development. The author asserts that play creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD) for the child. The ZPD is the distance between what a child can do independently (actual developmental level) and what they can achieve under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (potential developmental level). Although Vygotsky does not use the term “RPG,” the concept of the ZPD—which he describes as fundamental to the formation of the mind—lies at the heart of pedagogical role-playing games.

Vygotski (1991) further concludes that there is an inseparability between the imaginary situation and the rules within play. The same applies to RPGs, where immersion in the imaginary situation is guided by a system of rules inherent to the role being played. During these games, the child suppresses impulses and submits to established rules to achieve maximum enjoyment, thereby developing self-control and morality.

Based on Vygotski (1991), it can be concluded that pedagogical RPGs hold significant potential for shaping the social mind, as they combine formal instruction with playfulness, imagination, conscious adherence to rules, and social collaboration to internalize new knowledge.

According to Caillouis (2017), role-playing and make-believe games are classified as *mimicry* (the work was originally published in 1958). In this category, by “pretending” to be a character, the child achieves a state of “awareness of unreality” that alleviates academic pressure, making learning more engaging and unconstrained. Pedagogical RPGs harness *mimicry* to enable students to acquire knowledge through collaborative dialogue, experiencing memorable, playful moments driven by imagination.

From the perspective of the aforementioned authors, an educational game is not merely a form of entertainment. Consequently, identifying the barriers and challenges involved in implementing tabletop RPGs in the classroom is essential; the integration of play and instruction is complex, and if poorly executed, it can negate the practice’s profound cognitive and emancipatory benefits.

In light of the above, the following question arises: what barriers and challenges do teachers face when implementing role-playing games—specifically tabletop RPGs—during the classroom learning process?

Thus, the general objective of this literature review was to identify the barriers and challenges teachers face when implementing tabletop RPGs in the classroom, as well as the motivations underpinning their adoption as a didactic resource in education.

The specific objectives selected were:

- a) to conduct a literature review regarding the barriers and challenges faced when implementing tabletop RPGs in the classroom; and
- b) to identify the motivations for using role-playing games as a didactic resource in education.

METHODS

This study is classified as theoretical and exploratory research employing a qualitative approach based on a literature review of articles published primarily in the fields of education and teaching between 2020 and 2025, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish.

The selection of articles relevant to the study’s theme followed these steps:

- 1) Selection of journals indexed in the CAPES/MEC journal directory platform. Search term: “role playing game” (exact match). Search scope: search all fields. Material type: article. Access: open access. National production: no option selected (options: “yes” and “no”). Peer-reviewed: no option selected (options: “yes” and “no”). Areas: no option selected. Languages: Portuguese, English, and Spanish.
- 2) Searches were conducted on March 29, 2025, yielding 286 articles: 267 in English, 17 in Portuguese, and 2 in Spanish.
- 3) Selection of works actually addressing the research topic based on reading titles, abstracts, and—in some cases—the full text, aiming to choose those most aligned with the study’s

objectives. Articles lacking the potential to address the research problem and general objective were excluded, with the exclusion process proceeding from title analysis to abstract reading and, finally, reading the full article.

To address the research problem and the general objective, the methodology adopted a primary research question for analysis: what are the barriers and difficulties faced by teachers when implementing role-playing games (RPGs)—specifically tabletop RPGs—during the classroom learning process?

Additionally, a second question regarding the topic was posed to understand the rationale for using pedagogical RPGs: why role-playing games should be used as a didactic resource in education.

To answer both questions, a methodology for article selection was outlined, resulting in the following flowchart (Figure 1):

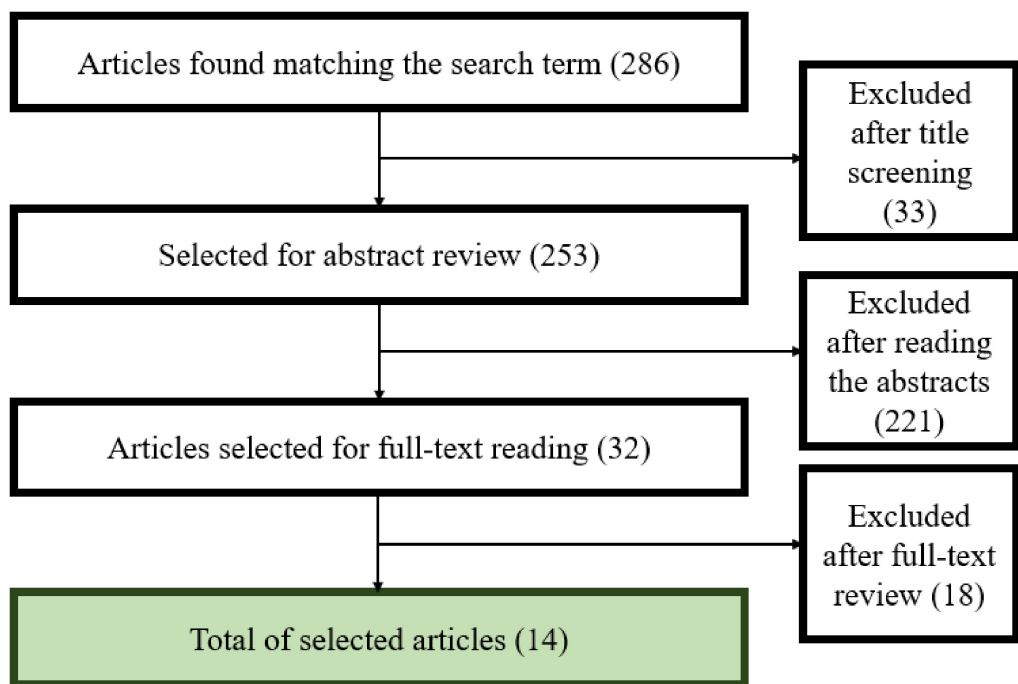


Figure 1. Flowchart of the selection process for the searched articles. The number of articles at each stage is indicated in parentheses.

Source: done by the author.

Having outlined the methodology and the selection process flowchart (Figure 1), it is worth presenting the publication context and methodological characteristics of the 14 articles selected for this study.

1. Context of the publications

Contextualizing the publications allows readers to verify the types and academic classifications of the works in question, while also aiding in the analysis of which fields are most focused on the subject of this article. This study on the state of knowledge regarding RPGs and their pedagogical use imposed no restrictions based on academic field. Nor did it consider the level of reach or citation count of each article.

Thus, based on the 2021–2024 quadrennial journal classification from the Sucupira/Capes platform, the 14 articles were categorized by “evaluation area” and “Qualis” rating.

Chart 1 was created to ensure the information was presented clearly and was easy to consult:

As shown in Chart 1, the expected outcome occurred: journals in the field of Education published the most (57%) on the topic covered in this review. Although

Chart 1. Articles selected by evaluation area and Qualis.

N.	Journal	Field	Qualis	ISSN
1	Social Sciences & Humanities Open	Education	A1	2590-2911
2	Teaching and Teacher Education	Education	A1	0742-051X
3	International Journal of Role-Playing - Issue 13	Communication, information, and museology	B1	2210-4909
4	Environmental research communications	Interdisciplinary	A3	2515-7620
5	Journal of chemical education	Education	A1	0021-9584
6	Episodes	Teaching	A2	0705-3797
7	Journal of virtual exchange	Education	A1	2647-4832
8	Revista estudos aplicados em educação	Education	A4	2525-703X
9	Contemporânea – revista de ética e filosofia política	Education	C	2447-0961
10	Ensino, Educação e Ciências Humanas	Education	A3	2447-8733
11	Revista Española de Ciencia Política	Political Science and International Relations	A1 (Journal, 2017–2020 four-year period). Not classified in the 2021–2024 four-year period.	1575-6548
12	Scientia Naturalis	Education	A2	2596-1640
13	Revista Extensão em Foco	Teaching	B2	2317-9791
14	International Journal of Role-Playing - Issue 11	Communication, information, and museology	B1	2210-4909

Source: done by the author.

the field of Education accounts for the majority of publications, the topic also appeared in journals from diverse fields—including communication and information, museology, interdisciplinary studies, teaching, and political science and international relations—highlighting its potential interdisciplinarity and applicability across various branches of knowledge. This demonstrates that RPGs can be applied in a wide range of educational areas.

Finally, it is worth noting that publications on this topic within the field of Education span various Qualis strata (A1, A2, A3, A4, and C), indicating that the discussion appears in journals with differing foci and levels of prominence within the field of education. The inclusion of an article classified as Qualis C in this review will be explained in the results section.

2. Methodological characteristics

The 14 studies reviewed are classified as follows: six (43%) are qualitative, zero (0%) are quantitative, and eight (57%) are mixed-methods (qualitative-quantitative). Regarding the type of study, seven (50%) were classified as explanatory and six (43%) as exploratory. Descriptive studies—which seek to describe the phenomenon of tabletop RPGs in the classroom while highlighting associated challenges—account for the vast majority of the reviewed sample, specifically twelve (85%) studies. It was common to find studies that were simultaneously

descriptive and exploratory, as well as those combining descriptive and explanatory characteristics.

Various research approaches were employed across the reviewed studies. Field research predominated in 9 (64%) studies; 8 (57%) used case studies; 5 (35%) used surveys; 4 (28%) used participatory research; 2 (14%) used bibliographic research; 2 (14%) used action research; 1 (7%) used focus groups; 1 (7%) used ex-post-facto research; and 1 (7%) used quasi-experimental research.

In this literature review, 12 (85%) of the selected articles developed their own role-playing game systems to adapt the activities to the specific needs and interests of their students.

RESULTS

Thirty-three (33) articles were eliminated during the title-reading phase because they addressed video games, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), mobile RPGs, or RPGs applied to physical therapy treatment.

After reading the 253 (two hundred and fifty-three) abstracts, 221 (two hundred and twenty-one) were excluded because they dealt with:

- 1) Conceptual confusion: This category encompasses articles using the term "Role-playing" or "RPG" in contexts other than tabletop RPGs (narrative-based, involving dice, character sheets, and a game master). Included here are studies that conflate the term with dramatization, children's theater, psychodrama, process drama, role-play (role simulation), dialogue-based acting exercises, corporate or military training, and management, clinical, or governance simulations;
- 2) Research focused on virtual environments lacking the characteristics of tabletop RPGs: This category covers video games, MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online games), console games, mobile device games, and digital gamification using software or digital platforms;
- 3) Lack of focus on pedagogical intervention (teacher, students, and school environment): This category encompasses studies on culture, sociology, BDSM, politics, clinical psychology, mental health, social behavior, or leisure, without involving the teacher or classroom dynamics;
- 4) Exclusive focus on game design and software architecture: articles concerned with game creation or algorithm programming, disregarding teaching practice;
- 5) Literature reviews; and
- 6) Articles making no mention of RPGs: works addressing diverse topics where RPGs are not the subject matter, or which were identified as inclusion errors during the initial screening. This category includes programs focused on sexual and reproductive health, the history of Chinese migration, and studies on public management and institutional marketing.

After a full reading of 32 (thirty-two) articles, 18 (eighteen) were eliminated for failing to address both questions established by the methodology.

The exclusion criteria were applied rigorously and in a standardized manner, regardless of language (English, Portuguese, or Spanish). Consequently, only studies that simultaneously addressed both research questions were retained. This resulted in a final sample representing approximately 5% (five percent) of the total articles identified, ensuring strict alignment with the study's problem statement and general objective.

Of the 286 articles identified, 267 were in English. As they constituted the vast majority of the initial sample, it is natural that they accounted for the highest number of exclusions as well as the majority of inclusions (10 of the 14 articles in the final sample).

Chart 2 presents the 14 (fourteen) selected articles, listed by author, year, and title:

The findings of these articles are analyzed below to address the research problem.

Chart 2. Selected articles by author/year and title.

Nº	AUTHOR/YEAR	TITLE
01	Winardy and Septiana (2023)	<i>Role-playing and games: Comparison between role-playing games and role-play in education</i>
02	Boysen et al. (2023)	<i>The role of expertise in playful learning activities: A design-based self-study within teacher education aimed at the development of tabletop role-playing games</i>
03	Westborg (2023)	<i>The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix: Mapping Design Components onto Types of Education</i>
04	Segoni (2022)	<i>A role-playing game to complement teaching activities in an 'environmental impact assessment' teaching course</i>
05	López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021)	<i>Should We Ban Single-Use Plastics? A Role-Playing Game to Argue and Make Decisions in a Grade8 School Chemistry Class</i>
06	Horodyskyj, Lennon and Greco (2024)	<i>SUSTAINABLE STATES: a role-playing game for sustainability education</i>
07	Liberado and Tzoumis (2024)	<i>Using role-playing games in virtual exchanges: Global experiences in intercultural and multidisciplinary approaches to learning about environmental sustainability</i>
08	Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024)	<i>Flexibilização do conhecimento matemático mediante uso do role playing game flex: uma experiência pedagógica com estudantes do curso de Administração</i>
09	Lima and Marchesi (2024)	<i>The Making Of Historical Role Playing Games In Secondary And Tertiary Education: An Experience Of International Cooperation Between History Teachers</i>
10	Macedo and Andrade (2024)	<i>O Uso do Role Playing Game como uma Ferramenta de Ensino e Aprendizagem dos Conceitos de Evolução Biológica</i>
11	Cruz-Martinez, Soto and Benito (2022)	<i>Learning about political systems while playing: Testing short-term knowledge retention through a role-play classroom game</i>
12	Freitas and Bianco (2021)	<i>Radioatividade: o uso de role-playing game como estratégia para o ensino de química na educação básica</i>
13	Kurutz, Hülse and Bonin (2020)	<i>Folclore em forma de role-playing game: criação de um jogo para utilização na educação infantil</i>
14	Geneuss (2021)	<i>The Use of the Role-playing Technique STARS in Formal Didactic Contexts</i>

Source: Prepared by the author.

Chart 3 presents the main responses identified in response to the inquiry: “What are the barriers and difficulties faced by teachers when implementing role-playing games (RPGs) or tabletop RPGs during the classroom training process?”

Chart 3. Responses to the first question.

Paraphrase of key responses	%	Author/Year
A teacher’s lack of practical experience or familiarity with <i>role-playing games</i> can limit the educational possibilities and the playful potential of these games (RPGs).	28	Boysen et al. (2023), Westborg (2023), Horodyskyj, Lennon and Greco (2024), Freitas and Bianco (2021)
Since RPGs often span several hours, days, or even months, time management becomes a crucial factor when introducing them into the educational environment, where schedules are generally tight and inflexible.	28	Boysen et al. (2023), Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024), Lima and Marchesi (2024), Cruz-Martinez, Soto and Benito (2022)

Source: Prepared by the author.

Chart 3. Continued...

Paraphrase of key responses	%	Author/Year
Developing an original game system requires teachers to engage in even more detailed planning and to mobilize a greater number of resources.	14	Winardy and Septiana (2023), Lima and Marchesi (2024)
It is essential that players actively engage with the clues, challenges, and proposals presented by the Game Master, otherwise, students may end up following paths that diverge from the desired educational objectives.	14	Boysen et al. (2023), Freitas and Bianco (2021)
It is necessary to prepare the students beforehand, instructing and familiarizing them with the dynamics of the RPG.	14	Liberado and Tzoumis (2024), Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024)
Students may have difficulty accepting opinions contrary to their own, even hindering the Master from directing the story. There may be a lot of noise, physical interaction, and failure to follow instructions or narrative. It can get to the point where the teacher asks students to leave the room.	14	Freitas and Bianco (2021), Geneuss (2021).
There is a lack of academic studies comparing traditional <i>role-playing games</i> with the RPGs used in educational settings. This gap in the literature highlights the absence of well-defined guidelines and research investigating how to effectively apply RPGs within the school context. Furthermore, the failure to explore the distinction between these two types of games may pose an initial challenge for teachers seeking to understand the specific characteristics of using RPGs in the classroom.	7	Winardy and Septiana (2023)
The use of RPGs in an educational context requires a variety of specific resources and tools for their application in the classroom.	7	Winardy and Septiana (2023)
The use of RPGs that explore more intense emotional content requires extra preparation from teachers, as well as a higher level of sensitivity and specialized knowledge.	7	Winardy and Septiana (2023)
Games without a pre-set plot, while requiring more from the Game Master to handle the unpredictability of events, offer significant benefits. One of these is their resemblance to real life, which often does not follow a script. Furthermore, players enjoy a more authentic experience, as the unfolding of the game and its outcome are direct consequences of their own decisions and actions.	7	Segoni (2022)
Virtual instruction created challenges and disruptions in educational dynamics. A lack of internet access for some students was a significant obstacle in the online RPG. The discussions proved complex. This difficulty limited the potential for enrichment that in-person interaction would have provided. Such issues highlight the limitations of the virtual format compared to the in-person one in certain respects.	7	López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021)
Simplifying the rules of an RPG requires extra effort to ensure that the intended learning outcome is achieved.	7	Horodyskyj, Lennon and Greco (2024)

Source: Prepared by the author.

Chart 3. Continued...

Paraphrase of key responses	%	Author/Year
An overload of information in an RPG ended up hindering the flow of the game—particularly regarding decision-making—given that RPGs naturally involve a great deal of information due to their nature as a form of storytelling.	7	Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024)
The number of students in the classroom poses a challenge for gameplay. Therefore, it is necessary to divide the class into groups. Game sessions work best with a maximum of 15 participants.	7	Lima and Marchesi (2024)
It is necessary to make pedagogical adaptations to the RPG before teaching the content to be covered.	7	Macedo and Andrade (2024)
Institutional prejudice against the unknown is perhaps the most complex barrier for the teacher, who may be prohibited from using the methodology. Regrettably, for a long time, RPGs were viewed as detrimental to learning.	7	Kurutz, Hülse and Bonin (2020)

Source: Prepared by the author.

Despite being classified as Qualis C, the article by Lima and Marchesi (2024) was retained in the final sample because it was the only one to respond to the first inquiry by stating that “the number of students in the classroom for gameplay poses a challenge, requiring the class to be divided into groups, with a recommended maximum of 15 participants.” Consequently, it was deemed essential to the proposed discussion.

Having addressed the research’s central question, it is relevant to investigate the reasons why role-playing games should be used as a didactic resource in education.

Chart 4 presents the key responses identified regarding the inquiry (“why role-playing games should be used as a didactic resource in education”).

Chart 4. Responses to the second question

Paraphrase of key responses	%	Author/Year
Generates joyful experiences or motivation.	28	Boysen et al. (2023), Segoni (2022), López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021), Freitas and Bianco (2021)
It is transformative or effective learning.	28	Winardy and Septiana (2023), López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021), Freitas and Bianco (2021), Geneuss (2021)
Generates student involvement, engagement, or heightened interest	28	Boysen et al. (2023), López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021), Liberado and Tzoumis (2024), Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024)
Creates immersion	28	Boysen et al. (2023), Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024), Lima and Marchesi (2024), Freitas and Bianco (2021)
Stimulates creativity and critical thinking	21	Winardy and Septiana (2023), Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024), Macedo and Andrade (2024)
Is a teaching method that incorporates play and a playful approach	21	Ferreira, Leão and Vasconcelos (2024), Kurutz, Hülse and Bonin (2020), Segoni (2022)
Boosts self-confidence	14	Winardy and Septiana (2023), Cruz-Martinez, Soto and Benito (2022)
Enables the study of concepts that are difficult to learn otherwise	14	Winardy and Septiana (2023), López-Fernández, González-García and Franco-Mariscal (2021),

Source: Prepared by the author.

Chart 4. Continued...

Paraphrase of key responses	%	Author/Year
RPGs facilitate the teaching of various subjects within a shared reality.	14	Horodyskyj, Lennon and Greco (2024), Macedo and Andrade (2024)
When using games, the teaching-learning dynamic becomes more egalitarian between students and the teacher, unlike in other pedagogical approaches.	7	Lima and Marchesi (2024)
The student takes on the leading role; they are the protagonist and responsible for their own journey.	7	Kurutz, Hülse and Bonin (2020)

Source: Prepared by the author.

DISCUSSION

It was possible to identify various barriers and difficulties faced by teachers when implementing *role-playing games* (RPGs) during the classroom learning process (see Chart 3).

From Paulo Freire's perspective regarding the dismantling of "banking" education, a teacher's lack of practical experience limits the potential of RPGs, as the educator fails to relinquish the centralized control characteristic of traditional teaching in favor of assuming the role of a mediator in the co-construction of knowledge.

According to Caillois's theory of *mimicry*, the clash between time management within tight schedules and the need for immersion creates structural issues that threaten the effectiveness of RPGs as an active learning methodology; this triggers an abrupt break in the "awareness of unreality," necessitates re-immersion, and can even lead to frustration. When the teacher—acting as the game master—abruptly halts the game because a class has ended, the immersion is destroyed; at each subsequent session, they must spend precious minutes preparing students and re-establishing the narrative and rules, while also frequently finding themselves forced to rush the story along.

In Freirean pedagogy, education must be problem-posing; consequently, learning must confront the student with problem situations drawn from their own reality. Since educational RPGs aim to resolve problem situations related to classroom content, commercial RPG systems generally do not meet these specific needs, requiring pedagogical adaptations. Therefore, the teacher/Game Master must invest more time and resources into creating scenarios, universes, and problem sets specifically aligned with the curriculum.

In tabletop RPGs, the clues, challenges, and prompts provided by the teacher/Game Master serve as the essential "guidance" to lead the student toward their level of potential development. Drawing on Vygotski (1991), it is evident that if players do not actively engage with these RPG elements, they drift out of the lesson's planned Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), succumb to the impulses of free play, and fail to consciously submit to the rules and limits inherent in the formal instruction of the subject matter.

Students must break free from "banking" conditioning; prior preparation is required to "de-condition" them from the passivity often associated with traditional schooling before immersing them in the educational RPG setting. They must be instructed that, in this environment, they will not simply listen to a pre-scripted story but will need to exercise authentic critical thinking, make decisions, and engage in horizontal communication.

Reported difficulties—such as students refusing to accept opposing views or disrupting the teacher during the RPG session—highlight the practical challenges of establishing the co-authorship of knowledge and the democratic communication advocated by Freire, underscoring the need to apply Vygotsky's principles regarding rules and engagement.

Traditional RPGs focus on fluid, open-ended entertainment. In contrast, pedagogical RPGs—viewed through a Freirean lens—must be structured to pose problems, confronting learners with situations linked to specific subject matter. The lack of research comparing these two models means teachers lack guidelines on how to transform a purely recreational adventure into a tool that challenges “banking” education and fosters authentic critical thinking and the co-construction of knowledge.

In the “banking” model of education criticized by Freire, resource requirements are minimal, as the teacher merely “deposits” content into passive students. Since pedagogical RPGs are the antithesis of this approach, they require specific RPG tools, such as character sheets and maps.

Freirean pedagogy advocates that education should derive problem situations from the student’s own reality. However, these realities often involve emotionally charged moral, ethical, or social dilemmas. When an RPG explores intense themes, students’ choices may reveal personal anxieties, prejudices, or vulnerabilities. The teacher—acting as the game master—requires extra preparation and great sensitivity to facilitate this co-construction of knowledge without imposing authoritarian judgments.

Lacking a predefined plot, RPGs require the teacher/game master to manage unpredictability. This characteristic reinforces the Freirean view that ideal learning occurs when students make autonomous decisions and deal with their consequences.

Obstacles to virtual teaching involve both technological issues (such as a lack of internet access) and challenges regarding dialogicity, which hinder horizontal communication and prevent the co-construction of knowledge. Consequently, there is a risk of isolating students and impeding the exercise of the autonomy advocated by Freire.

It is often necessary to simplify rules and reduce information overload during decision-making in educational RPGs to align the mediating tool (the game) with the students’ developmental level; this requires extra effort to effectively structure the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

When a teacher/game master faces the reality of a large class, ensuring that every student has an active voice and participates in joint decision-making within a single narrative becomes unfeasible. In a session with 30 or more students, the mediation of this ZPD can easily devolve into chaos. Subdividing the class into groups of no more than 15 students can allow the teacher/game master to guide the game properly and maintain group self-regulation.

Institutional prejudice often acts as a defense mechanism for “banking” education. In the traditional model, the school expects a passive student who functions merely as a receptacle. Institutional prejudice tends to rigidly separate “serious study” from “play,” reducing RPGs to mere entertainment and disregarding their cognitive potential within the ZPD.

When cross-referencing the barriers teachers face when implementing RPGs with the foundational theories of Freire, Vygotsky, and Caillois, a clear need emerges for teacher training programs to address specific competencies: teaching teachers to let go of absolute control; training them to act as mediators of dialogicity; equipping them to properly structure a ZPD through games; developing their ability to balance game mechanics to avoid cognitive overload; and preparing them for group management. and equip him to pedagogically justify the potential of RPGs, breaking the stigma that the game is detrimental to learning.

A systemic reading of Chart 3 reveals that the teacher’s lack of practical exposure to or experience with RPGs is not merely another listed difficulty, but rather an “obstacle” that triggers and exacerbates other barriers and challenges, such as: the need to adapt traditional RPGs for pedagogical use; the loss of control over the narrative and mediation; the requirement for “table management” techniques to handle players and time; student preparation, rule-setting, and behavioral issues; the challenge of large class sizes; institutional prejudice; emotional content; and the use of RPGs in virtual environments.

The reasons why *role-playing games* should be used as a didactic resource in education were also addressed (see Chart 4).

The notion that “the student takes on the lead role—acting as the protagonist and taking responsibility for their own journey” (7%) reflects Paulo Freire’s ideal that the student should be an active agent in the co-construction of knowledge. The observation that “the teaching-learning dynamic becomes more egalitarian between students and the teacher” (7%) is the exact embodiment of the “dialogicity” and “horizontal communication” advocated by the author, highlighting an environment free from a single possessor of absolute truth.

The fact that RPGs “stimulate creativity and critical thinking” (21%) supports the premise that problematization and autonomous decision-making in the face of problem situations foster emancipatory learning, transforming naive curiosity into “epistemological curiosity.”

Observations that RPGs represent “transformative or effective learning” (28%) and “enable the study of concepts that are difficult to learn otherwise” (14%) validate the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The game acts as a guiding tool, allowing the student to reach a level of potential development they could not achieve on their own.

Indications that “RPGs facilitate the teaching of various topics within a shared reality” (14%) and constitute “a teaching method that utilizes play and playfulness” (21%) demonstrate the inseparability—described by Vygotsky—between the imaginary situation and the rules. The “shared reality” serves as the space for collaborative social interaction that is fundamental to the social formation of the mind.

Observations that RPGs “generate immersion” (28%), “foster student involvement, engagement, or heightened interest” (28%), and “create joyful experiences or motivation” (28%) reflect the direct consequences of adopting a character role (mimicry).

Finally, the finding that the use of games “boosts self-confidence” (14%) demonstrates that, by operating within a state of “unreality”—free from the constraints and fear of error inherent in traditional assessment systems—students feel more secure in exploring their capabilities.

Studies reveal that, despite the identified difficulties and barriers, there are compelling pedagogical reasons for using tabletop RPGs as a teaching resource. The literature indicates that RPGs foster motivation, engagement, immersion, and transformative learning, while also stimulating creativity, critical thinking, and student agency. By promoting a more horizontal relationship between teacher and students and enabling the exploration of complex content within a shared reality, tabletop RPGs emerge as a strategy aligned with contemporary approaches to teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we aim to foster reflection on the barriers and challenges teachers face when implementing tabletop RPGs in the classroom, seeking to demonstrate that there is still much to be researched on this topic and much to be encouraged regarding the use of this methodology across all levels and modalities of education.

Adopting tabletop RPGs as an active learning methodology reveals vast emancipatory and cognitive potential, evidenced by the motivations outlined in Chart 4—such as the promotion of transformative learning, the stimulation of critical thinking, and high levels of student immersion and engagement. This methodological effectiveness aligns directly with overcoming “banking” education in favor of Freire’s concepts of autonomy and dialogicity; with the creation of a Zone of Proximal Development mediated by rules and social collaboration, as described by Vygotsky; and with liberation from assessment pressures through the immersion found in Caillois’s concept of *mimicry*.

Educational research plays an indispensable role in supporting teacher training and consolidating the place of RPGs within the discourse on active learning methodologies. However, the fact that educational RPGs are often stigmatized and prohibited tends to hinder the promotion of academic research in this field. Consequently, teachers who decide to innovate today face a twofold challenge: they encounter resistance from their school administration and struggle with the lack of extensive scientific literature or clear guidelines to help them justify the validity of their practice.

One limitation of this study concerns the article screening and selection phase, which was conducted by a single researcher. To mitigate potential bias, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined *a priori* in great detail, and ambiguous cases were discussed with the research supervisor.

Regarding the exclusion methodology employed, out of the 286 articles identified, 32 were selected for full-text reading following the analysis of abstracts; of these, only 14 addressed the study's specific theme (see Figure 1). This represents 5% of the total articles found, suggesting that the field remains underexplored, despite its academic and scientific relevance.

It is worth noting that many of the challenges identified can serve as opportunities for "Game Masters" to create better classroom experiences. Thus, although this study did not aim to outline specific ways to implement RPGs in the classroom, it offers insights for future applications.

As a general recommendation, future research should further investigate and clearly define the importance of studying *role-playing games* within an educational context.

Regarding the future outlook for tabletop RPGs, it is hoped that educators will increasingly use them as an alternative teaching-learning method, resulting in an active, engaging, and interesting methodology from the students' perspective.

The methodology adopted in this research successfully addressed the research problem, the general objective, and the specific objectives. However, as previously mentioned, future research could conduct further studies to clearly define the importance of investigating *role-playing games* within the educational context and the reasons why they should be used as a teaching resource in education.

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Authors contribution

IAC: Conceptualization (study design, definition of questions and objectives); Methodology (methodological design of the research); Data management (management of data and metadata, maintenance of data for initial and subsequent use); Data analysis (interpretation of results and attribution of meaning based on pre-determined theoretical frameworks); Writing (drafting of the original manuscript); Review (critical review of the original manuscript and approval of the version to be submitted). AJPP: Project administration (guidance, supervision, or coordination); Conceptualization (study design, definition of questions and objectives); Methodology (methodological design of the research); Data analysis (interpretation of results and attribution of meaning based on pre-determined theoretical frameworks); Review (critical review of the original manuscript and approval of the version to be submitted).

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